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# **ROOTS AND ROUTES**

**Questions of Home, Belonging and  
Return in an Afghan Diaspora**

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Picture on front cover: [www.epyphites.net](http://www.epyphites.net) (omitted in PDF version)

Pronunciation of Dari sounds

- ā - as in *father*, an *a* with a touch of *o* in it
- u - as the double *oo* in *room*
- gh - like a thick *r* in the French *garçon*
- kh - a throaty, coughing sound as the *ch* in the Scottish *loch*, or the Dutch *g*
- q - an explosive, breathy sound not existing in English, like a *k* pronounced deep in the throat

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# INTRODUCTION

A fieldwork practise and the reflection thereof in a thesis marks the final stage of the studies of Cultural Anthropology / Sociology of Non-Western Societies at Leiden University. It still is an unwritten decree that students of anthropology perform their fieldwork in a remote, exotic place, where a period of hardships, deprivation and seclusion functions as a *rite de passage*, a liminal phase in which they are transformed from students to mature anthropologists, equipped for the professional life. I believe however that in this age of large-scale movements of people, goods and ideas, this tradition is in serious need of revision. Anthropologists no longer have to undertake long journeys to remote locations to find their customary subjects of study. The classical conception of anthropology as the study of bounded and distant traditional communities is not adequate any more to the reality of shifting boundaries and migrating cultures. The forces of globalisation now deliver 'the exotic' into the anthropologist's own back yard, and this certainly holds true for the population of the country of my interest, Afghanistan.

More than two decades of war in Afghanistan have displaced a third of its population. Afghan natives now reside in at least 78 countries around the world. Money, goods, information and people circulate between Afghans in different continents. Around a hundred thousand Afghans found their way to Germany, and a few thousand were even born there. Nearly a quarter of them reside in the northern city of Hamburg, thereby forming the largest Afghan community in Europe. Whereas before the war Afghanistan's capital Kabul was called 'the Paris of the East', nowadays Hamburg is sometimes referred to as 'the Kabul of Europe'. Hamburg became the location of my research, which took place between March and October 2003. I was interested in discovering how Afghans in Hamburg negotiated their senses of home and belonging, and how these influenced their attitudes towards return. The end result is an account of two kinds of journeys; two searches for home and spaces of belonging that take place simultaneously. The first is a physical one, across national borders, from Afghanistan to Germany and perhaps back to Afghanistan again. The other kind is a journey through questions of identity, history, cultures, ancestry and belonging.

## Context of Study

On the 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2001, two hijacked airplanes flew into New York's World Trade Towers. Almost immediately, the Saudi Arabian terrorist and multimillionaire Osama Bin Laden was identified as the brain behind the attacks. The eyes of the world turned to Afghanistan, the mountainous and war-torn Asian country that hosted him and his Muslim terrorist Al-Qaida network. The Taliban movement of religious students that rigidly ruled most of the country refused to hand over Bin Laden. On the 7<sup>th</sup> of October, the Americans launched bombing attacks on alleged Taliban and Al-Qaida positions. Until the time of writing, Osama Bin Laden has not been captured. The Taliban regime, however, fell within weeks. Afghanistan had largely been forgotten by the world community since the end of the Cold War, when the Soviet army retreated its troops and the various resistance groups started to fight each other in a hopeless and gory civil war. Suddenly, the country was placed on the world map again. With the help of Western nations, an interim government was installed in the capital Kabul on December the 22<sup>nd</sup> 2002.

Since the fall of the Taliban, more than 3.7 million Afghan refugees, mainly from Pakistan and Iran, have returned to Afghanistan (Website UNHCR). An estimated 3.4 million Afghans still remain outside the country (UNDP 2004: 5). The issue of return suddenly became very relevant. This relevance is double-edged. On the one hand, Germany and other host countries are putting an increasing pressure upon Afghan refugees without a secure legal status to return to their country of origin. On the other hand, Afghans themselves are suddenly confronted with the possibility to travel to Afghanistan, and remain there for a few weeks, even years, or possibly forever. Direct return flights now connect Germany and Kabul, and a growing number of Afghans are grabbing the opportunity to visit the country they had left so many years ago.

### **Research Questions**

Is it accurate in this case to speak about a return ‘home’? The assumption that the national borders of the country left-behind constitute the ideal habitat for any person is part of a long academic tradition. The country of origin is commonly referred to as ‘home’ or ‘homeland’, and it has long been considered the ultimate wish of all displaced people to return to where they came from and forever belong. Although these assumptions persist until today, many contemporary studies about refugees and diasporas challenge such static views regarding home and homeland and the connection between people and place, as these vary with the reality of exile. The truth of the matter is that with the passage of time, both the refugee and the country of origin are likely to undergo changes. These changes affect senses of ‘home’ and belonging, which might in turn have important consequences for the question of return. It can very well be that for Afghans residing in other countries, sometimes already for decades, Afghanistan no longer represents ‘home’. New ‘homes’ and new senses of belonging could have been established outside Afghanistan, especially when prospects for peace in Afghanistan were dim for years and many gave up hope of being able to return. The occurrences since 2001 and the sudden possibility to return and become involved in Afghanistan’s developments might have forced Afghans to re-evaluate their bonds with Afghanistan as well as with the country that hosts them. Questions such as “Where do I belong?” and “Would I still feel at home in Afghanistan, or has the country I live in now become my new home?” might have gained importance. Bearing these considerations in mind, the main question that has guided my research has been the following:

*What are the notions of Afghans in Germany regarding home and belonging, and how do these relate to their attitudes towards returning to Afghanistan?*

A very useful guiding principle to analyse and discuss issues of belonging among displaced Afghans appeared to be the homophobe ‘roots / routes’. These two metaphors are employed by a handful of anthropologists such as Clifford, Hall and Gilroy who are concerned with globalisation. Issues of home and belonging involve negotiations and dialogues between two different narratives: that of unchanging and authentic ‘roots’ and that of ‘routes’ of hybridity and transformation. The outcomes of these negotiations can vary between individuals. As Armbruster (2002: 25) argues, “stories of fixed cores and origins co-exist with stories of discontinuity and difference.” Articulations of ‘roots’ emphasise a sense of belonging to Afghanistan. Acknowledgements of ‘routes’ often complicate this sense of belonging. Both types of narratives play an important role among Afghans in the formation of identities and the localisation of spaces of belonging.

## **Significance**

Considering the fact that Afghans have formed the largest refugee group worldwide for years and still constitute almost 25% of all refugees worldwide, surprisingly little anthropological literature is available about this group of people. Most anthropological studies on Afghan refugees focus on refugees with a rural background, predominantly Pashtuns, residing in Pakistan's refugee camps. Within pre-war Afghanistan, some rural and nomad groups have been studied. Only a small number of anthropologists, in particular Centlivres, Centlivres-Demont and Omidian, have occupied themselves thus far with the Afghans in Europe and the United States. I hope that this study, addressing some contemporary and relevant issues among the Afghan diaspora, could add to the needed body of literature.

The interdisciplinary field of refugee studies emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. Anthropologists' interest in refugees and diasporas did not arise until the late 1980s. This coincided with the rapid increase of the number of migrations across the globe, a considerable part of them of a forced nature (Malkki 1995a: 507; Shami 1996: 6). Refugee movements on a large scale have become a prominent feature of contemporary society. According to the UNHCR, the number of refugees worldwide was 9.2 million by the end of 2004. In addition, 7.6 million people were displaced within their own country and 839 thousand asylum seekers' cases were still pending. While most displaced people sought refuge in their own countries or regions in the South, a minority was able to apply for asylum in the European Union, the USA, Canada or Australia (Website UNHCR). Within anthropology, there is now a growing recognition that "people are increasingly moving targets" and that anthropology's "lens of enquiry [should be shifted] to examine peripheries, boundaries, borderlands, migrants, and the processes of apparent flux and disorder" (Hammond 1999: 233). However, assumptions of culture and community as territorialized units are still deeply rooted in anthropology in general. The study of refugees and diasporic communities is particularly suited to question this isomorphism of space, place, culture and identity. Some studies have been successful in this, but many others are themselves still interlarded with such ideas. Because of the relative newness of this branch of anthropology, theoretical frameworks and concepts are still developing and being refined, and much analysis is still needed (Malkki 1995b: 2; Gupta and Ferguson 1992: 6-9). Hopefully, this case study of Afghans in Hamburg can make a contribution to the growing body of knowledge in anthropology with regard to theories of 'home', 'homeland', multiple senses of belonging and refugee repatriation.

Besides these aimed contributions to the academic fields of Afghanistan studies and the anthropology of displacement, I hope that this study can be used to critically review German policies regarding asylum, naturalisation and repatriation that influence so many Afghans' lives. Concepts of 'home' and return can mean something vastly different to Afghans themselves than the meanings that policy makers attribute to them. Programs for voluntary repatriation for example seem to fail to take the opinions and wishes of the Afghans themselves into account. Policy makers might be left wondering why hardly any Afghan has shown an interest in participating in such a program. Both Afghans and the German society might benefit from a better understanding of the ties that bind Afghans to Afghanistan as well as to Germany.

## Outline of Chapters

Part I of this thesis provides contextual information about the fieldwork and the research population. Chapter 1 presents background information of Afghanistan's geographical, social and ethnic structure and the historical and political events that have led to the exodus of Afghans. It describes the three major waves of refugees to industrialized countries, and places a specific focus on Germany as a destination. Chapter 2 offers a profile of the Afghan population in Germany. It places the growth of the Afghan population there into a history of Germany's asylum system. Asylum laws and regulations define the type of life that Afghans are able to adopt in Germany, and divide the Afghan population into two main categories of established and non-established. The second part of the chapter offers a socio-economical and statistical profile of the Afghan population in Hamburg. Chapter 3 describes the way I organised and conducted the fieldwork. It elaborates on the qualitative research methods and techniques that I adopted to find an entrance into Afghan networks and gather data. Further on, it deals with some specific problems that were faced, such as overcoming distrust.

Part II of this thesis is concerned with the ways in which Afghans imagine who they are, where they belong, what the place they came from, and also the one where they are now living in, actually means to them. A critical discussion of the relevant anthropological terminology is an important component in each of these chapters. Chapter 4 offers an analysis of the concepts of 'home' and 'homeland' and investigates to what extent these concepts are useful in understanding senses of belonging among the Afghan diaspora in Hamburg. Arguments will be presented showing that the anthropologist's analytical concepts of 'home' and 'homeland' are rather ambiguous in their meanings. I make a plea for the utilisation and analysis of emic concepts used by the respondents themselves, having cognate meanings but not clear equivalents in the English concepts. Chapter 5 begins with an explanation of the metaphors 'roots' and 'routes'. The remainder of the chapter concentrates on stories of roots and ideas of an inborn and unchangeable identity, connected with notions of blood and origin. A considerable part is spent analysing the meanings attached to the Afghan notion of homeland, *watan*. In the second part of the chapter, an attempt is made to explain why ideas of fixed roots are so important for people on the move. Chapter 6 analyses how the changes that accompany life in another country are dealt with and how these affect views about identity and belonging as well as definitions of *Heimat* and *Zuhause*. The chapter aims at showing respondents' struggles with identifying places and spaces of belonging out of interactions between senses of roots and routes. The outcomes are often ambiguous. The centre of attention is placed on Afghans in their late teens and their twenties.

Part III is concerned with the issue of returning to Afghanistan. Attitudes towards a permanent return are the focus of Chapter 7. Although several programs for voluntary return have been developed, only a small number of Afghans show a genuine interest in them. The chapter focuses on potential dreams of return, but also shows the way in which these are likely to clash with practical considerations. Chapter 8 describes the personal experiences of Afghans who have returned to Afghanistan for a few weeks or months. The question will be asked if it is still possible to speak about a return 'home', as both the returnee and the country itself have changed during the years of absence. Return visits act as reality-checks against images that have been formed while being in exile, and often evoke renegotiations of feelings of belonging and identification. Finally there is the conclusion, summing up and highlighting the main findings of the study.

# **Part I**

## **CONTEXT**



## Chapter 1

# THE AFGHAN EXODUS

“Even if there wasn’t any fighting, there wouldn’t be peace either. I don’t think there will ever be peace in Afghanistan. Every time a new movement stands up. It’s been like this since Chenghiz Khan.<sup>1</sup>”

(Ferozan)

“‘War,’ Hewadmal continues, ‘transforms any country into a madhouse, and the exiles are the inmates who escaped’.”

(Ahang Shamel 2003: 50)

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

The invasion of Afghanistan by the former U.S.S.R. at the end of 1979 was the starting-signal of more than two decades of war, displacing more than a third of the Afghan population. Since the withdrawal of the Russians in 1989, Afghanistan has not been able to achieve peace and security. After every political conquest and transition of power from one group to another, waves of Afghans have fled the country to avoid persecution. In the first half of the 1980s, the Afghan refugee population was at its peak and was the largest in the world, consisting of more than 6.5 million refugees in the neighbouring countries of Pakistan and Iran alone (Website UNHCR).<sup>2</sup> More than 100 thousand Afghans found their way to Germany, and around a quarter of them now reside in Hamburg (Tietjens 2002: 10). The displacement of Afghans bears a double character through both time and space: a massive and forced exile to the neighbouring countries Pakistan and Iran, and a relatively small elite exile to Western countries.

#### Afghan Refugees in the Region

The first type of migration was a massive and forced exile of mostly rural Afghans to the neighbouring countries Pakistan and Iran. This emigration was directly related to the Soviet intervention in 1979 and had its peak in the mid-1980s. The exile still continued between 1985 and the beginning of the nineties, but during the same period more than 1.5 million Afghans returned. The second half of the nineties brought an extreme drought that forced thousands of Afghans to flee their homes in search of food and water. The Afghans remaining in Pakistan and Iran originated primarily from rural areas, where they had been small farmers, village artisans and tenants, or were lower middle-class shopkeepers, civil servants and bazaar craftsmen (Boesen 1990: 160). Some of the middle class people managed to continue their journey to industrialised countries



Afghan refugees in Central-Iran (Photo: Marije Braakman)

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<sup>1</sup> A 13<sup>th</sup> century conqueror.

<sup>2</sup> In terms of the Geneva Convention of 1951, a refugee is someone “who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted ... is outside [his or her] country of nationality” (Article 1, Geneva Convention 1951). In common usage, the term ‘refugee’ has a much broader coverage and refers to a person who is uprooted as a result of war or political oppression. In this study, unless an explicit distinction is made between asylum seekers and recognised refugees, this broader definition of refugees as forced migrants is used.

in later years (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 2000b: 153).

Around 70% of the Afghans that had sought refuge in Pakistan were ethnic Pashtuns of rural origin (Immig and Van Heugten 2000: 47). Three-quarters of them were women and children (Dupree 1990: 121). Millions of rural Afghans ended up in refugee camps in Pakistan's North-Western Frontier Province, where they became dependent on aid supplies, provided to them by one of the numerous international aid agencies that had sprung up around Peshawar. Members of the former urban middle class tried to build a self-sufficient existence in the cities (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 2000b: 153). In recent years, international aid has almost dried up. There have been increasing signs that 'asylum fatigue' has led to pressures on Afghan refugees to return. Sections of several refugee camps have been evicted and closed down. Pakistani authorities are increasingly harsh towards Afghan refugees, subjecting them to arbitrary detention, bribery and physical harassment. (Amnesty International 2003: 7-8, Website United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants).



Afghan boys in Karachi, Pakistan (Photo: Marije Braakman)

In Iran, only a few percent of the refugees have lived in camps. Although most Afghans are living in the border provinces, many are scattered throughout Iran, in cities as well as rural areas. Most of them are Shiite Hazara, or belong to other Persian speaking groups and originate from Herat, Farah and north-western and central provinces (Website USCRI). In Iran, where employment opportunities were higher but humanitarian assistance by NGO's was almost absent, the percentage of males has always been much higher than among refugees in Pakistan (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 2000b: 160). A number of Afghan men found work as manual labourers, often at construction sites. However, the 'asylum fatigue' in Iran is even more disturbing than in Pakistan. The Iranian government and civilians appeared increasingly intolerant and hostile towards Afghans. By the mid-1990s, most refugees were no longer eligible for regular education, health services and food rations. A majority are either undocumented or hold a temporary registration card and are increasingly restricted in earning a livelihood. The situation of Afghans in Iran deteriorated even further after the fall of the Taliban. Many residence permits were revoked. While the UNHCR have tried to develop voluntary repatriation schemes, there have been numerous reports of arbitrary arrests, physical harassments and forced repatriations by the Iranian authorities, even for those with an UNHCR refugee status (Amnesty International 2003: 8-9; Website USCRI).

Besides these large refugee populations in Iran and Pakistan, the Central Asian republics Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, as well as India and Russia are host to considerable numbers of Afghan refugees. Most of the 150 thousand Afghans residing in Russia left their country when Najibullah, the last communist president, was removed from power by the Mujaheddin troops in 1992 (Merau 2002). India proved to be a destination for

Afghan Hindus and Sikhs, as well as for Afghans affiliated with the communist regime (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 2000b: 161).

### **Afghan Refugees in the West**

A second type of emigration, however, is important to this study. This was a selective and elite one to the West. A minority of a few hundred thousand refugees were able to reach Europe, North-America, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. Most of them belonged to the wealthy, urban, educated Pashtun or Tajik elite and middle classes, especially from the capital Kabul. The extreme rich mostly sought refuge in Canada and the USA, and the middle classes in Europe. Many had a direct link to the government, be it as a government employee or at an ideological level by the adherence to the politics of a certain regime and have followed a secondary or higher education in Afghanistan or abroad (Boesen 1990: 160; Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 2000b: 153, 157; Gehrig 1999: 184). Between 1994 and 2004, 238 thousand of Afghans applied for asylum in industrialized countries. Most of them, around 50 thousand, came to Germany, followed by 36 thousand who went to the Netherlands. The other important destinations were the U.K., Austria, Hungary and Denmark (Website UNHCR). Exact figures about the number of Afghans in Western countries are almost impossible to obtain, one of the reasons being that many of them became nationals in their country of residence. Thirty-year-old Mahmud's story is only one out of those thousands:

After the murder of his father, a member of an influential and wealthy family, Mahmud left the country in 1980 with his family. He was seven years old when he finally arrived in Germany: "We couldn't leave Afghanistan in a normal way, because our family was well-known. We dressed up like a trucker's family. First, we crossed Jalalabad. Fighting was intense over there. On the border to Pakistan, there was a checkpoint. An officer said: 'You aren't a trucker's family, are you? Your language is different. Wait, I'll order a Mercedes to pick you up and drive you to prison'. My brother was taken away for interrogation [...]. These moments of fear are still on my mind. That my brother was taken away... a lot of men disappeared this way. I will never forget how the truck driver was swearing at me, because I was talking too loud and told everybody my name. As a child, you hear it all. Moments you can't describe. I experienced a lot." After paying a bribe in the form of a precious carpet, the family continued its journey to relatives in Pakistan. But Pakistan turned out to be no safe heaven either, and the flight was continued by airplane, to Germany, where an uncle was already residing. "In the plane, my mother was crying constantly, for being so far away from her country now."

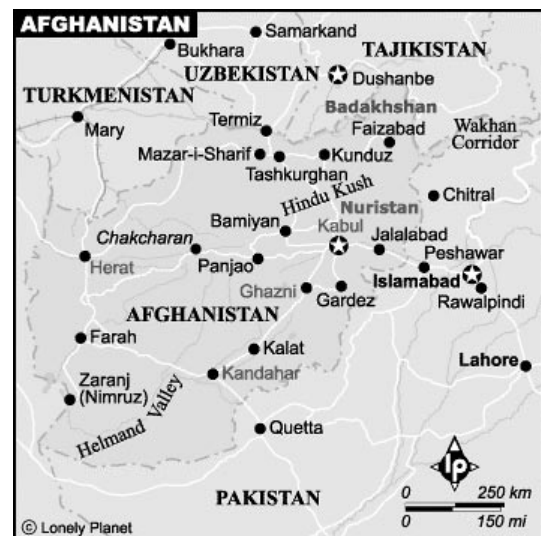
This chapter aims to place Mahmud's flight, as well as those of thousands of others to Germany, into a broader context. Ethnical, geographical, religious, urban-rural and ideological contradictions all play a role in understanding Afghanistan's turbulent history and the events that led to such a mass displacement of Afghans. After a short introduction to Afghanistan's geographical and social structure, three major waves of refugees into Germany and other Western countries will be placed into a historical context. The last paragraph will focus on Germany as a destination.

## **1.2 AFGHANISTAN'S SOCIAL STRUCTURE**

'Fragmentation' seems to be the keyword when describing Afghanistan's social geography and ethnical, social and political structures. The population of Afghanistan is estimated at 21 to over 27 million. Around 80% are dependent on agriculture and live in rural areas. However, only 12% of Afghanistan's 652.225 square kilometres of land are suitable for agriculture. Afghanistan is surrounded by Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan,

Tajikistan and China, and has cold winters and warm summers. The high mountains of the Hindu Kush and the Kuh-e Baba cover the northeast and centre of the country. Vast stone and sand deserts are found in the west and southwest, where rainfall is scarce. Other major cities besides the capital Kabul are Qandahar, Mazar-e Sharif, Herat and Jalalabad. The country is 19 times the size of the Netherlands, and is divided into 32 provinces (Dupree 1973: 1-5; Website Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Vogelsang 2002: 74). The two official languages are Dari and Pashto, but many more local languages are spoken. The average yearly income and life expectancy rates are extremely low, and infant mortality rates and illiteracy, especially among females, are extraordinarily high.<sup>3</sup>

The area that is now called Afghanistan used to be an important centre of Buddhist culture, until Islam made its entrance at the end of the seventh century. Nowadays, almost all Afghans are Muslims. Religion, therefore, is probably the most important binding factor in Afghanistan. Islam was the most significant force uniting the resistance against the communist regime. However, Islam can also act as a differentiating factor. Most Afghans, approximately 85% are Sunnites, whereas the Hazara, Farsiwan from around Herat, Mountain Tajiks and Qizilbash, mainly from Kabul, are Shiites.<sup>4</sup> Most Afghans practise a more tolerant, Hanafite, version of Sunna. There are also some adherers of Ismaeli Islam (a Shia split off) and Sufism, a mystical branch of Islam. Hindus, Sikhs and Jews formed a few percent of Afghanistan's population; most of them have found shelter outside Afghanistan during the last decades (Dupree 1973: 101-103; Website Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Vogelsang 2002: 55-59).



The ethnic constellation of Afghanistan reflects centuries of migrations from other parts of Asia as well as more recent internal migrations. The geographical features of Afghanistan, with its sky-scraping mountain ranges, deserts and isolated valleys, allowed many communities to preserve their distinct identity and a certain level of autonomy. Approximately 40% of the population are Pashtuns and form the largest as well as the hierarchically highest placed ethnic group. They practise the Sunni variant of Islam and the majority speak Pashto. These Pashtuns primarily populate the south and southeast of Afghanistan and are sub-divided into different tribes, of which the Durrani and Ghilzai are the most important. Almost all rulers of Afghanistan have been Durrani Pashtuns. Tajiks, who form the second-largest but very heterogeneous ethnic group, are mostly found in the northeast, the west in and around Herat, and south-eastern provinces including Kabul. They speak Dari, a dialect of Persian, and are mostly Sunnis. Little tribal organisation exists among them. The two biggest Turkic-speaking

<sup>3</sup> According to 2004's National Human Development Report, life expectancy is 44.5 years. Literacy is 43% in men and 14% in women. One out of five children dies before the age of five. The average annual income was \$190 in 2004, but was distributed very unequally (UNDP 2004).

<sup>4</sup> A division of the Islamic community into Sunnites and Shiites arose shortly after the death of the prophet Mohammad in 632 AD. Abu Bakr, a close associate of Mohammad, was appointed as Mohammad's successor. Shiites, however, only recognise direct descendants of Mohammed as his successors. For them, Mohammad's son-in-law Ali is an important figure. Whereas in Sunna doctrine the tasks of religious leaders are limited and believers are directly responsible to God, Shiism is much more hierarchical with Shiite Imams and their deputies functioning as infallible spiritual leaders, appointed by God (Van Koningsveld 1996: 116-120).

groups are Uzbeks and Turkmens, predominantly residing in the north and northwest of Afghanistan. Central Afghanistan is the heartland of the Hazara, a Shiite minority that has faced much discrimination during Afghan history. Other ethnic groups include the Aimaq, Arabs, Qizilbash, Kirghiz, Brahui, Ahl-e Honud (Hindus and Sikhs) and Baluchi (Connor 1989: 912-916; Dupree 1973: 59-64).<sup>5</sup>



Bamyan in Central-Afghanistan (Source: Unknown)

This ethnic pluralism is not the sole key factor to understand Afghanistan's history and conflicts. Afghanistan's social order is highly stratified and hierarchical. This hierarchy is based on gender, age, family background and class. The fundamental economic and social unit is the extended family (Nawa 2001: 6). "People see themselves as part of their family system, religious sect and village, but also as part of a tribe, region, and finally, country," Nawa (2001: 26) states. A chief level of identification and socio-political organisation, especially among Pashtuns, has always been the *qawm*. *Qawm* is often translated as 'ethnic group' or 'tribe', but its connotations can be far broader, meaning 'nation', or narrower, referring to the extended family, descent group, linguistic, regional or occupational group or caste, or the inhabitants of the same valley or village. The *qawm* provides a network for cooperation and protection against outsiders (Orywal 1988: 38; Tapper 1988: 25-31; Vogelsang 2000: 29). Since 1979 ethnicity has however gained more and more importance as a source of political

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<sup>5</sup> Schetter argues that it is impossible to calculate how many ethnic groups exist and how large they are. Afghanistan's ethnic groups are not solid clear-cut cultural units that exist since time immemorial. Ethnic boundaries are fuzzy. According to Schetter, it was not until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century that foreign researchers and the Afghan government started to divide Afghan society systematically into distinct ethnic categories. The term Tajik, for example, was a creation to refer to those non-tribal Persian speaking Sunnites who did not belong to any other social category. The leading Afghanistan specialist Dupree (1973) identified 21 distinct ethnic groups. A German survey counted 54 and a

mobilisation (Schetter 1999: 91; Vogelsang 2002: 29; Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 2000a: 419, 425). Tribal solidarity and identity is in general weaker among the urban population, where people have access to non-kin networks (Nawa 2001: 27).

The distinction between the urban areas and the countryside is also relevant for other reasons. Throughout Afghanistan's history, modernisations supported by the urban educated elite met with severe resistance from the conservative and predominantly illiterate population in the countryside, where an opposition to centralized authority still prevails today. Only a fraction of the total population of Afghanistan belonged to the elite and middle classes. The old elite consisted of approximately 3 thousand persons in the early 1970s. The entire middle class numbered perhaps 1 million people (Dupree 1973 in: Suhrke and Klink 1987: 95). This contradiction between city and countryside is likely to cause problems again in the future. Kabul has been, and is again becoming, a city with a cosmopolitan character that offers education, employment, health services and access to information. In contrast to this, most villages are still isolated due to the bad infrastructure and a lack of security. They barely profit from economic growth and foreign assistance (Vogelsang 2002: 68).

### **1.3 A HISTORY OF THE WAR AND THE WAVES OF REFUGEES**

“My children asked me what I was going to tell at this lecture. I said I didn't know yet. Every time when I think I am informed about the current situation in Afghanistan, I look on the Internet and something new has happened. Then my son said: 'Just tell them how old you are and how many presidents you have lived under'. Together we counted. I am 46 years old now, I lived in Afghanistan for 24 years and I have experienced 13 different head of states.”

(Shafiq at a lecture on Afghanistan in a public library)

#### **Until 1973: The Kingdom of Afghanistan**

“In Afghanistan's history there has never been a leader that was good to his people. A big merit of Zaher Khan is that for 40 years there wasn't any war. That's already quite a thing.”

(Jamil)

The borders of present-day Afghanistan were drawn after two Anglo-Afghan wars at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The eastern border, which still divides the heartland of the Pashtuns into an Afghan and a Pakistani part, was fixed by the Durand treaty of 1893 (Vogelsang 2002: 15-16). Between 1919 and 1973, Afghanistan was a constitutional monarchy, although a national bond or sense of citizenship was almost non-existent among its population (Magnus and Naby 1998: 40). King Amanullah carried out a number of radical modernist reforms during the 1920's. These reforms that were inspired by Atatürk's Turkey, met with an increasing resistance by conservative Islamic tribal leaders. In 1929, Amanullah was forced to flee the capital. The Tajik rebel leader Bacha-ye Saqqao seized power. Nine months later, he was chased away by a tribal army led by General Mohammad Nader Khan (Immig and Van Heugten 2000: 10-11). Nader Khan, belonging to the Musahiban lineage of the Durrani Pashtuns, was proclaimed Shah, King of Afghanistan (Dupree 1973: 458-460).

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Soviet study 200 different ethnic groups (Schetter 2003: 1-3). Notwithstanding such critical views, it cannot be denied that the categorisation into the ethnic groups that I mentioned is now quite current, among foreign researchers, governments and Afghan people themselves alike.

Zaher Shah inherited the throne when his father Nader Shah was murdered in 1933. Zaher Shah's regime was characterised by a rapid development of the Afghan state. The number of people employed in the public sector grew strongly. Other sectors of the economy, such as agriculture and industry, were not able to absorb the growing number of young educated adults. Until 1963, Zaher Shah himself was a rather passive monarch. Members of his extended family administered the country, mainly as prime ministers (Magnus and Naby 1998: 45). His cousin Daoud Khan was appointed as prime minister in 1953. His plans for social, emancipatory, educational and military reform required funding and advisors. In ten years time, he was able to obtain 552 million dollars of credit and aid from the Soviet Union and 350 million from the United States. Daoud was a strong advocate of a larger Afghanistan, including the Pashtun areas of Pakistan. This Pashtunistan issue seriously deteriorated ties with Pakistan that had recently gained independence from Great Britain. Because of his unpopular foreign and interior politics, his family forced him to resign as prime minister in 1963 (Magnus and Naby 1998: 46-47; Immig and Van Heugten 2000: 13).

As an answer to the increasing call for political reforms, a new liberal constitution was adopted in 1964, allowing freedom of press, religion and assembly. The parliamentary elections of 1965 that resulted in a conservative and anti-reformist parliament were a disappointment for the emerging urban middle-class of educated people who voiced a growing resentment towards the political and economical power of a small royal elite. When the ban on political parties was lifted, they channelled their protest into radical urban and university-based communist parties of Maoist or Soviet orientation, as well as into radical Islamic groups inspired by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. One of the parties that was founded was the Soviet-oriented DVPA, Democratic Party of the People of Afghanistan. It broke up into two factions in 1968: the *Khalq* [The People], headed by Nur Mohammed Taraki and Babrak Karmal's *Parcham* [The Flag]. The Islamist groups would form the core leadership for the diverse parties that later fought the Soviets. In Kabul, an increasingly heated political struggle developed. Amidst these tensions, the former prime minister Daoud Khan staged a coup with the help of *Parcham*. He overthrew his cousin Zaher Shah and proclaimed the Republic of Afghanistan with himself as president (Immig and Van Heugten 2000: 14-15; Vogelsang 2002: 19-20).

### **1973-1992: Revolutions and Soviet Occupation – The First Wave of Refugees**

“One evening, my father didn't return home from his work. He was a well-know man, and had criticized the communists openly. We have never heard of him again.”

