

Recalling the Past to Assert Ethnic Rights in the Present: The Case of the Gawars in Afghanistan

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Summary

This paper studies the production of historical knowledge in modern Afghanistan. It is argued that after the civil war and following the adoption of the new constitution in 2004, where for the first time in Afghan history the ethnic composition of the country was codified by enumerating the main ethnic groups, an ethnically dominated view on current politics and on the past became prevalent in society. Representatives of various different ethnic groups have organized cultural associations and started to publish books and brochures in which they attempt to make their group known and to assert its right to exist among the ethnic groups of Afghanistan. This seems to date to have been a much easier pursuit for the bigger such groups, who are mentioned in the text of the constitution and who have influential representatives at the central political level. This paper deals with the question of how smaller ethnic groups, who in the text of the constitution figure only among the “others” and have no representatives at the central political level, try to find their place in the ethnically dominated political life of Afghanistan today. For this, the case of the Gawars has been chosen. These people speak a Dardic language, and live in remote mountainous areas of Kunar Province in eastern Afghanistan. The paper is based on an analysis of publications that were released by the cultural association of the Gawars, as well as on interviews with the head of this organization. The analysis discusses which elements of the Gawar past have been chosen for self-representation today, by which factors this selection can be explained, and what lines of argumentation are followed in historical narrations so as to generate stories about the past that are meaningful for the present. It is also shown that written historiography often follows well-known models of oral narration.

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Introduction: The “ethnicification”¹ of historiography

Ethnically oriented historiography is in vogue in Afghanistan today. This is a rather new and quite remarkable phenomenon. Premodern Afghan historiography primarily consisted of dynastic chronicles written by court officials. The principle of territoriality, constitutive of the unity of the Afghan nation, has been promoted in the

1 “Ethnicification” is understood as the process of turning social and political phenomena into ethnic ones, or the reducing of them to the ethnic factor.