



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

THE COLLECTIVE FOR
AFGHANISTAN STUDIES

Afghanistan

Continuity and the Persistence of Tradition, Culture, and Identity

Conference Programme and Abstracts

8 – 9 November 2024





The Minaret of Jam. Shahrak District,
Ghor Province, Afghanistan.

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Afghanistan

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AGA KHAN CENTRE

10 Handyside Street, London N1C 4DN
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Welcome

The field of Afghanistan studies has significantly transformed over time due to pivotal historical events, political instability, and changing academic interests. As Afghanistan navigates its complex social and political contexts, academic discourse around the country must evolve.

In the past, the study of Afghanistan was framed predominantly by Western viewpoints, particularly during the colonial era and the Cold War. British and European military officers, travellers, explorers, and anthropologists significantly influenced early Afghanistan studies. Their accounts, often based on firsthand observations but influenced by preconceived ideas, provided a mix of valuable and sometimes inaccurate insights into the country's geography, history, ethnicity, and culture.

Afghanistan studies witnessed a new direction following the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. Civil wars led to significant international interest and a surge of scholarship that highlighted conflict-driven narratives while neglecting local perspectives and cultural complexities. Recently, there has been a notable shift toward interdisciplinary approaches that merge sociology, anthropology, archaeology, history, and fine arts leading to a nuanced understanding of Afghan life. This trend recognises Afghanistan as more than a conflict zone; it is a country rich in diverse cultures and histories deserving of thorough academic exploration.

In recent decades, new generations of Afghan researchers, both male and female, have emerged, conducting valuable academic work on Afghanistan's history, ethnicity, culture, language, and customs. These scholars utilise various disciplinary traditions to illuminate the complexities of Afghanistan's society.

This new wave of scholarship emphasises local perspectives, challenging the dominance of oversimplified Western narratives. By drawing on their lived experiences and knowledge of their communities, these researchers provide authentic insights into the country's past and present. Their work fosters a comprehensive understanding of Afghanistan, challenging stereotypes and promoting appreciation for its rich cultural heritage.



Afghan scholars currently confront numerous challenges, including precarious security, limited access to local resources, and systemic biases favouring Western narratives. Addressing these issues is vital for allowing Afghan scholars to contribute meaningfully to Afghanistan studies.

This conference's themes and papers demonstrate that incorporating local voices is essential for the authentic exploration of Afghan society. We are witnessing a nascent research framework, combining interdisciplinary strategies and innovative methodologies, within Afghanistan studies. Interdisciplinary strategies, synthesizing insights from anthropology, sociology, history, fine arts, and political science, cultivate a holistic understanding of Afghanistan's culture and society. Similarly, innovative techniques, such as participatory action research, digital ethnography, and mixed-methods research, enhance insights into the country and its diasporic communities. This framework enables richer analyses that respect local contexts while engaging in broader global dialogues.

The conference not only reveals an evolving landscape of Afghanistan studies but also presents numerous avenues for future research and collaboration. Establishing partnerships between rising and established Afghan scholars and international researchers can foster knowledge sharing, increase resource accessibility, and promote various viewpoints. Interdisciplinary approaches create fertile ground for pioneering research. Emerging technologies offer exciting opportunities for investigations, enabling remote interviews and connections through social media. Additionally, there is a crucial need to focus on less thoroughly researched areas of Afghanistan studies.

Yahia Baiza

Senior Research Associate

Central Asian Studies Unit
The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Conference Programme

Friday, 8 November 2024

09:00 – 09:45

Registration

10:00 – 10:15

Welcome and Opening Remarks

Hakim Elnazarov and Rabia Latif Khan

10:15 – 10:55

Keynote Address

Nancy Lindisfarne

Afghanistan: Remembering the Past and the Reality of Climate Change Today

10:55 – 11:15

Health Break

11:15 – 12:55

Panel 1: Diaspora and Identity in a New Home

Moderator: Rabia Latif Khan

Afghan Diaspora in France and the Question of the Maintenance of Cultural Identity

Abdul-Hakim Hamidi, INALCO, Paris

In Perennial Search for Home: A Study of Afghan Refugees in India

Mahima Chouhan and Ruchi Sharma, Jawaharlal Nehru University

Poetics and Politics of Place-Making: Boundaries of Self and Other in Golshahr

Azadeh Sobout, Queen's University Belfast

Other's Stories: A Photographic Journey of Afghan Women and Diaspora Life

Helia Hamedani, Independent Researcher



12:55 – 13:55

Group photo and lunch break

13:55 – 15:35

Panel 2: Making and remaking of community

Moderator: Abdul-Hakim Hamidi

Surviving the Crisis: A Socioeconomic Assessment of the Middle Class in Kabul
Lutfi Rahimi and Omar Joya, Biruni Institute

Beyond the Headlines: Understanding Afghanistan through its Visual Culture and History
Parwana Haydar, AVAH

Preserving Cultural Identities through Civil Activism: The Case of the Hazara Diasporic Communities
Arif Sahar, University of Sheffield Hallam

Digital Inclusion and Technological Innovations in the Transformation of Traditional Cultural Practices in Afghanistan: Pathologies and Strategies
Murtaza Mohiqi, University of Agder, Norway, and Marzie Moheqqi, Independent Researcher

15:35 – 15:55

Health Break

15:55 – 18:00

Panel 3: Preserving heritage and faith

Moderator: Hakim Elnazarov

Afghanistan's Buddhist heritage: Between Vulnerability and Relevance
Jolyon Leslie, Afghan Cultural Heritage Consulting Organisation

The Evolution of Minarets in Muslim Medieval History: A Case Study of Minaret of Jam
Mehrullah Hussaini, Religious Education Teacher

From Panjtani to Shi'a Imami Isma'ili Muslims: Revisiting the Relationship between Afghanistan's Isma'ili Communities and the Isma'ili Imamate
Murid Shah Nadiri, University of Oxford

The Lost Goddesses: A Study of Feminine Statues from Ancient Balkh
Leila Mousavi, Independent artist

Displacement and Cultural Continuity in a Changing Climate
Narjes Zivdar, UN development and humanitarian practitioner and researcher

Conference Programme

Saturday, 9 November 2024

10:00 – 10:40

Keynote Address

Yahia Baiza

The Evolving Landscape of Afghanistan Studies: An Analytical Historical Perspective

10:40 – 11:00

Health Break

11:00 – 12:40

Panel 4: Women in Education and Social Governance in Afghanistan

Moderator: Yahia Baiza

Navigating Tradition and Innovation: Digital Education and Women's Agency in Kandahar

Tanya Qadir, Rumie Organisation

The Participation of Women in Political Negotiations in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021

Khatera Yekta, University of Southampton

Redefining Education: Women's Role and Participation in Afghanistan's CBE Localization Agenda and Practice

Rohullah Hakimi, University of East Anglia

Afghanistan: Gender Politics and Intersectionality

Farkhondeh Akbari, Monash University, Australia

12:40 – 13:30

Lunch break



13:30 – 15:10

Panel 5: Literature and Print in Afghanistan

Moderator: Barry Sadid

Persian and Pashto Literature in Concert: Perspectives from the 18th Century

Timur Khan, Leiden University

Imagined Afghans: The Role of Magazine Publications in Forming Afghan Cultural Identity

Sahar Rabbani, Independent researcher

A Bibliographic Study of Zhvandun: Defining and Capturing Afghan Life in the 20th Century

Sophia Tarin, Vartan Gregorian Center for Research in the Humanities

The Female Character's Multi-Faceted Self: Individuality in Short Fiction Written by Afghan Female Writers after 1978

Anita Karimi, Philipps University of Marburg

15:10 – 15:30

Health Break

15:30 – 17:10

Panel 6: Culture and Identity in the Diaspora

Moderator: Zalmay Nishat

Bread & Butter: Food Stories Crystallizing Hazara Strife, Exclusion and Survival in Afghanistan and Abroad

Farangies Shah, Sciences Po, Paris

Memory and Identity from the Standpoint of Hazara Refugee Women

Anis Rezaei, University of Oxford

The Impact of Khamak Embroidery on Preserving the Cultural Identity of Afghans in the Diaspora

Azita Ibrahimi, Humboldt University, Germany

A Fragrant Memory: Female Piety and Communal Performance in the Diaspora

Ahmad Rashid Salim, University of California, Berkeley

17:10 – 17:40

Closing Remarks

Jonathan Lee and Yahia Baiza

Keynote Address, Day 1

Afghanistan: Remembering the Past and the Reality of Climate Change Today

Nancy Lindisfarne

Dr Nancy Lindisfarne will begin her keynote address with some reflections on her anthropological fieldwork in northwestern Afghanistan between 1968 and 1972. She will then focus on the ways people cooperated and the importance of class divisions, before turning to consider the immense challenge the people of Afghanistan are now facing from climate change.