(Tamana)

Daoud counted on the support of the Marxists, especially on the Karmal's *Parcham* faction. He used their help to eliminate the Islamic resistance. As soon as that mission was completed, Daoud tried to set the Marxists aside and removed them from their positions within the government. The reaction to this was that *Parcham* and *Khalq* joined hands to stage a coup, in which Daoud was killed. This coup took place on the 27<sup>th</sup> of April 1978 and became known as the Saur Revolution. The rural population of Afghanistan did not agree with the radical Marxist reforms in the field of agriculture, education, nationalization and the emancipation of women. Armed revolts broke out in a large number of provinces. At the same time, the radical *Khalq* faction was trying to eliminate the *Parcham* faction. Thousands of opponents were executed or tortured in prison. In 1979, president Taraki was replaced by Hafizullah Amin, another *Khalqi*. In September of that year, both Taraki and Amin were executed.

At the moment that a flood of nationwide resistance threatened to overthrow the communist regime, the Soviet Union intervened to save their 'satellite state'. In December 1979, Soviet troops entered the country. The U.S.S.R. installed Karmal as president, but he did not succeed in restoring order in the country. Several Islamic guerrilla groups formed to fight the Soviet occupation. These *Mujaheddin*, or 'fighters of the Holy War' used Pakistan as a home base and were supported by Pakistan, the United States, European and Middle-Eastern countries and China (Vogelsang 2002: 20-22; Immig and Van Heugten 2000: 17-22; Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 2000a: 419). Meanwhile, the exodus of refugees had begun. In 1986, the new Soviet president Gorbachev had decided that his troops should retreat from Afghanistan. Karmal was replaced by Mohammad Najibullah. Najibullah, known by the Afghans as Dr. Najib, had been the head of the KHAD, the military intelligence service responsible for thousands of disappearances and executions. After many international negotiations and internal and external pressure, the Soviet troops began to retreat in February 1989. The powerful statesman Najibullah held onto power until April 1992, when the Mujaheddin forces of the Tajik general Ahmadshah Massoud and the Uzbek general Rashid Dostum finally managed to enter Kabul (Vogelsang 2002: 22-23; Immig and Van Heugten 2000: 23-36).

"The communists worked for Russia; they killed 2.5 million people and disabled 3 million. I was born in a village in the Panjshir. On a certain day, when I was 13 years old, 70 helicopters dropped 60 bombs in our valley. In the village, 300 women and children died. It weren't the Russians. It were Afghans who did that."

(Rafiq Jan, originating from an anti-Soviet stronghold)

"We were not communists, we were democrats. Real communism just cannot be introduced in an illiterate country like Afghanistan. During the time of the *Hezb* [Hezb-e Parcham], for the first time, people were being helped. Food coupons and food were being distributed. Women were free."

(Nadra, a *Parcham* adherent)

The massive refugee wave to Pakistan and Iran between 1978 and 1992 can be linked to the events around the 1978 coup, the Russian invasion in 1979, the introduction of new national military service regulations in 1981-82 as well as several attempts by the Kabul government to destroy opposition bases (Connor 1989: 918). The obligatory education of women and other communist policies forcing the emancipation of women were other reasons for Afghans to flee the country in the winter of 1978-79, in order to protect the honour of their female kin (Centlivres-Demont 1994: 346). A peak was reached in 1981 (Dupree 1990: 2-3). After the withdrawal of the Russians in 1989 and the taking of power by the Mujaheddin in 1992, many of them returned to Afghanistan. For example, in the year 1992 alone, 1.6 million Afghans left Iran and Pakistan (Haut Commissariat des Nations Unies pour les Réfugiés 2000: 19).

The peak of the elite migration to the West which is of importance to this study, probably occurred in the first three years, in the wake of the Marxist coup and Soviet invasion. Afghans that sought refuge in Germany and other Western countries between 1978 and 1989 belonged to a westernised intelligentsia of professors, high functionaries, rich merchants and university students who did not support the Marxists (Gehrig 1999: 184; Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 2000b: 156). Often, these were prominent Pashtuns whose families resided in the DVPA-controlled cities of Kabul, Qandahar and Jalalabad (Naby 2005: 173). Many of them had been educated in one of the schools and universities linked to Western countries and where the language of instruction had been English, French or German; others had received a scholarship to study abroad. Some had worked for

American enterprises or organisations that were present in Afghanistan during the monarchy or the period of Daoud (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 2000b: 156). The shifts in the communist regimes subsequently evoked the flight of Maoists, Khalqis and Parchamis (Naby 2005: 177).

### **1992-1996: The Mujaheddin in Power – A Second Wave of Refugees**

“When the war started, life became very difficult. When the Mujaheddin conquered the city [Kabul], we were locked in at home. We were frightened of the rockets. We armoured all windows with blankets. At the beginning, we cooked by oil; when that had run out, we used wood. For two months, we didn’t eat any meat. Once we peeled potatoes and discovered the Mujaheddin had injected them with poison. They did the same to fruit and vegetables. In any case, it was too dangerous to leave the house and buy fresh vegetables. When the quarter [Mikrorayan, Kabul] was taken over by [the Uzbek Mujahed] Dostum, life became a bit better. For a while, people were able to go on the streets. I had to wear a *chādri* [large headscarf]. When, for a few days, there was a truce, everybody escaped from Mikrorayan. We fled to Kārt-e Chahār [another Kabuli quarter], where we lived for a while. We all were afraid of the Mujaheddin. They could enter the house by force and steal all wooden doors, cupboards and other things made of wood. They sold the wood on the market and walked off with the money.”

(Ziba)

The second wave of refugees to the West took place between 1992 and 1996. After the fall of Najibullah, an interim government was formed, headed by the Tajik Burhannudin Rabbani. The violent war between the communist regime, its Soviet backers and the resistance fighters had devastated many parts of the country, but spared Kabul. Now that their common enemy had been defeated, the different Mujaheddin groups, who had never united politically and whose members had become accustomed to an existence as warriors began to fight each other, and Kabul became the stage of intense fighting. The Pashtun groups in particular were very divided among themselves. Furthermore, Pakistan’s favourite Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s *Hezb-e Islami*, Dostum’s *Jombesh-e Melli* and the *Hezb-e Wahdat* of the Hazara Karim Khalili did not accept the dominant position of Rabbani and Ahmad Shah Massud, both Tajiks from the *Jamiat-e Islami*, and refused to acknowledge the interim government. Many parts of the city were completely destroyed, each Mujaheddin group having taken position in a different quarter of the city. Afghanistan’s neighbouring countries each supported its own favourite group. The government’s authority outside Kabul was trifling. The north-western part of Afghanistan remained in control of Dostum, while warlord Ismael Khan had much influence in and around Herat and local Pashtun warlords and drug barons fought each other in the southeast (Vogelsang 2002: 22-23; Website Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Immig and Van Heugten 2000: 36-40).

“I have learned a lot, because I was allowed to experience a lot... From every bomb, from every night that I spent awake, because it was raining rockets, from every moment that I feared for the life of my family and of myself, from every scream of the poor *Qala-ye Zamānkhānis*, that sought shelter in the cellars of Makrorayan [Kabul], because Qalai Zamānkhāna [Kabul] was set on fire, from the tears of which many dried in my eyes and many covered my face... Desperate mothers, crying for their children, despaired fathers that came home empty-handed, and their children that didn’t have anything to eat.”

(Roya, at that time a child, in an email)

The fear of the bombs and rockets, as well as the risk of being accused of having supported the communist and ‘atheist’ enemy prompted those affiliated with the *Khalq* or *Parcham* regime or employed as civil servants to seek refuge in the West. Not having taken up arms or having joined a resistance party could be enough reason for civilians to be suspected of communist loyalties. During the same period, many Afghan students at universities in the former Soviet Union and Eastern bloc countries moved to Western countries when the Berlin Wall fell.

Many Afghan employees of international non-governmental organisations also managed to escape to Western countries (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 2000b: 156; Gehrig 1999: 184; Gehrig and Monsutti 2003: 11).

### **1994-2001: The Rise of the Taliban – A Third Wave of Refugees**

“Why are the Taliban in Afghanistan? Why couldn’t they just be somewhere else?”

(Nazhla, 12)

A third wave of refugees to Western countries arose when the *Taliban* captured Kabul in 1996. The *Taliban*, literally ‘religious students’, were originally young Pashtuns from the countryside. They had gathered around the charismatic Mullah Mohammed Omar Akhund from Qandahar. Most of them had been raised in local Islamic schools in the Afghan-Pakistani border areas, estranged from the mitigating influence of women, family and village. In those schools, they had been educated in a rigid Wahhabist or Deoband Sunni interpretation of Islam and *shari’a*, religious law. In 1994, the Taliban established themselves in Qandahar. Pakistan realised that the group it had been supporting for years, Hekmatyar’s *Hezb-e Islami*, would never be able to capture Kabul and bring peace to Afghanistan. Support was therefore shifted to the Taliban. The Taliban promised to end the fighting and restore law and order under the *shari’a*. Rapidly, the Taliban were able to take command in large parts of the country. Financial and military support from Pakistan and Arab countries, as well as the fact that most Afghans longed for peace and stability, played a role in this quick advance. In September 1995, Herat’s warlord Ismael Khan was defeated and in September 1996, the Taliban took Kabul. Two years later, Mazar-e Sharif fell into their hands; the local governor Dostum sought shelter abroad. From out of their stronghold in the Panjshir valley, Massud and Rabbani continued to fight against the Taliban, but they could not escape seeing their territory diminishing quickly (Vogelsang 2002: 23-24; Immig and Van Heugten 2000: 41-67).

Wherever they gained control, the Taliban disarmed local warlords and imposed their rigid laws, based on their literal interpretation of the *shari’a*. Trespassers of the law were punished by amputation, stoning and execution. Women were banned from public life, and girls were no longer allowed to follow an education. Music, television, images of living beings and kite flying were forbidden, and strict dress codes for both men and women were introduced. Within the rural Pashtun dominated provinces, the ideas of the Taliban did not meet much resistance. In Kabul and other cities where life styles were more liberal, the Taliban rules were conceived of as alien. The United States turned a blind eye on their repressive practices, in the hope that they would provide access to the mineral reserves of Central Asia. Afghanistan disappeared from the international agenda of policy makers and donor countries. At the end of 1997, however, when the Taliban refused to hand over the Saudi multi-millionaire Osama Bin Laden who was in residence in Afghanistan and who was held responsible for attacks on American embassies in Tanzania and Kenya and on an American military ship in Yemen, the United States officially took position against them and bombed several of Bin Laden’s training camps. The United Nations proclaimed a growing number of sanctions against Afghanistan, which isolated the country more and more from the outer world. In the spring of 2001, the Taliban caught the attention of the world by destroying two ancient Buddha statues in Bamian, Central-Afghanistan. Two days before the attack on New York’s World Trade Towers which shocked the world community, Massud was killed in a suicide attack by two supporters of Bin Laden (Vogelsang 2002: 24-25, 27; Website Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Immig and Van Heugten 2000: 76-88).

Afghans that fled to the West during this period were middle-class urban educated Afghans that felt themselves forced to flee because of the alien and repressive Taliban measures that posed security concerns, as well as the lack of livelihood and education opportunities. A number of them had been employed by international NGO's. In addition, ethnic and religious minorities, particularly Shiite Hazara and Ismaelites, persecuted by the Taliban sought their way out of Afghanistan. The latter were assisted by their richer co-religionists in Pakistan and by organisations of their wealthy religious leader, the Aga Khan (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 2000b: 157; Gehrig 1999: 184). There was also a considerable group of less educated middle-class Afghans that fled to the West to join their relatives there (Tietjens 2002: 8).

### 2001 Until Now: The Karzai Era

“My uncle flew over Pakistan to Kabul. When he returned, he had negative stories. In the beginning, when the Taliban were gone, there was euphoria: now there is freedom, America is supporting us! But then we came back to earth again. Those who return [on a visit] are rich; they can spend lots of money. But for the people who live there, from their view, it's totally different. They don't have money and work.”

(Javad)



The flag of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan for sale at a seminar (Photo: Marije Braakman)

Immediately after the '9/11' events, Afghanistan was placed on the world map again as the hotbed of terrorism. The 'War against Terrorism' that was launched by the United States and their allies brought a quick end to the Taliban era. The oppositional forces that were amalgamated under the name of the Northern Alliance and controlled only 5% of Afghanistan at that moment, received American support in the form of weaponry, intelligence and advisors. At the same time, American airplanes bombed alleged Taliban and Al-Qaida positions. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of November, Mazar-e Sharif fell, and three days later Herat. On the 13<sup>th</sup> of November, the Taliban retreated from Kabul. Qandahar was taken over on the 7<sup>th</sup> of December. In December 2001, an international conference was held in the German city of Bonn. Participants of this conference were representatives of the anti-Taliban militia forces that assisted the Allied Forces, representatives of the former king Zahir Shah, and representatives of other groups of exiled Afghans. They elected the Pashtun Hamid Karzai, a U.S. national, as

head of the interim government (Vogelsang 2002: 25-28).

Several militia leaders and remnants of past military forces who had assisted the Allied Forces in bringing down the Taliban were granted important positions within the government. Among them were the Uzbek commandant Dostum, the self-appointed Emir of Herat Ismael Khan and the Tajik Marshal Fahim, who at the same time undermined central authority and peace by maintaining their local strongholds and private militias. At the time of my interviews, this power of warlords was a major concern of many Afghans inside and outside Afghanistan. In both 2002 and 2003, a Loya Jirga, or National Council, took place. A new constitution was put into force in January 2004. In the summer of 2004, Karzai managed to diminish the power of two important warlords. Fahim was dismissed from his post as vice president and Khan as the governor of Herat. In many areas, however, local

and regional leaders are still more powerful than the government. Clashes between regional leaders frequently occur. Local military and police forces, even in Kabul, have been involved in killings, arbitrary arrests, property confiscation, human rights abuses, rapes of women, girls and boys, bribery, kidnapping etcetera. The economy is still dominated by the opium trade. In the south and south-east Taliban remnants and other antigovernment forces are active (Website Human Rights Watch). The International Security Assistance Force troops are stationed in Kabul, Kunduz and Faizabad (Website Bundesregierung Online). American military forces are still active in other parts of Afghanistan, hunting down affiliates of the Taliban and Al-Qaida.

Karzai was re-elected during Afghanistan's first-ever presidential election, which took place on October the 9th 2004 (Website HRW). In December 2004, Karzai announced a new cabinet of 26 ministers. With the exception of Ismael Khan who has been given a relatively weak post as minister of energy, the new ministers are relatively undisputed technocrats rather than warlords. The most important posts are occupied by Pashtuns. Tajiks and Hazaras are well represented, whereas Uzbeks are underrepresented. Three ministers are women. Parliamentary elections are scheduled for September 2005. Despite some minor improvements, Afghanistan continues to suffer from serious instability, violent outbursts and extremely low living standards (Website Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs). Twenty-four years of war have created a practically uneducated generation that is used to war and violence. All Afghans have relatives and friends that are either deceased, exiled or handicapped. The country has not enough capacity, in the form of housing, food, drinking water and health care, to absorb all the returning refugees. Although the international community has promised to donate millions of aid dollars, just a part of that amount has actually been transferred. Reconstruction and redevelopment efforts have started to take shape in some areas, but these form only the beginning. The infrastructure, economy, industry, education and health care systems are completely devastated, agricultural land is covered by live landmines and almost all educated Afghans reside abroad. All in all, the future of Afghanistan is still extremely insecure.

Afghans continue to form the largest refugee population worldwide, with the exception of the Palestinians. The U.S. bombings and a severe drought uprooted thousands of Afghans. Since 2002 however, more than 2.5 million Afghans have returned from Pakistan and more than 1.2 million from Iran. In Pakistan, just under a million Afghan camp refugees are registered by the UNHCR. In addition, an estimated 1.9 million Afghans live an independent life in urban areas in Pakistan. Around a million Afghans have remained in Iran. The number of asylum applications in Western countries sank dramatically during the last years. Those who do claim asylum do not have much chance of being accepted. In Germany, the number of asylum applications has decreased from 5.850 in 2001 to 900 in 2004 (Website UNHCR).

## **1.4 DESTINATION GERMANY**

### **The Relationship between Afghanistan and Germany**

“I came here because I thought that Afghanistan and Germany are friendly nations. Intimate friends, for already 200 years. We share the same blood, as Aryans.”<sup>6</sup>

(Rafiq Jan)

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<sup>6</sup> Afghanistan's historical name is *Aryāna*, land of the Aryans. Before Hitler, Aryan was a synonym for Indo-Germanic. Because of the misuse of the term by national-socialists, who used the term to refer to a Germanic superior race, for Europeans the word Aryan has taken on

“I originate from Zazai, a village in Pakhtia. There is a blood bond between the Germans and us: we are Aryub.<sup>7</sup> And my father was a car dealer. He had been to Germany several times and told us many good things about the country. I would have a good future over there.”

(Akbar)

A main reason why Germany became a favoured destination for Afghans on the run was the historical relationship between the two nations, dating back to the 1920's. Until the Soviet invasion, Germany played a considerable role in Afghanistan's modernisation processes. In Kabul in 1924, the Amani secondary school opened its doors. Education took place in German and teachers from Germany were employed. A number of graduates were able to continue their studies in Germany. German experts were active in the fields of road building, water supply, electricity, construction, telecommunication and radio (Najibi and Hamed 1986: 12).



The Armani secondary school in Kabul (Source: <http://www.zfa-kabul.dasan.de>)

After a short intermission during the Second World War, in which Afghanistan retained its neutral position, amicable co-operation between Afghanistan and Western Germany was intensified. Between 1950 and 1978, substantial numbers of Afghan students received an education at the BRD (Najibi and Hamed 1986: 12-13). Afghan traders settled in Hamburg and Munich (Hamed 2003: 5). The Soviet invasion brought decades of co-operation to a quick end. German experts, diplomats and

teachers at the Amani high school left the country (Najibi and Hamed 1986: 11). During the communist occupation, Western Germany offered humanitarian aid to the needy Afghans in Afghanistan and abroad (Hamed 2003: 10). During this period, Eastern Germany granted a number of Afghans scholarships (Bindemann 1994: 20-21). Considering these historical ties between Afghanistan and Germany, it was no more than logical that when war broke out in Afghanistan and Afghans had to escape, a number of them choose to come to Germany.

### **The Journey to Germany**

Although the flight was forced, many Afghans anticipated and planned it. In order to meet the *qāchāqbar*'s [smuggler] demands, important sums of money<sup>8</sup> had to be collected, with the help of relatives and other contacts residing in Afghanistan or abroad (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 2000b: 158). Many families became dispersed, as they were not able to escape all together. Many times, a young man was sent first in order to pave the way for the rest of the family (Zulfacar 1998: 108-109). This explains the higher percentage of men among the total Afghan population in Germany: 56% in 2001 (Tietjens 2002: 10). Family reunions depend on the conditions of immigration and installation in the different receiving countries, on intermediates and on the possibilities of acquiring financial means (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 2000b: 158-161; Gehrig 1999: 184-185). For example, the first Afghans arriving in Northern California in the 1980s were part of the wealthy and highly educated elite. Family reunion brought their less educated middle-class relatives and even a small group with a traditional and rural background (Omidian and Lipson 1997: 112). In the majority of cases, it is impossible for the entire extended family to re-settle together all in one country or city. Family and kinship ties

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another meaning. Afghans do not attach the notion to Hitler's atrocities and use it in the original sense. I met several Afghans who proudly declared themselves Aryans. Afghanistan's national airlines company is called Ariana, and Aryan is a common male name.

<sup>7</sup> The Aryub are a Pashto tribe.

have thus moved to a global space, and Afghans find that their most important kin and friends are just as likely to be living on the other side of the world as close by them (Centlivres, Centlivres-Demont and Gehrig 2000: 274). They are often able to actively maintain these spatially extended relations. Afghans in Western countries are often morally obligated to financially support kin in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Only a lucky few of the Afghans now residing in Germany arrived directly at Frankfurt Airport. The majority of the Afghans I talked to had a long route behind them. During the flight, intermediate stops had to be made, sometimes lasting up to months or years. Only a small minority managed to reach the West directly, without first passing through and spending some time in Pakistan, Russia, Iran, India, Eastern Europe, Central Asia or an Arab country.<sup>9</sup> I even met Afghans who had spent time in China, Egypt and Malaysia. The final destination did not always correspond to the initial decision (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 2000b: 160-161). Germany was just meant to be an in-between stop on the way to England, the States or Canada for some refugees (Zulfacar 1998: 91). Some deliberately chose to come to Germany, while others did not know exactly where they were heading. Below, five short flight narratives are presented.

*Shabi unjā, sahar injā  
Pedar unjā, pesar injā  
Hama dast ba dawā'i ko  
khodā jān key shawim yak jā*

There in the evening, here by dawn  
There the father, here the son  
Let us all pray  
Dear God, when will we all be at one place?

(Fragment of a song by Ahmad Parwez)

28-year old Faranaz, born and raised in Herat, had travelled greatly before she and her family finally reached Germany:

“We really had a good life in Afghanistan. Much better than in Germany. We had a very big house. My father was a carpet-dealer and earned a lot of money. But during the war, my father died. My mother stayed alone with me, my sisters and two little brothers. In Afghanistan, a woman alone cannot survive. We escaped to Pakistan. When we came there, my mother called my uncle and asked him to come to Pakistan too, to protect the family. He had to work for us, but he wasn't able to provide for two families. It was said that the situation in Afghanistan had improved. We decided to return, but Afghanistan turned out to be very dangerous. Our house and the carpet shop were robbed completely. For two weeks, the whole family sat in one room, while outside rockets were smashing in. We were in constant fear. The toilet was outside, but we didn't use it out of fear to leave the house. Again we escaped to Pakistan. Like this, we commuted between Afghanistan and Pakistan a few times, every time a few weeks here and then a few weeks there,” Faranaz recounts. “We couldn't believe the situation to become better soon. And in Pakistan, my uncle couldn't provide for the whole family. We asked my relatives in Holland to lend us money. They didn't have it and lent it from another man. After arrival [in Europe], we would have to work and earn back the money.”

Almost all Shiite Herati families I have met had lived in Iran for several years. Their children were often born in Iran. As the situation of Afghan refugees in Iran worsened, Afghans were in constant fear of being arrested and deported, and therefore they decided to move westward.

Ali Reza (27) left Herat when he was only a few years old. He grew up in Masshad, an Iranian city near the border with Afghanistan where a large Afghan community can be found: “Iranians are Shiites too, but they do unbelievable stuff against Afghans. They [Afghans] can't go to school and can only work black. I grew up in Masshad, went to school over there, but I knew I wouldn't be able to continue my studies. I played soccer too, but to continue on a higher level I needed a passport.” An uncle in Berlin

<sup>8</sup> For a 'trip' from Kabul to Germany, \$3.000 (via countries which made up the former Soviet Union) or \$6.000 (via Pakistan) had to be paid per person in October 2002. Children younger than 11 paid 50% (Tietjens 2002: 19).

<sup>9</sup> Such intermediate stays were often concealed when applying for asylum in Germany. Like most Western countries, Germany does not accept asylum seekers that passed through a safe 'third country'. During interviews, respondents without a secure legal status were often reluctant to talk about intermediate stays, afraid it would endanger them. When they did not bring the flight route up themselves, I never asked respondents about it.

prepared his flight. He is determined not to stay in Germany. His dream destination is either Afghanistan or Canada.

Asil (27) tells me the following story:

“In 1988, me and my three brothers fled to India. We knew the Soviets would retreat and the Mujaheddin would take over the city and we were afraid. We wanted to return to Kabul after the change would have taken place. But after a year we saw it wouldn’t become better.” I ask Asil why they did not stay in India. “In India, foreigners were not allowed to work, to go to school or to receive training. There only were private schools, which were very expensive. Until 1990, the UNHCR supported refugees, after that not any more.” Why did he come to Germany? “I had been in the Armani-school and one of my brothers already lived in Germany. We came semi-legally. We had bought a ticket India-Rome-Amsterdam-Prague. We had difficulties in Rome, they didn’t want us to fly to Amsterdam and we were held for two days before we could continue our journey. We deplaned in Amsterdam. Our brother came by car to pick us up,” Asil tells me. “I cried as I left Afghanistan. When I left India, I cried too, as I thought by myself ‘now I go far away from Afghanistan’.” A few years after the flight, Asil’s mother was able to join her sons. Four months after the interview I tried to contact Asil. I found he had moved to Poland to set up a business there and to live there with his Polish girlfriend and her family. He had never felt at home in Germany. One of his brothers had moved to Canada in 1992, the year Germany started to threaten Afghans with expulsion.

The young Nazhla and her family left Kabul in Taliban-time:

“My father carried a lot of money with him when we escaped. Everywhere he had to give money to men who said: ‘Give me your money or I’ll take your children and kill them’. We travelled in the back of a truck and I couldn’t see anything. When we arrived in Moscow, we were out of money. We organised a second-hand market and sold all our things. With some other families, we stayed in a deserted house. It was very cold and we hardly had any clothes. The children were not allowed to cry, otherwise the man would...” Nazhla, now 12 years old, puts her hands on her mouth, showing the way the Russian smuggler would have smothered a child that would make a noise. “There were women with babies. All children got tablets to make them quiet and let them fall asleep. In the truck we were many people. There was a tiny air hole and it was completely dark. I kept on falling on the floor and I was trampled. My father repeatedly called ‘Where are you?’”

Beltun tells me the story of a family that currently faces the threat of expulsion to Afghanistan:

“The man was picked up on the street by the Russians and sent to the frontier for eight years. The roar of the guns damaged his ears. His first wife died and his young son survived. He remarried had another child. He wanted to find peace and security, and brought his wife and two children from Peshawar to Karachi and then Peking. There, he worked and collected money. On his own, he went to Moscow, where he worked for two years. He sent the money he earned to Peking for his wife and children to join him. In temperatures of minus 30 degrees, the children sold tea and *bolāni*, vegetable-stuffed pancakes, on the street. Then he sent one child to Germany. The child disappeared somewhere along the road and the father and mother cried for half a year. Next, they sent the second child, and after that, they themselves came to Germany. They went looking for the son that had disappeared. The Red Cross found out that a nice woman had taken him into her home. He was now taken to Hamburg where the family was finally reunited. He himself is illiterate; the children attend school here. He says: ‘I did everything to save my children. I don’t go back to the darkness, where there is no security’.”

Upon arrival in Germany, the subjects of these narratives had to apply for asylum, just like thousands of others. The next chapter elaborates on the situation of Afghans within the complex German asylum system and considers some demographical and social characteristics of the Afghan population in Germany.

## Chapter 2

# AFGHANS IN GERMANY

*“Germany is a wonderful country. Here, I enjoy the security of being at home. Germany is a very humane country that offers me the possibility to lead a simple, pleasant, uncomplicated life.” – “However,” she curtails herself after thinking shortly, “I can only speak for myself. In the meantime, for homeless people that are looking for a new anchor over here, it has become very difficult.”*

Mariam Notten & Erica Fischer *Ich wählte die Freiheit* (2003: 286; translated from German by MB)

### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter offers a profile of the Afghan population in Germany and more specifically in Hamburg. The type of life that Afghans were able to adopt in Germany depended on laws and policies regulating the situation of asylum seekers and foreigners. The first half of this chapter, therefore, places the influx of Afghans in context of the history of Germany’s asylum system. Roughly, Afghans can be divided into two categories: the established and the non-established. The established have permanent resident rights or even German nationality, and are allowed to work and to travel. The non-established often find themselves spending long years in Germany with uncertain status or as rejected asylum applicants. They still face an uncertain



Map of Germany (Source: <http://www.cia.gov>)

future, and the threat of forced repatriation. The second part of this chapter offers a social profile of the Afghan population in Hamburg. After a paragraph on the regional distribution of Afghans over Germany, it touches upon socio-cultural life in Hamburg and offers some statistical data.

### 2.2 THE INFLUX OF AFGHANS

*“When we arrived in Germany, everything was new for us. We didn’t know the language and didn’t have a place to spend the night. It was almost like Adam and Eve, when they were expelled from the Garden of Eden and were now thrown on themselves.”*

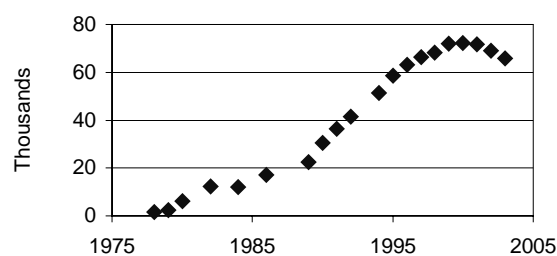
(Trabzadah 2003; translation MB)

Although before 1979 German population statistics included some Afghan students and merchants, it was not until the Soviet invasion that considerable streams of Afghans found their way into Germany. Many students that were already residing in Germany decided to remain there when war broke out in Afghanistan. One of them is Rahim, now a man around sixty:

Rahim came to Germany in 1963 as a student. He had graduated from the German Amani-school. “Scholarships for Germany were only given to graduates with good relations to the government, and to graduates that scored high on their final examinations. This second group still had to fight [...]. I just managed to get a scholarship to study, and afterwards I was supposed to return to Afghanistan. But my life took a different road.” He became involved in the German left-wing political scene and the student movement of that time. He founded an Afghan student organisation as well as an aid organisation and supported anti-governmental actions; at first against the Shah, and afterwards against Daoud and the communist regime. Going back would have been too dangerous: “If I would have returned, I would have been put into prison straight away.”

Afghan refugees travelling by air entered Germany at Frankfurt Airport. In the early 1980s, most Afghans entered Germany this way, and applied for asylum in the cities where relatives or other social connections were already residing, mostly Frankfurt, Hamburg, Cologne and Bonn. Hamburg Harbour was a major point of entry as well. The socio-economic background of Afghan asylum seekers changed over time from rich to poor. The extreme rich sought refuge mostly in Canada and the USA, but the first asylum seekers in Germany also belonged to the elite and privileged families of the pre-communist regime. Later refugees were mainly from the moderate middle class. Less well-off Afghans found their way into Germany too, but generally after an overland journey full of hardships. These Afghans travelling over land generally came in later years and entered Germany through the Eastern border. Many of them arrived empty handed, as all their capital had to be spent on travelling and smugglers’ expenses (Zulfacar 1998: 107, 109).

**Figure 2.1 Afghans in Germany**



**Table 2.1 Years of residence of the Afghan population in Germany (31.12.2003)**

Years of residence in Germany	Less than 1	1 - 4	4 - 6	6 - 8	8 - 10	10 - 15	15 - 20	20 - 25	25 - 30	More than 30	Total
Number of Afghans in thousands	2.1	13.1	8.9	9.5	11.0	15.0	3.5	2.3	0.3	0.2	65.8

(Source: Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge)

As can be seen in figure 2.1, the number of Afghans in Germany has risen considerably in the last two and a half decades.<sup>1</sup> By the end of 2003, Germany hosted 65.800 Afghans. Almost 8.300 of them were born in Germany (Website Statistisches Bundesamt). Figure 2.1 and table 2.1 do not include those Afghans that gained German nationality. These numbered at least 36.800 by the end of 2003<sup>2</sup> (Tietjens 2002: 10; Statistisches Bundesamt). Thus, it is estimated that more than 100 thousand Afghans reside in Germany.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A large number of sources were used to collect these data. Among them: Statistisches Bundesamt; Ausländerbeauftragte; Info4Alien; Link 2000: 13; Orywal 1993-4: 17-19.

<sup>2</sup> Between 1990 and 2001, 27.122 Afghans were naturalised (Tietjens 2002: 12). In 2002, an additional 4750 Afghans changed their nationality, and in 2003 a further 4948, which makes a total of 36.820 naturalisations (Statistisches Bundesamt). I have not been able to find statistical information about naturalisations before 1990, but these figures will probably not be very high.

