

THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

What Is the Value of the Persianate to Afghan Studies? or, What Can Afghan History Tell Us about the Persianate? Lessons from the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

NICOLE FERREIRA

NICOLE FERREIRA is an academic adviser and a coordinator of the international student program at Santa Fe Community College in Santa Fe, New Mexico. She received her PhD in South and Southeast Asian studies from the University of California, Berkeley, in 2022. She is currently revising her dissertation, *Mobile Pasts: Memory, Migration, and Place in Afghan Identity, 1451–1770*.

In the late sixteenth century, Afghans living in the Mughal Empire (1526–1858) began to write the first histories of the Afghan قوم (*qaum*; “community”). Their language of choice was Persian, a cosmopolitan language shared across empires from the Ottoman Balkans to Bengal.¹ In these texts, Afghan authors looked back on the reigns of the Afghan Lodi (r. 1451–1526) and Suri (r. 1540–55) sultans of Delhi, the first Afghan monarchs to rule in north India’s prestigious political center. Yet they also referred to the humbler aspects of their community’s past, including the Afghans’ reputation for social backwardness and discomfort with ادب (*adab*), the social niceties prized by the Persian linguistic community. In this article, I show how the first generation of Afghan history writers found resonance for their experiences in the classics of Persian letters, which they creatively adapted to describe the origins of their community. I then show how their distinctive application of the ideas and aesthetics of Persian literature illustrate largely unexplored possibilities of the so-called Persianate. Recent scholarship has examined the role of *adab* in enabling communication across this linguistic sphere (Kia 3). However, instead of accommodating themselves to these expectations, Afghans of the early modern period drew on another set of discourses—characterized by humor and the subversion of elite norms—to construct a compelling vision of Afghan identity at once recognizable to and respected by the diverse members of the Persianate world.

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307

Afghans and Defining the Persianate

As early as the fourteenth century, Persian-speaking elites migrated from the Tughluq sultanate (1320–1413) in Delhi to distant regions of the Indian subcontinent, carrying with them not only the Persian language but a collection of social mores developed and imbibed by those who spoke it. These mores found their most enduring expression in texts—among them اخلاقی (*akhlaqi*) digests, or ethical treatises; آداب (*ādāb*), or “mirrors for princes”; and immensely popular prose and poetry works like the گلستان (*Gulistan; Rose Garden*) of Shaykh Mushrifuddin Sa‘di of Shiraz (d. 1291). Wherever Persian speakers roamed, these texts traveled, forming the backbone of a literate individual’s education. Because Persian speakers continuously encountered other ethnic and linguistic contexts, Persian literature was eventually shaped by a range of languages with their own histories and aesthetics. Still, scholars have argued, Persian literature continued to share a distinct core of social, aesthetic, and moral paradigms. It was these mores that formed the true connective tissue of a sprawling and diverse—yet remarkably integrated—“Persianate world” (Alam; Eaton; Green, *Persianate World*; Kia).

In her book *Persianate Selves*, Mana Kia has identified this connective material as *adab*, a semantically rich Persian term with ethical connotations. As she writes, *adab* was a “concept . . . of proper aesthetic and ethical forms, of thinking, acting, and speaking, and thus of perceiving, desiring, and experiencing” (5). In her view, this was “the coherent logic of being Persian” (5), a way of being in the world that allowed Persian-literate individuals to transcend the differences among themselves and find ways of living harmoniously with one another. While difference and conflict might prove too difficult to overcome, this context was ultimately a “compelling instance of coexistence” (5), in which the Persianate encompassed the distinctions between groups while providing the material for communication and even kinship.

In Kia’s framework, the Afghans of the early modern period present a curious case. In spite of the marked presence of Afghans from present-day

Iran to Bengal, and the Afghans’ early embrace of the Persian language, polite Persian society was often, in fact, noticeably hostile to the Afghans in their midst. This hostility was so prevalent that the earliest descriptions of Afghans almost uniformly described them as fearsome, uncouth, and rustic—lacking the “proper forms” of *adab* central to Kia’s account. However, the Afghans who emerged as major political and social figures during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries took few pains to rid themselves of this image, instead transforming the Persian-language writing that explicitly excluded Afghans from polite society to tell a remarkably cosmopolitan story about themselves in the moral and aesthetic language of the Persian literary tradition.