NANCY LINDISFARNE is an anthropologist, painter, and printmaker, and she has won prizes for her short fiction. She did graduate work at SOAS University of London, where she taught for many years. She has done fieldwork in the Middle East – in Iran, Afghanistan, Turkey and Syria – and in South Wales and New England, and has published widely on gender issues, practised Islam, and climate jobs.

Her books include *Bartered Brides: Politics, Gender and Marriage in an Afghan Tribal Society* (Cambridge University Press, 1991/ 2006) and, with Richard Tapper, *Afghan Village Voices: Stories from a Tribal Community* (Bloomsbury, 2020). Her latest book, written with Jonathan Neale, is *Why Men? A Human History of Violence and Inequality* (Hurst, 2023). She and Richard Tapper are presently working on a photo ethnography, *The Piruzai of Afghanistan*, which they hope to see published in 2025.



Keynote Address, Day 2

The Evolving Landscape of Afghanistan Studies: An Analytical Historical Perspective

Yahia Baiza

Afghanistan studies has undergone significant transformations over the decades, shaped by historical events, political upheavals, and evolving scholarly interests. As Afghanistan continues to navigate its complex socio-political landscape, the academic discourse surrounding it must also adapt to reflect these changes. The challenges faced by Afghan scholars today are profound; they grapple with issues ranging from limited access to resources and security concerns to the need for greater representation in a field often dominated by external voices. At the heart of this evolving landscape is the critical importance of local perspectives. Engaging with Afghan scholars not only enriches research but also ensures that narratives about Afghanistan are authentic and nuanced. Interdisciplinary approaches have emerged as essential tools for understanding this multifaceted region, allowing scholars to draw insights from various fields such as anthropology, history, sociology, and political science. Furthermore, innovative methodologies—ranging from participatory action research to digital humanities—offer new avenues for inquiry that can illuminate underexplored aspects of Afghan society and culture. This paper aims to analyse these transformations in Afghanistan studies while addressing the myriad challenges faced by researchers in this domain. It will explore how local voices can reshape narratives, emphasize interdisciplinary collaboration's value in fostering comprehensive understanding, and identify opportunities for future research that could lead to meaningful engagement with Afghanistan's rich tapestry of experiences.

YAHIA BAIZA is a Senior Research Associate at the Central Asian Studies Unit of The Institute of Ismaili Studies, London, United Kingdom. He specializes in education, Islam, Central Asia and Afghanistan studies, Persian manuscripts, and diaspora communities in Europe. He also serves as Bloomsbury Education and Childhood Studies Regional Editor for Afghanistan. Yahia is the author of more than 80 academic articles on various subjects, including education, religion, history, and politics in Afghanistan and Muslim societies. He is also the author of *Education in Afghanistan* (Routledge, 2013); editor of *Education in Troubled Times* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022); and he has three books in the pipeline, namely, *The Hazara Ismailis of Afghanistan and their History*; *At Home but without a Homeland: Tales of Migration of Ismailis of Afghanistan in Germany*; and *Schools in Afghanistan: A Lens on Education Facilities and Quality*.



Afghanistan: Gender Politics and Intersectionality

Farkhondeh Akbari

The politics of gender have been a salient feature of local and international power holders in Afghanistan throughout periods of war and peace. First, the paper aims to deconstruct the identity of ‘Afghan women’; it will highlight the heterogeneous experiences of Afghan women and counter the homogeneous narratives about them. The paper will then introduce an intersectionality framework to examine the vulnerabilities of women in Afghanistan across different political episodes, as well as their diverse experiences and voices. The case of Hazara women will be studied to situate intersectionality within the diverse experiences of women and to understand how political instability, historical marginalization, and gender violence silently undermine women’s rights and security in Afghanistan. It discusses what it means for Hazara women to fight for women’s rights in Afghanistan within the intersectional paradigms of ethnicity and gender vulnerabilities. The paper will conclude that adopting an intersectional lens can provide deep insights into the experiences of women in Afghanistan and identify grounded solutions to bring change in protecting women’s rights.

FARKHONDEH AKBARI is a postdoctoral research fellow at Monash University where she researches inclusive peace, non-state armed actors’ diplomacy, foreign policy and the Women, Peace and Security agenda. She received her PhD in diplomatic studies from the Australian National University. Her thesis examined the required characteristics for non-state armed actors to engage meaningfully in diplomacy for peace settlements and studied the cases of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. Farkhondeh’s publications include ‘Geopolitical Narratives of Withdrawal and the Counter-Narrative of Women’s Rights Activism in Afghanistan’ and ‘Bargaining with Patriarchy in Peacemaking’ in *Global Studies Quarterly*, and two forthcoming books: *Women, Peace and Security in Afghanistan* (De Gruyter, 2025), and *Diplomatic Actors* (Routledge New Diplomacy Studies, 2025).

BISMELLAH ALIZADA is a PhD Candidate at SOAS University of London. His PhD research focuses on demands for decentralisation among the Hazaras of Afghanistan between 1992 and 2021. His overall research interests include decentralisation, political settlements, post-conflict institutional design, political participation, ethnic politics, and conflict.



In Perennial Search for Home: A Study of Afghan Refugees in India

Mahima Chouhan and Ruchi Sharma

Cultural identity, instead of being static or linear, is loaded with fluidity and hybridity and is contingent upon a variety of variables. It has been theorized as not an essence but a 'positioning', which is implicated in socio-political contexts. With the advent of the modern nation-state system, this fluidity is further complicated by the processes of globalization and transnational movement. Within this context, the figure of the refugee presents an acutely vulnerable category, navigating a complex space between cultural preservation and adaptation in the host country. Amid protracted conflict, repeated displacement, persecution and expulsion, Afghans have faced continual onslaught on their rich and diverse cultural heritage. In response, they have resorted to multiple strategies to sustain their cultural identity and traditions.

This study seeks to explore the experiences of Afghan refugees in India, specifically in the capital, New Delhi. To understand the preservation and construction of Afghan diaspora identities, this paper will investigate the acculturation strategies adopted by Afghans in India. Looking into their subjectivity, it will highlight their understandings of 'home' and 'belongingness', their communal engagements, and their everyday ways of retaining 'presence-in-absence'. It will further delve into the ways in which these diasporic spaces sustain a connection with the homeland through transnational networks.

Moreover, it will crucially analyse how their experiences are informed by the nature of the host state that presents a hostile legal-bureaucratic ecosystem for refugees. It will employ qualitative research methodology, in particular, in-depth personal interviews with Afghan migrants residing in Lajpat Nagar (colloquially called 'mini-Kabul') and in Bhogal. Through this, it seeks to contribute to theorizations on cultural identities, adaptive practices, and refugee migration within a postmodernist framework.

MAHIMA CHOUHAN is a PhD scholar at the Centre for Inner Asian Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University. Her research is on ‘Understanding Afghan Nationalism within the Context of Ethnic Othering’. She has presented on a range of topics at various conferences, including ‘Nationalism and the Politics of Ethnic Identity: A Legacy of Human Rights Violation in Afghanistan’ at Turin University, Italy. Mahima’s areas of focus include subaltern and postcolonial studies and the theory of intersectionality.

RUCHI SHARMA is a PhD scholar at the Centre for West Asian Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University. Her research is on ‘Gender Politics and Women’s Engagement in the Public Sphere in the Islamic Republic of Iran’. Ruchi is also an Associate Fellow at the International Centre for Peace Studies, New Delhi. Her areas of interest include women’s movements, postcolonial/decolonial theory and cultural productions, with a special focus on West Asia and South Asia.