<sup>3</sup> Statistical data about Afghans only includes those people who did not gain the German nationality. Officially, Germany does not allow dual citizenship. In the case of Afghanistan, however, de-naturalisation is complicated and therefore most Afghans could uphold their Afghan

## 2.3 ASYLUM

“When we arrived in Germany we didn’t have any shoes. Only second-hand plastic slippers and old clothes that we had bought in Russia. We lived on a boat [in the city part called Altona] for two years; first a green one and then a blue one. I was afraid of the water. I was afraid to fall in. The stairs were very shaky. My mother was very scared of the water too. She always cooked eggs for me, as she was afraid to go shopping. Dangerous men were living on the boat. I couldn’t speak any German [...]. The neighbours from Yugoslavia brought us food. We ate pork but we didn’t know. Then we moved to this camp. At first we lived with six persons in a room. Now we have three rooms.”

(Nazhla, 12)

### Recognition or Rejection

Upon arrival in Germany, asylum had to be applied for. The right to asylum is guaranteed in article 16 of the German Constitution, which states that ‘persons persecuted for political reasons enjoy the right of asylum’ (Bosswick 2000: 44). For years, the number of asylum applicants from Afghanistan were in the top ten of asylum applications. Between 1980 and 1990, the yearly number of asylum applications varied between 700 and 3.600 (Kothén 2002: 27). Rates of acceptance have varied enormously in time. This depended not only on the changing situation in Afghanistan, but above all on the asylum policy of the German *Bundesamt*. In the 70’s and early 80’s, the total number of asylum applications was comparatively low, and in this Cold War era, the German government was generous in granting asylum statuses to those who had fled from countries like Afghanistan that were ruled by communist regimes (Kothén 2002: 28). Between 1979 and 1982, Afghans that applied for asylum were accepted generously, and asylum was granted within a few months. Mahmud’s family, introduced in Chapter 1, arrived in Germany in 1980:

Upon arrival at Frankfurt Airport, Mahmud’s family applied for asylum. The interpreter knew the family and immediately said that this family could not be sent back. Mahmud’s mother was accepted as a refugee within a year. Mahmud’s application was turned down. His second asylum procedure proved to be more successful. They lived in a camp in the south for a few years, before they moved to a village near Cologne, where his uncle resided. Mahmud, now 30, has only been living in Hamburg for a few months. “I didn’t have any difficulties [in the refugee camp]. The camp was relatively new and we received a hearty welcome. My classmates helped me a lot at school. In the camp there were a lot of Afghan children who were as old as me. It was a nice period. The youth played soccer and volleyball and the women gathered every evening. There was a lot of cordiality, both from the Afghans and from the caretakers of the camp; they were very tolerant. The Afghans were just delighted to be out of the war zone.”

The climate changed quickly. In 1980, asylum became a prominent topic in electoral campaigns. Coinciding with a public debate, the first attacks on asylum seekers and shelters took place. This violence against foreigners flared up every few years until the end of the 1990s. The new liberal-conservative government introduced a series of measures and laws to embank the number of asylum seekers, and adopted a new Asylum Procedure Code [*Asylverfahrensgesetz*] in 1982. The possibilities of appeal were restricted, expulsions were facilitated and welfare allowances reduced (Bosswick 2000: 46). Procedures took much longer, and the percentage of rejections increased dramatically (Zulfacar 1998: 92). Still, between 1984 and 1986, 61 to 72% of the asylum applications by Afghans were accepted (Kothén 2002: 28). Further restrictive regulations were implemented in 1987. Asylum seekers who had spent some time in a so-called safe state before entering Germany were barred from asylum and could be forced to return to that third country. In 1988, the percentage of accepted Afghan asylum applications

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citizenship next to the German one. Anyhow, exiles from Afghan origin generally declare themselves to be Afghans spontaneously, even if their official nationality is German (see Chapter 4 and 5).

dropped to 26% (Bosswick 2000: 46; Zulfacar 1998: 92). The fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 and the reunification of Western and Eastern Germany in 1990 triggered a mass immigration of ethnic Germans to Germany, and of former East German citizens into West Germany. Tensions between the local population and foreigners rose, especially in the former East Germany. The government claimed that decreasing the number of asylum seekers was necessary to combat the violence.

“When we were living in a refugee camp, there were reports about fires being set in refugee camps. We were so scared that something like that would happen to us as well.”

(Aryan)

In 1991, the restrictive Aliens Act came into law (Bosswick 2000: 48). Two years later, the right to asylum was removed for all those who entered Germany over land, as they had passed a neighbouring state where they could have applied for asylum. Shahram applied for asylum in 1991:

“In the past, it was very easy for Afghans to get a passport in Germany, a house, a work permit. I came in 1991. I was 16. At that time, there were many asylum seekers, from numerous countries. I had very bad experiences. First of all, because I was only allowed to travel in a circle of 20 km [...]. I wasn’t allowed to work, wasn’t allowed to go to school [...]. After a lot of trouble I got a permission to work in 1994. But only for six months at a time [...]. My asylum application was still in procedure. Every time I received refusals and made an appeal.”

For Afghan asylum seekers, there was an additional problem. Cases of individual persecution and human rights abuses are only recognised if they are of a clearly political nature and committed by state representatives. Thus, an applicant has to show persecution by the ruling government. Since the fall of Najibullah’s regime in 1992, Afghanistan did not have an authoritative government. It follows that since 1992, Afghans hardly had any chance to be accepted as refugees (Kothén 2002: 30-31). Around 90% of the Afghan asylum applications were rejected. In 1999, only 1.6% and in 2000, only 0.8% of the asylum-seeking Afghans were granted refugee status (Website Statistisches Bundesamt).<sup>4</sup> In 2000 the court ordered a modification of this asylum policy: persecution by a state-like organisation should be eligible for asylum as well. The court recognised the Taliban as a quasi-governmental movement. Following this order, some old cases were reviewed and the quota of recognised refugees rose to 61% between May and October 2001, to decline sharply again to almost 0% after the fall of the Taliban (Kopp 2002: 8; Zimmermann 2001). All in all, most of those people that fled to Germany after the take-over by the Mujaheddin in 1992 have still not been recognised.



Mother and daughter (Photo: Marije Braakman)

### Other Residence Titles

The above sub-paragraph focused on the acceptance or rejection of Afghans as political refugees. Those whose asylum applications are accepted enjoy protection based on the German right to asylum. This grants the Afghan refugees full rights under the German constitution, short of citizenship and participation in elections. This is the

<sup>4</sup> In comparison, in the same period, Denmark, France and Austria accepted 51 to 89% of the Afghan asylum claims (Statistisches Bundesamt).

so-called *Großes Asyl* or Big Asylum. However, there are more levels of legal protection. Appendix I offers a detailed description of the different residence titles.

The German right to asylum is related to political persecution of individuals by the state of origin. A significant number of asylum seekers do not meet these strict demands, but are still allowed to stay in Germany according to the broader refugee concept of the Geneva Convention. The *Kleines Asyl* or Small Asylum is a form of protection on humanitarian grounds or pressing political grounds for particular categories of people that face group persecution, or for people from countries that are too dangerous to return to because of (civil) war. It can also be granted to those that can prove individual persecution but passed another secure state on their way to Germany.

**Table 2.2 Number and type of residence permits granted to Afghans in Germany (30.06.2004)**

<i>Aufenthaltserlaubnis befristet</i> (temporary)	10.021
<i>Aufenthaltserlaubnis unbefristet</i> (permanent)	12.901
<i>Aufenthaltsberechtigung</i>	268
<i>Aufenthaltsbewilligung</i>	263
<i>Aufenthaltsbefugnis</i>	18.109
<i>Duldung</i>	7.846
<i>Aufenthalts gestattet</i> (still in asylum procedure). And other	12.041
<b>Total</b>	<b>61.449</b>

(Source: Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge)

German passport	>36.820
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Robina arrived in Frankfurt by airplane. Due to a certain incident, she did not or could not apply for asylum right away. She called her brother in Hamburg who came to pick her up. There she applied for asylum. This was in the summer of 2001, the short period in which Afghans had a chance to be accepted. Unfortunately, only those who claimed asylum at the airport were eligible for a Big Asylum. All others were supposed to have passed secure states on their way. The *Bundesamt* argued that she could not prove to have arrived by air. She remembered she had left a bag in the police office at Frankfurt Airport. A call was made to the airport where indeed her bag was found. But because it was shortly after September 11<sup>th</sup> her lawyer advised her not to make an appeal, as there was a high risk of losing the Small Asylum as well. She spent two months in a refugee centre in Lübeck before she could join her brothers in Hamburg. She has a *Befugnis* that has to be renewed every two years. She is struggling to find a job, as she fears losing her *Befugnis* and receiving a *Duldung* instead.

The name of the temporarily residence permit tied to the Small Asylum is *Befugnis*, that has to be renewed every one or two years. If the conditions in the homeland have changed, the *Befugnis* might be withdrawn and changed into a so-called *Duldung* or an order to leave the country. Shahram who was first mentioned in the former paragraph climbed up from a *Befugnis* to German citizenship:

“When I was here for eight years, I withdrew my asylum application. Because I had worked and wasn’t dependent on social aid, and had paid taxes, I was granted a two-years *visa* [*Befugnis*]. When I was here for ten years, I received an *Unbefristet* and immediately I applied for German nationality.”

However, in the period my research took place, the Hamburger foreign police were reluctant to issue *Befugnissen*. Several Afghans that were dependent on social aid and went to the foreign police in Hamburg to renew their *Befugnis* merely received a *Duldung* instead. Receiving a *Duldung* puts one in the most precarious position. It is not a residence permit, as it does not legalize one’s presence in Germany. It merely delays deportation until further notice. Due to the several legal and practical obstacles for deportation, those Afghans that did not qualify for the Big or Small Asylum did not face a forced return to Afghanistan. Instead, these Afghans were temporarily tolerated, ‘*geduldet*’. The *Duldung* is a piece of paper glued into an Afghan’s passport and is valid for a few days to a maximum of six months. Employment and mobility are severely restricted. Children are only allowed to attend primary and secondary school. There is another specific category of temporarily tolerated Afghans. Instead of applying for asylum and being randomly dispatched to another region

in Germany, they preferred to apply for a *Duldung* and find cultural, financial and social support around their friends and relatives in Hamburg or another city. Afghans usually refer to them as *mehmān* or guest. Nasim is one of them, although rumour has it that he escaped to France a month after we met for an interview:

“Here are Afghans. I didn’t want to be sent to some remote place. I knew people here and wanted to stay in Hamburg.”

This type of *Duldung* can never be ‘upgraded’ into a more secure status. Even if at some time the German government would adopt a settlement for ‘old comers’, it would not apply to this category.



Demonstration against the forced return to Afghanistan, October 2003 (Photo: Marije Braakman)

### **The Threat of Deportation**

For many years, legal and practical obstacles prevented the government to carry out forced returns to Afghanistan. However, since the Taliban were removed from power and Afghanistan was deemed ‘liberated’, the topic of repatriation has appeared on the agendas of the Federal States’ meetings, the *InnerMinisterium Konferenz* (IMK). The Federal States of Hamburg and Hessen are strongly in favour of a rigid deportation policy. Other Federal States argue that Afghanistan’s political situation is still too fragile and advocate a stimulation of voluntary repatriation. Repeatedly, the *IMK* launched short-term moratoria on deportations, after which forced repatriations could be initiated, causing panic and anxiety among all those Afghans without a secure status. Rumors circulated that in Hamburg between 5 and 11 thousand Afghans would be forcefully removed. Pressure on Hamburg’s Afghans to sign up for ‘voluntary’ return increased continuously. The first forced repatriation in twenty-three years took place in June 2003. The subject was a man who had committed a criminal offence in Germany (Die Welt, 20. June

2003). During the following two years, only lawbreakers were deported. In May 2005, Hamburg started repatriating Afghan single male *Duldung*-holders aged between 18 and 60 (Die Welt, 6. June 2005). Thousands of Afghans remain in an extremely insecure situation, not knowing how much longer they will be able to renew their permits.

## **2.4 REGIONAL DISTRIBUTION**

“There is no better city in Germany than Hamburg. It is a big city, with people from 160 different countries, with a strong economy and, above all, a large Afghan community.”

(Farshid)

“I didn’t mind where I was going to, but in Germany, especially in Hamburg, there were many more Afghans and relatives, and people I knew”

(Samay)

Afghans are very unequally distributed over Germany. The largest community, about a quarter of all Afghans in Germany, is found in Hamburg (Tietjens 2002: 10). The concentration of Afghans in Hamburg can be explained

historically by the old trade relations and the liberal traditions of the Hanseatic merchants. The Free Hanseatic City of Hamburg is known as the *Tor zur Welt*, the Gateway to the World. Situated in north-western Germany at about a hundred kilometres from the open sea and facilitating the world's biggest shipping company, Hamburg used to function as a transit port for emigrants, goods and slaves. Until the outbreak of the Second World War, Hamburg attracted many traders, students and diplomats from Asia and Africa. A considerable colony of merchants settled down in Hamburg and traded carpets, silk, tea, tobacco, cotton, dried fruits, spices and handicrafts (Kaifa s.a.). Numerous successful Afghan businessmen, among them many carpet dealers, already resided in Hamburg prior to 1979 (Zulfacar 1998: 93, 111). While less than 4% of Hamburg's population are non-Germans in 1970, by the end of 2003, the population of Hamburg consisted of 1.7 million people, of which 14.6% did not have German nationality. Only in the cities Berlin and Munich were the proportions of immigrants higher<sup>5</sup> (Kaifa s.a.; Website Statistikamt Nord). People belonging to 184 different countries of origin were residing in Hamburg.<sup>6</sup>

Besides the more than 20 thousand Afghans in Hamburg, nearly another quarter of the total Afghan population in Germany are found in *Bundesland* Hessen, predominantly in the city of Frankfurt, as many Afghans entered the country at Frankfurt International Airport. *Bundesländer* Baden-Württemberg (Stuttgart) and Nordrhein-Westfalen (Köln, Bonn and Bochum) together host another 30%. The remaining 22% are scattered over the other twelve *Bundesländer*<sup>7</sup> (Tietjens 2002: 10). Afghans generally prefer to live in the larger cities of Germany where their relatives already live, where there is more tolerance towards



Oriental carpets for sale in the old Speicherstadt area of Hamburg. Many carpet dealers are Afghans (Source: <http://www.hhla.de>)

minorities and employment opportunities are much better (Zulfacar 1998: 110-111). In larger cities, Afghan shops, mosques, restaurants, car-repair shops, wedding parlours and cultural and political organisations are available (Zulfacar 1998: 49). Asylum applicants are randomly dispatched over the various Federal States, but as soon as their legal situation allows it many move to cities where they have a social network. After his arrival in Germany, Sobair lived in a refugee camp near Essen for two months before he could come to Hamburg:

“I wanted to go to Hamburg and so was one of the lucky ones who were sent there. Everybody is afraid to be sent to Eastern Germany.”

The Nikzada family, however, has been less lucky:

I meet the Nikzada family, father, mother and daughter Nazanin, while I am on holiday in the Black Forest in the south of German. They have been living in a ramshackle refugee camp outside a tiny village for five years already and they are the only Afghans in the whole area. They feel completely isolated and both husband and wife are suffering from depression. All the close relatives of both sides stay in Hamburg, but the family is not allowed to leave the district they are confined to. Every now and then they decide to run the risk of being caught and secretly travel to Hamburg to visit their relatives.

<sup>5</sup> When speaking about immigrants or non-Germans it is meant those persons that have a nationality other than the German one.

<sup>6</sup> The bulk of immigrants originated from other European countries (71%), especially from Eastern Europe. The biggest immigrant group were the Turks who accounted for 4% of all Hamburg's inhabitants and 26% of all foreigners in 1997. This was followed by people from the former Yugoslavia, Poland, Afghanistan, Iran and Portugal (Ausländerbeauftragte 1999: 5).

<sup>7</sup> Exact percentages at 31 December 2001 (excluding Afghans with German nationality) were: Hamburg 25.2%, Hessen 23.4%, Nordrhein-Westfalen 17.2% and Baden-Württemberg 12.5%. The percentages of Afghans in the remaining *Bundesländer* ranged between almost 0% and 6.4% (Tietjens 2002: 10).

Hamburg's Afghan population is very heterogeneous, as is the Afghan community in Frankfurt. According to Kaifa (s.a.), most Afghans in Hamburg are ethnic Tajiks<sup>8</sup> and originate from Kabul and Herat. According to another source, 40% of the Hamburger Afghans are ethnic Pashtuns and another 40% are Tajiks. The remaining 20% are Hazaras, Uzbeks, Hindus and others (Wagner 2001). The largest community of Herati's in Europe is found in Hamburg. Frankfurt contains a relatively large number of Qandahari's, and is favoured by business-oriented Afghans. Both Hamburg and Frankfurt host a considerable community of Afghan Hindus. In Nord-Rhein-Westfalia, the 'old Afghan establishment' with ties to the University of Bochum is said to be found. Berlin is the residence of a number of former students who came to Germany in the 1960s, and of former students who were sent to Eastern Germany during the 1980s (Zulfacar 1998: 93, 108).

## 2.4 HAMBURG, 'THE KABUL OF EUROPE'

### A Socio-Cultural Profile

Hamburg is one of the most preferred places to live in for Afghans, because of the large Afghan community and its Afghan-based economic, religious and cultural strongholds. The harbour city also offers good employment opportunities, including in the flourishing black market. (Zulfacar 1998: 111). A number of Afghans that formerly worked as *bazaris* on one of Afghanistan's markets run fast food restaurants and various kinds of shops selling vegetables and different foods, as well as traditional arts, crafts and antiques. Afghan Internet and call agencies connect Afghans in Hamburg with relatives and friends all over the world, and Afghan and Indian music and videos are sold at a number of locations. Most of these shops are located in a part of the city called St. Georg, directly behind the central station. Some taxi companies have predominantly Afghan drivers. Carpet dealers form a rich elite. Carpet shops are concentrated in the old Speicherstadt area, especially in the streets of Sandtorkai, Kehrwieder, Brook, and Neuen and Alten Wandrahm. Sandtorkai even has the nickname *Afghanenstraße*, Street of Afghans (Stroux 2002: 8). There are two Sunnite and one Shiite Afghan mosque. The Hindu community has a big temple and runs a cultural association in a part of the city called Rothenburg-Ost. On weekends, five Afghan wedding parlours host large weddings, engagements and concerts. Just as in the old days, in summer many Afghan families go on a *mella*, picnic, to one of Hamburg's large parks, bringing carpets to sit on, thermoses full of tea and barbecues to grill *kebab* and chicken.



Numerous Afghan businesses are concentrated in and around Steindamm Street in the city part of St. Georg (Source: hamburg.de)

<sup>8</sup> This over-representation of Tajiks contrasts with the overall situation in Europe, where ethnic Pashtuns form the biggest ethnic group (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 2000a: 427).

Society in Afghanistan is highly stratified, as are the communities of exiled Afghans. Due to differences in ethnicity, classes, language groups and religions, Afghans in Hamburg do not form a homogeneous community. Community life is based on divisions and continually changing coalitions instead of on unity and togetherness. Class, regional, political and ethnical divisions continue to affect how Afghans interact with one another and cope with life in Hamburg.

“There are too many Afghans over here. Small communities have more cohesion. The Afghans over here are not unified. In former days, in the time when we came here, there were not so many Afghans yet, and families hanged together much more and did things together; holidays and outings. Now contacts are based on kinship. Because there are so many Afghans here, one doesn’t have the eagerness to get to know Afghans, preferably as few as possible,” Asil tells me.

Samira visits me in Hamburg. She does not want to stroll through the quarter where the Afghan shops are found. She does not want to run the risk of bumping into the man that murdered her father when she was still a child.

There often is a considerable deal of mistrust and suspicion towards Afghans outside the own social network. This network consists mainly of kinship and friendship ties that already existed back in Afghanistan. The organisational level of Afghans is low. Although numerous Afghan associations and clubs exist, attempts to build up a representative umbrella organisation have so far been unsuccessful. Public gatherings and concerts regularly end up in fighting.

Afghans range from comfortable to just above the breadline. Most Afghans experience an extreme loss of social, economic and professional status in exile. Out of a probability sample of Afghans in Hamburg, 61% had finished secondary or tertiary education outside Germany (Ausländerbeauftragte 2001c: 38). However, Afghan diplomas are rarely acknowledged and the kind of employment these people are able to find in exile are generally much lower in comparison to the higher positions most of them occupied in Afghanistan. A considerable part of the Afghans in Hamburg belonged to the better-off and educated sections of Afghanistan, and now many find themselves at the bottom of the social ladder. For men especially it can be difficult and humiliating to accept the ‘lower-class’ employment. In order to regain a part of their former status Afghans have to start all over again, learning a new language, getting re-qualified or learning new skills. Only a few are willing and able, let alone allowed - by legal status - to start again. The loss of status and honour of the first generation of exiled Afghans is often compensated by an attachment of much value and importance to the education of their children, to allow for the next generation to bring economic reclassification (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 1998: 224; Dadfar 1994: 134). Afghan men in particular experience a certain loss of authority, formerly related to their age and their position within the extended family and the community. The hierarchy in which elder generations are placed on top can turn upside down as parents become dependent on their children, who master the language of the host country much quicker (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 1998: 224).

“My husband was a chemistry master at the University of Kabul”, Reyhana tells me. “He has studied in Iran and America [...]. When he finally received a labour permit, he applied for a number of jobs, but after a while he said: ‘I give up, it makes me crazy to stare at the post-box every day’. Now he works in the import and export sector and most of his clients are Afghans, Iranians and Indians. He works a lot.”

A few of the Afghans that were awarded the refugee or a temporary residence status and therefore hold a labour permit have been able to build a secure existence and acquire a certain level of welfare. Among the old-comers there are a number of successful businessmen, and some have acquired good positions in, for example, the

medical field. However, unemployment among immigrants in Hamburg is very high and Afghans seem to be affected as well, especially those who are prohibited by law to find permanent employment. In 1999, 35.8% of a sample group of adult Afghans were said to be unemployed and 1.4% was self-employed. This unemployment rate of over a third was significantly higher than unemployment among other immigrant groups (Ausländerbeauftragte 2001c: 38, 40). Like other immigrants, many Afghans rely on social welfare, or find positions as assistant employees in the corporate and service industries. A number of Afghan women in my research group took care of elderly German citizens.

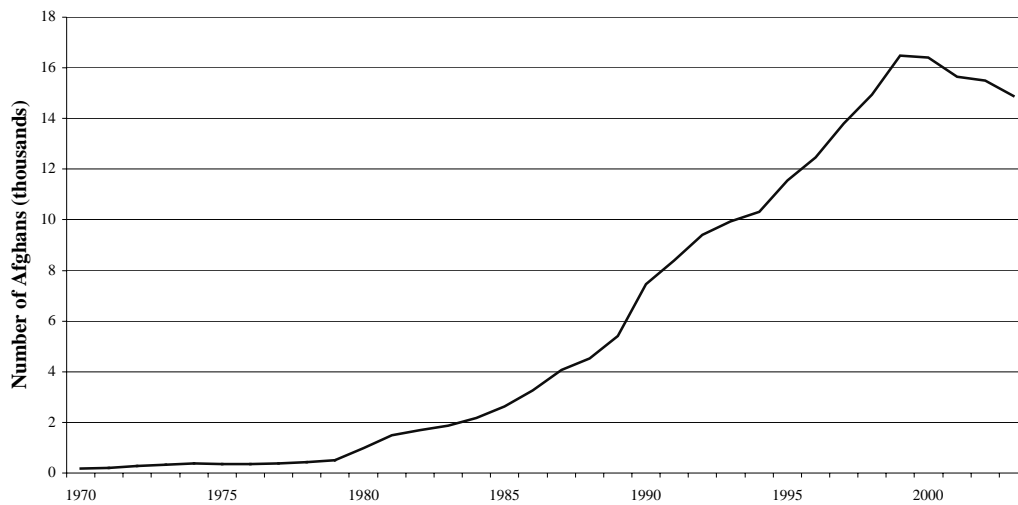


(Photo: Marije Braakman)

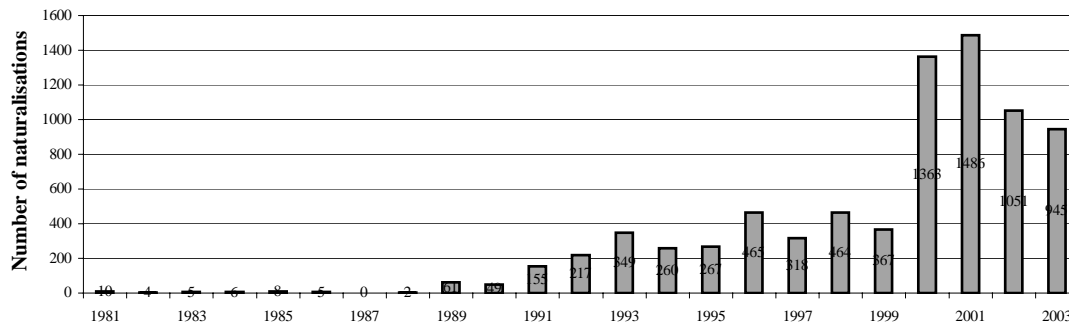
### **Statistical Information**

As shown in figure 2.2, the number of Afghans residing in Hamburg rose significantly between 1970 and 2000, from 177 individuals to more than 16.4 thousand. After 2000, a decrease is shown. This decrease might be related to the recent decrease of asylum applicants in Germany, but the main reason is the increasing number of naturalisations. Between 1981 and 2003, Hamburg has naturalised 7.857 Afghans. These Afghans are no longer included in the statistics on Afghans in Hamburg. It is not known how many of them are still residing in Hamburg, or how many naturalised Afghans have moved to Hamburg from elsewhere. As figure 2.3 on the next page shows, most of those naturalisations took place from 2000 onwards, after the relaxation of the naturalisation law. Table 2.3 shows that by the end of 2001, 36.9% of the Afghans living in Hamburg were below eighteen and 6.3% were sixty years or older. At that time, boys and men made up 54.0% and girls and women 46.0% (Website Ausländerbeauftragte).

**Figure 2.2 Afghan population in Hamburg**  
(Source: Statistisches Amt für Hamburg und Schleswig-Holstein)



**Figure 2.3 Naturalisations of Afghans in Hamburg per year**  
(Source: Statistisches Amt für Hamburg und Schleswig-Holstein)



**Table 2.3 Age distribution among the Afghan population in Hamburg (31.12.2001)**

Age	0 - 3	3 - 6	6 - 12	12 - 18	18 - 20	20 - 30	30 - 45	45 - 60	60 - 65	65 and older	Total population
Number of Afghans	714	837	2.006	2.215	814	3.152	3.346	1.588	344	645	15.661

(Source: Website Ausländerbeauftragte)

The Afghan population is not equally distributed over Hamburg. Hamburg is divided into seven districts [*Bezirge*], subdivided further into *Stadtteile* [city parts], which in turn can be divided into 180 *Ortsteile*.<sup>9</sup> The districts of Wandsbek and Hamburg-Mitte both accommodate approximately a quarter of the Afghan population, as seen in table 2.4. The other half is distributed among the districts of Hamburg-Nord, Eimsbüttel, Harburg, Altona and Bergedorf (Ausländerbeauftragte 2001a: 10). Especially many Afghans live in the eastern *Ortsteil*

<sup>9</sup> For a map of Hamburg, see Appendix II.

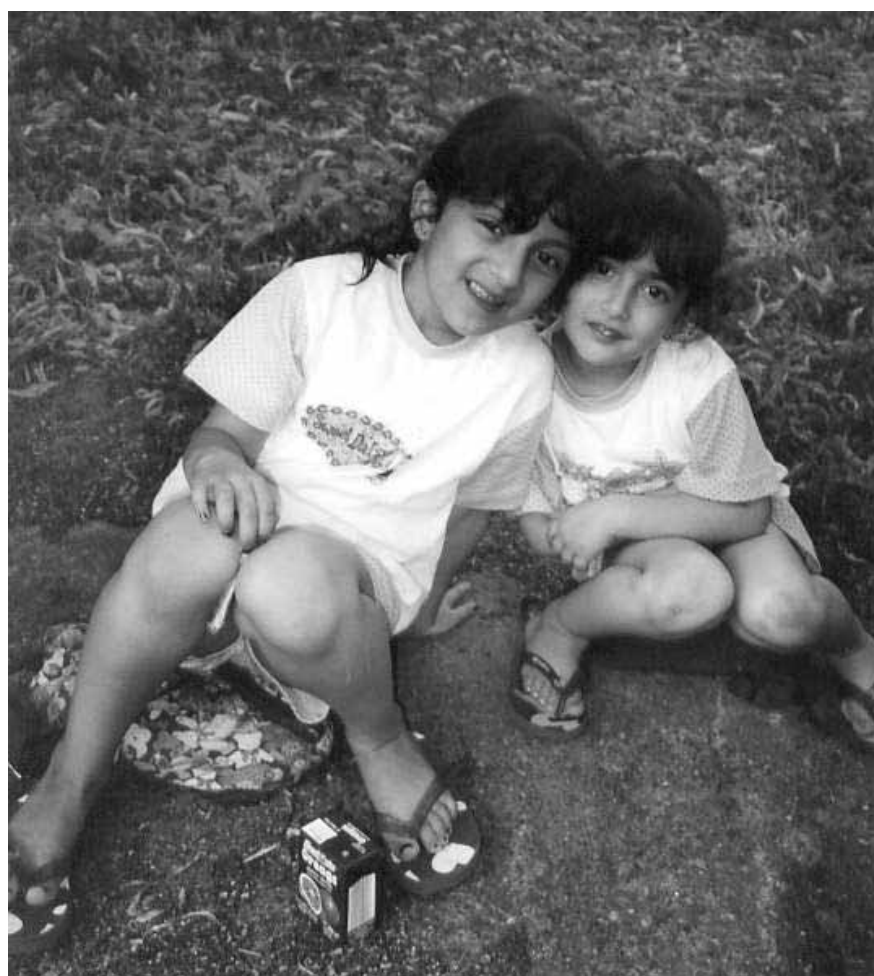
**Table 2.4: Distribution of Afghan and other immigrants in Hamburg's districts (31.12.2001)**

Districts	Number of Afghans in district	Number of immigrants in district	Total population in district
Hamburg-Mitte	3.386	59.211	227.199
Altona	1.382	41.131	240.972
Eimsbüttel	1.304	35.329	245.491
Hamburg-Nord	2.009	37.929	276.326
Wandsbek	4.198	44.118	406.506
Bergedorf	4.198	11.311	116.038
Harburg	1.609	39.737	198.400
Total	15.661	268.766	1.710.932

(Source: Website Ausländerbeauftragte)

Mümmelnsberg. Painted on the viaduct that one passes on entering Mümmelnsberg is a reference to the Qalai Zamānkhān quarter in Kabul. It says: “*Khosh āmadid ba Qala-ye Zamānkhān*” or “Welcome to Qalai Zamānkhān.”

For a few months in 2003, the ‘Kabul of Europe’ became the setting for my fieldwork. The lengths I went to gain acceptance by the Afghan population to collect data, and the problems I encountered in the process will be described in the next chapter.