The First Persian-Language Accounts of Afghans

From the first accounts of Afghans written in the tenth and eleventh centuries, Persian observers described them as utterly foreign to their own sensibilities. One of these authors was Minhaj-i Siraj Juzjani, a قاضی (*qazi*; “judge”) and the author of one of the first histories of the Delhi sultanate (1206–1526), the طبقات ناصری (*Tabaqat-i Nasiri; The Nasirian Classes*). Like many literati who formed the administrative backbone of the Delhi sultanate, Juzjani had fled from his home in present-day Afghanistan during the invasions of Chinggis Khan (d. 1227), which decimated large swathes of the Persian-speaking heartlands. In the light of these events, Juzjani moved south and eastward to Delhi, where the sultan Iltutmish (r. 1210–36) had established a united Delhi sultanate that extended well beyond the capital city (Bosworth; Kumar, *Emergence* 3).

Early on, the Delhi sultans realized the value of those whom they called “Afghan,” especially in the forested frontiers of their domain. These regions were occupied by communities who at times resisted the rule of the metropole. According to Sunil Kumar, Afghans were viewed as promising guardians and agents of sultanate authority in these areas because of their relative social isolation. Separated from their home in the mountains bordering present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan,

Afghans could be counted on not to put down roots and potentially jeopardize sultanate control (Kumar, *Emergence* 277–78).

Sometime before writing his *Tabaqat-i Nasiri*, Juzjani encountered a contingent of these Afghan soldiers to the south of the capital. Betraying his fear and the distance he felt from them, he wrote:

[E]ach one of them, one could say, is like an elephant with two braided manes on [their] broad shoulders, or is like a bastion . . . and each one of them would seize a hundred Hindus, [whether] in the mountain or the jungle, and on a dark night would reduce a demon to helplessness.

(qtd. in Kumar, “Ignored Elites” 53)

Afghans, however, continued to migrate to the Delhi sultanate and find lucrative employment. By the following century, a settlement named “Afghanpur” cropped up on the outskirts of the capital (Hardy 36). Afghans even rose to positions of political authority in the sultan’s administration. During the reign of the Tughluq sultans, members of the nobility sported names like “Gul Afghan” and “Shahu Afghan” (Ali 95). Nonetheless, the reputation they had developed in Persian literature continued to follow them. Around 1280, the soldier and poet Amir Khusrau (d. 1325) complained of the time he was forced to spend in the company of Afghans. Writing to his friend and fellow soldier, he claimed:

In this (?) fortress live the Afghans—nay man-slaying demons, for even the demons groan in fright at their shouts. Their heads like big sacks of straw, their beards like the combs of the weaver, long-legged as the stork but more ferocious than the eagle, their heads lowered like that of the owl of the wilderness. Their voices hoarse and shrill like that of a jack-daw, their mouths open like that of a shark. Their tongue is blunt like a home-made arrow, and flings stones like the sling of a battering ram. Well has a wise man said that when speech was sent to men from the sky, the Afghans got the last and least share of it. (qtd. in Mirza 51–52)

Without a doubt, the Afghans who served the Delhi sultanate at this time would have learned to speak

Persian, the language of political administration. As a part of this linguistic community, they would also learn the social and cultural forms that supported it—the *adab* that was deeply intertwined with the language of Persian itself. Nonetheless, as Khusrau’s comments suggest, Persian-speaking elites continued to find Afghans incapable of speaking beautifully—an important point, given the centrality of the Persian language to the Persianate and its putative ability to transcend social differences. By the end of the fourteenth century, Afghans rubbed shoulders with the more pedigreed Persian elite in South Asia and had earned honors that placed them on a par with the older cadre of administrators with roots in the Persian-speaking world. Still, the Afghans’ ability to participate in the Persianate remained in doubt to many sultanate elites, who continued to allude to Afghans as “foreigners” who lived on the margins of their society.