HAKIM ELNAZAROV is Head of the Central Asian Studies Unit at the Department of Academic Research and Publications of the Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS). He holds a PhD in the History of Empires from King's College, London. Hakim also obtained an MEd in Teacher Education from the Aga Khan University, Pakistan and a BA in Arabic language and literature from the Tajik State University. He has participated in various research projects, including the oral traditions of the Central Asian Ismailis as well as the history, intellectual traditions, and languages of the mountain societies of Central Asia. Hakim has edited several books and authored and co-authored articles and book reviews on a range of topics, including the history and traditions of Central Asian Muslims, religious education, endangered languages, and gender issues in Central Asia. He is a Chief Editor of the IIS's Russian and Tajik publications and is an Associate Editor of *The Endangered Languages Yearbook*, published by Brill.

Redefining Education: Women's Role and Participation in Afghanistan's CBE Localization Agenda and Practice

Rohullah Hakimi

Amidst political instability and persistent humanitarian and human rights crises in Afghanistan, the localization of educational initiatives has become paramount. Following a directive from the Taliban's Ministry of Education in June 2023, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) delivering Community-Based Education (CBE) are mandated to transition their educational activities to local NGOs (LNGOs). While the localization agenda has been a core topic in humanitarian and development since the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, debates on whether localization perpetuates power imbalances and reproduces inequality and exclusions in other ways and specific contexts are rarely explored. This study examines women's role, voice, and participation in Afghanistan's CBE localization agenda and practices. Drawing on the localization framework and the concepts of gender equality and social inclusion, the research focused on how the exclusion of women-led organizations and female NGO workers impacts localization practices, smooth delivery, quality of education, and the overall well-being of women in NGOs and communities. Employing a qualitative longitudinal approach, this study engages with key stakeholders, including representatives from INGOs, LNGOs, and School Management Council members at the community level. Data collection methods include semi-structured interviews and remote document analysis to accommodate security concerns and logistical challenges.



The preliminary analysis underscores that an ideal education localization is challenging without meaningful inclusion of women in the localization agenda and practices. The study reveals that the absence of female workers in NGOs and the exclusion of women-led organizations resulted in complex challenges affecting quality education delivery, beyond what is commonly reported in recent reports and literature. These complexities highlight both structural and systematic deprivation for women-led organizations and female NGO workers from opportunities and their rights, exacerbated by interlocking issues, including social and gender norms and the ban on female secondary and higher education. By amplifying the need for educational access and quality, the nuances of education localization, and the role of women, the study aims to contribute to policy discourse and advocacy efforts to promote inclusive, quality, and sustainable educational development in conflict-affected contexts.

ROHULLAH HAKIMI is a doctoral student in Education and Development at the School of Global Development of the University of East Anglia (UEA). His research project focuses on non-formal Community-Based Education (CBE) in Afghanistan, with a special focus on CBE localization, associated challenges, opportunities, and the implications of this process, including the roles of international and local NGOs in the localization agenda and practices. Rohullah obtained his master's degree in education and development from the UEA School of Global Development through the Chevening scholarship and his bachelor's degree in linguistics and literature from Kabul University. Previously, he served in education programme management and monitoring for more than six years with various international non-governmental organisations and donors in Afghanistan.

Other's Stories: A Photographic Journey of Afghan Women and Diaspora Life

Helia Hamedani

This paper explores the historically significant photographic series by Reza Heidari Shahbidak, an Afghan photographer who has spent most of his life as a migrant in Iran, and who recently resettled in Italy amid the Taliban's resurgence. His acclaimed community-based projects include 'Everyday Golshahr', where Afghan photographers used their cell phones to capture daily life in the Golshahr area of Mashhad in Iran.

The focal point of the paper is a compelling series of portraits taken between 2018 and 2019 featuring Afghan women from civil society. These portraits, coupled with audio interviews (unfortunately lost during the author's border crossings, but whose impressions and key words the author recalls and includes in the captions), witness the aspirations and perspectives of women of three generations: those who collaborated with the Taliban and international organisations in health, education, and humanitarian aid during their rule; teenagers haunted by bitter memories of that era; and those who returned to contribute to their country after years in exile.

Initially intended for exhibition in Afghanistan, the display of these portraits became impossible with the Taliban's resurgence. This paper examines how these images, and the lost voice recordings from which the author of these images recalls fragments and key words to include in the captions, witness the resilience of Afghan women and the impact of artistic expression on cultural identity preservation. The historical importance of these portraits lies in their documentation of women who are now largely invisible, as the Taliban's return has barred them from their former workplaces and roles.



HELIA HAMEDANI is an Iranian art historian and an independent curator with a particular interest in the intercultural field. She lives between Iran and Italy, writes about visual arts in Italian, Farsi, and English, and has collaborated with non-profit cultural associations and curated exhibitions in both Iran and Italy. Helia has also co-curated projects for inclusion and education through art for public schools in Rome and has conducted courses on contemporary art history in Tehran. Her BA in Art History at Sapienza University of Rome focused on the idea of witnessing political tragedies through art, and her MA focused on re-reading relational aesthetics. Her PhD at the same university focuses on the overlooked narration of Iranian art historiography over the past 60 years.

Afghan Diaspora in France and the Question of the Maintenance of Cultural Identity

Abdul-Hakim Hamidi

This paper examines how the preservation of cultural identity by the Afghan diaspora influences their social integration in France. It explores the shift from multiculturalism to dominant social values and scrutinizes the assumption that integration problems lie with immigrants. Drawing on theoretical frameworks of acculturation, transnationalism, and multiculturalism, the study investigates Afghan migrants' strategies for maintaining cultural heritage while navigating the complexities of life in the host society.

Through mixed-methods research, applying qualitative interviews and ethnographic observations with quantitative surveys, this paper investigates how Afghan diaspora communities balance cultural preservation with integration demands. It analyses the role of ethnic and religious identities in shaping the integration experiences of these communities and evaluates the perceived threat to a host country's national identity and social cohesion posed by maintaining distinct cultural identities.

The findings highlight the tension between maintaining cultural identity and the pressure to conform to a homogenous national identity. This study provides insights into policies and practices that can facilitate or hinder the integration process, advocating for a more nuanced understanding that respects cultural diversity while promoting social cohesion. By contextualizing the experiences of the Afghan diaspora within broader sociopolitical and economic frameworks, this paper contributes to the discourse on migration, identity, and integration. It offers practical recommendations for policymakers and community leaders to foster inclusive societies that value diversity and uphold democratic values.



ABDUL-HAKIM HAMIDI is a PhD scholar in Sociology-Anthropology at INALCO, Paris, where he also serves as coordinateur pédagogique of hospitalité, médiations, migrations (DU H2M). He completed his high school in exile in Iran, before returning to Afghanistan and attaining a bachelor's in History at the University of Herat. While in Herat, in 2004, Abdul-Hakim founded Simorgh, an association working on the enhancement of the human rights landscape, with particular emphasis on women's and children's rights. In 2014, he undertook a fellowship at the University of York before relocating to Paris as part of the ICORN program. He completed his master's degree at Sciences Po, Paris, and subsequently worked with the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) and the Collège de France. In addition to writing and translating articles primarily into Persian, he has actively participated in numerous conferences across Europe, where he has spoken on the human rights situation in Afghanistan.

Beyond the Headlines: Understanding Afghanistan through its Visual Culture and History

Parwana Haydar

The Afghan Visual Arts & History (AVAH) collective was formed in 2020 to address the lack of accessible information and long-term initiatives concerning Afghan art. The collective, comprised of art historians, curators, and artists from around the world, employs a horizontal and project-led approach to research and curation. Our research focuses on collecting and analysing knowledge from personal memoirs, artistic projects, oral histories, and online sources. This paper aims to answer the questions: What are Afghan visual arts? How do they contextualise the tumultuous history of Afghanistan?

AVAH curated an online exhibition with Morteza Herati at the <de>confine 2021 South Asian Digital Arts Festival. The exhibition, 'Afghan Glitch', used the metaphor of a glitch to comment on the socio-political crisis in Afghanistan. Herati's work visually reconstructs the moment when the country was disrupted by the Taliban takeover, exploring both the political and technical 'glitches' that have isolated Afghanistan from the rest of the world.

Through our curation, we aim to encourage research and artistic practice to support critical resources for understanding the past and present of Afghan visual culture. We gather art histories, contextualize contemporary practices, and create a platform for critical discussion and professional networks. Our goal is to move beyond the pioneer syndrome of Afghan art and history and contribute to a deeper understanding of the country's visual culture.