Two nieces, born in Germany (Photo: Marije Braakman)

## Chapter 3

# REFLECTIONS ON THE FIELDWORK

*“Experiences follow patterns, which repeat themselves again and again. In our tradition, stories can help you recognize the shape of an experience, to make sense of and to deal with it. So, you see, what you may take for mere snippets of myth and legend encapsulate what you need to know to guide you on your way anywhere among Afghans.”*

Saira Shah's *The Storyteller's Daughter* (2003: 8)

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes the processes of fieldwork, including my entrée to the Afghan population, research methods and techniques, and my personal experiences and reflections. My stay in Hamburg started in March, with a one-and-a-half month intensive German course. The actual fieldwork took place between the 15<sup>th</sup> of April and the 25<sup>th</sup> of October 2003, with three interruptions of four weeks in total, which were spent outside Germany. Therefore, a total of almost five and a half months were spent collecting research data. When I told people I was not going to Africa or Asia, but would just cross the Dutch-German border, many raised their eyebrows and might have thought I was going to carry out my fieldwork training ‘the easy way’. Indeed, I did not suffer from a jetlag or a culture shock and did not have to worry about sterilizing my drinking water or taking my daily anti-malaria tablets. However, conducting research in a metropolis where only one percent of its population belong to my research group, and where my presence was not noticed the way it would have been in a small village in a far-away country, was certainly not easy and raised some specific methodical issues and difficulties. These will be addressed in this chapter.



'Being there': the anthropologist (extreme right) in a group of young Afghans (Photo: Marasa Kakal)

My research has been explorative as well as qualitative in nature. An explorative study can “provide a beginning familiarity with a topic. This purpose is typical when a researcher is examining a new interest or when the subject of study is itself relatively new and unstudied” (Babbie 1995: 84). An important advantage of an

explorative type of study is its flexibility: the research design can be modified at any time, according to newly gained insights (Dechering 1997: 10). I considered it difficult and undesirable to define detailed concepts and relevant variables before starting the fieldwork, because so far very little research has been conducted among Afghans in Hamburg and about their feelings of belonging. This flexibility and ability to adapt the research design to accommodate fit in unexpected data was further enhanced by choosing a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach (Chadwick 1984: 222). Furthermore, the strong emphasis placed on Afghans' personal constructions of meaning and of experiences would not have been easy to accommodate in statistical procedures. In qualitative research, however, the meaning is of central concern and the insiders' or emic view is highly valued. The goal is to understand the world of others from their perspective, in their own words and context, rather than categorizing their experiences from the researcher's own view (Omidian 2000: 42; Bodgan and Biklen 1986: 2, 29).

### **3.2 PROBLEMS EXPECTED AND ENCOUNTERED**

“You want to research Afghans? Well... good luck to you!”

(Khaybar)

Shortly after my arrival in Hamburg, I told an Afghan boy about my research plans. He jokingly called me an “FBI-agent” and told me not to expect too much cooperation from Afghans, but instead reckon with suspicion. Already before coming to Germany, Afghans had said to me that researching Afghans would be impossible. “Never trust an Afghan” and “all Afghans are lying,” were phrases I heard over and over again. However, these quotations might not so much reflect the supposed attitudes of Afghans towards researchers, but a general aloofness and lack of trust towards other Afghans. Among Afghans, there is a strong sense of mistrust in interpersonal relationships, and individuals are always on guard to protect themselves and their family. Trusting relationships mainly exist with family members and life-long friends. Within the community, gossip is a pervasive and feared means of social control, pressing individuals to conform to community norms. In this sense, being a non-Afghan could even have been an advantage: “You I can trust, because you are not an Afghan,” a girl once said to me. As somebody outside the community, I could offer a space for venting, although it happened once that a girl refused to meet me, because I “knew too many Afghans.”

#### **Overcoming Distrust**

“In the field of refugee research,” Omidian (2000: 42) argues, “we cannot afford to lose our humanity, and the data we gather must be credible, since the people we work with are often so incredibly at risk.” In order to be able to gather credible information, the development of a certain level of trust of the research population towards the researcher is required. But especially in the case of refugees, this trust seems particularly difficult to foster, Afghans not being an exception (Omidian 2000: 60). The same author (Omidian 2000: 45) states that in “the Afghan refugee community with its distrust of outsiders, it is more important to gain the trust and openness of a few reliable informants, than to interview many people, and often receive incorrect answers,” a guideline I took as a premise in my research. Afghans are hesitant to share their private lives with outsiders. A high importance is given to family privacy and an outsider intruding into this privacy is encountered with suspicion (Zulfacar 1998:

48). The notion of ‘shame’ and the desire to ‘save face’ are particularly strong among Afghans, Iranians and Arabs and are reflected into the unwillingness to disclose negative information about oneself and one’s family; as long as the researcher is not trusted fully, the chance of receiving socially desired answers is considerable (Lipson and Meleis 1989: 107).

Suspicion of inquisitive strangers may indeed be common among people from war torn countries with severe political schisms or from countries where one has to be aware of government spies (Lipson and Meleis 1989: 106) and where universities are not independent of the government. Afghans too have experienced a police state where they always had to be aware of spies (Omidian 1996: 37). Bloch (1999: 379) noted that refugees feared that research information would go to the authorities. Refugees who were not sure about their immigration status were particularly afraid of repercussions. Omidian (1994: 153-155) also noticed a distrust of foreigners, of inquiries by government representatives and of people who ask many questions. In my research, most reluctance and evading answers were experienced during interviews or conversations with Afghans who were still in the asylum procedure, notwithstanding the fact that I always emphasized that the informant’s identities would be protected and I only used the data for my university. “Case-e marā kharāb mekoni – you are destroying my [asylum] case,” one respondent commented. Another respondent had already told me about his life in Pakistan, but during the interview, he pretended to have come from Afghanistan straight away. He explained his disinclination to reveal such facts that could threaten his asylum procedure with a metaphor. “A thief is not going to stand on a high mountain,” he said, meaning that somebody who has done something wrong or illegal will not do anything to attract attention to that fact.



(Photo: Marije Braakman)

### **Explaining Research Purposes**

Lipson and Meleis (1989: 106) state that many refugees do not understand the purpose of research and are reluctant to participate as long as it does not benefit their family directly. Sometimes, I found it hard to make my intentions clear. Some people whom I asked to cooperate answered that I should not ask them, because they did

not possess the sought-after knowledge. Often, they suggested to me that I should contact Afghan academics and principals of Afghan organisations. Some Afghans offered their help enthusiastically, stating they had many books on Afghanistan, or they knew everything about the history of Afghanistan. That I was more interested in their personal stories, opinions and experiences was often hard to communicate, as Afghans had problems connecting these with science, which in their eyes is all about objective knowledge. The example of Mahmud, talking with me on the phone about his younger cousin that I was about to interview, illustrates this view on research:

“He was born in a hospital in Bonn. Don’t let him tell you anything about Afghanistan, because he doesn’t know a thing. It will only be lies. And I don’t want something like that to come into your thesis. Your professors will notice it for sure. They will say: but that doesn’t tally at all, does it? He doesn’t know but a stone from Afghanistan. What could he tell you about Afghanistan?”

Instead of a direct and ‘impolite’ refusal, “give me your number and I will call you as soon as I have time for an interview” proved to be one of the Afghan ways of saying an interview was not wished for. After a while, I came to realise that promises, invitations or offers for help are easily made, but should often be taken merely as expressions of politeness, that cannot be taken too literally. Zulfacar (1998: 48) too noted that her requests for interviews did not receive straightforward denials, but polite refutations “due to lack of time or the constraints of work schedules.” I always tried to assure respondents that the information they gave would be rendered anonymous. I was also always willing to answer counter-questions about myself. I exploited the fact that I had worked with ill and injured Afghan children, as this seemed to bring about a certain level of sympathy and trustworthiness and a feeling that I was ‘on their side’. Other strategies I employed to gain trust are reflected in the following paragraphs. They include referral by mutual friends and spending much time within the community. Having heard many statements by Afghans about the impossibility of my research, and having studied the literature on refugee research described above, and thus prepared for the worst, on the whole I was happily surprised about the amount of direct and personal answers I received, especially from younger people.

### **3.3 FINDING ENTRANCE TO THE RESEARCH GROUP**

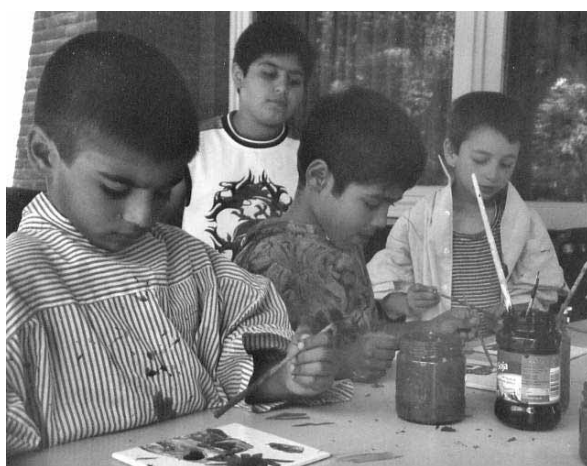
#### **Snowball Sampling**

Refugee research often uses snowball sampling to locate respondents, because refugees are difficult to access and identify using other means (Bloch 1999: 371). Snowball sampling is a technique that starts with a few relevant respondents and expands the sample through referral (Babbie 1995: 287). In identifying respondents for my interviews, I relied less on this method than I had envisaged. At the end of most interviews, I asked the respondent, if he or she could put me in touch with other possible respondents. Out of Afghan politeness, most of them agreed, but only four actually did so. One respondent told me: “Sorry, I asked a few families, but they refused. They are scared.” A more informal and uncontrolled form of snowball sampling, however, was of high importance to expand my social networks. For example, when I was invited to someone’s house, very often other visitors would pass by and in this way new acquaintances were made.

#### **Representativeness**

A danger in snowball sampling is that there could be an over-dependence on a certain network, while excluding others; the sample may not be a representation of the whole target community (Bloch 1999: 372). In a community as large, heterogeneous and scattered as in the case of Hamburger Afghans, this danger should not be overlooked. To avoid leaning disproportionately on one network, I therefore used different strategies to build contacts and strived explicitly to find entrance to different networks. It would be false to claim that my sample included all possible sub-groups. Still, I believe to have accomplished a great deal of variation among my Afghan networks, on different levels. A mix of male and female respondents was sought, as well as some variation in years of residence in Germany, age, socio-economical status in Germany and regional, ethnic, religious and political background. Nevertheless, although the data collected stems from a range of individuals with differing backgrounds, this study is not meant to be a quantitative survey based upon a representative sample, speaking for the Afghan community in Hamburg as a whole, but is one which relies upon the stories of those Afghans I became acquainted with.

Reflecting the Hamburger Afghan population in general, most respondents came from Kabul, and in the second place from Herat. Others came from Mazar-e Sharif, Ghazni, Qandahar and smaller places. The majority were ethnic Pashtuns and Tajiks. I spoke to a few Hazara and one Uzbek, and also some respondents with a mixed ethnic background. All my respondents had a Sunni or a Shiite Muslim background, but there was considerable variation in the degree to which the Islam was practised.<sup>1</sup> Both Afghans who are accepted as refugees or had gained the German nationality, and who therefore are not Afghans any more in a legal sense, and Afghans whose residence in Germany is insecure and temporal have been included. Almost all respondents were born in Afghanistan. Their residence in Germany ranged from 2 to 41 years. Furthermore, I sought contact with a number of persons who had visited Afghanistan in recent times. My Afghan respondents were disproportionately around my own age as they were easier to make contact with, and generally more open in their answers. Moreover, their negotiations of identity and spaces of belonging proved to be of particular interest for my research topics. Although I had planned to select respondents over eighteen, I had some interesting and enlightening spontaneous conversations with teenagers under eighteen years of age.



Combining fieldwork and social work: arts and crafts with a group of Afghan children from one of Hamburg's refugee centres (Photo: Marie Braakman)

Non-Muslims make up only a few percent of Afghanistan's population. Hamburg however hosts a considerable Hindu community. This community hardly interacts with those of Muslim Afghans. Although I have had some contacts with Hindus, no interviews have taken place. Their bond to Afghanistan might differ from that of Muslim Afghans to such an extent, that it would be better to conduct a separate research among them.

## Network Building

Finding access to the research population proved to be a time-consuming process, which started at a discouragingly slow pace but speeded up exponentially towards the end. Different strategies were used for network building. Initially introduced to by a fellow anthropologist, I was able to build up several contacts to women and families who were connected through the Council of Afghan Women. Through this network, I was often invited to houses,

private and public meetings and celebrations. A second network of contacts was established through one of the three Afghan mosques. One afternoon a week over a period of a few months, I taught German to adults. On Saturdays, I went to the Persian school and sat in a class with Afghan children. I was also invited to attend a *nazr*, a religious celebration held when a wish has been granted. Two women I met in the mosque invited me over to their houses. A third network was developed by my volunteer work in a refugee centre where around 250 Afghans resided. Initially, I helped out with leisure activities and homework classes for children. Through an enthusiastic German teacher, I was able to come in contact with several of the Afghan women. In July 2003 and August 2004, I was given the opportunity to accompany a group of women and children from this centre on a five-day holiday to a village near Hamburg. During my last week in Hamburg, I conducted a group interview with women from this refugee centre. Every second week, I took part in a social gathering of German and foreign women, organised by a church. While consuming coffee, tea and home-baked cake, the foreign women had the opportunity to improve their German. Among them were always some Afghan women; most of them were living in the refugee centre where I did volunteer work.

I distributed leaflets, in which I asked for respondents and explained my intentions and my background in German and Dari, at the university, in language schools and in Afghan shops. These resulted in only three responses, but through these, a number of other respondents were found. Another very important source through



Ethnic Pashtuns dancing the *atan* at a seminar (Photo: Marije Braakman)

which I established contacts were Afghan websites (see par. 3.4). Most of these Afghans were in their twenties, but there was a great deal of variety in other characteristics. About ten interviews were conducted with youngsters I had met on the Net. Three virtual acquaintances from Hamburg introduced me to their families, which I visited regularly. Furthermore, I participated in a one-week Afghanistan-seminar in a village close to Hamburg, as well as in a weekend seminar in Iserlohn and a meeting of Afghans and Germans in Düsseldorf. At

these encounters, a wide range of themes were dealt with, ranging from the juridical situation of Afghan refugees to aid projects in Afghanistan, and from generational conflicts among Afghan exiles to the history of Pashtun literature. During the workshops and informal conversations, my insight on several themes was considerably expanded.

### 3.4 APPROACHES FOR DATA COLLECTION

Qualitative research requires the use of multiple and flexible methods of data collection. The validity<sup>2</sup> of the research findings is enhanced by triangulation, the cross-checking of results by using different research methods (Omidian 2000: 54; Lipson and Meleis 1989: 112-113). I relied on participant observation, unstructured

<sup>2</sup> Validity refers to the correctness and trustworthiness of data, research instruments and research findings (Bernard 1995: 38).

interviews, casual conversations as well as discussion groups. In addition to that, I collected articles and statistics on the Internet and in the university library, and followed discussions on German-Afghan Internet forums.

Note taking was restricted to more formal interview settings; I developed a quick way of noting down the respondent's words as literally as possible. In other cases, I recorded the information afterwards. I tried to train my memory by memorizing and repeating quotations. Travelling home by the underground or bus, I often had plenty of opportunity to note down the most important points. At home, I would type down an account of the conversations, observations and events of that day. Most Afghans were used to the fact that I wrote down new Dari words and expressions in a small notebook that I always carried with me, which sometimes gave me the opportunity to note some important other points as well. I only made use of a tape recorder at the seminar. Throughout this thesis, a large amount of quotations are used, giving the impression that all of them are literal translations of what my informants have said. However, I cannot escape the fact that some of them are no more than approximate renderings of my informants' words, due to the fact they were recorded afterwards. I am uneasy with using observations, personal narratives, and other stories collected in a private setting as research data. Although people knew I was conducting research, in the process of spending time together and becoming friends, they tended to forget the main reason why I was with them and disclosed personal information to me as a friend, information they would not have told a researcher.<sup>3</sup> To deal with this dilemma ethically, I have tried to conceal all identities, by changing all respondent's names and some characteristics or facts. I deliberately choose not to use certain information that I consider to be too personal, even if it would have contributed to the arguments of this thesis.



Young Afghans attending Dari and Koran classes at the Shiite mosque (Photo: Tina Gehrig)

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<sup>3</sup> One could argue, as Omidian (2000: 55-56) does, that it is the anthropologist's methodology of participatory observation itself that creates this dilemma.

## Participant Observation

“Don’t talk to them, they won’t tell you the truth. You should mix with them and observe them by yourself.”

(Massud)

By the participant observation technique, the researcher gets an idea of what people actually do, rather than what, in interviews, they say they do. It is therefore an important instrument to cross-check information gathered from interviews, making them more reliable. At the same time, it is an important means of establishing contacts and trust. It involves spending a great deal of time in a community, observing and, to a certain extent, taking part in everyday interactions. However, this is less easily done in an urban environment, where Afghans are scattered throughout the city and where I lived separately from my research group, than in more traditional anthropological settings. I devoted considerable time and effort to gaining access to the Afghan community, socialising and ‘hanging out’ with them.<sup>4</sup> In this way, Afghans became accustomed to my presence and got to know me, while at the same time, I gained more and more insights into their private and community lives, and I was able to establish bonds of friendship and trust. As has been argued, this is of paramount importance when researching Afghans and other refugee communities, although I will never know how informants would have acted and what they would have said had I not been around them. In other words, my presence influenced the course of things. Beside the activities already mentioned in the former paragraph, I had the opportunity to attend three weddings, an engagement party and a few concerts. I have experienced a *fatiha*, a memorial service in the mosque, and a Sunday celebration at the Hindu temple. I was present at a considerable number of action and information meetings on the imminent expulsion of Afghan asylum seekers as well as at a few information gatherings on voluntary return and about the actual situation in Afghanistan and I also visited a few literary events. Furthermore, I was regularly invited to dinners and to grills and picnics in the park.

## Unstructured Interviews

The most suitable type of interview to explore an unknown topic is the unstructured one. An unstructured interview is “an interaction between an interviewer and a respondent in which the interviewer has a general plan of inquiry but not a specific set of questions that must be asked in particular words or in a particular order. An unstructured interview is essentially a conversation in which the interviewer establishes a general direction for the conversation and pursues specific topics raised by the respondent” (Babbie 1995: 289). Although they are based on a clear plan, they are characterised “by a minimum of control over the informant’s responses” (Bernard 1994: 209). According to Omidian (2000: 47), “Afghans are more open to questionnaires that ask open-ended questions and allow for lengthy explanations, and indirect questions work much better than direct questions.” This was especially appropriate when collecting data from boys and men, and also chairpersons from Afghan organisations, where a certain formality and distance was sought after. Although I aimed at creating an

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<sup>4</sup> Once a personal relationship is established, the anthropologist can expect to be asked favours, some of which might raise dilemmas for the researcher (Lipson and Meleis 1989: 108, 112). According to Omidian and Lipson, amicable relationships with Afghans require a balanced reciprocity. I found myself translating letters from mail order houses, assisting Afghans to doctors and hospitals to interpret, finding German courses, calling lawyers and writing letters to housing associations, but this has never brought me into dilemma’s. On the contrary, at the same time, these were occasions that enlarged my understanding of the lives of my respondents. Furthermore, I was glad to be able to ‘repay’ the immense hospitality and sumptuous Afghan dinners. I felt honoured when, for example, an Afghan woman called me to find her a Persian-speaking gynaecologist, something she could not have asked her male relatives. Volunteering in a refugee centre and a mosque were ways to expand my social network and collect useful data. On Afghans’ patron-client relationships with strangers as opposed to a more balanced reciprocity among relatives and friends, see Omidian and Lipson (1996: 356-358). Omidian found herself providing a lot of

atmosphere of trust and openness, it was obvious to both me and the respondent that an interview was taking place; that I was in the role of a researcher, taking notes and asking questions. As it is culturally not appropriate to associate with the opposite sex, I was reluctant to build close friendships with males. Coincidentally, men and boys were more easily accessible than women for interviews with no preliminary acquaintance.

Ten interviews took place with respondents I had not met before. An interview was always preceded by an 'ice-breaking process', an informal acquaintance and mutual introduction. The other ten were conducted with respondents that I had met before at least once. I usually arranged interviews to take place in a public place: a café, a mosque, a fast food restaurant or the university. A total of twenty in-depth interviews were conducted, lasting from one and a half to five hours. Mostly, I let the interview take its own course, giving it a push in the right direction every now and then. As a consequence, every interview had its own character and focus. Questions arose naturally during the conversation, and sidelines could be explored leisurely, which sometimes offered more valid conclusions and new insights. To my delight, in almost all cases, my respondents did not need much encouragement to narrate. I avoided breaking the flow of conversation when stories seemed not to be directly related to my topics. Sometimes it proved to be precisely these stories that deepened my understanding of their situation and lives; they offered me a framework in which the other research data could be placed. A disadvantage of this open-ended, conversational manner of interviewing is that data is difficult to standardise or quantify, but that is not what qualitative research aims at. The great advantage of this method is that topics could be explored that would not have come up using a more structured type of interview. A list was constructed of topics to be covered, and offered a welcome handhold, especially in the first few interviews. Although I always took the list with me, I hardly consulted it during later interviews.

### **Casual Conversations**

A large amount of useful research information surfaced during unplanned, casual conversations with a high number of informants throughout a wider variety of contexts. Lipson and Meleis (1989: 106) acknowledge that in their research, sometimes the most useful data was gathered during chats before and after the formal interview. I used these casual conversations as an independent research method. Sometimes, these casual conversations were as extended as a formal interview, the biggest difference being that I was not taking notes – at least not constantly. Mostly, they focussed on one or more particular topics, raised either by me or by the interlocutor. Although they were aware of the fact that I was a researcher, conversations were personal, relaxed and natural. With many of the people that I established good relationships with, especially women, I have never conducted a formal interview. I might have been too hesitant or shy asking people to do an interview, and settled instead for more casual conversations, as a formal interview, from my point of view, required the difficult shifting of roles from 'friend' to the more distant 'researcher'.

### **Informal Discussion Groups**

Omidian realised that "for people who are group or collectivist focused, imposition of an individualistic model of privacy and personal interviewing may not let them be comfortable enough to make up for loss of the chance to

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advocacy for individuals, for example in the field of legal matters or health care (Omidian 2000: 60). Mirdal also had the impression that she conducted more social work than data collection in a traditional sense (Mirdal 1984: 987).

hear 'secrets'." Inviting the researcher to their home but excluding the presence of other family members would be strange for most Afghans. She finally gave in to this "cultural style based on family collectivity" and came to consider discussion groups to be "the most natural of the data collection situations and often the most fruitful" (Omidian 2000: 51-52). I mostly conducted individual interviews, but also used this method of discussion groups. Some individual interviews turned into group discussions spontaneously, as other family members or visitors would join in. The most fruitful casual conversations took place with more than one person. One group interview was planned in advance, with a group of women from a refugee centre. This discussion group did not yield remarkable results, as the women did not elaborate much on their answers. Indeed, one disadvantage of group discussions, as noted by Dechering (1997: 77), is that respondents may curtail each other's views and give more socially desirable and less personal information.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, not all respondents contribute equally to the discussion and it is difficult to register and analyse what is being said. At the same time, however, it was interesting to observe how the women reacted to each other, agreeing, disagreeing and discussing with one another. One advantage of group discussions is indeed that respondents may stimulate each other and the researcher is able to collect more views at the same time (Dechering 1997: 77). Group discussions can offer "a wonderful opportunity for the researcher to get a sense of the range of 'acceptable' opinions," as Omidian (2000: 51) states.

### **Internethnography**

Internet is one of the means by which Afghans residing in different continents get in touch with one another. An increasing number of Afghans in Germany meet each other in virtual meeting places. On several discussion forums world wide, views on numerous issues related to topics such as culture, entertainment, politics, religion are exchanged, and in chat rooms, communication ranges from chit-chat and flirting to more serious discussions. I regularly visited three German-based discussion forums and one chat room.<sup>6</sup> In the chat room, I was an active participant, not hiding my personal background. On the forums, I remained an invisible observer for most of the time. Some discussion threads gave me more insight into topics such as return and identity. In all three forums, I started one thread, sharing my research findings, doubts and questions and asking for reactions, which I received.

This method of 'internethnography', as Tapper (2001: 15) has named it, is not very common yet and might raise questions of credibility. It is true that most online Afghans mask their identity, but I agree with the opinion of Tapper: "I am reasonably sure that, even if some identities are disguised, all are 'real' individuals, dealing with real problems and issues." I have the impression that exactly because they are able to remain anonymous, they can be more open about their opinions and feelings than in real life, where their speech is curtailed by social control and the duty to uphold the family honour. According to Tapper, they are "just as 'credible', if not more so." Moreover, some virtual informants did not remain virtual. I participated in two 'live' gatherings of forum

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<sup>5</sup> Other explanations for their relative reserve might be that it concerned a group of women from a refugee centre; as I have said before, Afghans whose status was pending generally were less open respondents. Furthermore, a Japanese journalist who heard about the group interview asked permission to be present as well, which was granted by both the women and myself. The discussion proceeded less fluently, however, as all what was said had to be translated, and basic facts about Afghanistan had to be explained.

<sup>6</sup> The chat room I participated in was the German section of Afghansite, called Aus Germany. The three discussion forums were the largest communities of German Afghans on the net: AfghanMania (more than 15 thousand members), Afghanchat (the largest number of monthly visitors and the most active members, according to its administrators) and Afghan-German Online (around 600 members). The webmasters of the first two reside in Hamburg, but members are scattered all over Germany. I estimate that most participants are between 15 and 30 years of age.

members, found a few respondents for an interview and established a number of friendships, some of them lasting until today.

### 3.5 THE ANTHROPOLOGIST AS RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

In anthropological research, the anthropologist self is the most important instrument for both data collection and analysis (Bernard 1994: 144-145). It is therefore very important to realise that personal characteristics undoubtedly make a difference in fieldwork. Several aspects of my identity, such as my gender, origins, character, looks, age and marital state, influenced the nature of my social relationships with the research population, and thus the type of research I was able to carry out and the data I was able to collect (see Abu-Lughod 1986: 16). It is probably inherent in the methods of anthropology, whereby relatively close relationships with the group being researched are established, that anthropologists come to struggle with finding balances and dealing with frictions between being a participant and an observer, between distance and involvement, between 'going native' and being an outsider, between being a friend and a researcher, switching back and forward between the insiders' view and that of an analyst. I too found it difficult at times to find a balance and to shift roles according to context. In this paragraph, a few of the consequences of using myself as a research tool are dealt with.



The anthropologist at a wedding in Nordrhein-Westfalen

"I couldn't talk to you on the phone, because my uncle was sitting next to me. You know how things are in our culture, I cannot talk to girls."

(Ali, calling back)

Most ethnographic literature about Islamic communities places female anthropologists in an advantaged position. Western women are said to be able to enter both the women's and men's world, where they are said to be considered an 'honorary man'. The fact that I am a single female certainly had consequences for the kind of data I was able to collect, and raised some specific dilemmas. Finding the proper gender role for myself was not always easy. In how far should I live up to Afghan gender rules? To what extent should I live up to what Afghans thought of as appropriate conduct for a girl, and to what extent was I, as a Western researcher, excused from such norms? Young unmarried males were the easiest category to recruit as respondents, but in general, as I described before, I tried to keep my contacts to boys and men more distant.<sup>7</sup> My initial hope to get to know

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<sup>7</sup> Once, I have found myself in a situation I regret strongly. An Afghan boy I trusted invited me to his uncle's house to conduct interviews with the uncle and a few of his friends. I reasoned that that boy would never have proposed the visit if it would not have been culturally appropriate. This turned out to be a large misconception. Although the uncle had lived in Germany for about twenty years, he projected his particular image of European girls to me, and offered me strong alcoholic beverages and massages. It took me some effort to escape the house.

families through such boys scattered quickly. Interactions are highly disapproved of between boys and girls who are not from the same family. I know that most boys that I interviewed met me secretly, without their family



'Going native': the anthropologist in traditional Afghan clothes

knowing. The more intimate relationships I established were almost exclusively with women. Over and over again, I was asked when I was going to marry, as most Afghans girls at my age are already married. Some even hatched plans to marry me off to an Afghan. When I explained, with some exaggeration, that in our culture, we do things differently, they reacted: "But you are like an Afghan, you know all about our culture." Incidents like this show that the research population might not always have known how to label me: of course, I was not an Afghan, but the fact that I spent much time with them, spoke Dari<sup>8</sup>, did not have the looks of a stereotypical North European

girl, and had some understanding of Afghan manners and culture set me apart from Germans and the way they were expected to behave. Knowledge of, and an interest in Afghanistan, and a polite conforming to cultural rules could easily be taken as a wish to 'go native'. I myself had some problems too defining my position between being an insider and an outsider and the level of adaption.

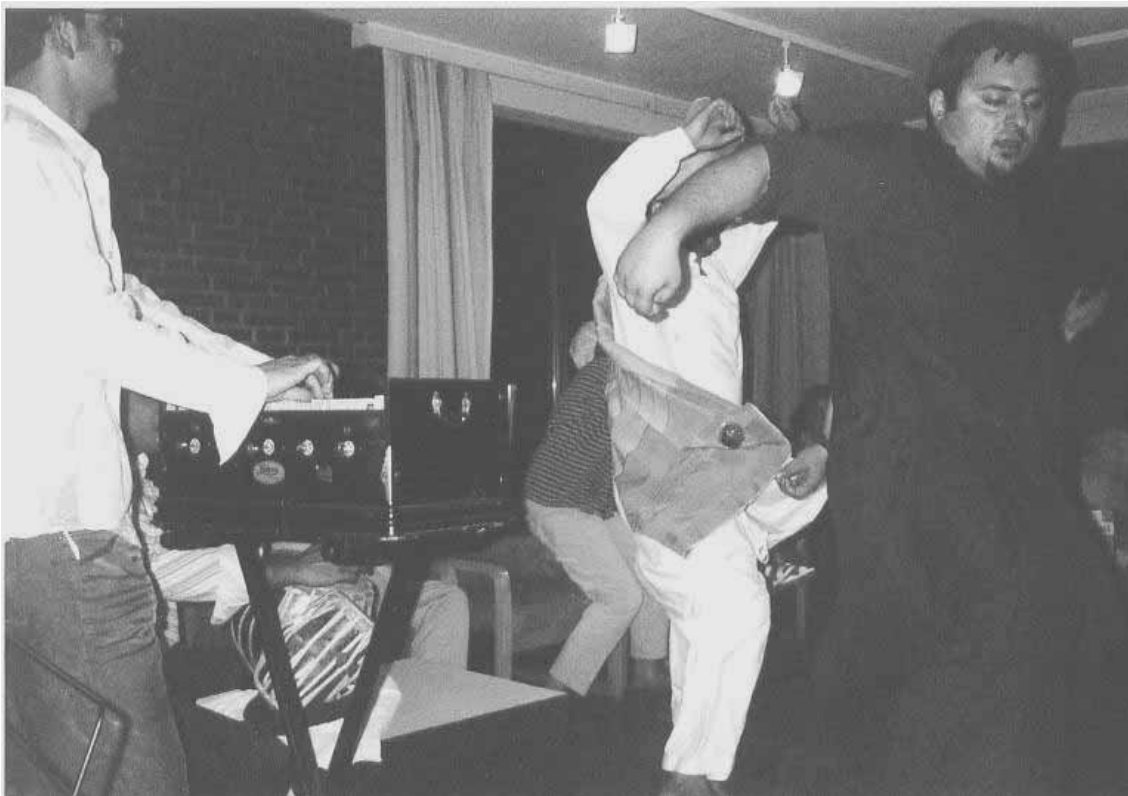
The fact that I was also a foreigner, a non-German, could have been of some importance. In a way, I was a little bit like them, a stranger in Germany. "I called you up because you are a stranger here too," an Afghan once gave as an explanation for his telephone call. This made it easier to actuate conversations about such topics as homesickness and their stance towards German society. I received many positive reactions when I said I came from Holland. In the 1990's, Afghan asylum seekers were generally better off in Holland than in Germany, and among many Afghans in Hamburg, the Dutch seemed to have the reputation of being more tolerant and warm-hearted than the Germans. Sometimes, I encountered suspicion about my origins and motives. Why did I know so much about Afghanistan? Why was I so interested in them and why did I understand their language? According to many Afghans, people from Holland should have blond hair and a light skin. My dark hair and eyes made me less noticeable in a crowd of Afghans, a fact I enjoyed. It made some people think that I was Afghan or half-Afghan. A disadvantage is that doubts about my origins might have had implications for respondents' own openness towards me. "I wanted to ask you something, but I don't, because I know you are not Dutch," a boy once said during an interview.