In the century following Khusrau’s death, the northern subcontinent underwent a series of dramatic changes, culminating in a fifteenth-century landscape of many sultanates and independent political entities. Among these was a geographically diminished yet culturally significant Delhi sultanate led by none other than the Lodi Afghans—a tribe who first rose to prominence in Punjab and captured the throne in the 1450s. Throughout their reign, the Lodis were productive builders, leaving their mark on nearly every corner of the built environment in Delhi. During the reign of the second Lodi sultan, Sikandar (r. 1489–1517), the sultan’s وزیر (*wazir*; “prime minister”) Miyan Bhua published the طب سکندری (*Tibb-i Sikandari; Medicine of Sikandar*), a Persian-language work drawing from Ayurvedic (Indian) medicinal texts that remained tremendously influential in the following centuries. The Lodi sultans also patronized literary production in multiple languages, a clear indication of their participation in the diverse and cosmopolitan world of ideas that characterized fifteenth-century India (Green, *Making Space* 76–77).

The Afghan sultanates were not long lasting, however. In the early sixteenth century, the first Mughal emperor, Babur (d. 1530), unseated the

third Lodi sultan, Ibrahim (d. 1526), and his successors soon routed Afghan and other challengers in north India. Nonetheless, this context was exceedingly productive in the history of Afghan identity formation. As the Mughals emerged victorious across much of the northern subcontinent, Afghans began writing the first Afghan histories—an increasingly elaborate collection of texts that explored the topic of Afghan origins and the migration of Afghans to localities across South Asia. In some ways, these texts resembled other Persian *تواریخ* (*tawarikh*), or historical chronicles, and *تذکرات* (*tazkirat*), or biographical dictionaries of eminent persons—both respectable genres in Persian literature. Nonetheless, these works echoed some of the same characterizations of Afghans made by writers like Khusrau and Juzjani—that Afghan origins were, in fact, extraordinarily humble, reaching back to noncourtly and rural localities where Afghans engaged in the horse trade (Kabir 5). In most cases, these historians even evinced an awareness of the assumptions long made by Persianate writers: that Afghans tended to be rude, uncouth, and perennially ill at ease in the presence of polite society.

At first glance, such a choice might appear strange, and even unwise. Why would the first Afghan historians, writing after the emergence of the great Mughal Empire, refer to these stereotypes in their own Persian-language histories? Would it not be more amenable to downplay these embarrassing aspects of their past and instead promote a vision of Afghan history based on nobility and politeness? I argue that the ideas and aesthetics embodied in the classics of Persian writing provided ample material for an often-belittled community to make a powerful case for their own way of life and identity. Beloved and memorized across the Persianate sphere, the works that these authors drew on—texts by writers like Hafiz (d. 1390), Sa'di, and Firdawsī (d. 1020)—delves into some of the most significant moral and spiritual questions of their time. Applying them to their own experience, the first Afghan history writers demonstrated the moral, ethical, and spiritual wisdom of “the Afghan way.”²

Humor and Humility in Afghan Origins

One of the first authors to describe Afghan origins was Muhammad Kabir, a member of the Afghan gentry living in the north Indian region of Bihar at the turn of the seventeenth century. Of his own volition, Kabir composed the *افسانه شاهان* (*Afsana-yi Shahan; Story of Kings*), which accounted for the regional sultanates eclipsed by the Mughals in the sixteenth century. This text also bore a marked resemblance to Sa'di's *Gulistan*: the thirteenth-century prose work widely considered one of the most influential pieces of Persian literature (Thackston iv). Like Sa'di, Kabir divided his work into *حکایات* (*hikāyāt*; “stories”), many of which contained poetic interludes intended to illuminate and complexify the meaning of the prose section. Kabir, too, directly acknowledged Sa'di's effect on his own work. Shortly before writing, Kabir explained, his son had passed away from a snake bite. The *Afsana-yi Shahan*, while meant to distract him from his grief, was also an effort to preserve his stories in a world in which all life was ephemeral. Quoting the *Gulistan*, he wrote:

غرض نقش است کز ما باز ماند
که هستی را نمی بینم بقایی.

(Kabir 2)

The purpose of this writing is that we will last
For I do not see life as lasting.³

This reference, as well as the work's similarity to the *Gulistan* as a whole, suggests that Kabir imagined the *Afsana-yi Shahan* as his own *گلستان* (*gulistan*), or rose garden of wisdom that would remain perennially in bloom.