PARWANA HAYDAR is a filmmaker and curator based in London. Her work deals with memory, archives, and displacement through video collages, academic research and digital art practices. She is a current artist in residence at Somerset House and has previously shown work at the London Film Festival, Metroland Studios, and Interfilm Festival, amongst others. Parwana studied Social Anthropology and Persian at SOAS, University of London, with a specific focus on decolonial theory, Persian poetry, literature, and folktales. She is a curator of Afghan Visual Arts & History Collective (AVAH) a curatorial collective highlighting artists from Afghanistan and the diaspora. Her practice is collective and multidisciplinary, drawing from the personal to confront the structural and sociopolitical realities of displacement from Afghanistan.

The Evolution of Minarets in Muslim Medieval History: A Case Study of the Minaret of Jam

Mehrullah Hussaini

This article examines the evolution of minarets in Muslim medieval history, with a case study of the Minaret of Jam (*Minar-i Jam*) in Ghor province of Afghanistan. Minarets, initially absent in early mosques, became integral features symbolizing the presence of Islam and serving practical purposes such as the call to prayer. The architectural evolution of minarets reflects the influence of various pre-Islamic and Muslim dynasties, including the Umayyads, Abbasids, and Ghaznavids, as well as regional styles like those of Mesopotamia and Persia. The Minaret of Jam, constructed in the late 12th century, stands as a testament to these architectural developments. It is the second tallest fired brick tower globally and exhibits features inspired by earlier Ghaznavid minarets. The Minaret of Jam was built for both political and religious purposes, commemorating Ghurid victories and asserting their legitimacy through inscriptions of Quranic verses and the name of Sultan Ghiyath al-Din Muhammad b. Sam. The architectural style of the minaret, including its intricate terracotta ornamentation and calligraphy, highlights the synthesis of Persian and Ghaznavid influences. The study emphasizes that the minaret's design and inscriptions were intended to convey theological principles and reinforce political authority. The Minaret of Jam illustrates how Islamic architecture can serve as a medium for religious expression and political legitimization. The article concludes that understanding the evolution of minarets, particularly the Minaret of Jam, provides valuable insights into the cultural and political dynamics of medieval Islamic societies. This historical context enriches the appreciation of Islamic architectural heritage and its role in the broader narrative of Muslim civilization.



MEHRULLAH HUSSAINI is a religious education teacher in Afghanistan. He holds an MA in Muslim Societies and Civilisations from the Institute of Ismaili Studies, and a Postgraduate Diploma in Teaching and Reflective Practice from the University College London. Also, he holds a master's in Education (MEd) from Savitribai Phule Pune University (SPPU) in India and a bachelor's degree in English Literature from Baghlan University in Afghanistan.

The Impact of Khamak Embroidery on Preserving the Cultural Identity of Afghans in the Diaspora

Azita Ibrahim

This research explores the significance of Afghan *khamak* embroidery in preserving the cultural identity of Afghans, especially those living in Germany. It defines identity as a combination of material and immaterial signs that distinguish individuals and groups, emphasizing both individual and group identity aspects. *Khamak* embroidery is highlighted as an integral part of Afghan cultural heritage, symbolizing values and history, and serving as a means of emotional expression and storytelling.

Afghan families in the diaspora, particularly those who have left their country under challenging conditions, maintain a strong connection to their cultural heritage through traditional arts like *khamak* embroidery. This practice helps preserve their identity and provides a link to their cultural and historical roots in a new environment.

The research involved using ethnographic methods among Afghan families in Germany. By participating in various traditional and religious ceremonies, such as weddings, Henna nights, Sismuni (baby showers), Eid, New Year, Yalda night, birthdays, and anniversaries across different German provinces, the study aimed to understand the role and usage of *khamak*-embroidered textiles. The paper investigates how these fabrics contribute to cultural identity preservation and identifies the specific ceremonies where they are predominantly used. Research methods included interviews, participation, observation, and photography to gather insights from participants using *khamak* embroidery in the diaspora.



AZITA IBRAHIMI is a PhD candidate at the Humboldt University of Berlin, specializing in Cultural Studies with a focus on Central Asia. Her current research delves into Afghan embroidered textiles at the Berlin Ethnological Museum, exploring knowledge transfer, shared knowledge, and collecting strategies. Azita also holds an MFA from Al-Zahra University, Tehran, and a Bachelor of Arts from Herat University in Afghanistan, where she ranked first in her faculty. She has extensive teaching experience as a lecturer at Herat University and held a Research Fellow Technical University of Dortmund as part of the Academy in Exile.

The Female Character's Multi-Faceted Self: Individuality in Short Fiction Written by Afghan Female Writers after 1978

Anita Karimi

In recent years, the exploration of Afghan female writers has gained momentum, particularly those who craft narratives while residing in the diaspora. Despite their significant contributions to literature, these voices have often been overlooked within broader literary discourse. This study seeks to address this gap by delving into the works of notable female writers such as Spojmai Raouf Zaryab, Mahbubeh Bayani, Batul Haidari, Maryam Mahbub, Fawziya Rahgozar, and Aliyeh Ataei.

My criterion for selecting the aforementioned female writers is their prominent position in literary theory. A further significant criterion for me involved the fact that these women writers meet the standards of modern writing. I have selected narratives that were penned in Persian/ Dari and originated outside of Afghanistan, that is, in the diaspora. They often explore themes central to the Afghan experience.

What are the central themes explored in Afghan female short fiction? Their works focus on the complexities of identity and the struggles women face in a patriarchal society. They frequently delve into the trauma of war, the impact of displacement, and the challenges of exile. Memory, nostalgia, and the longing for a lost homeland and representations of homeland are recurring motifs, alongside a strong social and political critique.

What are the literary and social implications of this study? The exploration of works by Afghan women, apart from some short reviews in compilations, has mostly been neglected within literary circles. Despite this, female writers try not to be passive but write actively about their experiences in emigration or diaspora, following a modern literary trend. I assume the persistence of patriarchal culture and tradition lingers on, mainly due to the lack of the concepts of *individuality*, which will lead to self-censorship and self-silencing for women. Added to this, my experiences in a transitory society provide a lens for me to look through the phenomenon of self as well.



Theoretically and practically this study can have important implications on understanding the impact of individuality and its interrelationships with other concepts such as self-assertion, self-image, and self-consciousness in *écriture féminine*. Understanding the phenomenon of self can promote *écriture féminine* by bringing this distinguishing entity to the self-conscious attention of Afghan female writers. This can lead them to an increased awareness in presenting their experiences on a worldwide stage and also encourage them to display other aspects of their less-known experiences, and can therefore enable them to introduce new content into their writings. Moreover, this study will provide results and recommendations for literary critics, female writers and avid readers, which hopefully can be a contribution to the field.

ANITA KARIMI is a PhD student at Phillips University of Marburg in Germany. Her research is part of a broader project in collaboration with the Hannah Arendt Institute at the University of Dresden. Her work focuses on the short stories of Afghan female writers in the diaspora, contributing to our understanding of individuality and its relation to the diaspora, war, trauma, and identity.

RABIA LATIF KHAN obtained her PhD from SOAS University of London. Her doctoral research focused on Hazara ethnic consciousness. She also holds an LLM in Human Rights from SOAS



Persian and Pashto Literature in Concert: Perspectives from the 18th Century

Timur Khan

Historical Pashto literature has often been viewed in a nationalist light, as an expression of ethnic identity and part of a Pashtun national story – in the words of William E.B. Sherman, ‘as if Pashto writing was meant to arc towards [...] patriotic rallying cries’ exemplified in the works of Khushhal Khan Khattak. Consequently, little attention is given to the Persian-language bodies of work produced by many of the known Pashto authors of the 17th and 18th centuries. However, the writers of the time easily incorporated both Persian and Pashto into their literary education and output. They were not simply influenced by Persian literature either, but actively engaged with and contributed to it.