In October 2003, I returned to Leiden with a suitcase filled with research material and a mind filled with memories and impressions. I experienced the lengthy and lonely phase of writing, structuring, interpreting, sifting and reflecting upon this enormous amount of research information, of which this thesis is the end result. I

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<sup>8</sup> I did not work with an interpreter. I agree strongly with what one of my respondents claimed: "Language is the key to a society." According to my beliefs, a language is a reflection of the culture and system of meanings it is attached to. Interviews and conversations were conducted in German or Dari, and sometimes in a mixture of both. I certainly missed some important information, as I do not speak Dari fluently. However, I am convinced that the fact that I knew some Dari had a large influence on the results of my research. Besides from the fact that I could communicate better and understand what was going on around me, I am sure that I was accepted into the community more easily, as it possibly showed my genuine interest in Afghanistan. Moreover, I am sure that some crucial meanings and factors would have been overlooked if I had only used German. Had I not known the word *watan* for example, the end result of this thesis would have been very different. However, I am aware of the fact that my research has a strong Dari bias, as I could speak Dari but not the second language Pashto.

found this to be an even more arduous undertaking than the actual fieldwork among the Hamburger Afghans. Like every anthropologist, I became, as Bruner (1984: 6) so righteously stated, “painfully aware of the discrepancy between the richness of the lived field experience and the paucity of the language to characterize it.”



Accompanied by *harmonia* and *tabla*, a group of men perform the *atan* dance (Photo: Marije Braakman)

**Part II**  
**SPACES OF BELONGING**



## Chapter 4

# HOME AND HOMELAND IN A WORLD OF MOVEMENT

*Time has caught up at last with my family. I am no longer alone. Four million Afghan refugees have been exiled from their homes for two decades. A whole generation has grown up outside Afghanistan. They have never lost their Afghan identity, because they have never been offered another in its place. They have learned, through bitter experience, the value of a myth.*

*If you have a myth, you can be proud of where you come from. You cannot be proud of a shred of a tent in the dustbowl that is a refugee camp in Pakistan. If you have a myth, you can hold your head high when the lowliest locals call you a dirty Afghani and accuse you of trying to take their jobs. If you have a myth, you can quote back at them the great Afghan poet Jalaluddin Rumi: "A royal falcon landed among owls. They hooted at him in danger. He replied: 'Oh, foolish ones – you think I am trying to usurp your homes, but my true place is on the wrist of a king!'"*

Saira Shah's *The Storyteller's Daughter* (2003: 31-32)

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

What is the connection between a diaspora and its country of origin?<sup>1</sup> How do people in diaspora negotiate senses of belonging and non-belonging to the so-called 'homeland', and how do these relate to issues of return? I aspired to find an answer to these questions in the case of a particular diaspora: the Afghans living in Hamburg. The concept of 'home', regularly occurring in studies of refugees and other migrants, appeared to be a suitable analytical tool to acquire a comprehension of such issues of belonging.

The more I read and pondered about the notion of 'home', the more I became aware of its complex and ambiguous nature. There is no consensus among scholars about what 'home' really is. As an analytical tool, 'home' might sometimes obscure more than it clarifies. Moreover, the ultimate decision of what will, or will not be classified under the etic concept of 'home' lies in the hands of the researcher.<sup>2</sup> In the languages that were used during my research, an unambiguous equivalent of the English 'home' could not be found. A whole range of belongings were encountered, which I could, or could not have translated as 'home'. I felt that these multiple, and sometimes conflicting senses of belonging that the respondents experienced could not be caught in, and classified under, a single etic concept of 'home'; at least not without an unnecessary loss of research data. I

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<sup>1</sup> The word 'diaspora' is based on the Greek *speiro*, which means 'to sow' and the preposition *dia*, meaning 'over' or 'across'. The ancient Greeks used it to describe their spreading all over the then known world (Brazier & Mannur 2003: 1; Lewellen 2002: 160). Later in history, the word Diaspora, written with a capital D, was reserved for the exile of Jews and their dispersal throughout the world (Safran 1991: 83). The Armenians and Africans adopted the term. Today, the word is commonly used for diverse groups around the globe that are displaced from their original territory due to the movements of migration or exile (Brazier & Mannur 2003: 1). The criteria of what defines a diaspora and which groups may be called diaspora are contestable. Some scholars make a rigid distinction between people who live in diaspora and those in exile. Ghorashi (2001), for example, distinguishes between a 'diasporic' and an 'exilic' approach to home and homeland. I believe that this distinction is difficult to maintain in practice. Cohen (1997: x) has suggested a typology of diasporas, based on the motives for leaving the country or region of origin. One of the most common types, and also the category that Afghan refugees could be placed in, is the 'victim diaspora', by others called 'conflict-generated diaspora', where dispersal is caused by extreme repression, forced exile or natural disaster. This forced dispersal becomes a key aspect of collective memory, identity and ideology.

<sup>2</sup> The opposites emic, insiders' or culturally specific view, and etic, outsiders' or universal/academic view, are developed by the linguistic anthropologist Pike. According to Pike (1967: 38) "Descriptions or analyses from the etic standpoint are 'alien' in view, with criteria external to the system. Emic descriptions provide an internal view, with criteria chosen from within the system." The anthropologist's conventional task is to penetrate into an emic world and present the academic public with an etic translation of it.

therefore decided to use the word 'home' with a certain care. I often preferred to use so-called emic terminology, used by respondents themselves, that have cognate meanings but are not clear equivalents of 'home'.

After a consideration of the connection between people, place and culture in earlier studies of displacement, paragraph 3 and 4 describe the Dari concept of *khāna* in its meaning of both 'house' and 'home'. The Dari word *khāna* is the best equivalent of the English word 'home'. However, this word was only useful to examine a small and territorialized sense of belonging: that of the family house. Although this analysis touches upon many themes that are linked to issues of belonging and return, the concept of *khāna* or its Pashto counterpart *kur* did not qualify as a main principle guiding my research. The analysis will be followed by a theoretical discussion of the concept of 'home', showing its complexities and limitations for research purposes. In paragraph 7, some implicit assumptions regarding the notion of 'homeland' will be critically analysed. Finally, the use of emic terminology and its translation into etic concepts will be discussed.

## 4.2 PEOPLE AND PLACE IN EARLIER STUDIES

Recent studies on refugees and diasporas criticise static views on identity, belonging and home, and try to show the multiplicity of loyalties and belongings. However, there is a long academic tradition of perceiving the national borders of the country left-behind as "not only the normal but the ideal habitat for any person" (Appadurai 1988 in: Malkki 1995a: 509). This place of origin is referred to as 'home' or 'homeland'. It is considered the ultimate wish of all displaced people to return to, and hence belong to, where they came from. This desire is referred to as the 'myth of return'. People who are forced to leave their country of origin remain homeless until the time they are able to return 'home' (Ghorashi 2001: 180). These viewpoints are closely related to assumptions of culture and community as territorialized units. Ethnic, local and national belonging and identity have often been assumed to be static and bound to a specific territory. The condition of being 'deterritorialized' is becoming 'normal' for an increasing number of people. Nonetheless, 'uprootedness' is still seen as profoundly unnatural in common sense and also in many studies. According to Malkki (1992: 27), these "widely held commonsense assumptions linking people to place, nation to territory, are not simply territorializing, but deeply metaphysical." She argues that arboreal metaphors are intimately related to such ideas of kinship and national identity. Malkki introduced the term 'the national order of things' to refer to this classification of the world into territorially separated nations that are conceived of as naturally given. Botanical metaphors such as 'roots', 'land' and 'soil' as well as metaphors of kinship such as 'motherland', 'fatherland' and 'family tree' suggest a nation to be conceived of as naturally given, "a grand genealogical tree, rooted in the soil that nourishes it" (Malkki 1992: 28). Uprooting threatens this 'national order of things'.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Turner's (1974) concept of 'liminality', a transitional and ambiguous period from one state to another, is often used to describe the exilic condition. According to Malkki (1995b: 6), "[t]he [anthropological] work done on classifications and rites de passage, liminality and pollution [...] is remarkably applicable to the study of the ways in which order and liminality are constituted in the national order of things". In works on classification systems, aberrations to categories are considered polluting and dangerous. Malkki (1995b: 7-8) compares this to the way in which refugees and immigrants, aberrations in the 'natural order of things', are always seen as a 'problem', as a threat to national security and identity (Malkki 1992: 28-34; 1995b: 1-8).

In numerous studies, it is assumed that because culture and people 'belonging' to this culture are thought to be bound to a specific territory, people that become 'uprooted' from that territory are automatically stripped of their culture and identity (Malkki 1995b: 9).<sup>4</sup> The transitional phase should either be followed by total incorporation into the host society, or by a return to the country of origin (Barrett 1998: 5; Malkki 1995b: 9). Other studies view displacement in a different but related way. People are forever tied to the culture they belong to, so that migrants are seen as having brought their primordial homeland identities and cultural values along with them. People from a particular country are often seen as a static homogeneous group with similar needs (Barrett 1998: 5). A return 'home' is the only preferable solution.

The assumption that all refugees and members of diasporas long to return 'home' - home being their country of origin that they belong to automatically - is still frequently encountered. At the same time, however, the body of anthropological literature questioning the localisation and meanings of 'home' is steadily growing. In this thesis, I will frequently argue that the changes that both exiles and their country of origin undergo complicate questions of where and what 'home' is. It is however important to realise that an impossibility to call the country of origin one's 'home' is not necessarily the result of living in exile. Feelings of non-belonging might have developed prior to the flight. Many refugees leave their country precisely because they have already lost their homes there - in a physical as well as emotional sense - and feel like strangers within their own countries, because the government they identified with has, for example, been replaced by a regime which is hostile towards them (Ghorashi 2001: 111).

Many Afghans have faced an 'otherness' and alienation inside Afghanistan during the course of ethnic cleansings, violence and other traumatic experiences. People who they considered their own might have turned against them. Afkhami (1994: 128) interviewed an Afghan woman belonging to the extended family that had ruled Afghanistan for decades, and her life became endangered when the communists took over and she was taken away for interrogation: "This land and these people were fast becoming foreign to me. My dress, my culture, my language, my past, my name were all perceived as other, and incomprehensible. My exile began that afternoon in my own country." Mahdi and his family experienced alienation from Afghanistan as discrimination against their ethnic group grew:

"I had always thought that all Afghans were the same. My world collapsed when I heard that that was not the case. When I was little, a boy asked me: 'Where are you from?' 'Afghanistan', I replied. The boy said: 'No, that is not what I mean'. 'I am from Kabul', I said. 'No, what is your origin? Are you Tajik or Pashtun or Turkmen?' I didn't know," Mahdi recounts. "That night, I asked my mother: 'What am I?' She was surprised about my question, but told me we were Hazara. I didn't rack my brains about it. In the years that followed, the war became more severe. I noticed that my friends started to discriminate against each other. More and more I became aware of the fact that we belonged to the filth of society. My parents strengthened this feeling because they were so depressed. They knew more than I did. They knew they weren't worth a thing. In the case of my parents, this depression and fear turned into hatred against others. I have managed to free myself from my parents' opinion in the meantime."

The following examination of one of the levels of 'home', that of the family house, will further refute simplistic views on returning 'home'.

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<sup>4</sup> This may also lead to the universalisation and generalisation of the figure of 'the refugee' as a special kind of person. Refugees are often depicted as helpless, powerless and mentally distressed victims. Various references can be found of for example 'the refugee women' and 'the refugee experience'. In this way, refugees have almost become, as Malkki (1995a: 511) states, "an essentialized anthropological 'tribe'"

### 4.3 KHĀNA: THE HOUSE AS HOME

The Dari word *khāna* can be translated as ‘house’ or ‘home’.<sup>5</sup> Both the English home and the Dari *khāna* - as well as the Pashto *kur* - are associated in the first place with the house one lives in. Just as the English word home, the word *khāna* can be used to refer to larger and more abstract units than the house.<sup>6</sup> However, that use is less common than in English, and *khāna* has a less powerful intrinsic emotional value than the emic word for ‘homeland’, *watan* (see Chapter 5). Life in Afghanistan evolved around the house.<sup>7</sup> In nostalgic memories, houses often play an important role. When respondents claimed to have had a better life in Afghanistan than they will ever have in Germany, they always refer to the house they used to live in. For many, the former house has become a symbol of a ‘*dowrān-e gozashta*’, a period that is no more, of childhood memories and a time that family and friends were still together and alive, and where guests came and went.

Like many scholars who occupied themselves with the concept of home, Papastergiadis (1998: 2) sees home as entailing both a physical place and a symbolic space: “The ideal home is not just a house which offers shelter [...]. Apart from this physical protection and market value, a home is a place where personal and social meaning are grounded.” A house is not merely a place of residence, but is infused with meaning. Ideally, it is the lived space one feels most at ease or ‘at home,’ where one is surrounded by family, memories and familiar things, and which offers a sense of warmth, security and shelter. Khattak (2002: 106) contends that the house symbolizes a way of life, a culture, a feeling of belonging, and is decorated and furnished in such a way that it forms a reflection of the people who inhabit it. Fletcher (1999: 5) argues that the house is an “icon of community and family values, the heart of daily life where people redefine their own power to construct culture.” The house can be seen as the smallest unit of a territorialized sense of belonging. Leaving that house to become a refugee means leaving one’s familiar and comfortable ways of life. “Leaving home becomes symbolic of the larger insecurity where one is unable to guard against the outside and therefore is forced to abandon the most sacred of places – the home,” according to Khattak (2002: 107).<sup>8</sup> One could however argue that in the case of most refugees, home is lost before the house is: it is often precisely because the house partly loses its meaning of home, in the sense of a place offering protection and safety against malicious outsiders, that it has to be left in search for a new safe home.

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of persons sharing a common culture, nature and identity, thereby bypassing the political, historical and cultural contexts (Malkki 1995a: 511; 1995b: 8-14).

<sup>5</sup> Pashto speakers use the word *kur*, but because of my Dari bias, only the Dari word will be taken into consideration here. However, *kur* can also be translated as both ‘house’ and ‘home’, and just like *khāna*, its connotations can reach beyond the level of the house. Two less common Dari words for house, *āsiān(a)* [nest, abode, den] and *kāshāna* [(small) house, abode, dwelling] can also be used for the meaning of home, a place one feels to belong. Khattak (2002: 106) claims that Afghan refugees in Peshawar used the word *watan* not only to refer to the homeland Afghanistan, but also to refer to their old home, their former house.

<sup>6</sup> One can say for example “*Afghānestān khāna-ye mā-st*” – Afghanistan is our home.

<sup>7</sup> Examples of the central importance of the house can be discovered in the Dari language. An expression used to thank somebody is *khāna ābād (bāshad)* – may your house flourish, in the same way as *khāna kharāb* – having a ruined house - is used to insult someone. To guests, one often says “*khāna-ye khodetān ast* – make yourself at home” [literally: it is your own house].

<sup>8</sup> I do not agree with Khattak on every point. Her way of speaking about house and home often reflects older and essentialist notions of home, in which it is the ultimate dream of all displaced persons to ‘return home’, a home that cannot be established elsewhere, and in which the original house and home are used as synonyms. In the same way as a country has to be infused with feelings of security, protection and belonging in order to be considered a homeland, a house has to be infused with the same feelings in order to make it a home. It is important to keep in mind that Afghan interfamilial relations are hardly as idyllic as communicated to the external world. Bhattacharjee and other feminist anthropologists emphasize that the home is not necessarily a cozy place, attached with positive feelings. It can be a site of repression and also violence, especially for women (Bhattacharjee 1997: 308). One could argue that in such cases, the word home should perhaps not be used. Another point of critic to Khattak’s argumentation is that she identifies only one true home for Afghan women in exile, as if inside Afghanistan they never changed residence. Leaving the house is not an exceptional experience, only connected to the exilic condition. At the time of marriage, all Afghan women have to leave the parental house to take residence in that of her family-in-law.

*Khāna* is closely associated with family life. It could be argued that the house and the family are not only the smallest, but also often the most essential level of identification. Most Afghans feel first of all connected and loyal to their family and relatives, and through their kin with the larger ‘family’, the community, and only in the last place with the nation. Shagofa tells me:

“House, *khāna*, means life. [In Afghanistan,] family members live together in a house. The life inside the house is more important than life outside.”

The association of house with family is found in the Dari language. The word *khānawāda*, containing the word *khāna*, is a word for close family, although the most often used word is *fāmil*. ‘Having a house,’ *khānadār*, means ‘being married, having a family, being settled’. In a figurative sense, it is even possible for a man to refer to his wife as *khāna*.

### **The House in Afghanistan and in Exile**

In Afghanistan, many Afghans have lived in much larger houses, often with a sizeable, walled compound and a garden full of fruit trees. The house sometimes consisted of several quarters where a large number of relatives lived together. One room, with a floor covered by Persian carpets and large pillows leaning against the walls, was especially reserved for the reception of guests. In Kabul, modern housing blocks had sprung up, housing nuclear families. Most wealthy families had servants for cooking, gardening, gate keeping, driving and the laundry, or even more than one house. As a result of the war, however, numerous houses have been destroyed. Moreover, many Afghans had to sell their house and property in order to be able to pay the costly flight out of Afghanistan. Afghans who left Afghanistan in the later years fared particularly badly and hardly have any property left; if at all. This is probably connected to the fact that the people who escaped later were generally less well off as those who left earlier, combined with the fact that smugglers’ expenses increased considerably. The bitter fact is that exactly these Afghans are under the threat of being send back to Afghanistan, with no place or property to return to.

Their former residences stand in great contrast to the crowded refugee centres in Germany, where a whole family resides in one or two rooms. But even those who are self-settled usually live in smaller residences than Germans, although at the same time their household consists of more members.<sup>9</sup> I have not spoken to any respondent that valued the new house more than the former house in Afghanistan. Mahbuba:

“In Afghanistan, we had a nice and clean room especially for guests. It was locked and was opened only when guests came. My room now [a one-room apartment], is a guest room, bedroom and living room all at the same time. When visitors arrive, I have to quickly tidy up my things.”

Ziba and Ghasem try to convince me that life in Kabul as they knew it – they were from high-class families – used to be very European-like and progressive, and much better than their life in Germany. When I ask about the reasons, Ziba first compares residences: “Our house is so small.” However, it is better than the room in the refugee center they used to live in: a shipping container that was so humid and damp that both of them developed serious health problems. She narrates at length about her parental house in Afghanistan: “My father was a doctor and very rich. We had a very big living room with beautiful furniture and a large dinette.” They had a gardener, cook, cleaner and driver; a refrigerator, washing machine and a car. Many evenings, the gardener brought chairs out into the garden and guests

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<sup>9</sup> Research among self-settled Afghans and other immigrants has shown that half of the Afghan households in the sample (51.7%) consisted of five or more members, whereas more than half of the German households (64.0%) were composed of one or two persons. The average size of the houses Germans lived in was 82.8 square metres, compared with 69.2 square metres in the case of Afghans. Almost all Afghans in the sample (94.4%) rented or sub-rented a house (Ausländerbeauftragte 2001b: 33).

came that stayed until ten 'o'clock at night. "We ate, told each other stories and jokes, and we laughed a lot." After leaving the parental house, the couple lived in Mikrorayan, where they had central heating and hot water two days a week. "In Mikrorayan, our house was smaller, but my sister and other family members lived in the same quarter." That house had to be left in the course of the civil war, when barricades did not offer enough protection any more against warriors and rockets, and home became less and less home.

Shagofa mourns about the loss in exile of the house as a symbol of family closeness:

"Some [Afghans] have adopted a European lifestyle, and live together in one house, but not with each other. Their house is only to sleep and eat in."

Furniture and decoration can contribute to the transformation of the house into a home, and these habitually include some objects that establish a link to the country of origin and facilitating a sense of closeness to relatives living far away. In European eyes, Afghan houses are sparsely decorated. Some items were encountered in almost all houses I visited. Besides a Persian or Afghan carpet on the floor, these were a relatively large musical installation and a television set with video and DVD dominating the living room. The musical installation often played Afghan music, whereas the television screen repeatedly showed Bollywood musicals, wedding videos and recordings of home videos in which relatives living on the other side of the world appeared. Often, pictures of relatives living far away were found hanging on the wall or standing on the sideboard. Although my respondents seemed to attach great value to a house furnished in a stately style, this alone is not enough to transform it into a home.

Habib has spent a lot of money decorating his house luxuriously with a glass table and cupboard, and impressive leather couches but it does not feel like or represent home to him. "I have everything. *Khāna-ye khodam rā jor kardom* – I fixed my house – *amā hich delam khosh nist* - but my heart is not happy at all [...]. I have a house full of new things, but what is the use of it? For what? For whom? I am alone here." He longs to return to what he considers his 'real home', his father, mother and fiancée in Afghanistan. He now spends more time at the house of his brother and his wife than in his own house. Home to him is the place where he is surrounded by close kin, or at least by fellow Afghans: "If my brother's wife would have been German, who would have cooked my food and washed my clothes?" The house he is living in now can only be transformed into a home if he would be able to bring his fiancée Sahar over, which his legal status does not allow.

The house as a home, a stable place to feel 'at home', ideally combines material comfort, a sense of safety and shelter, and people - preferably family - one feels close to.

#### 4.4 RETURNING TO THE OLD HOUSE

"O my God, it looks so small!" A television crew follows Sima Calkin into the house she left 23 years ago before taking refuge in America. Although it is an office now, Sima's mother still cherishes the papers proving their owner's rights. Sima has been asked by her brother, who is considering moving back, to take a look. The viewer sees Sima asking the *chowkidār* [gatekeeper] permission to enter the compound. Totally overwhelmed by emotions, she wanders through the garden and the rooms of the house. "Even the light switches are the same!"

(*Network* broadcasting 3. Februari 2004)

Research by the University of Hamburg showed that 40% of its respondents still owned a piece of ground or ground with a house on it. 9% owned arable land and 3% livestock (Tietjens 2002: 9). An important motivation to visit Afghanistan, is to renovate, secure or reclaim the house. The ownership of a house or relatives in Afghanistan gives the emotional attachment to Afghanistan a material and concrete dimension. A substantial

difference between the dreams of returning by those without, and those with real estate in Afghanistan cannot be claimed on the basis of my research findings. Nevertheless, when it comes to realisation of such dreams, Afghans who have such a tangible ‘base’ are more inclined to actually visit Afghanistan or make concrete plans for a permanent return. For some, imaginations of that house still represent home, a place infused with feelings of nostalgic longing, the scene of memories, or a symbol of a lost period and order. Many Afghans visiting Afghanistan go to see the place where they have lived. This is a visit that can evoke a range of emotions. When asked about the places in Afghanistan they would like to see again, many mention their old house and neighbourhood:



Kabul 2004 (Source: <http://www.epidhvtes.net>)

I ask Nasim where he would go first as soon as he would set foot in Afghanistan. “I would go to Khairkhāna, the quarter [in Kabul] where we lived. I would be so happy. But at the same time, I would have sad memories. I was there with my family. Now I don’t know who is living in our house.”

Ali Reza (27) left his birthplace Herat at the age of ten: “I want to know what our house looks like now, and I miss my aunt and uncle. I would like to see how everything looks now. Just to take a walk through the streets. I want to see everything at once, but of course that is impossible. Who is living in our house now? What does our shop look like? I wasn’t there for ten or eleven years, but I can remember everything. I will never forget it; I live in these thoughts.”

### The Old House as Home?

For some, the old house represents the lost home, whereas for others, ‘house’ and ‘home’ are not synonyms any more. There are those who play with the thought of moving back, for example Abdurrahman:

Abdurrahman tells me that he, a brother and some cousins recently met to talk about rebuilding their old house. He takes a piece of paper out of a dresser, a map of the place, carefully drawn and measured out. “It is 130 by 60 meter, in one of the best areas of Kabul [...]. All of us want to return.” On the large walled compound of the extended family, all the nuclear families had their own house. In the past, there used to be a beautiful garden, a swimming pool and a place to grill. The garden was so enormous, that, by bribing the gardener, he could grill and swim with his girlfriend without anybody noticing. The floors of the house were made of marble. A large contrast with the flat he lives in now: “Here I am living in a dirty pigsty.” First of all, they are collecting money to rebuild the demolished wall. One of his cousins has already returned with his family from Pakistan to build a small dwelling in the middle of the compound, in which he now lives with his family. One day a commandant came and showed him a letter, claiming he had bought the residence. Had it not been for the cousin guarding the property, it would have been taken by a third party.



An Afghan man living in Switzerland visits the house where he spent his childhood (Source: <http://www.photopera.com>)

The impression that Abdurrahman’s plans have taken on quite concrete forms already might be misleading. At the moment it is too dangerous for Abdurrahman to return, because of his left-wing

political affiliations. Moreover, he has not found a solution for his own family. He does not want to imprison his German wife and his daughter in a 'golden cage' in Kabul, but fears that he would be unable to support them financially if they were to stay behind in Germany. Behind his dreams of return and his concrete efforts to reconstruct the old house might be a longing to restore the past, a past evolving around that house: "When I return, I return to my memories. I might very well become shocked. In a way, it is naivety. I [want to] return to our garden, although I know it isn't there any more. It's an illusion that one has in mind. I have built that house with my own hands, and when I see it doesn't exist any more, it might be a big shock for me."

Many do not talk about their old house in such a nostalgic way as Abdurrahman does. Their return to the old house is predominantly incited by financial motives as they try to sell or let the house. Because house rents and prices are extra-ordinary high, especially in Kabul, many exiles are able to leave Afghanistan with a large sum of money. It is however not always easy to reclaim the old house or land. Some returnees find that their applications to build or rebuild houses are delayed by bureaucracy (Traces 2002); some are said to have been forced to pay a few thousand dollars to General Fahim to get their land title deeds recognised (Tietjens: personal communication). Abdurrahman recounts:

"A friend of mine was in Afghanistan for three months, trying to reclaim his house. He didn't succeed." Beltun tells me about a Hindu from London that went to Kabul: "He had to pay a bribe to get his house and garden back, but in the end it didn't succeed."

For most Afghans, an important reason why Afghanistan does not qualify anymore as a home, a place to live, is that they "don't have anything there any more," a house being one of those things. Afghans in fear of forced return often called out to me in distress: "Where should we live? We don't have a house any more." Because of the influx of returnees from neighbouring countries as well as war destruction, housing is scarce, especially in the capital. International organisations and their staff paid high prices or rents for houses at good locations, which has caused exorbitant inflation. According to the journalist Beltun:

"Rents in the centre are 1000 to 5000 dollar. An apartment in Mikrorayan for which nobody would pay 3000 dollars two years ago, is being sold for 40.000 dollars. The cheapest houses in Khairkhana for example, for which nobody wanted to pay 10 dollars a month, now cost 500."

Most importantly, even if Afghans would return and shift their residence from Germany to Afghanistan, the question remains open-ended if they would be able to transform their former or newly acquired *khāna* from merely a house to a home.

At this concrete and small-scale level of the *khāna* as a house and a family home, the concept of home was quite suitable to address certain themes related to issues of belonging and return. However, home not only refers to the family house. As the next paragraph will demonstrate, it can involve many levels of meaning and is becoming an increasingly tortuous concept. The lack of clarity surrounding the concept of home illustrates just how difficult and fraught it is to pin down abstract notions and lived experiences of what a home actually is.

#### **4.5 THE POST-MODERN HOME**

Traditional conceptions of home considered it to be the "stable, physical centre of one's universe", a safe and territorially fixed place to leave and return to, a space under one's own control and of familiarity (Rapport and Dawson 1998: 7). Apart from this physical place of dwelling, home has commonly been defined at three levels:

the domestic sphere of the family or household, the community and the nation (Al-Ali and Koser 2002: 6; Bhattacharjee 1997: 314-315).

**Home**

- A dwelling-place, house, abode; the fixed residence of a family or household; the seat of domestic life and interests; one's own house; the dwelling in which one habitually lives, or which one regards as one's proper abode. Sometimes including the members of a family collectively; the home-circle or household.
- The place of one's dwelling or nurturing, with the conditions, circumstances, and feelings which naturally and properly attach to it, and are associated with it. *a home from home*, a place away from home which provides home-like accommodation or amenities; also (outside Britain), *a home away from home*.
- *fig.* In various connexions, referring to the grave, or future state: the 'long' or 'last' home.
- A place, region, or state to which one properly belongs, in which one's affections centre, or where one finds refuge, rest, or satisfaction.
- One's own country, one's native land.
- The seat, centre, or native habitat; the place or region where a thing is native, indigenous, or most common.
- An institution providing refuge or rest for the destitute, the afflicted, the infirm, etc., or for those who either have no home of their own, or are obliged by their vocation to live at a distance from the home of their family.

**At home**

- At or in one's own house, or place of abode.
- In one's own neighbourhood, town, country, etc.; in one's native land.
- At one's ease, as if in one's own home; in one's element. Hence, Unconstrained, unembarrassed; familiar.

(A selection of meanings, Oxford English Dictionary)

In this era of global refugee movements and displacement it is clear that the concept of home has become a complicated one. Is home the place that displaced people originated from, or can a new home be established elsewhere? Are displaced people necessarily 'homeless' or can they have more than one home? As Malkki (1995a: 509) argues, "if home is where one feels most safe and at ease, instead of some point on the map, then it is far from clear that returning to where one fled from is the same thing as 'going home'". Definitions of home can shift across a number of registers. Although one could seriously question if a fixed and stable home has ever existed, in a generalized way, the 'leaving home' could be seen as a breaking apart of the coexistence of these registers of home (Ahmed 1999: 338). There is a growing awareness that notions of home are the outcomes of dynamic processes, evolving over time and varying from individual to individual (Al-Ali and Koser 2002: 6).

An ongoing tension between definitions of home can be spotted in the literature on the matter between definitions that refer to physical places and those that refer to symbolic spaces. Many scholars would agree that

*Khānadār rā yak khāna  
Bi khāna rā sad khāna*

One home for the settled one  
A hundred homes for the one  
without a home

(Afghan proverb)

home entails a dual meaning of both a concrete physical space and an emotional and personal space of identification and feelings of belonging (e.g. Demuth 2000: 24; Olwig 1998: 225). Besides a geographical aspect, home is emotionally charged with a rather diffuse 'feeling of home': where one belongs or wants to belong. Graham and Khosravi (1997: 130) define home as "a place as well as a culture to

which one belongs." Brah and Ahmed distinguish between two types of homes for the migrant: the first is the place of origin, and the second type is a home as "the lived experience of locality, its sounds and smells" (Brah 1996: 192) or "home as the sensory world of everyday experience" (Ahmed 1999: 341). The home as a place of origin in Brah's vision is "a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense, it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin'" (Brah 1996: 192).