Although ostensibly about Hindustan's rulers from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the *Afsana-yi Shahan* begins with a unique account of Afghan history “in the beginning,” in a place called “Roh.” Located along the Gomāl River running through present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan, Roh was far removed from the political intrigues of the Indian subcontinent. There, the first Afghans lived humbly and, notably, without the rule of a monarch—those individuals whose legacies make up the majority of the *Afsana-yi Shahan*. Kabir describes their way of life:

زمینی که بود در برادران قسمت بود آنزمین را کاشته میخوردند و هیچکس بر هیچکس زیادتی نمیکرد و نه ایشان رعیت بکسی بودند نه عمل پادشاهی تا حالا هم هستند. . . . و بر قبیله خود یککس کلان بودی. . . . و بر ایشان هیچ کس صاحب نه بود و نه عمل پادشاهی.

The land that was there, they divided among brothers, and they ate what they cultivated from the land, and no one oppressed the other. They were not subject to anyone, nor [were they subject] to the command of a king. It is like that to this day. . . . In their tribes there was an elder. . . . and no one was his master, and neither was [he under] the rule of a *padishah*.

In this narrative, Kabir's fellow Afghans did not possess a particularly illustrious lineage. Rather, the early Afghans of Roh subsisted on the cultivation of land and managed their way of life as brothers, not through the guidance of a monarch or *padishah*.

As if to emphasize this point, Kabir includes a couplet from the *Gulistan*:

نه بر اشتر سوارم نه شتر زیر بارم
نه خواجه ی رعیت نه غلام شهریارم.

Neither am I riding atop a camel, nor am I beneath a load like a camel
Neither am I a master over people, nor am I a slave of a monarch.

From the *Gulistan*'s chapter "On the Character of Dervishes," the passage this couplet comes from tells the story of a bareheaded and barefoot dervish setting out with a caravan for the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. As he walked along with a proud strut, he recited the aforementioned verses. A man on a camel saw him and called out, "Dervish, where are you going? Turn back, or you will die of hardship!"; Sa'di 54). When the caravan reached an oasis, however, the man riding on the camel had died. The dervish turned over on his pillow and said: "[W]e did not die of hardship, and you died on a Bactrian camel!"; 54). Kabir uses one of the most beloved and well-known works of Persian writing,

the *Gulistan*, to explore the ethical possibilities of the "Afghan way," and most notably the marked absence of kingship among the Afghans. In the Persianate cosmology of Kabir's time, kings were often imagined to play a vital role in shepherding their subjects toward correct behavior. For many thinkers, the Muslim monarch modeled the *adab* that could bring them and their people closer to the divine, something noted by a contemporary observer of the Afghans, Akhund Darweza (d. 1638). A theologian and inhabitant of the Afghan heartlands, Darweza once wrote:

نزد خرد شاهی و پیغمبری
چون دو نگین اند یک انگشتری.

Close are the wisdom of kingship and prophethood, like two jewels in a ring.

In his account of the Afghans who lived around his home in Nangarhar,⁴ the Afghans' reluctance to accept the rule of a king had damned them even in the eyes of the Prophet Muhammad. According to him, the Prophet had cursed the Afghans, telling them:

اولاد شما بعد از شما جهال محض خواهند گشت زیرا که پادشاهی را
کم قبول خواهند کرد قوام دین محمدی صلی الله علیه و سلم بی
سیاست پادشاه اسلام ممکن نیست.

Your descendants will fall into downright ignorance because they will little accept *padishahi* [the rule of a king]. And the existence of Muhammad's religion is not possible without a *padishah* of Islam.

At least in Darweza's account, the Prophet had foreseen this penchant among the community and had predicted the tragic fate that would await them because of it.

In his account of Afghan origins, Kabir turns this argument completely on its head by drawing on the wisdom in Sa'di's *Gulistan*. Indeed, by including the couplet recited by the bareheaded and barefoot dervish, Kabir argued for the perceptiveness and superiority of the Afghan way of life. Much like the dervish, Afghans had faced the ridicule of their social superiors, symbolized by

the wealthy man riding a camel. Yet the dervish's simple means of transport—his own two feet—got him safely to his destination when the rich man's possessions could not. The Afghans of Roh may not have accepted the rule of a monarch, yet in their comparatively modest way of living, Kabir noted a spiritual wisdom recognizable to Sa'di and others acquainted with the lessons of Persian literature.