Focusing on some lesser-known Pashto prose and verse authors from the 18th century, such as Muizullah Mohmand (fl. c. 1750) and Ali Akbar Orakzai (b. 1739-47), we can see how Persian and Pashto literature worked in concert historically, with writers able to express different views on identity, politics, and the world at large in different styles across both languages. Even those who evinced ‘patriotic’ ideas in their writing could do so in Persian, and these ideas did not lead them to exclude expression in that language or even in others, namely Urdu. This more flexible, shared approach to identity in literary culture has suffered in different ways at the hands of colonial and nationalist policies in both Afghanistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. But it continues to live, and its roots run deep, its endurance offering an alternative to exclusionary nationalism.

TIMUR KHAN is a PhD candidate at the Institute for Area Studies, Leiden University. His Dutch Research Council (NWO) funded project is entitled ‘Beyond the Frontier’ and examines transformations to the Peshawar Valley’s local communities and networks in the Afsharid, Durrani, Sikh, and early British periods from 1739 to 1900. He has written on different aspects of Durrani’s history for the *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* and various public platforms.

Afghanistan's Buddhist Heritage: Between Vulnerability and Relevance

Jolyon Leslie

Between 2016 and 2022 a process of documentation, excavation, conservation, and partial reconstruction took place at two Buddhist monastic sites, at Topdara (Parwan province) and Shewaki (Kabul province), in Afghanistan. The sites are part of a string of religious institutions situated along trade and pilgrimage routes that once crossed the region, and likely played a key role in both political and economic life between the 1st and 9th centuries CE. The sheer scale of investments made in such complexes is evidence of an era of prosperity, driven by commerce and exploitation of natural resources, that seems to have waned in the Kabul area by the mid-8th century CE. It was not however until the 11th century AD that Islam became the predominant faith among the population.

The recent conservation work on the stupas has shed new light on the close similarities in their siting, form, and architectural details that, while largely determined by ritual, may also have rendered them 'legible' to Buddhist worshippers at the time. While they hold no such religious significance for Afghans today, the experience of work at Topdara and Shewaki points to a degree of curiosity and respect for such heritage. Along with many other historic structures across the country, the survival of these stupas is evidence of how communities remain the primary custodians of local heritage. This is rarely acknowledged in generalized portrayals of Afghanistan's historic sites as being somehow 'endangered'. Safeguarding presents multiple challenges, but Buddhist and other heritage may be of more relevance to Afghans today than some may care to admit.



JOLYON LESLIE was born in South Africa and is trained as an architect. He worked in Yemen before moving to Afghanistan in 1989, where he has since worked for the UN and NGOs among others. Between 2004 and 2010, Jolyon managed the programme of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, and since 2011 he has advised the Afghan Cultural Heritage Consulting Organisation, which is engaged in conservation and advocacy on cultural issues in the country. He co-authored a book on the political transition, *Mirage of Peace* (Zed Books 2004), and is currently researching a book about Kabul.

Digital Inclusion and Technological Innovations in the Transformation of Traditional Cultural Practices in Afghanistan: Pathologies and Strategies

Murtaza Mohiqi and Marzie Moheqqi

This paper explores the intersection of digital inclusion and technological innovations with traditional Afghan cultural practices. It examines how digital tools transform cultural practices, impacting preservation, accessibility, and community engagement. The research addresses several key questions: How are digital tools being adopted to sustain and revitalize traditional Afghan cultural practices? What are the challenges—such as the digital divide, cultural erosion, and socio-economic disparities—that arise from this technological integration? Conversely, what strategies have been effective in promoting digital inclusivity and fostering a harmonious relationship between technology and tradition?

Drawing on case studies and interviews, the paper highlights successful initiatives and areas of concern. Examples include the digitization of oral traditions and folklore, such as Story Weaver which has helped to preserve and share Afghan stories globally. Also, virtual heritage projects, like the Buddhas of Bamiyan, not only provide a digital reconstruction of this historical site but also illustrate the potential of technology to safeguard cultural heritage. In addition, social media platforms, with initiatives like the Afghan Cultural Heritage Education programme, engage youth in cultural preservation through digital storytelling and online workshops.

The research identifies strategic approaches to mitigate the negative impacts of technological integration. Community-driven digital literacy programmes, inclusive policy frameworks, and public-private partnerships are highlighted as essential for fostering digital equity and cultural sustainability. Collaborative platforms, such as the Aga Khan Trust for Culture's digital initiatives, demonstrate how technology can enhance cultural practices without undermining their authenticity.



This paper contributes to the discourse on cultural sustainability by examining how Afghanistan can balance modernity with cultural integrity. It emphasizes the need for tailored strategies to ensure that technological progress supports rather than undermines Afghan cultural heritage.

MURTAZA MOHIQI is an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Law at the University of Agder, Norway. He is also a legal columnist, and human rights researcher with experience in both human rights and private law at domestic and international levels. His extensive teaching and research efforts, spanning from the Global South to the Global North, focus on comprehensively examining multifaceted human rights aspects related to diverse demographic groups, including women, children, minorities, immigrants, and individuals with disabilities. Previously, Murtaza served as an Assistant Professor in the Human Rights and Multiculturalism master's programme at the University of South-Eastern Norway. He is also a senior member of the Human Rights and Diversities Research Group at the University of South-Eastern Norway.

MARZIE MOHEQQI is an education activist and researcher with a focus on human rights advocacy, memory preservation, and technological innovation. Marzie actively contributes to numerous conferences and papers, addressing a diverse range of topics. Her research explores how digital archives can support marginalized voices and preserve stories of injustice. She also tackles the complex relationship between intellectual property and equitable access to educational resources. Additionally, Marzie explores the ethical dilemmas of AI, privacy, and surveillance, especially in the context of athletes' rights. Through her academic work, she continues to connect technological advancements with pressing social issues.

The Lost Goddesses: A Study of Feminine Statues from Ancient Balkh

Leila Mousavi

This paper presents a comprehensive study of the enigmatic feminine statues from the Bactrian civilization, dating back to the second millennium BCE. Centred in the Balkh province of present-day Afghanistan, these statues, often referred to as “Bactrian Princesses”, offer unique insights into the role of women in ancient Afghan society. Through a detailed examination of these statues, this research addresses several key questions: What were the functions and significance of these statues within Bactrian society? Do they represent actual women or mythological figures? How does the study of these statues inform contemporary discussions about the role of women in Afghanistan? Additionally, the paper explores the processes of discovery, excavation, and preservation of these artefacts, as well as their current locations. By shedding light on the historical and cultural significance of the Bactrian goddesses, this research aims to contribute to a broader understanding of Afghanistan’s rich cultural heritage. It challenges traditional narratives that marginalize the contributions of women in history and seeks to foster a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of ancient Afghan society.

LEILA MOUSAVI is an Afghan artist based in Hamburg. She uses 3D simulation, video, sound, sculpture, and digital fabrication to recreate myth and history. Through archival practices and storytelling, her work interweaves intricate counter-narratives that challenge the enduring influence of colonialism and patriarchy. By this examination of historical and cultural heritage, she challenges traditional definitions of identity and gender roles. This aims to inform a more complete understanding of identity and place, taking her space within her heritage.



From Panjtani to Shi'a Imami Isma'ili Muslims: Revisiting the Relationship between Afghanistan's Isma'ili Communities and the Isma'ili Imamate

Murid Shah Nadiri

Afghanistan's 'Islams' have taken various forms amid the changing socio-political milieu of the last two centuries. Among many ethno-religious communities, the Shi'a Imami Ismaili Muslims, with their diverse ethno-linguistic composition make up one such Islam in Afghanistan. In the current scholarship, the religious identity of these communities is connected either to the Persian poet and philosopher Nasir-i Khusraw or to the Ismaili *da'i* Ghiyath al-Din Isfahani. Historically, however, neither these two dignitaries nor the people who followed them referred to themselves as 'Shi'a Imami Isma'ili Muslims'— even though they acknowledged and accepted the Imamate of Ismaili Imams. Ismaili identity became part of their everyday lives only in the twenty-first century, which has since then overshadowed their ethnic, social, and political affiliations in contemporary Afghanistan. Today, the Ismaili Imamate and institutions represent and speak for these communities, but how did they negotiate their complex religious identities in the face of changing, and often hostile, religiopolitical environments before the twenty-first century? How has their contact with the Ismaili Imamate, which brought with it a complex religious institutionalization, affected their religious, social, cultural, and political dynamics within and outside Afghanistan? Relying on secondary and some unexplored primary literature written and/or preserved by the Ismailis of Central Asia and Afghanistan, this paper situates the Ismailis of Afghanistan within the broader contexts of empire and nation-building on the one hand and of the global Ismaili community on the other hand, and argues that despite being a trans-national religious community, the Ismaili Imamate functions very much like a nation-state, often focused on unification and homogenization of otherwise diverse communities. It is only in the context of such a model that one can make sense of the different reactions to institutionalization among Afghanistan's Ismailis.