In this post-modernist era, more and more emphasis seems to be placed on the plurilocality, mobility and flexibility of homes. Rapport and Dawson (1998: 9) stress the fluidity and ambiguity of home and define it very broadly as “where one best knows oneself.” They maintain that people are “always and yet never ‘at home’”, as places do not exist in isolation and people live in movement, transition and transgression. Berger (1984: 64) argues that contemporary people are more ‘at home’ in “words, jokes, opinions, gestures, actions, even the way one wears a hat.” Some make a distinction between ‘feeling at home’ and calling a place home.

A tendency seems to develop to question the concept of home and its meanings to such an extent, that in my opinion, a hollow and unusable concept remains. An overall theoretical framework is still lacking and each anthropologist seems to utilize his or her own and not always explicitly stated definition of home. This makes debates quite confusing. It all seems to be a matter of decisions and definitions made by individual researchers, about what becomes translated as home and what not. A home will always be ‘not-home’ at another level, or according to another definition. For example, Bhattacharjee and other feminist anthropologists emphasize that home is not necessary a cosy place, attached with positive feelings. It can also be a site of repression and violence (Bhattacharjee 1997: 308). A number of others would argue that such places should not be called home. Di Stefano (2002) suggests that for many displaced people, the notion of home might be understood as a sense of being between places. This feeling of in-between-ness could be called a condition of homelessness by others, while someone else would in this case identify multiple homes. Especially confusing is the fact that the word home is often employed without a clear definition. A researcher’s choice concerning what to call home and what not is even more complicated in cases where interviews and other forms of data collection have taken place in a language in which there is no clear equivalent for the English word home, so that it really seems to be up to the researcher to interpret what home is and what not. This problem will be discussed in paragraph 7. The concept of home has been dismantled to such an extent that, I feel it is hardly usable anymore as a research tool. The concept of homeland, on the contrary, has hardly been questioned.

#### 4.6 HOMELAND: IMPLICIT ASSUMPTIONS

One cannot talk about refugees, migrants, exiles or diasporas without referring to the place they came from, because it is exactly this place of origin that they are defined against. Without a history of dispersal from this place of origin, there would be no refugee and no diaspora. This bare fact, however, does not say anything about the nature of this relationship between a place of origin and the people who left. The nature of this particular link has long been taken for granted as an affective and emotional one. The supposition that the place of origin automatically represents home - and hence a place of longing and belonging has been falsified in recent years. However, I want to argue that similar assumptions still live on in the concept of ‘homeland’.

I am a stranger in this world, and in my exile there is a severe solitude and painful lonesomeness. I am alone, but in my aloneness I contemplate about an unknown and magical homeland, and these reflections fill my dreams with phantoms of a great and remote land that my eyes have never seen.

(Khalil Gibran’s *The Storm* [1993];  
Quoted [in German] by an Afghan boy  
on an Internet forum, stating:  
“Considering the notion of *Heimat*, I  
have the following verse in mind.”)

Homeland is the word that is used to refer to a place of origin. Especially in diaspora studies, it is a notion of central importance.<sup>10</sup> Because it contains the word home, it encompasses connotations of ‘a place they, refugees and diasporas, belong to naturally’ and ‘a place they themselves long to be’. Definitions of diaspora may vary, but the most-agreed upon aspect of diaspora is the emotional relationship to some sort of homeland (Lewellen 2002: 166). This is coupled to an idea of a collective identity formed around this homeland that has a sentimental, emotive meaning (Lewellen 2002: 161). According to Al-Rasheed (1994: 201), the construction of a place as homeland “not only includes the physical drawing, locating and describing of a geographical centre from which people claim to have originated, but also involves a strong emotive element.” Refugees’ discourses about their homeland are not objective descriptions of the place they came from, but rather “a strong assertion linked to national and ethnic belonging” (Al-Rasheed 1994: 202). A well-known but quite narrowly defined characterization of diaspora is given by Safran (1991: 83-84). Firstly, they or their ancestors were dispersed from a specific original centre to at least two foreign regions; and secondly, there is a collective memory or myth about their original homeland. Thirdly, they believe that they are not fully accepted by the host country and feel partly alienated from it; and fourthly, the ancestral homeland is considered to be the true, ideal home and the place they or their descendants should eventually return to when conditions are appropriate. A fifth point is that they are committed to the restoration or maintenance of the homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and the sixth and last point is that one way or another, be it personally or vicariously, they continue to relate to the homeland, and this relationship plays an important role in the definition of their ethno-communal consciousness and solidarity.

In my opinion, it is inaccurate to presuppose such sentimental links to the homeland. Instead, I would like to suggest thoughtful evaluations of what this place of origin really means to individuals that do not live there any more. However, if one casts such doubts on the existence of an inescapable emotional link between a displaced person and his place of origin, some interesting theoretical questions arise, that I have not previously encountered. If a homeland is A) a place of origin and B) of sentimental significance for a displaced person, one could argue whether or not the word could still be used in case only one of those elements is present. Firstly, could a place that is not a place of origin but to which an individual has developed a sense of belonging (B without A) be called a homeland? In such cases, not homeland but the word home seems to be employed. I have only once encountered the word homeland being used for countries of resettlement: Barnes (2001: 409) speaks of an original and a new homeland, or a previous and current homeland, for Vietnamese in Australia. Secondly, can the place an individual’s forefathers originate from, but he or she does not feel emotionally connected to (A without B), be called homeland? Tsuda implicitly touches on these issues when he distinguishes between two places of origin for second and next generations: a country of natal and one of ethnic origin, from which only the one that is “imbued with positive emotional affect as a place of desire and longing to which the individual feels a strong sense of personal attachment and affiliation” (Tsuda 2000: 6) becomes conceptualised as a real homeland.<sup>11</sup> Like the word home, I try to treat homeland with a certain care. I have chosen to use the word only

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<sup>10</sup> It is not the case that none of the implicit assumptions regarding the notion of homeland have been criticised. The word was often used by anthropologists and others in reference to a country of origin and its national borders. Several scholars have argued that a homeland does not have to be congruent with an existing nation-state, nor do its borders have to be precisely defined. For example, ethnic Kurds from Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran might talk about their homeland Kurdistan, Indian Sikhs dream about their own homeland Khalistan and Christian Assyrian Iraqi’s who do not identify themselves with the Iraqi nation-state refer to a territory called Mesopotamia as their homeland. Bearing this point in mind, I will occasionally criticise my own use of the nation-state Afghanistan as the level of homeland.

<sup>11</sup> For that matter, in diaspora theory a natal place of origin is only called a homeland if it is also the place of ancestral origin.

for places of ancestral origin. Many times, I have avoided using the word, and have used ‘place of origin’ or an emic term instead.

I would suggest a differentiation between two different perspectives on homeland: a more collective versus a more individual one. People who are part of a diaspora construct and imagine the homeland as semi-collectives as well as individuals and these levels are related dialectically. On a collective level one finds the homeland of diaspora theory functioning as a unifying symbol and an anchor of community for dispersed Afghans by the creation of emotive discourses that emphasize the significance of ‘roots’. Such collective discourses on the homeland, however, do not tell much about the actual emotional attachment of its individual members to Afghanistan. Thus, against this macro-scale perspective, a particularized perspective can be placed, accentuating the actual emotional attachment of individual members of the diaspora to Afghanistan and to other places. In Chapter 5, with its focus on ‘roots’ and origins, the collective level is the most important, while in Chapter 6 the main emphasis will be placed on individual and ambiguous outcomes of struggles to find spaces of belonging between ‘roots’ and ‘routes’.

#### 4.7 EMIC AND ETIC CONCEPTS

If one would try to translate homeland in Dari and Pashto, *watan* would be the most appropriate word. In German, one would probably choose *Heimat*.<sup>12</sup> Home could be best translated in Dari as *khāna*, and in German as *Heim* or *Zuhause*. In Dari, it is more usual to speak in a negative sense of home as ‘not strange’. To feel at home would be translated as not having *ehsās-e bigāna*, a feeling of estrangement. However, as I have stated in the introduction of this chapter, one has to guard against an uncritical translation of etic concepts into emic ones and vice versa. Conceptual equivalence is hard to accomplish in translation, as concepts are often complex wholes of denotative, connotative and annotative meanings with a considerable cross-cultural and cross-lingual variance. I have previously written a methodology paper on the issue of cross-cultural and cross-lingual translatability of concepts (Braakman 2005). Instead of speaking about emic and etic concepts, I arrived at calling the overlap in meaning between a concept in the language of the anthropologist, and one in the language of the research group, ‘etic’, and conscious and unconscious culture and language specific meanings, in either concept, ‘emic’. Usunier (1999) speaks about the “hidden emicity in seemingly etic concepts.” The anthropologist’s so-called analytical concepts of home and homeland are not universally valid, but have an Anglo-Saxon linguistic and cultural source context, and thus an emic part of meaning. An unreflected translation runs the risk of imposing one’s own emic meanings onto the research group, while at the same time overlooking meanings that are specific to the concepts the research group used.

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<sup>12</sup> In my interviews, I used the words *Heimat* and *watan* as synonyms. All respondents stated that their meanings were alike. I became to realise much later that their uses are not identical. In all interviews I conducted in Dari, *watan* referred to Afghanistan. Speaking of other places than Afghanistan as *watan* is impossible, according to the high majority of respondents: for a place to be considered *watan*, ancestral origin is a prerequisite. The word *watan* is very connected to more collective discourses of ‘where we came from’, of ‘roots’. After a thorough analysis of the term, I concluded that the notion bore many similarities to the etic ‘homeland’ in diaspora theory. The German word *Heimat*, however, was disconnected from the territory of Afghanistan much more easily. Although there were many respondents that identified Afghanistan as their one and only *Heimat* in the same sense as they would speak about Afghanistan as their *watan*, others said Afghanistan did not represent *Heimat* to them any more; Germany or Hamburg was, while others felt *heimatslos* [without a *Heimat*], or identified more than one *Heimat*.

Duranti (1997: 154) argues that translation involves, a “long series of interpretations and decisions.” These, however, are seldom made apparent in the final product. For Iranian migrants and refugees in Sweden, Graham and Khosravi (1997: 130) argue that there is not one single place that offered all they desire; no home that fulfils all their personal, social, economic and social needs. Graham and Khosravi came to identify multiple homes: the country of origin that had become a place of nostalgia; a home in the meaning of a place where practical needs can be fulfilled, such as education and employment or the raising of children; a home in the sense of a preferred final destination, which could be the country of origin or another country; and a home in the meaning of a place whose culture best resembles the homeland culture as people remember it before they were forced to leave. In a Dari / Persian translation of a report (Turton and Marsden 2002) that mentions this research, the word home is translated as *watan*. Multiple *watans* are thus spoken of. I am almost certain that the Iranian respondents have not used this word, as *watan* stands for a place of origin. In Persian, there is no overarching concept to class these different homes in although the possibility that such a word exists in Swedish cannot be excluded. I suppose however that it was the researchers who decided how to interpret and translate different feelings of belonging and what to classify in the concept of home and what to discard as not-home.

I believe that both emic and etic concepts, as I will keep on calling them, need a thoughtful evaluation of their meanings and implicit assumptions. This chapter offered an evaluation of the etic concepts of home and homeland. In paragraph 4.5 it has been shown that the concept of home is open to many different interpretations. This may in turn lead to different choices of translations. In paragraph 4.6, I have analysed the lack of reflection on implicit assumptions regarding the concept of homeland. Instead of transferring these assumptions to the emic concepts of *Heimat* or *watan*, I have critically analysed the specific meanings of *watan* (see Chapter 5) before I could draw the conclusion that the two concepts have a considerable overlap. Throughout this thesis I have often decided not to translate the words home and homeland at all, but instead use the original emic German or Dari terminology.

The following case illustrates how different interpretations of home and homeland are expressed in emic terminology. Aryan’s senses of home can be compared to the dual home Ahmed (1999: 341) identifies, ‘home as a place of origin’ [*Heimat*] and ‘home as the sensory world of everyday experience’ [*Zuhause*]:

Aryan (24) consequently says ‘*die Heimat*’ to refer to Afghanistan. He left Afghanistan at the age of two and lived in Iran and India before coming to Germany 13 years ago. Aryan differentiates between *Heimat* and *Zuhause*. *Heimat* is his place of origin, which for Aryan is a powerful identity definer and metaphorical space of belonging, although he does not have any memories of it and does not know very much about it. *Zuhause* for him is the place he lives now. *Zuhause* is the place he feels at home, the place he is accustomed to and fulfils his practical needs, as well as the place where family and friends live. “For me, Afghanistan is still my *Heimat*, although I haven’t lived there. I feel to belong to Afghanistan and not to the Germans. I have learned how to live in Germany, but still I belong to Afghanistan.” When he was younger, his parents did not tell him much about Afghanistan, because he did not want to hear it anyway. He now regrets this: “I only know it from movies and television. I love to see documentaries and news, everything that has to do with Afghanistan.” He would like to make a holiday trip to his *Heimat* to get to know his family, the people, the country, the culture and the climate, but knows it will be difficult: “I don’t know it over there, I grew up over here.” Later in the interview, I ask Aryan if he feels at home over here. “Hmm, I never thought about that. I live here, I work here, I have my friends over here. Then I think it is my *Zuhause*. When I am somewhere abroad, after a certain time I think ‘*Ich muss wieder nach Hause gehen* - I have to go home again’. But I’m not a German. I am still an Afghan, although I have a German passport. *Zuhause* is where I live. I won’t say that Afghanistan is my *Zuhause*, because I don’t know it and I don’t live there.” For him and his brother, a

return to Afghanistan on a permanent basis is hardly imaginable. His parents, however, dream to return to Afghanistan as soon as the situation is peaceful and stable, in maybe 15 to 20 years time: “Here, they are better off financially, but it is the *Heimat*, you know.”

‘Home as a place of origin’ can be taken as the topic of the following chapter. It examines the emotional attachment of Afghans with the place they came from; the place their ‘roots’ are located.



Young Afghan woman in a traditional dress (Photo: Marije Braakman)

## Chapter 5

# THE NOSTALGIA FOR ROOTS

*I am three years old. I am sitting on my father's knee. He is telling me of a magical place: the fairytale landscape you enter in dreams. Fountains fling diamond droplets into mosaic pools. Coloured birds sing in the fruit-laden orchards. The pomegranates burst and their insides are rubies. Fruit is so abundant that even the goats are fed on melons. The water has magical properties: you can fill to bursting with fragrant pilau, then step to the brook and drink - and you will be ready to eat another meal.*

*On three sides of the plateau majestic mountains tower, capped with snow. The fourth side overlooks a sunny valley where, gleaming far below, sprawls a city of villas and minarets. And here is the best part of the story: it is true.*

*The garden is in Paghman, where my family had its seat for nine hundred years. The jewel-like city it overlooks is the Afghan capital, Kabul. The people of Paghman call the capital Kabul jan: beloved Kabul. We call it that too, for this is where we belong.*

*"Whatever outside appearances may be, no matter who tells you otherwise, this garden, this country, these are your origin. This is where you are truly from. Keep it in your heart, Saira jan. Never forget."*

*Any western adult might have told me that this was an exile's tale of a lost Eden: the place you dream about, to which you can never return. But even then, I wasn't going to accept that. Even then, I had absorbed enough of the East to feel I belonged there. And too much of the West not to try to nail down dreams.*

Saira Shah's *The Storyteller's Daughter* (2003: 3-4)

### 5.1 THE HOMOPHOBE ROOTS / ROUTES

"Our roots lie in Afghanistan. We have had the Afghan culture injected into our blood," Mahbuba, a woman in her forties, says to me, as she places an imaginary syringe against her arm. "Here we are so-so," she continues while twisting her hand, "we aren't real Afghans but neither are we Europeans."

Mahbuba's statement touches upon the ambiguous senses of belonging that people in diaspora face. For the individuals involved, issues of home and belonging entail negotiations and dialogues between two different narratives that are dialogically related. Constitutive of identity and senses of belonging are both 'where people come from' and 'where they travel to' (Friedman 1998: 178), and these involve the narratives of 'roots' and 'routes'.

In "our roots lie in Afghanistan" and "our blood," Mahbuba used an idiom derived from biology to refer to Afghan origins and inborn qualities. These correspond to narratives of 'roots', of primordial identity and permanence. The metaphor 'roots' refers to ideas of some sort of authentic home, common origin and bounded culture (Armbruster 2002: 25); to a "sense of ethnic or cultural purity and timeless tradition grounded in place" (Nash 2000). According to Friedman (2002: 670), "roots signify emotional bonds with the physical environment but often also contain notions of local community, shared culture, and so forth." Ideas of 'roots' and authentic identity played an important role in the identity formation of my respondents.

The second narrative, that of 'routes', involves movement, mobility and change. "Here we are so-so; we aren't real Afghans but neither are we Europeans," Mahbuba said. This refers to 'routes' and suggests that one can become less 'Afghan' while living abroad. Along the 'routes' the respondents have travelled, geographically as

well as mentally, something of the – more often imagined than real - pure ‘roots’ gets lost or mixed up with experiences of living in another society, another country, another culture. The metaphor ‘routes’ thus entails forms of diffusion and hybridism, intercultural movement and migrations (Armbruster 2002: 25). The question arises what ‘real Afghans’ are and why, according to Mahbuba, Afghans in Europe are not. In a common sense, being an Afghan seems to involve two levels. The first level is that of ‘roots’: of origins and ancestry, or an inborn and inescapable ‘nature’. However, Afghan origins alone are not sufficient to make one a real Afghan. The second level involves behaving in a certain way. One could say that ‘nature’ has to be combined with ‘culture,’ a learned way of ‘doing Afghan’. There is no consensus of opinion about the admissible level of change. As will be argued in Chapter 6, change can raise moral dilemmas, and it is often represented in negative terms such as ‘belying one’s nature’ or ‘forgetting who you are’. At the same time, there is an acknowledgement that living in another society necessarily involves change, both conscious and unconscious.

This chapter focuses on stories of ‘roots’. The next paragraph assesses the importance placed on ‘roots’, blood and ancestry in discourses of belonging and identity. Such stories of ‘roots’ often lay a claim on a particular territory. An analysis of the notion of *watan* seemed particularly suited to address this connection between place and ‘authentic’ identity. In the second part of this chapter, an attempt will be made to explain why ideas of ‘roots’ play such a significant role for ‘uprooted’ Afghans. It will be argued that it might be exactly the experiences of ‘routes’ that trigger awareness – and even an invention - of ‘roots’. In the imagination of ‘roots’ and the soil in which they are grounded, one can find a certain amount of nostalgia.

## 5.2 ASL WA NASAB: ORIGINS AND ROOTS

“Even if you are not born in Afghanistan, you stay an Afghan and Afghanistan is your *watan*,” according to Lisa.

Malkki (1992: 28) and others have severely criticized static notions of belonging and identity, and the way that arboreal and soil metaphors are employed to speak about kinship and the nation (see par. 4.2). Among the Afghan respondents themselves, however, such ideas about a quasi-natural bond between place, people and culture appear to be very essential. In negotiating senses of belonging and identity, stories of roots and origins, blood and ancestry, and the territory in which these roots are thought to be grounded, play an important role:

“Me as an Afghan in the German army, isn’t it ridiculous... I was the only one with black hair,” Bashir says. He was born in Belgium and moved to Germany when he was six. He possesses the German nationality and has just completed his military service. “But you are not an Afghan, are you?” I ask with a feigned naivety. His reaction is fierce: “I am an Afghan and will always be one. An Afghan cannot be bought, only rented. Qandahari blood is flowing inside me.”

Abu-Lughod (1986:4), when discussing Bedouins in Egypt, notes that “[b]lood both links people to the past and binds them in the present. As a link to the past, through genealogy, blood is essential to the definition of cultural identity.” This appears also to be true for Afghans. There is a strong sense of blood kinship and genealogy. Blood is the authenticator of origin or pedigree and as such is critical to identity and the feelings of belonging and non-belonging. Samir says:

“Unfortunately, I wasn’t born in Afghanistan, but I feel like a full-blooded Afghan. I am an Afghan with every fibre of my body.”

Ideas of biological inheritance via blood and genes and cultural inheritance passed on from generation to generation (a distinction borrowed from Nash 2003: 183) are hardly separable. In the introduction, Mahbuba biologized culture by declaring: “We have the Afghan culture injected into our blood.” Indeed, I have often heard people speak of cultural factors and qualities of character as being ‘in the blood’ and thus inescapable: hospitality, fighting spirit, pride, a worship of autonomy and an inclination to gossip. In Afghan discourse, culture can thus be depicted as, in Nash’s words (2003: 188), “a set of characteristics that are transmitted unchanged through generations along with bodily substance.” It follows that attempts to change one’s character or behaviour can be regarded as acting against one’s true nature and identity:

“You can’t escape your roots, even if you try desperately. You will always stay what you were in the beginning,” Said says. Lisa puts it this way: “As you get older, you unconsciously return to how you were in reality... that is, back to your *asl wa nasab*.”

Roy (1986: 12) states: “Every Afghan is linked to the past by a line of ancestors traced back from his father.” The most respondents, Pashtuns in particular, had a high level of historical awareness. Zmarai, who had left Afghanistan at the age of seven, derives his identity from his descent:

“My grandparents have always told me who I am descended from, what an honourable genealogical tree I have, and that I have the honour of belonging to the Mangal-tribe and that I have to maintain that honour. They have always told me what was expected from me, that is, to be upright, to be an Afghan and always to remember where I come from, that is from the poor province of Paktia, from the mountainous place Mangal, where my ancestors struggled for their survival.”<sup>1</sup>

Considering the importance that is placed on pedigree and blood, it is easy to imagine that the national level is often by no means the most important level of belonging. Armbruster (2002: 25) argues that roots are about ideas of common origin. Common origins are however difficult to identify in a country with such an ethnically heterogeneous population. Discourses of blood and origin are often employed as instruments of inclusion and exclusion. Different interpretations of ancient history and myths of descent are sometimes used to more or less exclude certain ethnical groups from an ‘Afghan nation’. For example, Pashtuns may claim to be the ‘real Afghans,’ the original Aryan inhabitants of Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup>

“In Afghanistan, time passes much slower,” says Wahid. “Here one forgets what happened yesterday. In Afghanistan, ancient history is looked at as if it happened yesterday. One doesn’t forget. Hazara are being hated because of the crimes of the Mongols, and because it was a Hazara that killed Nader Shah.<sup>3</sup> I myself didn’t know how to cope with the fact that my great grandfather owned land that he took from Hazara. For a long time, I felt very guilty about that.”

Mahdi says: “Yes, we still live in the Middle Ages. Hazara are still considered Mongols; Pashtuns are Pakistanis, Herati are seceded Iranians.” I react: “And Hindus and Sikhs are asylum seekers from India. Uzbeks belong to Uzbekistan, Tajiks to Tajikistan, and Turkmens to Turkmenistan.” “Exactly. We live in the past, worry about the future and forget about the present. That’s the reason we never make the grade.” However, Mahdi still believes in some kind of national feeling: “You know, Marije *jān*, we are

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<sup>1</sup> Many eastern and south-eastern Pashtun tribes, such as the Mangals, relate themselves to a particular territory or ‘homeland’, although members may live elsewhere and may never have seen that place. In western Afghanistan there are no areas that are attributed to particular tribes (Glatzer 2001: 10). Among the Nuristanis, the Qirghiz, the Turkmen and the Baluch, tribal organisation also plays a role (Canfield 1988: 186). Tajiks are not tribally organised. Instead of tracing their origins to a tribe or a mythical forefather, Tajiks usually identify with the place where they live, or originate from, and speak of themselves as Panshiris, Munjanis, Kabulis, Heratis etc. (Allan 2003: 194-195; Glatzer 2002: 5-6).

<sup>2</sup> According to Glatzer (2002: 5), this myth that Pashtuns are Aryans was adopted during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Before this time they believed to constitute one of the lost tribes of Israel. With the help of the Aryan myth, according to which Pashtuns are genuine inhabitants of Afghanistan instead of Israeli settlers, Pashtuns could more easily legitimate their hegemony over Afghanistan and other ethnicities.

<sup>3</sup> By other ethnical groups, Hazaras are often considered descendents of the armies of Chengiz Khan that invaded the area in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Hazaras themselves might claim that they have already inhabited an area in central Afghanistan for more than 6000 years.

a stupid people, but we are still attached to each other and most of all to our country. The Afghans can't separate themselves like the Yugoslavians did, although they are killing each other.”

The next paragraphs concentrate on the concept of *watan* as the territory of roots. The way this notion has changed as a result of mass displacement will be analysed.

### 5.3 ASLI WATAN AFGHANISTAN DAI : THE ORIGINAL HOMELAND IS AFGHANISTAN

#### Traditional Notions of *Watan*

The Dari dictionary of the Center for Afghanistan Studies (1993) translates *watan* as home country, fatherland, homeland and as hometown.<sup>4</sup> *Watan* is originally an Arabic word, and is also used in Turkish languages. Synonyms of *watan* are *meyhan* in Dari and *hewād* in Pashto. The *Farhang-e Hamid*, an authoritative work on Persian language, describes *watan* as a ‘place where you are born and raised and where you live’ [*Mahal-e eqāmāt-e shakhs wa jā-yi ke motawaled shoda wa parwāresh yāfta*].

Mahdi argues that *watan* means more than just homeland, as it is combined with many more emotions than the English ‘homeland’ and the German ‘*Heimat*’. According to him, ‘homeland’ needs an adjective that expresses the high level of patriotism and nostalgia attached to the concept of *watan*: “Sweet home? My sweet homeland?” he suggests.

*Watan* not merely refers to a piece of land, but also to the people who inhabit, or inhabited, it. It suggests the relationship among people from a particular place (Canfield 1988: 186). These people are each other’s *watandār* or *hamwatan* [compatriot, fellow countryman, fellow townsman; both in Dari and Pashto], or *hewadwal* in Pashto.<sup>5</sup> A *watan* is a geographical and social area where one feels at home, where one belongs to, where ones family and friends live, where one can rely on the people and where security and social warmth is felt (Glatzer 2001: 3). At the same time, *watan* is conceived of as something vulnerable that has to be defended and treasured. It is strongly connected to feelings of belonging and is a marker of social identity.<sup>6</sup> Even nomads identify themselves with a *watan*; this is mostly their winter quarter (Tapper 1988: 27). According to Glatzer (2001: 3), the German equivalent of *watan* is the word *Heimat*, which has a similar emotional quality.

In what ways did notions of *watan* change as a result of the mass displacement of Afghans brought about by the war? These circulations of people have certainly made questions of *watan* more urgent. *Watan* becomes especially meaningful and crucial when people come in contact with outsiders, which sets off processes of defining local and social identities. The awareness of *watan* is activated by the experience or awareness of non-*watan*, the unfamiliar. Not only has the notion gained importance, in certain ways its denotations have also changed. I will subsequently consider two elements of ambiguity that are especially important in the context of migration: that of the territorial scale and of the location of *watan*.

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<sup>4</sup> Another closely related word in Dari is *sarzamin*: homeland, native land, birthplace; land, territory, region (Center for Afghanistan Studies 1993). In Pashto, one could say *khawra* or *tatobai*. Connected words with a less emotional content are *mol*, *keshwar* and *mamlakat*, used in both Dari and Pashto: country, (territory of a) state; a nation or state; the land of a person’s birth, native country or land, home country, fatherland, homeland.

<sup>5</sup> The suffix *-dār* is derived from the verb *dāsh* [to have, to possess], and means ‘having’, ‘possessing’. *Hamwatan* is a similar word, *ham* meaning ‘too’ or ‘also’, here used in the sense of ‘fellow-’. I will argue later on that *hamwatan* and *watandār* are not complete synonyms.

<sup>6</sup> Tapper (1988: 26) distinguishes three main identity markers in pre-war popular discourse. Besides *watan*, these are *mazhab* [religion] and *qum* [fellow tribesmen; tribe, clan; (paternal) relatives].

## **Ambiguousness of Scale**

The scale of the *watan* will firstly be considered. As previously stated, *watan* can refer to a village, valley, district, province, region or the whole nation or country. An analysis has to start with a short history of the Afghan state and nation building. Unfortunately, literature on the concept of *watan* is very scarce, which makes it impossible to present a detailed history here about the way the notion of *watan* has expanded. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the term Afghan referred only to Pashtuns. 'Afghanistan', the land of the Afghans, was the region that was inhabited and controlled by Pashtun tribes (Glatzer 2002: 2; Magnus and Naby 1998: 11). As the British Indian empire expanded, some of these areas inhabited by ethnic Pashtuns were placed under Sikh and British rule. Having lost control over this eastern territory, Pashtun tribes began to conquer northern and western areas, inhabited by non-Afghans (Magnus and Naby 1998: 11-12). The first official reference to an area called Afghanistan that also included other ethnicities is found in the Anglo-Persian treaty of 1801 (Allan 2003: 195). Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, 'Afghanistan' was the stateless buffer zone between Russia, British India and Persia. It was not until 1880 that an official state called Afghanistan was declared, of which the borders were defined under the pressure of the great neighbouring powers (Glatzer 2002: 2). The term Afghan was politically transformed from a term referring to one ethnic group, now mostly referred to as Pashtuns, to one applied to a multiethnic people (Magnus and Naby 1998: 12). However, before the Marxist coup in 1978, hardly any sense of a national bond and citizenship existed (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 2000a: 419). The state remained an abstract concept in this non-literate country where infrastructure was lacking and the centralized regime had hardly been able to expand its power beyond Kabul (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 2000a: 420). In those rare cases that rural Afghans came in contact with the state, they rather considered it a hostile factor interfering with their life (Schetter 2003: 3)

Despite attempts by pre-war nationalist politicians and ideologists to extend the notion of *watan* to the whole of Afghanistan, this interpretation of *watan* did not succeed in becoming imperative at that time. These nationalists, who typically favoured Pashtun elements, belonged to a very small elite, almost exclusively located in Kabul. Its most important representatives were Pashtun monarchs and members of the royal family (Glatzer 2001: 3; Magnus and Naby 1998: 99; Schetter 2003: 3). This interpretation of *watan* stood far away from everyday reality, in which local, ethnical, religious and tribal factors played a much more decisive role in creating senses of belonging and identity. In popular usage, *watan* was typically a smaller local area where one knew one another personally, and where one was intimately connected with the social and physical environment (Glatzer 2001: 3).

The war and displacement of millions of Afghans then started. More than two decades of war led to the very paradoxical situation that on the one hand, ethnic and regional contradictions have sharpened, while on the other hand a sense of national belonging and identification has developed since the 1980s that did not exist before. As Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont (2000a: 419) argue, a national awareness is generally built in relation to an external otherness. In 1979, Afghanistan experienced the invasion of an external power into their own territory, at the same time that Afghans found themselves as foreigners in other countries.