Kabir and his *Gulistan*-inspired history were not alone in this representation of Afghan identity. Another writer from the previous generation, Rizq Allah Mushtaqi of Delhi, used stereotypes of Afghan backwardness to depict the first Lodi sultan of Delhi, Bahlul (r. 1451–89), as a humble yet remarkably apt ruler of Hindustan. Writing in the early 1570s, Mushtaqi witnessed the decline of the Afghan sultanates and the rise of the third Mughal emperor, Akbar (r. 1556–1605). Still, he told a story of the Afghan rulers that both playfully and reverently described their personalities and the context in which they lived. Indeed, Mushtaqi had been patronized by members of Sikandar's court (Siddiqui xv), while his title of "shaikh" recognized him as a spiritual authority in his age, an important point related to how he might have been received as a historian.

According to Mushtaqi, when the first Afghan sultan, Bahlul, came to power in the 1450s, his rise was met with consternation by Delhi's spiritual authorities. Some of them even publicly denigrated him and his fellow Afghans. In one relevant passage, Mushtaqi describes a time when the newly crowned Bahlul entered the congregational mosque of Delhi. When the imam saw the sultan, he came down from his pulpit and exclaimed:

سبحان الله! عجب قومی پیدا شدند. نمی دانم که پیش رو دجال یا خود
دجال سیرت اند که مادر را مور و برادر را رور و خانه را گور و
دبیه را شور و سیاه را تور و دگر را نور می گویند. (10)

Praise be to God! What strange people have arrived! I don't know whether they are forerunners of the Antichrist or if they are the Antichrist themselves, as they call the mother "mur," the brother "rur," the house "gur," the village "shur," black "tur," and everything else "nur"!

The sultan, however, simply smiled and said: ملا قادن بس کن که همه بندگان خداییم ("Stop it, Mullah Qadan! We are all servants of God"; 10–11). Unlike Kabir, Mushtaqi does not directly reference Sa'di, Hafiz, or any other Persian litterateur in this story. Nonetheless, the sultan's lighthearted response mirrors the subversion of stereotypes enacted in anecdotal and didactic texts like the *Gulistan*. While the rich man in Sa'di's story formed the object of the joke, Bahlul's encounter calls to mind other tales from these texts that poke fun at equally presumptuous religious authorities. In these tales, littered throughout works like the *Gulistan*, spiritual wisdom is radically asserted to reside not in traditional loci of authority—individuals like the mullah or imam—but in those who sometimes formed the objects of their ridicule or disdain: the itinerant, uneducated, or otherwise marginalized. In the story of Bahlul and the imam, Mushtaqi shows the spiritual leader attempting to assert his own superiority by disparaging the Afghan sultan and the speech habits of his community. However, by laughing at the imam's joke, Bahlul turns the jibe back at its maker. Through his gentle response, Bahlul demonstrates his own lack of vanity and his knowledge that subservience to God outweighs the distinctions otherwise made between individuals.

This embrace of Afghan humility, which runs through texts like *واقعات مشتاقی* (*Waqi'at-i Mushtaqi; The Occurrences of Mushtaqi*) and *Afsana-yi Shahan*, underscores the historical richness of the Persianate and the capacity of a historically marginalized community to create a place for themselves within it. Afghans did not always fit comfortably in the refined circles of *adab*. The architects of the Afghan past encountered centuries of Persian-language writing that depicted them as foreign and even incapable of sharing in the world of Persianate social niceties. Nonetheless, in telling stories of their history, these authors evinced their intimate familiarity with the rhetoric and principles of Persian letters. They found the most resonance in the discourses of humor and modesty that animated texts like Sa'di's *Gulistan*, using them to demonstrate the divine wisdom of their own way of life.

In this sense, the historical process of Afghan identity formation reveals how Afghans participated in the Persianate beyond possessing decorum, speaking in a certain way, or having a prestigious blood lineage. As these authors demonstrated, the Persianate also accommodated humor, playfulness, and above all humility.

NOTES

1. Referring to Ahmed's "Balkans-to-Bengal complex" (18).
2. Adapted from Ho's concept of the "Alawī Way" (28).
3. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
4. A region in eastern Afghanistan.

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