MURID SHAH NADIRI is an Oxford Nizami Ganjavi Centre Scholar in History, at the University of Oxford, where his doctoral research focuses on the cross-regional connections of Ismaili Muslims between Central and South Asia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Previously, he completed his MSc in Globalised Muslim World at the University of Edinburgh which he undertook as part of the Graduate Programme in Islamic Studies and Humanities at the Institute of Ismaili Studies, where he completed an MA in Islamic Studies and Humanities, awarded by SOAS, University of London.



ZALMAI NISHAT is the Executive Chair of the Mosaic Foundation, a non-profit in the UK. Previously, he was the Programme Lead for Central and South Asia at the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change. Previously, he was a public policy advisor for the Government of Afghanistan (2014–2019) and a senior policy analyst at the GIZ, German Development Agency in Afghanistan (2020–2021). Zalmi is a fellow at the Afghanistan Institute of Strategic Studies and assisted NGOs in Afghanistan in public health and education (2014–2021). He completed his BA in Politics at SOAS University of London, and his MA in Political Theory at the University of Essex.

Navigating Tradition and Innovation: Digital Education and Women's Agency in Kandahar

Tanya Qadir

This research examines digital education initiatives in the conflict-affected region of Kandahar in Afghanistan. It explores how these initiatives contribute to women's long-term and sustainable socio-economic agency. Through a qualitative research approach, the study centres on a case study of Learn Afghanistan, an NGO founded by social activist Pashtana Durrani, who plays a pivotal role in shaping initiatives for women's empowerment in Afghanistan.

This research addresses the overarching question: *In what ways can digital education initiatives be designed to enhance women's socio-economic agency in Kandahar while preserving indigenous knowledge and cultural practices?* In addressing this question, this study explores the impact of modernization and globalization, through digital education, on the preservation and evolution of local practices and identities.

By delving into the specific mechanisms through which these initiatives empower women in community participation, economic endeavours, and decision-making processes, the study will provide nuanced insights into digital education programmes, and how they can co-exist with and support the preservation of indigenous knowledge and cultural practices.

The research methodology includes interviews with Pashtana Durrani and key research informants from Afghan women participating in Learn Afghanistan's programmes. These interviews explore the intersection of digital education with local knowledge and practices, and how they can be designed to sustainably enhance women's socio-economic agency.



This case study-based approach not only contributes to academic discourse but also offers practical implications for policymaking. It explores how shared cultural knowledge, and traditions can be preserved while fostering socio-economic development and gender empowerment through digital education. By integrating insights from key female leaders and examining the role of digital education in a conflict-ridden context, this research provides a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic processes of change and adaptation in Afghanistan.

TANYA QADIR holds an MA in Adult Education and Community Development. Her research focuses on gender, digital innovation, and community development in conflict-affected areas. As Head of Programmes at Rumie, she collaborates with communities to create innovative learning practices, especially for women and youth. She also develops digital resources for Rumie's library. In 2022, she was named a DMZ Woman of the Year for her work in social impact. In her previous role, Tanya led projects in Afghanistan and Pakistan, focusing on providing educational resources to women and girls. She developed strategies to ensure project success aligned with feminist principles. In Pakistan, she partnered with Aurat Raaj to conduct a workshop on women's hygiene using Rumie's resources for flood-affected communities. This work used technology to empower marginalized communities. As co-founder of The Dabke Collective, a platform for marginalized communities, Tanya has been an advocate for decolonization and feminism. She co-creates spaces for knowledge exchange and believes in centring local voices and challenging power imbalances, especially in conflict-affected regions.

Imagined Afghans: The Role of Magazine Publications in Forming Afghan Cultural Identity

Sahar Rabbani

Afghanistan has an extensive and under-researched experience with national periodical publications. This paper explores the changes that have occurred throughout the print durations of various publications, which have magnified Afghan cultural identity, and at other times, filter and selectively highlight cultural identities for political means. In his seminal work, *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson posits that nationalisms are constructed through the mass production of print materials, allowing readers to imagine themselves as part of a community 'rooted in daily life'.

This paper applies Anderson's framework to Afghan publications accessed through the Library of Congress, such as *Da Kabul Kalanay*, *Kabul Magazine*, and *Zhvandun* magazine, examining how Afghan cultural identity has been naturally cultivated and forcibly disseminated in Afghan publications, following political upheavals and regime change. By engaging in archival research and textual analysis, this paper identifies changes in the visual, linguistic, and subject content of the magazine publications, analysing the manner in which political upheavals have altered the publication of the works and the subsequent impact it had on the cultivation of national identity. A reflection on the findings will then explore how the parallels drawn from the growing restriction of publications is one factor which has resulted in a restricted and fractured vision of national culture and unity.



Overall, this paper offers a vital insight into Afghan cultural, creative, and national identity formation through the medium of magazine publications, which have served to reinforce political changes in the nation and region. It concludes with an interrogation of the relationship that Afghan publications have had with the wider political superstructure; has the medium been able to withstand political enforcement, and what is the resulting impact on national identities?

SAHAR RABBANI is a recent first-class Politics graduate from King's College London. She specializes in political theory, policy analysis, and the interaction between the cultural superstructures of Afghanistan, the SWANA region, and the Global North. Her dissertation, 'Perceptions in Policy-Making: A Comparative Study of the Disparate Resettlement Policies for Afghan and Ukrainian Refugees in the UK', utilized process-tracing, archival methods, and textual analysis to investigate British parliamentary documentation for disparities in the policy-making process for Afghan asylum seekers. Sahar has recently founded, edited, and published her own magazine, *Silk Road Series* with its first issue entitled, 'Stories of Home'. The magazine has focused on the arts and culture of Afghanistan and Central Asia, examining how modern-day diasporic communities have replicated a modern-day Silk Road through artisanal and cultural trade and exchanges, using interview methods and ethnographic research in part of a wider commitment to document and preserve Afghan traditions.

Surviving the Crisis: A Socioeconomic Assessment of the Middle Class in Kabul

Lutfi Rahimi and Omar Joya

This paper assesses the socioeconomic status of the urbanite middle class in Kabul and how they have coped with radical institutional changes and persistent economic shocks since the Taliban takeover in August 2021. The study is based on a survey of nearly 300 individuals in Kabul City, who are part of the educated middle class. The survey was implemented between May and July 2023 and was complemented with in-depth semi-structured interviews with 24 participants. It explored various aspects of the targeted population's life under Taliban control, from employment, health, mental health, and basic political freedoms to perceptions toward migration, community-level cooperation, and social changes.

This study's findings demonstrate that the middle class in Kabul is barely surviving in the aftermath of the collapse. The findings raise the question of whether they can still be classified as a 'middle class', in the sense of how this term is understood in the contexts of developing countries. While data on other income quantiles was not collected during the survey, the results suggest that the educated middle class in Kabul was exposed to greater negative impacts of the political shock. While facing economic and mental health challenges, and social isolation, they are not optimistic about the future and wish to leave the country. This is a disastrous situation for a country hoping for progress and prosperity. This study was funded by the University of Central Asia's Afghanistan Research Initiative, supported by a grant from Canada's International Development Research Centre and the Aga Khan Foundation of Canada.

LUTFI RAHIMI is the Head of Research at Biruni Institute, Afghanistan. His previous experience includes working as a Senior Policy Advisor to the Ministry of Economy in Afghanistan, as an Economic Consultant with the World Bank, and Assistant Professor of Economics at the American University of Afghanistan (AUAF). Dr Rahimi holds a PhD in Economics from the University of Exeter, United Kingdom. He has a BSc from the University of Essex and an MSc from the University of Exeter, both in Economics.