Some respondents stated that Afghans are only able to unite when an outside force is threatening them. Scales of loyalties extended in the presence of a common enemy, the Soviets, and tribal and regional leaders developed subtle alliances with one another (Omidian 1996: 64-65). *Watan* is seen as a treasured and vulnerable entity, in



Golden pendant in the shape of Afghanistan with the word Allah in the middle  
(Source: <http://www.ebay.com>)

need of defence. During the war against the Soviets, the territory to be defended was extended from ones own tribal land to the whole of Afghanistan (Glatzer 2001: 10). Unfortunately, after the retreat of the common enemy, loyalties were again curtailed to smaller social units and several groups of *Mujaheddin* began to fight each other. Since then, however, every single group has sought for the control over the whole territory of Afghanistan. It is only the Taliban who finally came close to that objective. It is hard to speak of an Afghan nation-state, especially after more than two decades of civil war that placed groups from different regional and ethnic backgrounds against each other, fighting over territory and power.

Afghanistan's state and society are still extremely fragmented. Yet, the majority of the Afghans inside and outside Afghanistan support the maintenance of a nation-state Afghanistan and its present borders – be it that some Pashtuns would also like to include the tribal areas of Pakistan (Schetter 2003: 5). The shape of Afghanistan's geographical borders has taken on an iconic status, and can for example be found back as a golden charm on necklaces (see picture).

The scale of the homeland is by definition dependent on the scope of the other, the non-homeland. That scope extended considerably as Afghans experienced their original *watan* from a distance. Their spatial frames of reference shifted from the traditional micro-cosmos that represented *watan* towards larger units (Glatzer 2002: 2). Host societies, policy makers, the media and international organisations addressed all refugees as Afghans and spoke of them in general terms as a homogeneous national community. This stimulated the refugees themselves to identify with a place of origin called Afghanistan, thus contributing to a collective consciousness and a national awareness (Centlivres 2000a: 424). Afghans still divide and classify themselves simultaneously according to a multitude of different social categories. The national level, however, is now a crucial level of belonging, especially towards outsiders, non-Afghans. For the millions of Afghans that have experienced living outside Afghanistan and seeing it from a distance, the word *watan* has taken on the meaning 'Afghanistan' (Glatzer 2001: 4). Glatzer (2001: 3) contends: "Only in diaspora, when Afghans feel far away from home can Afghanistan melt into one *watan*, and any fellow Afghan becomes a *watandār*, one who shares the same *watan* [...]. As a rule, the *watan* expands physically with the distance between a person and his *watan*." Mashal and Abasin, living in the Netherlands, enlighten me with their written comments:

"Look... when I am in Holland and I say I am going to *watan*, I mean Afghanistan... and when I am in Afghanistan and say something like that, then I mean Nanghahar."

"When we were in Afghanistan (Kabul) and we talked about *watan* and *watandār*, we meant my parents' native city and townsmen. And if we now talk about *watan* and *watandār* we mean Afghanistan and Afghans."

Tamana claims that it has to do with scale:

"That's no more than logical... Abroad, somebody from Germany would also say that Germany is his *Heimat*. Inside Germany he would refer to the city he lives in [...]. The larger the distance from a

place, the bigger the circle of belonging. You go from a large space of belonging towards a smaller and stronger centre of belonging as you come closer.”

The equation ‘Afghanistan = *watan*’ was encountered during the whole fieldwork and can be considered the dominant, though not the only, exile interpretation of *watan*. A certain level of ambiguity in scale remains and different dimensions of *watan* still exist alongside each other and become meaningful in particular contexts. The fact that Afghanistan is called *watan*, however, certainly does not imply that an individual feels equally connected to all Afghans and all areas of Afghanistan. One important reason is that *watan* is closely connected with memories (see par. 5.4). One might say ‘Afghanistan’ but have images of particular local places and people in mind. A second important reason is the ethnic and regional character of the civil war. Despite the ethnical hierarchy promoted by the state, ethnic conflicts hardly occurred before 1979. This changed as political and military groups increasingly came to use ethnic background as a mobilisation force. The civil war from 1992 onwards had a high ethnic character. This spread much hate and distrust and made feelings of belonging to fellow-Afghans complicated. Indeed, it often seems that the concept of *watan* refers more to territory than to all of its inhabitants. Selsela commented:

“I think we all love the earth, but not the people of Afghanistan.”

Therefore, I do not agree with the second point in Glatzer’s assertion that in diaspora, any fellow Afghan becomes a *watandār*. Although the word *watandār* is used in this sense - see Abasin’s comment above - first and foremost, *watandār* refers to a person from the same town or area, as the two following examples illustrate:

Waghma and I spend at least an hour in an Afghan music store, listening to dozens of CD’s. Waghma is looking for a particular song in the dialect of the Hazaras, ‘restyled and updated’ by Habib Qaderi, a young and popular singer. Waghma belongs to a Pashtun family, and had left Qandahar twenty years ago when she was sixteen. The shop owner jokes about her interest in ‘Hazara music’. “*Ena, i az watandār-e shomā-st* – Here, this is from your *watandār*,” the shop owner says while handing her a CD from a Qandahari musician.

“Isn’t he from Loghar as well?” I ask Sulthan when we discover we have a mutual acquaintance. “Yes, he is my *watandār*.” “But aren’t all Afghans your *watandār*?” I ask. “*Haha*, actually you are right, but we Afghans speak like this among each other.”

The word *watandār* radiates a certain warmth and solidarity, and is used mainly among people from the countryside, where a person automatically belongs to his or her area or village. Large cities are a heterogeneous mixture of classes, religious and political groups, subcultures and people, and solidarity is more based on feelings of belonging to one or more of these subgroups than to the inhabitants of the city as a whole. It is therefore less common for city inhabitants to call each other *watandār*. They can however refer to people from their original village or region of origin as *watandār*. In addition, the word *watandār* can be used purposely to create a certain feeling of solidarity or closeness, for example by someone who seeks to convince somebody else, no matter from which area, of his opinions. To address or speak about Afghans in general, not the colloquial *watandār*, but the more formal *hamwatan* is the word that is usually used. Speeches and writings often begin with the words “*hamwatanān-e gerāmi*” or “*hamwatanān-e aziz*” - “dear compatriots”.



Map of Afghanistan (Source: <http://www.epiphytes.net>)

## Ambiguousness of Location

Afghans were forced to leave their villages, regions, or even country on a massive scale. Place and people were not automatically attached to each other like they were before. The definition of *watan* given by the *Farhang-e Hamid* implicates an ambiguousness in location or time, as *watan* means both ‘place of origin’ and ‘place of residence’. Although some migration had certainly taken place before the war, these places commonly overlapped.<sup>7</sup> For many, however, they no longer do. Is it possible for Germany to become the *watan* of Afghans that live there, making an allowance for the fact that a person’s *watan* can be his or her place of residence? “No,” almost all respondents stated. No matter how long one lives in another country, your place of origin determines your *watan*, they argue. Hosnia claims that even young Afghans who grew up in Germany and feel more German than Afghan will call Afghanistan their *watan*.<sup>8</sup> It is impossible to say for example: “*Almān watanem ast* – Germany is my *watan*,” only “*Almān mesl-e watanem ast* – Germany is like my *watan*” would be possible, according to them. Nasim for example says:

“*Watan* is *zādgāh*, the place you were born.<sup>9</sup> Earth was created by God, and it doesn’t matter where you live, it is all God’s earth. It is important where you were born. That is your *zādgāh*, which determines your culture, your food and your clothes. After that, it doesn’t matter where on earth you live, in Germany or somewhere else [...]. It is very difficult to change your own culture. In any case I will always remain an Afghan by *meliat* [nationality]. Even in a German passport, it would be mentioned that I was born in Afghanistan.”

The concept of *watan* as a place of origin becomes complicated when thinking about next generations in exile. Therefore, one has to disentangle the conception of a ‘place of origin’ and distinguish between a ‘place of natal origin’ or ‘place of birth’ and a ‘place of ancestral origin’. Lida:

“I think that you rather have to understand the place of origin as a place of ‘ancestral origin’ if you talk about refugee-Afghans and their children [...]. I think that *watan* is a place you feel very connected to even if you have not been born there yourself, but that connection has to stem from somewhere, that your parents or grandparents came from there...”

Therefore, for a place to be considered *watan*, ancestral origin is a prerequisite. As such, the location of *watan* is not that ambiguous after all. For emigrant Afghans, *watan* is the ancestral ‘place of origin’ and not the actual ‘place of residence’. *Watan* constitutes the original home, and as such, people who live *dur az watan* – far from the homeland – are in a certain sense homeless. Indeed, Afghan refugees often refer to themselves as *āwāragān*. The Dari dictionary translates *āwāra* as ‘vagrant’, ‘wanderer’ or ‘homeless’.<sup>10</sup> In the song alongside, the exiled Afghan is imagined as a flower, cut off from the homeland grass.

*Gharib bi bi watan gashti watandār*  
*Guli dur az chaman gashti watandār*  
*Az ruzike az meghan boridi*  
*Du chasm tar ba khun gashti watandār*  
*Zabun gashti watandār*

Deprived, without a *watan*, you wandered around, *watandār*  
Like a flower far away from the grass, you wandered around,  
*watandār*  
From the day you were cut off the homeland  
With two eyes wet with blood, you wandered around,  
*watandār*  
Miserably you wandered around, *watandār*

(First couplet of *Watandār*, a song by Ahmad Parwez)

<sup>7</sup> People who had migrated from the countryside to larger cities used the word *watan* to refer to the village or area they or their parents originated from.

<sup>8</sup> Only a few argue that, theoretically, it might be possible to use *watan* differently and claim that those who grew up in Germany and do not feel connected to Afghanistan are able to call Germany their *watan*. Tamana gives her nephew as an example. He was young when he came to America. His parents spoke to him in English and he was raised in a pure American environment. “He feels like an American and can say: ‘America is my *watan*’. For people like him, who don’t have a connection to Afghanistan, *watan* is there where there are at that moment.” Most other respondents argued against this perception of *watan*.

<sup>9</sup> *Zādgāh* (Dari) is translated as ‘birthplace, homeland’ (Center for Afghanistan Studies 1993). The equivalent in Pashto is *kelay wulus*.

<sup>10</sup> They also use the term *mohājerin*. The word *mohājerin* refers to the *hijra*, the flight of Mohammed and a group of his followers from Mecca to Medina in 622 AD and thus has a religious significance. Afghan refugees who fled to Pakistan during the, in their eyes, ‘atheist’

## 5.4 THE REMOTE HOMELAND

“The word *watan* has a kind of magic in it and the sound of it raises a certain feeling inside every Afghan. *Watan* has more to do with who we are, and not only with where we came from. *Watan* is a part of you that accompanies you forever. Even if you were not born in Afghanistan, you stay an Afghan and Afghanistan is your *watan*. *Asli watan Afghanistan dai* [the original homeland is Afghanistan].”

(Nabil’s written comment about my question on an Internet forum about what *watan* is)

Although the great majority of respondents claim the ancestral place of origin to be the *watan* for all Afghans in diaspora, they also emphasize that this notion not merely refers to that place, but is accompanied by strong sentiments. This would imply that all Afghans in diaspora have an emotional attachment to the place they came from as a place of longing and belonging. This was exactly my point of criticism towards the generalized notion of an idealised homeland in the diaspora theory (see par. 4.6). One should guard against treating the diaspora as a homogenous entity, or even treating all diasporas as equal, by their presupposed longing towards a mythical homeland. Speaking about ties between diaspora and their place of origin on a macro-scale runs the risk of overlooking a whole range of individual – sometimes even conflicting - feelings of belonging and non-belonging, as well as ignoring the possible fragmentation and conflicts within a certain diaspora.



Boy in a Dari class staring at a text called *watan*  
(Source: <http://modersmal.skolutveckling.se>)

Probably one of the most important variables causing variation in emotional stances towards Afghanistan is one of generational differences. For first generation refugees or migrants, concepts of the place of origin are based on memories, founded on first-hand sensory experiences and concrete and particular local places, such as a specific neighbourhood, city or village, the family home, and also particular sounds, smells and tastes (Tsuda 2000: 20), and as such, do not refer to the whole of

Afghanistan’s territory. It could be added that those images of the homeland, since they are based on memories, necessarily relate more to the Afghanistan of the past than that of the present. More accurately, they are based on a reconstituted past, seen through today’s eyes. Second and later generations who lack these first-hand encounters and memories of particular times and places tend to imagine the homeland in more abstract terms. These imaginations are partly constructed from narratives passed down from parents and grandparents, but are also influenced by global mass media networks, which according to Appadurai, Gupta and Ferguson, have become the primary means to imagine homelands from a distance (in: Tsuda 2000: 20). In the case of Afghanistan, the sudden mass-media attention towards the country seems to have had a profound influence on many Afghans’ images and meanings attached to Afghanistan, particularly on second-generation Afghans and Afghans that left Afghanistan at a young age. Edris says:

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communist time could identify with this early *mohājerin*, or ‘religious emigrants’. However, this word is widely used nowadays, also when motivations behind the flight are not religious. Afghans in Western countries also use the word *panāhandagān*, ‘searchers of shelter’ or ‘asylum seekers’ (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 2000a: 423; Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 2000b: 157).

“When our parents speak about Afghanistan, it is about Kabul in the 1960’s and ‘70’s. They conveyed these images upon us. But in the meantime a war of more than 25 years has raged. It has to be completely different now.”

One could maintain that, on a collective level, the ‘homeland’ Afghanistan serves as a symbol and a community anchor for dispersed Afghans. A necessary characteristic of a symbol is its complex, ambiguous or imprecise nature. It evolves a range of meanings that are not clearly specified. Many of these meanings are conveyed collectively or semi-collectively through sentimental and nostalgic discourses, expressed in and through conversations, songs, poems, pictures and customs. In this sense, it is a place of roots one is at least expected to

*Asli watan Afghanistan dai  
Os me prassib pradee watan ke dai mayena  
Wai yar mayena*

My original *watan* is Afghanistan  
But fate has taken me to strange estates  
O my ladylove

(Song in Pashto by Farhad Darya, quoted by a few respondents)

feel to belong to and to identify with. Cohen’s (1996: ix) characterization of diasporic communities seems a more acceptable one than for example Safran’s (see par. 4.6), because it leaves some space for individual differentiation: “‘The old country’ – a notion often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore – always has some claim on their [members of a diaspora’s] loyalty and emotions. That claim can

be strong or weak. Or boldly or meekly articulated in a given circumstance or historical period, but a member’s adherence to a diasporic community is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link with their past migration history and a sense of co-ethnicity with others of a similar background.”

In the following paragraphs some general sentiments and ideas attached to the notion of *watan* and to Afghanistan as a distant homeland will be discussed. It has to be kept in mind that even if certain diasporas create certain collective emotive discourses about the homeland, the actual emotional attachment of its individual members to the place of origin can differentiate.

### ***Har Cha Ta Khpel Watan Kashmir Dai: One’s Own Homeland Is Like Kashmir***

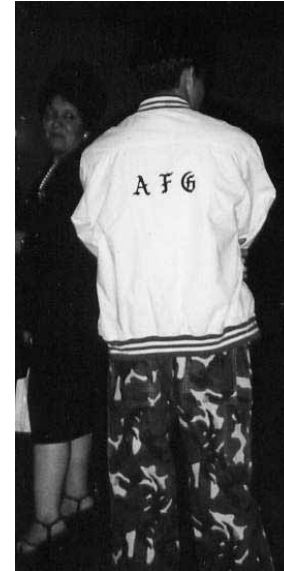
“Have you heard of Kashmir ? The most beautiful place on earth? To me, Afghanistan is Kashmir, the paradise. Afghanistan *watan-am ast* – Afghanistan is my homeland. I was born over there.” Nasim was the first one in a row of respondents that recited the Pashto proverb ‘*Har cha ta khpel watan Kashmir dai* – one’s own homeland is like Kashmir’.<sup>11</sup> By email, Munir explains it in the following way: “For everybody, his or her country is as beautiful as Kashmir. That is, irrespective of how poor, destroyed and full of misery your country is, for you it keeps on being the most beautiful place on earth (Kashmir).” Ironically enough, Kashmir, once known as a paradise on earth, faced a similar fate as Afghanistan, as the area has also been spoiled by conflict and war.

One might find other homes, but not another *watan*. It might especially be the fact that *watan* is not the current place of residence for displaced Afghans, that enables it to become infused with a high level of sentiment and nostalgia.<sup>12</sup> “Love of country increases in direct proportion to distance from it,” Veaser (1998 in: Pattie 1999: 15) contends. Boym’s (2001: xiii-xiv) assertions are even stronger: “Nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship [...]. A cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images – of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life. The moment we try to force it into a single image, it breaks the frame or burns the surface.” Tsuda (2000: 29) argues that by absence, the taken-for-

<sup>11</sup>I was told three times that the proverb can be turned into a poem by adding a second part: ‘*Ma ta Kashmir dai de Kabul shinku baghuna* – For me the green gardens of Kabul are like Kashmir’. Instead of ‘green gardens,’ ‘*spera daguna*’, ‘dry deserts’ can be substituted.

granted nature of the own country is disrupted, and evaluative contrasts between ‘here’ and ‘there’ are produced: “Geographical detachment from one’s own country is ironically necessary to produce an emotional attachment to it as a homeland.” Moreover, he claims that it is because of experiences of social rejection and alienation abroad, that migrants suddenly recognise positive aspects of their own country that they had not acknowledged before. In this way, it is reproduced from simply a country of birth into an emotionally charged and idealised place of nostalgic longing and identification.

An Afghan proverb says: ‘*Sadā-ye dhol az dur khush ast* - at a distance, the sound of the drum is beautiful,’ comparable to the English saying ‘the grass is greener on the other side’. A girl on a discussion forum quotes it to underline her feelings towards Afghanistan. Whereas in Afghanistan she was attracted to Western clothes, products and lifestyle, in Germany she has developed a taste for Afghan traditional clothes and music, and she misses the smells, the villages and the feeling of being surrounded by compatriots. “Often it is the case that you can’t appraise the value of a possession, until you are separated from it [...]. Only now am I able to appraise the value of my homeland.” A boy reacts: “Back then, I was often ashamed of many traditions and described them as old-fashioned.” He used to admire people who dressed in a Western way and he bought all kinds of candy that had chocolate in it. “And now? I’d rather eat *qorut*<sup>13</sup> than chocolate and I pay more attention to someone dressed in an *Afghani* or *Panjubi*<sup>14</sup> than to someone in Western clothes. He concludes: “To be honest, in a way I am glad that I had to leave my homeland, otherwise I wouldn’t have known how valuable she is.”<sup>15</sup>



“I am an Afghan”  
(Photo: Marije Braakman)

*Watan* seems to call upon many attributes that present-day Afghanistan often does not offer any more. The notion therefore seems to bear many similarities with the mystical, lost and idealised homeland of diaspora theory. I have sometimes heard people talking about being *bi watan*, without a *watan*. This is the realisation that a *watan*, as an actual or possible place of residence, bearing the warm and idealised sentiments attached to the word *watan*, is non-existent or unreachable: as such *watan* is a lost place. Present-day Afghanistan is still *watan*, but at the same time in a certain way non-*watan*. Therefore, discourses about *watan* are often accompanied by a great deal of nostalgia and tragedy.



Key cord expressing a clear statement about the origins of the owner (Photo: Marije Braakman)

<sup>12</sup> The word nostalgia comes from the Greek *nostos*, which means return home, and *algos*, pain. It thus implies an aching longing or yearning for ‘home’ (Boym 2001: xiii). According to the Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, ‘nostalgia’ is “a feeling of pleasure and sometimes slight sadness at the same time as you think about things that happened in the past.”

<sup>13</sup> Lumps of dried buttermilk.

<sup>14</sup> Indian style dress combined with baggy trousers.

<sup>15</sup> In the same way it may take a trip to Afghanistan to be able to value life in Germany. Senses of belonging might shift depending on one’s specific location: while many Afghans living in Germany might think of Afghanistan as their true home, they might feel less at home when actually in Afghanistan (see Chapter 8).

## 5.5 “AFGHANISTAN IS OUR MOTHER”: THE FEMALE HOMELAND METAPHOR

“I miss my country,” Aziz says. “What is it exactly what you miss?” I would like to know. “My country is my mother. I miss her.”

Gender and family metaphors frequently play a role in representations of homeland and the connections between land and people. Whereas the national community is often conceived of as male (‘brotherhoods’, ‘*fraternities*’), the homeland is usually constructed as female (Najmabadi 1997: 442). Sherwell (2003: 132) offers an interesting analysis of the way nationalist discourses are mapped onto female bodies. In the case of exiled Palestinians, she identifies three main symbolic female icons to praise the homeland: the ‘mother’, the ‘virgin’ and the ‘beloved’, each of which represents different characteristics assigned to the homeland. My Afghan respondents ascribed similar characteristics to their place of origin.

The link between a person and his or her homeland is often conceived of as a natural, biological bond. According to Sherwell, the homeland as a mother figure is a space of “nurturing and sustenance” and of “cultural authenticity and the preserver of traditions” (Sherwell 2003: 132).<sup>16</sup> Cohen (1997: 105) mentions the metaphorical representation of homeland as “a warm, cornucopian breast from which the people collectively suck their nourishment.” In Afghan perceptions, the homeland as a mother offers protection and a sense of security, and nurtures its ‘children’.<sup>17</sup> Two quotes cited here from a discussion about the meaning of homeland on an Internet forum affirm this:

“*Heimat* is a word that I always associate with my mother, because actually our *Heimat* is our real mother. True, our mothers bring us to world, but we receive the air and the bread from our *Heimat*, so one couldn’t live long without her.”

As soon as she has finished her studies, a girl on another forum wants to go to “my mummy that has waited so long for me, that is, Afghanistan *jān*.”

In this sense, Afghan refugees can be seen as orphans, taken away from the mother. A quote derived from another Internet discussion:

<sup>16</sup> Such associations of the homeland with a mother figure are not exclusive to Islamic contexts. Analyses of the German concept of *Heimat*, for example, show the way *Heimat* is associated with innocence, childhood experiences and a lack of responsibilities, a condition usually linked to a mother figure (Blicke 2002: 17, 130-131; Wickham 1999: 33). Greverus (1972: 373) noted the explicit use of a mother metaphor, a holy *Mutter Erde* [Mother Earth] to speak about *Heimat*.

<sup>17</sup> If the Afghan soil is depicted as a mother, its inhabitants could be metaphorically seen as one large family. It is indeed very common and polite to use terminology of kinship to address non-kin – although there is considerable conflict between the ‘siblings’ (see the poem above).

Mother, dry your tears

You are our dear mother, you make our life sweeter  
We are born out of you, we were raised by you sweetly  
You are our earth and heaven, you are our water of life  
We dearly love your beautiful mountains and rainbows  
By raising, nurturing and teaching us a lesson  
You experienced much trauma filled with misery and sorrow  
You were so brave to defend us with your landscape  
Because of your name and beauty you quickly gained notoriety  
Outsiders tried to dishonour you in a burlesque way  
But our prestigious grandparents have protected you  
They called out your name and fought together until dead  
They became heroes and were called out to in despair  
My dear mother, where have your heroes gone?  
Where are your children that used to fight for you?  
[...]  
Your four children\* do not manage to agree amongst each other  
They fight and strangle each other for power  
I am sorry that you are sad and that you are in pain  
Every time you are hit by a blind rocket  
And again you are being disappointed by an aimed gunshot  
I am sorry that they leave you to bleed to death until the last  
breath  
I am sorry that nobody hears your dying voice  
[...]  
Let me help you, let me wipe away your tears  
Tears that are infinite, tears that flow like the Nile  
Let me treat your wounds, let me nurse them  
Numerous wounds that were hit by vicious arrows  
It will be all right! Believe me my dear mother  
It will be all right! My country, my Afghanistan  
I cherish my faith in you  
In your proud and in your name  
But above all  
In your children named Afghans  
To whom I belong

(Translated from Dutch by MB – Author unknown, Website  
AfghanConnection)

\* Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazara and Uzbeks.

“It is as if one takes a child its mother away, although properly speaking it’s called *Vaterland* [fatherland].”

Freud has compared homesickness to a longing for a return to the womb of the motherland (Naficy 1991: 285). So does an Afghan girl speaking in another forum. Could a longing to be buried in the Afghan soil (par. 7.7) be viewed in this light?

“I experience *Heimat* as a place where I can experience the feeling of security, belonging and not of rejection. *Heimat* is like the womb of the own mother. She simply accepts you as you are and you know that she would never reject you.”

At the same time, the homeland soil itself is in need of protection. She herself is depicted as a vulnerable and precious entity that has to be defended and taken care of just like the female members of a man’s family. This connotation corresponds to Sherwell’s image of the ‘virgin’ land, and is often part of Islamic patriotic discourses. The female icon of the ‘virgin’ addresses the purity and sacredness of the land. Speaking about Iran, Najmabadi (1997: 445) argues that this is precisely what makes the members of the ‘brotherhood’ willing to protect her and sacrifice themselves for her honour. Sherwell (2003: 124) too links this metaphor to martyrdom.

*Watan* asks

How could I be proud of you?  
When I became an invalid  
When my feet cannot carry me any more  
When because of your behaviour I was devastated

When you decreased my dignity  
When you broke my back  
When my heart is wounded deeply  
When you could not stab any deeper

When my status was lost so easily  
When I became poor and weak  
When my history was sold so cheaply  
When your love for me was erased so quickly

When no animal or bird wants to live here any more  
When the blood on your hands has not yet dried  
When thousands of inhabitants have left me  
When everything with a market value has been sold

When my children cannot live under one flag  
When they have forgotten their own language  
When they speak the language of weapons  
Although I did not teach them that

Will you let me heal for a while  
Or might you leave that to someone else?  
Will you not care about me any more?  
Or do you wait until I have died?

Then you should not be allowed to belong to me  
Then I would not want to call you an Afghan  
Than I would be ashamed to have such a child  
Than I would not have any words left

(Tabesh 2005: 5, translation from Dutch by MB)

Both female bodies and the land are seen as vulnerable to attack; attacks by which they are desecrated (Hawley and Proudfoot 1994 in: Van Santen and Willemse: forthcoming). Such a conception of femininity seems to be particularly congruent with the general gender ideology that prevails in Afghanistan. The holy duty of men to protect and control their *zan* [womenfolk], as well as their *zamin* [land and territory] constitutes the masculine honour, called *nāmus* or *gheyrat* (Zulfacar 1998: 34). My respondents spoke of their ‘holy land’ and some even spoke of the ‘rape’ of Afghanistan by foreign powers.

The third female image identified by Sherwell (2003: 132), the beloved, “is used to elaborate on feelings of emotional and physical desire for the return to the homeland.” Indeed, I heard Afghans speaking about their ‘beloved Afghanistan’, a homeland that is loved and longed for. However, this love is not so much expressed in an erotic sense in the way Najmabadi (1997) speaks about the “erotic *Vatan*” of Iran that is longed for in an almost sexual sense.

In paragraph 5.3, I mentioned that the concept of *watan* seemed to refer more to territory than to its inhabitants, and that loving one’s country does not mean loving all of its inhabitants. The above analysis of the female homeland metaphor, showing that the positive homeland attributes are primarily connected to its soil and landscape, would seem to support this. The poems show Afghanistan as a female being that can shed tears,

become wounded and bleed. Instead of protecting her, her children fight and hate each other and hurt their mother. *Watan* itself is the innocent and victimized beloved.

## 5.6 AN ANCHOR OF ROOTS

“Everybody needs his roots, otherwise one doesn’t have a hold.”

(Tamana)

There might be different reasons why dispersed people cling to ‘roots’. Although post-modern anthropology focuses on hybrid identities and multiple belongings, I am convinced that many people find it hard to cope with a hybrid identity and strive at creating a ‘fix’ in the ‘flux’, as Geschiere and Meyer have named the dialectic processes of global flow and cultural closure. They assert that “people’s awareness of being involved in open-ended global flows seems to trigger a search for fixed orientation points and action frames, as well as determined efforts to affirm old and construct new boundaries” (Geschiere and Meyer 1998: 602). According to them, “[i]t looks at if, in a world characterized by flows, a great deal of energy is devoted to controlling and freezing them: grasping the flux often actually entails a politics of ‘fixing’ – a politics which is, above all, operative in struggles about the construction of identities” (Geschiere and Meyer 1998: 605). This could especially be true for migrants. Haines and Baxter (1998: 9) contend: “[A]lthough some migrants may embrace these challenges with enthusiasm, for most, the fluidity in identity, and the uprooting from cultural markers are experienced as disconcerting and often traumatic. In response, migrants often long for and pursue re-establishment of boundaries and the illusion of stability and permanence that accompanies them. The frequent search for identity – for ‘homeland’ and a reconstructed national consciousness – speaks to displaced peoples’ quest for order in the face of imposed disorder.” Such a longing for continuity and stability in a fragmented world is often expressed through discourses of ‘roots’, of ‘where we came from’ and ‘who we really are’.

[*Telephone conversation*]

Tamana: “Everybody needs a bit of *Heimat*, don’t you think?”

Me: “Hmm, but among Afghans, discourses about homeland are much more important. In Holland nobody would say ‘I love my country’ or ‘I am proud to be Dutch’. That’s taboo.”

Tamana: “Really? In Holland as well? Here in Germany there was a politician who said on television that he was proud to be German. He received loads of criticism.”

Me: “And among Afghans, it’s rather the opposite. It is taboo to say you don’t love Afghanistan or aren’t proud to be Afghan.”

Tamana: “Yes, but it wouldn’t have been that way if we were still in Afghanistan. We have lost our country. I think it has to do with the fact that we are far away and live in a country that forms such a big contrast. Especially young people that were born here or came here as small children have a longing, and search for a *Heimat*. They don’t know where they belong.”

An attempt to reconstruct what is familiar is an important psychological means of coping with forced separation and loss. The historian Hobsbawn argues that when social patterns are undermined or destroyed, the impulse to invent traditions increases, in order to attempt to symbolically establish continuity with a suitable historical past (Hobsbawn in: Naficy 1991: 297-298). Rushdie (1992: 9-10) argues that while migrants cannot claim precisely the thing that was lost, they might create fictitious, imaginary homelands. Images of Afghanistan invoked in

songs, poetry, visual representations and narratives sing the praises of its beautiful pure nature and landscape, and depict idyllic images of life in the countryside. It is especially these kind of images that are said to be suited for nostalgic constructions, as these imply a certain timelessness and natural order (Naficy 1991: 291). “To recreate a homeland demands an act of remembering and often much nostalgia,”, Graham and Khosravi (1997: 128) argue. Lorenzo (2005: 6) righteously points out that “nostalgia is never just a hankering for the old; it is mixed and cannot be separated from feelings in and for the present.” This nostalgia is not so much about preserving or duplicating the past as it really was: “Creating a home in exile can be experienced by some as reconstructing a culture that is truer to the ‘original’ than the culture that now dominates in the homeland itself” (Graham and Khosravi 1997: 127-128). Sodaba:

“If we had been in our own country, we would just have shaken our head when we saw someone who acted liberally. But now that we are nearly landless, we are afraid to lose our culture as well.”