Memory and Identity from the Standpoint of Hazara Refugee Women

Anis Rezaei

The Hazaras are one of the ‘most persecuted’ and historically oppressed ethnic groups in Afghanistan. The history of the Hazara people is significantly shaped by the experience of wars, atrocities, and the subsequent mass displacement and forced migration of the ethnic group to neighbouring countries such as Iran and Pakistan as well as the West. Although, as an ‘ethnic subaltern’, existing studies about the different facets of Hazara history, collective memory, and identity are limited, a nuanced and detailed analysis of Hazara women’s voices, experiences, and epistemologies is particularly underrepresented in what constitutes the Hazara epistemology. This negligence on the part of Hazara scholars (who are predominantly men) has, in turn, led to the emergence of an exclusionary, androcentric (male-centred), and ‘gender-blind’ knowledge about the Hazaras. To address this gap, this study examines collective memory and identity from the standpoint of Hazara refugee women in Britain. It attempts to shed light on how Hazara women, as an epistemically excluded group relate, subjectively interpret, and contribute to the preservation and transmission of Hazara identity and culture as refugees and members of the diaspora. In doing so, it takes gender as the unit of analysis and draws on Hazara refugee women’s individual and personal recollections of their past experiences in Afghanistan against the backdrop of their present situation as refugees. By foregrounding the voices, narratives, and subjective interpretations of Hazara refugee women, the study aims to unearth their memory and knowledge of the past and more importantly their role in the memorialization, preservation and transmission of Hazara identity and culture.

ANIS REZAEI holds a BA in PPE from the University of Essex and an MPhil in Development Studies from the University of Oxford. Her research is focused on the memory, identity, and post-migration challenges of women from persecuted backgrounds. Previously, she presented her research at different academic conferences including the University of Sussex, the University of Oxford, and the BRISMES 2024 conference.

ABDUL BARRY SADID is a journalist and historian whose work centres on oral history, 20th-century Afghan radicalism, and the history of prisons in Afghanistan.



Preserving Cultural Identities through Civil Activism: The Case of the Hazara Diasporic Communities

Arif Sahar

The paper explores the Hazara diasporic community's struggles to maintain their cultural identities through contesting and resisting the injustices they have experienced in Afghanistan's contemporary history. The paper uses the 'Epistemic Injustice' and 'Critical Rights Literacy' theories to analyse the ongoing struggle of the Hazaras to not only preserve but also enhance and adapt their cultural identities and social agency by organising for social inclusion, diversity, and justice. The Hazara ethnic group has experienced multiple forms of epistemic injustices, including political marginalization, social discrimination, and cultural repression in Afghanistan. The paper aims to build an understanding of the ways these communities understand their experiences, resist social marginalization, and are organising for peace with justice.

This paper is novel in its approach and makes several contributions. First, the concept of epistemic injustice is new to the context of Afghanistan and offers a fresh lens to identify several aspects of socio-economic and structural marginalization, not just in the ethical and moral, but in the political realms of Afghanistan. Second, (a) it improves our understanding of the opportunities and barriers for diasporic communities' capacity and agency to effect socio-cultural transformations in Afghanistan; (b) its findings have implications for policymakers and activists on how the barriers to social inclusion and diversity can be addressed to forge a ground for stability in Afghanistan; and (c) the findings and recommendations could be theorised as a framework of dialogue and struggles for other ethnic and social groups, particularly women's rights activists.

ARIF SAHAR holds a PhD from University College London (UCL) and is a researcher within the Centre of Excellence in Terrorism, Resilience, Intelligence and Organised Crime Research (CENTRIC) Institute at Sheffield Hallam University. He has published widely in numerous journals and is the co-author of 'Reconceptualizing Securitization in Afghanistan', which will be published by Routledge in London and New York in December 2024.

A Fragrant Memory: Female Piety and Communal Performance in the Diaspora

Ahmad Rashid Salim

Expressions of Islamic piety include prominent components such as the daily canonical prayers, *dhikr*, and melodic recitals of the Qur'ān. The communal organization of these pronounced particulars of Islamic piety are usually formed with the overwhelming presence of men. This presentation offers the first engagement with an extensive study of a counter phenomenon wherein the presence of men is forbidden: female gatherings related to the practice of *nazr* in the diaspora. In particular, this presentation discusses the process and practice of *Nazr-e Bebe Zaynab*: unique *nazr* (spiritual vow) practised and sustained only by the Shi'a of Afghanistan with origins in the circles of Qizilbash women in Kabul.

The presentation engages the religious background of *nazr* within the sacred texts of Islam and the personality of the Prophet's granddaughter Zaynab, particularly how her plight and words related to the martyrdom of her brother Hussein in Karbala during the Islamic month of Muharram in the year 680 are centred in the *nazr*. A discussion of the particular practices and framework of this *nazr* is elucidated, including the way(s) it serves as a counter to the various fractures in society and the multi-faceted ways Zaynab's status is referenced to challenge what is seen as both the political and the pietistic. Moreover, by extending invitations to both Shi'i and Sunni females, polemics and the paucity of unified communal engagement in pietistic expression are suspended, albeit temporarily.



The presentation concludes with anecdotes based on extensive oral interviews and the unique permission to attend these gatherings as a male (a first, according to organizers including those who had organized and attended these gatherings in Afghanistan). The critical space of the *nazr* illuminates the practice of piety in diasporic communities from Afghanistan, particularly Shi'i women, as part of efforts toward spiritual-cultural continuity, identity, and resistance.

AHMAD RASHID SALIM is an author and scholar in the fields of Islamic studies and Persian language and literature. His research elucidates the epistemologies of Islam in Sufism and Persian mystical poetry. He further studies the relationship between language and power, religious and political movements in Afghanistan, and the reception of classical Persian literature in the modern world. In addition to traditional training in Islamic sciences and Persian poetry, he was awarded a BA in Political Science with a focus on the Middle East, an MA in Middle Eastern Studies, and a PhD (with highest distinction) in Islamic Studies and Persian Language and Literature from the University of California, Berkeley. He currently teaches at the same institution and is a doctoral candidate completing his dissertation, 'The Harmony of Hayrat: Words, Worlds, and Wonder in Classical Persian Poetry'.

*Bread & Butter: Food Stories Crystallizing Hazara Strife,
Exclusion and Survival in Afghanistan and Abroad*

Farangies Shah

This paper presents one segment of a three-part research and story-telling series. This is a food ethnography written through accounts of the oral and recorded history of Afghanistan's Hazara people inside the country and in neighbouring Iran where Hazaras have lived both as indigenous people, refugees, and migrants. The series is broken down into three main segments: '*rogo zard*' (ghee), '*naan-i barbari*' (barbari bread), and traditional Hazara cuisine and utensils.

The first segment of this research is storytelling that presents the author's personal journey through Bamyan's ancient Dragon Valley, being exposed to *rogho-i zard* for the first time. A cooking staple across Afghanistan, this ingredient carries special historical significance for Hazaras, one of Afghanistan's most persecuted ethnicities. They were the only ethnic group that had to pay a 'head tax' (human tax) and *rogho-i zard* to the government of Afghanistan since the inception of the modern Afghan state – simply for existing. These taxes were often crippling and acted as a means of ensuring a perpetual state of poverty to suppress the Hazaras, who have always had a clear vision and will for self-determination.



This segment of my research seeks to uncover how Hazaras make *roggho-i zard* in Afghanistan's contemporary setting, how this tradition has been preserved over time, and how this new kitchen staple acted as a means of economic transactions amongst Hazaras and defined their relationship with the Afghan state through successive social and political upheavals. This research seeks to serve as a technology of memory and understanding for current and future generations about Afghanistan's profound food culture, taking on a reconciliatory approach in documenting the rarely acknowledged history of the ingredients used to make dishes loved by millions both in Afghanistan and abroad.

FARANGIES SHAH is a director, independent curator, and cultural consultant. She received her undergraduate degree from the Munk School of Global Affairs, the University of Toronto, followed by a master's from Sciences Po, Paris. Her professional background has spanned France, Afghanistan, and Canada with a background in governance, policy, and development. As a fourth-generation art collector with an interest in the Middle Eastern, Central and South Asian fine and applied arts, Farangies has always had a deep interest in exploring anthropologies of the region particularly textiles, food ethnographies, and contemporary art.

Poetics and Politics of Place-Making: Boundaries of Self and Other in Golshahr

Azadeh Sobout

The protracted situation of Afghan refugees during the last four decades has led to an increasing ubiquity of distinct social and spatial areas in Iranian cities. Despite this, refugees' own experience of conceptualisation of space, of place-making and everyday practices in negotiating spatial politics remain invisible to both urban planners and policymakers.

This essay brings a dynamic perspective to the analysis of Golshahr, an under-explored refugee quarter in northeast Iran. Despite its unique significance in the reconstruction of identities and new processes of cultural and socio-spatial transformation, Golshahr remains distant and 'out of place'. Engaging with fragmented memories of exile in Golshahr, the essay creates a spatial and poetic account of the exploration of memory, space, and attachment to place from the perspective of refugees. It does so with what Stuart C. Aitken calls ethno-poetry, an emotive mapping of stories that describe connections of people to other people and places.



This paper combines images, dialogues, stories, narratives, and poetry to provide a new framing of the individual and collective experiences of refugees in Golshahr. It highlights the continuity and struggle between social belonging and urban space, as to how belonging is reinforced through spatial imaginary, memory, and (re) appropriation of space in the everyday life of the community. Also, it elaborates how struggles within space get transformed into struggles to change space itself. In so doing, it builds on the relationship between emotion, activism, and spatial transformation, as well as the role of Afghan men, women, and children in the self-reclamation of their rights through creative use of urban space.

AZADEH SOBOUT is an interdisciplinary urbanist and researcher specialising in experimental and alternative urbanism, transitional justice, and peacebuilding. As a scholar-activist, Azadeh is interested in disentangling the ways in which urban collective actions, ideas, and tools shape policy and activism. In her doctoral research, she experimented with innovative approaches and methodologies that can enhance the procedures of place-making, memorialisation and social reconstruction in post-conflict settings. Azadeh is currently a research fellow at the School of Natural and Built Environment, Queen's University Belfast.

A Bibliographic Study of Zhvandun: Defining and Capturing Afghan Life in the 20th Century

Sophia Tarin

'A Bibliographic Study of *Zhvandun*: Defining and Capturing Afghan Life in the 20th Century' delves into the rich print history of the Afghan magazine *Zhvandun* (1949 to 1996), which flourished during a pivotal period in Afghanistan's cultural and social development. This study examines *Zhvandun*'s unique mixed media production techniques (including copier repros, woodcut stamps, lithography, woodcuts, etc.) and the history of its preservation. The magazine's production methods contributed to its eclectic and vibrant presentation. The paper showcases, through this case study, Afghan print traditions in the 20th century, an often overlooked medium of art-making. By incorporating old and new artistic techniques like lithography and woodcuts, *Zhvandun*'s creators exemplify how Afghan cultural expressions evolved with limited access to new technological advancements in mass media and how they came to define the aesthetic style of the magazine.

The magazine captures both the essence and aspirations of Kabul's growing upper classes and the changing governments in the 20th century, not just with articles but with advertisements and cartoons. Through its diverse content, it highlights various aspects of Afghan society, including arts and crafts in rural towns, Afghan Independence Day celebrations, top students from local schools, the royal family, infrastructure development, fashion houses, and local sports teams. Although *Zhvandun* primarily catered to a small, elite segment of the population, its documentation of this period remains significant. This bibliographic study aims to pave the way for further research, including potential interviews with former contributors to the magazine. By capturing the voices and stories of those connected to this publication, the study seeks to preserve the human element in a period so often defined by images and fragments.



SOPHIA TARIN is an Afghan-American poet, educator, and librarian and social activist. She works at the New York Public Library's Vartan Gregorian Center for Research in the Humanities. Her work focuses on documenting, preserving, and making accessible the histories of creatives and their communities. Tarin has previously worked at various cultural organizations, including the Walt Whitman Birthplace Association, the Coney Island Museum, the Armour-Stiner Octagon House, and the Cold Spring Harbor Library & Environmental Center. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Adelphi University, an MS in Library and Information Science from Pratt Institute, and she is completing an MA in the History of Art and Design at the Pratt Institute in New York. Her graduate thesis, 'Femme Maison: Vanessa Bell's Charleston', examines the creative ecosystems created by female artists at their private residences.

The Participation of Women in Political Negotiations in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021

Khatera Yekta

The Bonn Conference (2001), the Constitutional Loya Jirga (2004), and the peace process with the Taliban (2014–2021) are considered some of the most significant political negotiations regarding the state-building process in Afghanistan post-2001. Studies have shown that the presence of women in negotiations related to political settlements and post-war political negotiations (peace agreements, constitutions, and national sovereignty) can have a positive impact on the state-building process. However, the lack of women's participation in the negotiation processes and the control of political negotiations by male elites lead to resistance against women's rights and demands. Therefore, the main question in this research is: *What effect has the participation of women in political negotiations had on the political settlements and the formation of a modern state in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021?*

The primary argument presented in this study is that women were modestly involved in the Bonn Conference (2 women out of 24 participants), the Constitutional Loya Jirga (160 women out of 1501 participants), and the peace negotiation team with the Taliban (4 women out of 21 members). However, due to the combination of four factors (traditional and tribal culture, deep-rooted patriarchy in society, misogynistic attitudes in political and social structures, and extremist religious tendencies), political negotiations did not lead to a political settlement and consequently, the state-building process failed. High levels of failed state indicators, gender inequality, the fall of the Afghan state on August 15, 2021, and the re-emergence of the Taliban's "Islamic Emirate" in power are signs of the convergence of these four factors and the failure of the state-building process.



To analyse the argument, this paper first provides a brief review of the relationship between women's participation in political negotiations and state-building. It then demonstrates how women participated in the Bonn Conference, the Constitutional Loya Jirga, and the peace process with the Taliban. Finally, the impact of the four factors on women's participation and the state-building process in the past two decades is analysed using semi-structured interviews with Afghan political elites.

KHATERA YEKTA'S work at the University of Southampton focuses on examining the impact of gender norms on state-building in Afghanistan. Her research spans from 1919 to 2022, exploring how evolving gender norms have influenced the state-building process in Afghanistan. Through this historical lens, she aims to highlight the crucial role that gender dynamics play in the stability and progress of the state. Khatera holds a bachelor's degree in political science and a master's degree in international relations. Her academic career includes working as head of the Faculty of Political Science at Siraj Institute of Higher Education and lecturing at Khatam Al-Nabieen University, Karwan University, and Siraj Institute of Higher Education in Afghanistan.

Displacement and Cultural Continuity in a Changing Climate: Revisiting Heritage-Dependent Sustainable Livelihoods for the Afghan Transnational Migrants within the Context of International Development Aid in Iran

Narjes Zivdar

Forty-two years of displacement have followed the 1979 Soviet invasion, compounded by the post-September 11, 2001 war in Afghanistan. Over 3 million Afghans have arrived in host countries since the Taliban takeover in 2021, facing extreme environmental conditions both in Afghanistan and on the move. Furthermore, Iran, the largest host country, is an arid land with severe environmental issues, and the areas where refugees are located are mainly high-risk regions in terms of climate impacts. Climate change amplifies risks for Afghan transnational migrants, who have already experienced socio-political upheavals and negative impacts on their livelihoods, identity, and sense of belonging.

The majority of Afghans, historically skilled in farming and irrigation, continue to work in low-status agricultural jobs in Iran, which are highly vulnerable to environmental risks. International interventions acknowledge refugee protection issues but often overlook investment in durable solutions, sustainable livelihoods, or preservation of cultural identity.

Iran and Afghanistan share a similar language, a deep historical and cultural bond, and a long history of water scarcity. Shared traditions around water among both nations, such as Persian Qanat/Kariz, a collective water heritage inscribed by UNESCO, has played a vital role in communities' lives and livelihoods since ancient times. Recent rehabilitation and revitalization programmes for traditional irrigation techniques have been implemented in refugee-located areas. However, international interventions are often limited to physical aspects and lack a broader appreciation of socio-economic and cultural processes.



This research suggests that reclaiming culture through heritage-dependent sustainable livelihoods and communal revitalization of traditional environmental systems can contribute to long-term resilience for Afghan communities, both in host countries and upon repatriation. By empowering displaced populations and fostering social cohesion based on shared climate-resilient natural heritage, international aid can support the preservation of cultural identities and values, enhancing long-term resilience.

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