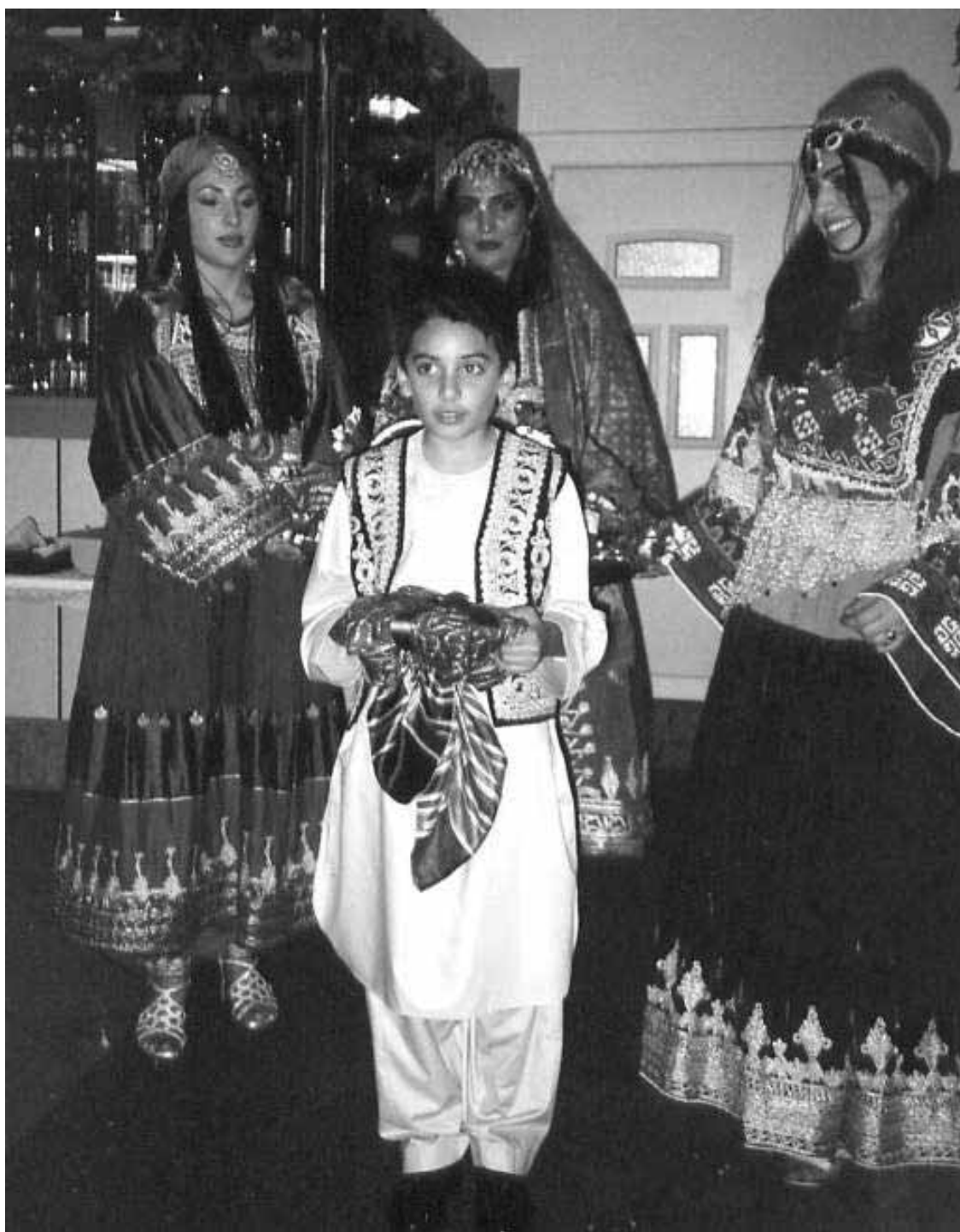
A recreation of the homeland culture can be taken as an endeavour to construct a meaningful identity in a new context (Buijs 1993: 18). Facets of life, such as language, food, dress, and religion, that had been rather unreflected aspects of everyday life have become conscious values as symbols and markers of an Afghan identity. Ang (1993: 12) argues that the very identification of ethnic minorities with a distant homeland, with an imagined ‘where you’re from’, is often at the same time a sign of a condition of marginalisation in the place ‘where you’re at’.

Morsal: “You are not an asylum seeker or refugee over there. It is your own country!” Sahel states: “No foreigner is accepted in an other country than his own. I have to tell you that most Afghans don’t feel at home in Europe, although they don’t have economical problems. But remember one thing: every Afghan is an Afghan. Even if you have lived in ten countries, your ancestors still originate from Afghanistan.”

As will be shown in Chapter 6, many Afghans do not possess unambiguous feelings of belonging towards Germany. For those Afghans who do not have a secure residence permit this is not that hard to imagine. However, even those Afghans who possess a German passport and have legal rights as German citizens often have a strong sense of being different, and marginalised as ‘others’ by German society. In such situations of marginalisation and hybridity, identifying with a *watan* can function as an instrument to create a feeling of belonging and of an unambiguous identity. Tamana explains:

“We cling to *watan* because we want to have roots. We have a sense of belonging to the Germans, but not totally. We live in between two worlds... We belong to both of them, but to both of them not really.”

In this chapter, the importance of roots and *watan* has become clear. It is the experience of displacement that has made stories of roots more imperative than before. For displaced Afghans, *watan* suggests a place of origin and roots, of belonging and authentic identity, that is infused with some nostalgia. As such, it locates the ‘home, sweet home’ in Afghanistan. However, for a real understanding of relations between individuals and their place of origin, it is not sufficient just to analyse these discourses. Unambiguous senses of belonging, solely based on discourses of roots, may be difficult to maintain in this day and age. A claim of roots stands in dialectical relation to a sense of routes, an acknowledgement of change and transition. The next chapter will focus on the way various individuals construct their senses of home and belonging; senses that require a continuous negotiation of roots and routes.



At a wedding in Hannover, a boy in traditional clothes carries a mirror. The bride and groom will glance at each other through the mirror, underneath a cloth thrown over their heads. Inside Afghanistan, this might be the first time that the bride and groom have seen each other. The young women carry a plate of henna to dye the hands of the couple and the guests  
(Photo: Marije Braakman)

## Chapter 6

# THE COMPLEXITIES OF BELONGING

*She is a German civilian with black hair and black eyes. She is a German civilian who was born in Kabul and went to school in Delhi and Berlin. She speaks German, Dari, English and Hindi. Her first language, however, is German. She thinks German, dreams German and probably feels German – for eighty percent, she says [...]. She is a cosmopolitan, Zuny says, who has the freedom to live everywhere on this globe. However, in the midst of her restlessness that drives her over and over again into foreign countries, there is Germany – a pole of peace and security. But it has not always been like that. Her worst time was after our return from India. In elementary school she had painful experiences which demonstrated that there are different classes of people, people who become outsiders merely because of their looks [...]. Her Afghan origins were something abstract to her, not much more than a passport in which Kabul was written as her place of birth. [...]*

*When Zuny became eighteen, she applied for the German citizenship. However, she did not gain the unscathed world. As she advanced through adolescence and began to think about herself, the more she perceived many differences between her and her German friends. And a need to get together with people who had experienced similar ruptures as she had. Zuny has already twice become heimatslos [homeless]. She is constantly looking for a part of herself, that she has never been able to realise. After September the 11<sup>th</sup>, she began pondering more strongly about her Afghan origins. The cosmopolitan receded into the background, and she experienced a connection with a country that she hardly had any memories of. But she saw the images on television, she saw the faces of the people and it haunted her to see how everything in Afghanistan had been destroyed. In this way, over a period of time she developed a Heimatsgefühl [feeling of Heimat] for that strange country where she had been born and which language she speaks, that was not that abstract any more. More frequently than in the past she was asked about Afghanistan and her relatives over there, and suddenly she stood up for this country with a great deal of eagerness and passion [...]*

*She is searching, but not for success and money [...]. She is searching for a Heimat, and this does not mean a country. She knows how to create out of the richness of her experiences, but the fears that had accompanied the multiple uprooting have brought about a deep longing for a resting-point.*

Mariam Notten & Erica Fischer *Ich wählte die Freiheit* (2003: 282-286; translated from German by MB)

### 6.1 INTRODUCTION

I tell Wahid about my interest in *Heimatsgefühle*, senses of *Heimat*, among Afghans in Hamburg. “That is much too broad,” he criticises my research subject. “Even among young people there is already so much variation.”

Wahid was right, as I have to admit now. Locating fixed social or cultural roots and establishing unambiguous senses of home and belonging in a world of movement becomes an increasingly complicated process (Eade 1999: 26). Many Afghans do not manage to construct an identity and a sense of home and of belonging based solely on narratives of roots, as these words from a girl on an Internet forum illustrate:

“I think that despite my origins, I can’t just say that Germany means nothing to me... I grew up here and I have family and friends here... All that I achieved by hard and difficult work took place over here... I am proud to be an Afghan. But in spite of all, Germany is just as well a part of me!”

As Eade (1999: 26) states: “The search for roots located in a specific place of origin or a cultural tradition [...] gives way to an increasing sense of routes along which people have moved and continue to move.” On a collective level, one route is clear: a geographical one away from the place of origin. At an individual level, however, variation in mental and geographical routes makes generalised statements about the nature of the link between an individual and a place of origin impossible. Routes entail forms of diffusion and hybridisation, intercultural movement and migrations.

In the classical visions of displacement that were described in paragraph 4.2, issues of home and belonging have two contrary and unequivocal outcomes: senses of home and belonging are either completely directed to the place of origin, or to the host country. According to one persistent traditional vision, displacement strips people of their identity. Displaced people can regain an identity by returning ‘home’ or assimilating into the host society and thus acquiring a new home. In the other traditional view, displaced people forever belong to their ‘home’ country. Anthropologists realise by now that the senses of home and belonging in reality hardly or never shift either totally to one side or the other. Individuals’ senses of home and belonging are located on different positions along the continuum between these two extreme poles. There are numerous factors that complicate a full sense of belonging to Afghanistan. At the same time however, paragraph 6.3 will show that my informants strongly insist on their differences from native Germans.

Routes [*Lari*]

My son does not understand my language  
 My father and I do not pray in the same mosque  
 My father follows his route and I go mine  
 My son deems our routes to be abolished, crooked routes  
 And he is looking for his own, novel route  
 We know well the art of changing routes  
 But are not used to changing ourselves  
 That is why we are en route all our lives  
 We do not reach our destination

(Kawoon Toofani 2003: 116-117;  
 Original in Pashto; translation Dutch – English by MB)

This chapter aims at showing respondents’ struggles to identify places and spaces of belonging out of interactions between senses of roots and routes. The outcomes are always ambiguous. There are numerous factors that are likely to generate considerable heterogeneity in notions of home and belonging: gender, present age as well as the age on leaving Afghanistan, length of stay in Germany, experiences of inclusion and exclusion in both Germany and Afghanistan, the time in history that they left

Afghanistan, legal status, ethnic and regional background, political affiliation, religion, personal character, former and present social-economical status and occupation, attitudes towards cultural change, the location of kin and other social networks, etcetera. It is an impossible task to address all of these aspects. Instead, I have chosen to put a special focus on generational issues and above all, from paragraph 6.4 onwards, on young Afghans’ negotiations with identity and home.

It is a common assumption that young people have a deeper cultural flexibility, whereas older people that have spent many years in a particular socio-cultural system are less open to novel cultural elements (Simon-Barouh 1999: 46). Unger (1986: 31) contends that people belonging to the older generation usually have a fairly clear understanding of what their *Heimat* is and where they belong, because they were able to develop their personality and their cultural identity through a mono-cultural socialisation. Their children are likely to struggle with identity issues and with the question of what home means to them, because they are growing up with two different value systems. Research by Mestheneos and Ionnadi (2002: 316) shows that the age at which refugees arrive in the host country is indeed an important factor in understanding their stance towards this country. They argue that younger people are far more able to adapt to the host society, regardless of whether they consider their exile to be permanent or temporary. Older generations think about the country of origin and the feasibility of return much more. They stick to their old life style and culture more strongly.

Afghan respondents of all ages identify generational differences as the single most important factor influencing identity, attachments to both countries and attitudes towards return.<sup>1</sup> They recognise a split between the elderly Afghans that have spent a considerable part of their life in Afghanistan and have many identity defining memories of the good old days as well as of war, flight and loss, and the young people who were born in Germany or came there as children and received their education over there. A large group of Afghan adults live relatively segregated from the mainstream society. They do not interact much with people outside their own Afghan social network, especially not for leisure. Language barriers are one of the reasons. Their children, who learn German much quicker, are more likely to interact with non-Afghan peers and be exposed to different norms and values.

## 6.2 TENSIONS BETWEEN CHANGE AND LOYALTY TO ROOTS

“I have been to Pakistan, and I thought the Afghans over there had changed so much. But then I said to myself ‘yes, but you have changed as well’. I have lived in Afghanistan until I was 15, but in my way of thinking I am very much influenced by Germany.”

(Amir)

### Culture and Identity

No Afghan would deny that living in another society and facing new circumstances necessarily involves change and adaptation. Changes in mentality, culture and life style might be both conscious and unconscious, wanted and unwanted. The focus in these paragraphs is not on the exact ways in which cultural practices and family relationships change, but rather on the influence these have on ideas of belonging and identity. One way to encounter changes in lifestyle and practices is with resignation: “*Europā-st dega* - It’s Europe, nothing to do about it.” However, I noticed a fear that Afghans would change too much and lose their identity, culture and religion in the process. Because of this, change can be a large concern and pose moral dilemmas to diasporic Afghans. This is a point that I miss in the work of the well-known anthropologists Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont who have studied the Afghan diaspora. Identity is a recurrent theme in their articles. Although they speak of change and adaptation, they only do so in a positive way, reinforcing rather than threatening Afghan identity.

*Ba mā beshini mā shawi  
Ba deq beshini siāh shawi*

If you sit with us, you will get like us  
If you sit beside a cooking pot, you will get black.

(Afghan proverb, meaning: you become to reflect  
your environment and the company you keep)

“In general, Afghans in Hamburg have Germanised. They have adapted themselves. They didn’t do it themselves; society made them do so. That is the *harakat*, the ehh... movement, of society. You have to adapt yourself, otherwise you are an outsider,” Sohrab tells me. “What kind of adaptation?” I like to know. “In all sectors. In the labour sector and in school for example, you have to obey rules. Children have to go to school every morning, they have to make their homework. It’s impossible to keep the children at home or to imprison your wife in your house. They come from a very different world or civilisation into another. It is a battle between two cultures, two civilisations. The Afghans will Germanise when time passes. But that’s not such a big deal... it’s a positive point. One has to take the positive sides from both. The children that have been born here are completely German. They behave

<sup>1</sup> The emphasis in this chapter lies in contrasts between belonging to Afghanistan and to Germany. I am aware that this is a simplification of reality. By speaking of national belonging and identities, one runs the risk of overlooking the possible importance of smaller or bigger spatial units. Instead of speaking about Germany, many respondents speak about Europe - about Europeans, European mentality and European culture - or only about their feelings of belonging towards Hamburg. At the same time, regional, ethnic or religious identities and belongings, for example Pashtun, Kabuli, Muslim or Eastern, can in some contexts be more important than belonging to the nation Afghanistan or an Afghan national identity. Within the ‘Afghan community’, identities are further differentiated. Afghans establish and reproduce sub-communities or subgroups. Feelings of belonging are redefined contextually, in a concoction of conscious and unconscious processes.

like Germans. The parents, also those who have lived here for twenty years, will always be in between two cultures and struggle between them.” Sohrab speaks more positively about cultural adjustment and change than many other respondents. But also for him, there ought to be a limit: “There are Afghans that want to forget everything, their culture and religion. They want total elimination [he probably meant assimilation] and lose themselves. For me, that is unacceptable.”

Afghans are critical towards German society that does not incorporate them fully (see paragraph 6.3), but at the same time there is a strong resistance to absorption into German society and losing their distinct identity, which will make them “dissolve like a fizz tablet,” as Tamana expresses it:

A few days before Christmas, an elderly German woman expresses her astonishment that her Afghan nurse Tamana does not join the celebrations. Shouldn't she integrate? In my presence, Tamana recalls how she answered this: “I am an Afghan with a German passport. I want to know where I came from, where my roots lie. I don't want to dissolve like a fizz tablet. I am integrated, I speak better German than many Germans, and I know my rights. But I want to celebrate *Eid*<sup>2</sup> and not Christmas.”

Probably all Afghans would agree that at least a part of the ‘authentic’ roots ought to be safeguarded by proper Afghan behaviour and the remembrance of ‘where one came from’, whether derived from direct experiences or handed down as stories. Even the second generation that has no direct memory of Afghanistan seems to have a fairly clear idea of something essential and different that has been lost and of a nebulous something that must be preserved. Being Afghan and behaving as such is often connected to the so-called ‘Afghan’ values of family closeness and loyalty, respect for the elderly, preservation of language, a Muslim identity, involvement of the family in the choice of marriage partners,<sup>3</sup> the modest behaviour of girls, hospitality, and cherishing Afghan festivities, food and music.

Nevertheless, what exactly these qualities and essentials are that mark Afghanness is hard to delineate for most Afghans. Even more difficult to define are the exact boundaries between Afghan and non-Afghan behaviour and the level to which change is allowed without losing Afghan identity. In

accordance with the work published by Nawa (2001), I will call this level the ‘Afghan limit’. As I will describe later on, this limit differs for males and females. I quote three young Afghans that all argue that change is not necessarily bad, but that it has to be kept within limits:

“We have a good culture but unfortunately we are not open to changes. We want to keep what we have and are not willing to improve our bad things. People who do so are immediately seen as Europeans, but that isn't right. What's wrong about adopting good things from other cultures?” Maliha wonders. Arman says: “Most Afghans in Europe have changed, that's a fact. It's nothing to be proud of, but well, times have changed. We live in another society now, and it doesn't hurt to adapt a bit. But some go too far and forget about their culture and origins.” Shoaib formulates it this way: “Your culture gives you an identity, it is in your blood. It reveals how you are. It's good to pick up positive aspects of other cultures, but that doesn't mean that you are allowed to forget your own culture.”



Two nieces at an Afghan party (Photo: Marije Braakman)

<sup>2</sup> The festival of fast-breaking at the end of the fasting month.

<sup>3</sup> The first male Afghans in Europe often married a European spouse. In the 1980s and 1990s, it was customary to bring over a cousin from Afghanistan, Pakistan or Iran. Nowadays a spouse is often searched for within the large Afghan diaspora in Western countries (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 2000b: 166-167). Since the fall of the Taliban, it has become easier to travel to Afghanistan, but this tendency is counteracted by increasingly strict immigration laws of host countries. The majority of exiled Afghans favour an Afghan spouse, often selected or at least approved of by the family. A small percentage of males have married a non-Afghan girl. For girls, marrying outside the community is less acceptable. Pre-marital relations and sex are unaccepted in the case of girls. For boys, it might be silently tolerated.

Afghans that have changed too much in the eyes of other Afghans have 'lost their way' or, in Dari, "*rāh-e khodrā gom kardand*." They cease to be 'real' Afghans in the eyes of the others. Their inborn and 'real' Afghan nature has to be combined with appropriate 'Afghan' behaviour, otherwise they are thought to 'believe their nature' and 'forget who they are'. The Afghan psychologist and family therapist Azimi (1998) speaks in this respect of an adoption of "a false sense of self-identity" that he believes leads to various social problems such as depression, alcoholism and marital discord. Saying that somebody has become westernised, Germanised or Europeanised is usually meant in a negative way, especially when said about unmarried girls.<sup>4</sup> I heard many negative claims about Afghans in Europe in general:

"There is a large difference between Afghans in Afghanistan and those in the West. Those over there love their country and their culture," Dost Mohammed (34) tells me. With some disdain, he calls most Afghans in the West communists and describes them as *bifarhang*, without culture: "For real Afghans, Germany is a difficult place to live. Not for the others, they make advantage of it. We can't practise our culture over here." He continues: "The Afghans that stayed are *watandost* [lovers of the homeland]. They have stayed at all costs."<sup>5</sup>

Rahim says: "Afghans over here are being distracted by the splendour of Europe and are just interested in money, wealth, material things and a better life." Shirin has a similar opinion: "Afghans over here are totally different than those in Afghanistan, too money-grubbing and materialistic." Rahim claims: "The worst part is that they do not become Europeans, because they are unable to, but that they lose the Afghan identity as well. They become like straw."

The processes of flight and living abroad accelerate changes in family relationships, lifestyle and cultural practises, and as described in paragraph 5.6, this is often counteracted with attempts to establish a sense of continuity and cultural purity. In German exile, aspects that used to be rather unreflected parts of life become markers of an Afghan identity, especially when they contrast what Afghans think of as 'German culture'. Cultural practises and lifestyles vary within Afghanistan and also change in the course of time. So-called traditions are in fact subject to constant renewal and modification. Hence, there is no such thing as a uniform, timeless and fixed 'Afghan culture'. However, Afghans in exile often come to think of life in Afghanistan and 'Afghan culture' in such terms. Being Afghan for them involves a certain level of 'invention of tradition'. Cultural practises and beliefs that appear to have remained intact can in fact change in form and meaning (Foner 1999: 260) and probably continue to do so for the next generations. 'Tradition' thus takes on new meanings and ramifications.

Afghans generally view Islam as an integral part of their cultural identity. More conservative Afghans that place a high worth on Islamic values perceive the liberal German society as a threat, especially to the younger female members of their family. They associate Western society with sexual licentiousness, alcohol, discos and bars, and a lack of care and respect between family members:

Frozan tells me that she and her husband already worry about the future upbringing of their daughter, who is now four years old. Another respondent, Habib is engaged to an Afghan girl in Pakistan. She grew up in Germany but was taken to Pakistan at puberty, because her father was afraid that the free German society would 'spoil' her. Habib recognises this threat as well: "The German society is not good to live in for us Afghans. We grew up in an Islamic society. For 17 years my ears heard *gap-e islāmi*, Islamic talk. Here *kolesh bar aks ast* - everything is the other way around. For example on television: on one channel there is a good program, on all others sex. When I stay here for a long time,

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<sup>4</sup> The word *dokhtar*, girl, is used for all unmarried females. As soon as they are married, they are referred to as *zan*, woman.

<sup>5</sup> Not all respondents see Afghans in Afghanistan as 'real' and 'pure'. Several respondents claimed that those Afghans have changed in a negative way as well. "Not even in Afghanistan you can find the real Afghan culture. The people have changed," Mustafa says. Asil: "The people are completely different. You can't cope easily with the mentality that has evolved over there." More about that in paragraph 8.4.

*hamintowr jor shawam* – I will become just like that. Children will forget Afghan things and ways. They will transform into Germans. But I have to stay an Afghan. *Bikhi dar del-e man ehsās-e degar ast* - In my heart, there really is a different feeling.”



Two teenage girls (Photo: Marije Braakman)

## The Afghan Limit and the Young Generation

The above example already indicates that children in particular are thought to be prone to change. There is a great deal of pressure upon young people to behave as Afghans and not to 'Germanise' too much, but at the same time, it seems as if the older generation will never perceive of them as 'real' Afghans. Although children's roots are Afghan, older generations believe that the German society has influenced their *mafkura* [ideas, thoughts], their mentality, character and habits in such a way that they can hardly be called 'real' Afghans. In general, the younger they were when leaving Afghanistan, the less Afghan they are thought to be:

"Afghanistan is far removed from the Western world and civilization. There are large cultural differences," Gul Agha, a burly man of around fifty, says: "In Afghanistan, tradition, religion and the family play an important role in child raising. Family is differently defined. The family is part of society and offers protection. It is the most important unit of society, and because of that, not so much change occurs. Traditions are passed on. In Afghanistan, parents play an important role. In Germany, society plays a role as well. In Afghanistan, children are dependent on their parents a lot longer. Here they are financially independent much faster. Afghan children that grew up here have the advantage that they are educated. The disadvantage is, that they have lost their own culture, language and bond to Afghanistan."

A number of parents do not seem to worry about these changes too much as long as their children are underage, while others consider it a difficult dilemma. Omidian (1996: x) writes about Afghans in California: "By coming to the U.S. or Canada they saved the lives of their children, but many feel that they have lost everything that makes their children Afghan."

"The youngsters are no Afghans any more. They talk about Islam and culture but don't know what it is. Most of them can't read and write," Hodayun says. I ask him what being Afghan involves. "Culture, religion, conduct, reading and writing..."

"Maybe he feels like an Afghan and has Afghan friends, but that's completely something else. He didn't experience what we experienced, what I experienced. He was born in a hospital in Bonn," Mahmud (31) says about his nephew who is about ten years younger. "He doesn't know but a stone from Afghanistan."

Afghan cultural values of family interdependence, respect for and strict obedience to elder family members, specifically to the father's authority, are challenged by the assertiveness and independence as individuals that children learn at school and from the German society. According to Omidian (1996: 155), it is especially the concept of respect that is used "to define how much culture and tradition has been lost." Parents are greatly concerned that their children put their personal self-interest before the family well-being and obligations and refuse to take care of their parents in their old age.

There is great pressure upon the young generation to behave in an Afghan way and to show loyalty to their roots. Boys are however granted more space and freedom to deviate from what is thought to be 'Afghan conduct'. Although drinking, gambling, smoking, visiting bars and discos, dating and pre-marital sex is considered un-Afghan behaviour for males, it is usually silently tolerated by the community as long as these males demonstrate loyalty and respect towards their families (Nawa 2001: 9-10). Girls are constrained in their lifestyle and activities much more. The limits within which girls can act, dress and move around while staying a *khub dokhtar*, a 'good' Afghan girl, instead of being labelled German or westernised, are much more strictly defined. Her reputation is likely to affect the reputation of her entire family, as every member of an Afghan family is considered a representative of that family rather than an independent individual. Although many young Afghans develop their own subjective views about what it means to be an Afghan and what Afghan culture is, their individual

interpretations of the Afghan limit are usually not validated by the community. It is generally the extended family that makes the rules and sets the boundaries. Varying definitions of the Afghan limit exist within the Afghan community, depending on how *āzād*, free, or conservative the family is. This distinction between conservative and liberal families already existed in Afghanistan. It does however happen that liberal families become more conservative and religious in exile in order to remain 'Afghan', and the opposite can probably be encountered as well (Nawa 2001). Young Afghans juggle between living up to the demands and expectations of their family and those of the non-Afghan environment where they also wish to fit in. This tension is likely to raise tantalizing negotiations of identity, belonging and the localisation and meanings of home. These are exactly the issues that will be dealt with in the second part of this chapter.

Loyalty to Afghan roots and the Afghan community and thus 'staying an Afghan' is not so much an individual choice as much as it is a social pressure to conform. The threat of gossip among members of the Afghan community is an extremely powerful means of social control that prevents individuals to openly cross or criticize the Afghan limit set by their families. Girls especially are frightened of *ghaybat*, gossip, as this can ruin their family name and honour that is 'as breakable as porcelain' (Chopan 2000: 97), their own reputation and their chances of finding a good spouse (Nawa 2001: 10). But the pressure to conform is not only confined to girls.

Faranaz, a young mother, complains to me about the pressure of cultural and family obligations and expectations. "I would like to have more contacts to Germans and learn the language better. But I can't associate with Germans. That's very bad in our culture. They will talk about me." Neither can she associate with all the Afghans: "In the camp I can only go about with three families." Later she says: "I would like to live like the Germans. But I was born in Afghanistan and I have relatives and friends that are Afghan. That's why I have to be like an Afghan woman. Our culture is so complicated."

Not many Afghans will risk being outcast by their family and community, however oppressive they perceive them to be, as they strongly believe that they cannot find the same level of support and security in a non-Afghan environment to which they can never fully belong. The point is that next to their own preoccupation with preserving a distinct identity, most Afghans believe that even if they go to great lengths to integrate or assimilate into German society, they will always be perceived as different and non-German by that society.

### 6.3 COMPLICATED BELONGING TO THE GERMAN NATION-STATE

"*Az ru-ye asnād*, from the perspective of my official documents, I could say that Germany became my second *Heimat*, but not *az ru-ye del*, from the perspective of the heart. It doesn't matter how high you climb, how far you reach, you'll always stay a *khāreji*, a foreigner," Habib strongly believes. "In name, in your passport and abroad, you are German, but inside Germany again you are a foreigner. A German foreigner."

"Germany is not my *Heimat*. My children aren't Germans either. They will remain *Ausländer*, foreigners, for ever, with their black hair." A feeling of not being allowed to belong comes up every time Rohila is asked where she comes from or when she is returning 'home'. Rohila (47) works as a physician in a hospital: "Even those people that are too old and sick to get up... the first or second question they ask is 'Where are you from?' In the beginning, I answered them patiently. Now I am fed up with this question. I just tell them that it isn't important for the diagnosis."

According to Safran (1991: 83) whose theories of diaspora and homeland are well-known, one of the intrinsic features of a diaspora is that "they believe that they are not – and perhaps cannot be – fully accepted by their host

society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it.” Although I do not agree with this indiscriminate statement – his definition of diaspora can be placed in line with those scholars who consider the country of origin the ideal habitat for any person - my data strongly suggests this particular feature to be true for most Afghans in Germany. My informants do not believe that one can be regarded as a complete German simply by living in Germany or becoming a German citizen. Many respondents have a feeling of being marginalised by German society and being perceived as different. Although these experiences of exclusion can be called subjective, quite a lot of social-scientific literature exists about the way the German nation-state defines insiders and outsiders and forces the non-German ‘other’ into a subordinate position.

### Living in Limbo

“As a joke, we guys say among each other: ‘We travelled to *Jarmani*<sup>6</sup>... yet it wasn’t *Jarmani* but *Deutschland*’. It wasn’t until I came here that I heard that Germany had another name: *Deutschland*. This *Deutschland* was unpleasant and *scheiße*, shit, for us. We didn’t have any good experiences here. Now I am here for six years, with an insecure status. I am not allowed to travel. I feel like a prisoner. Germany is the biggest nation in Europe. Like the Germans are proud, I thought I could feel proud as well. But this pride turned out to be only for the Germans. Not for foreigners.” Sohrab has a strong feeling of being excluded from society, which has to do with the fact that his prospects of being allowed to stay are grim: “When they would accept me, I could build up a good life and could simply be a proud German,” he says. “Now we are disappointed. Germany is so awful to us, and we experienced nothing but disappointments.” I ask him if he thinks they will still look at him as a foreigner if he had a German passport. “They would see me as a foreigner because of my dark skin and my black hair, but I wouldn’t feel like that. I would fight for my rights.”

For those Afghans like Sohrab who hardly have any legal rights to participate in German society, a feeling of exclusion and of being unwelcome is understandable. Thousands of Afghans find themselves socially and legally marginalised by Germany’s restrictive asylum policies (see Chapter 2). They cannot lead an independent life and plan a future and they are severely restricted in their settlement, movement, employment and educational opportunities. In pursuit of work and residence permits, they are forced to deal with various administrators within the *Behörden*, the public authorities. Many informants complain about the harsh treatment they receive at their hands. Those with a *Duldung* live in constant insecurity, stress and fear, and are forced to remain in such a state of limbo for years, with the threat of expulsion as the Sword of Damocles hanging above their head. Needless to say, for Afghans in such a situation it is nearly impossible to develop a sense of national belonging to Germany and establish a home in Germany.

I ask a group of women in a refugee centre if they could think of Germany as their *Heimat*. Farzana takes the floor: “At the moment: No! If only we were accepted, maybe we could consider it our *Heimat*.” The others agree. What would they like to do if they would be allowed to stay? Their answer expresses a longing to be full members of the German society with all its rights and duties: “We want to work and pay taxes, just like the Germans.”

### Germanhood

“Germans are reserved towards foreigners. That has to do with their imaginations. They think in races, although nobody says so openly.”

(Asil)

“Germany is not an immigration country.” That has been the official government credo for decades, despite *de facto* immigration and an extensive non-German population whose stay is not as temporary as envisaged (Bade

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<sup>6</sup> In Dari, Germany is called *Jarmani* (pronounced in almost the same way as the English Germany) or *Ālmān*.

1997: 28; Münz and Ulrich 1997: 65). The idea of a German nation predates the existence of the modern German state and is centred on the idea of a *Volk*, race, or *Volksgemeinschaft*, racial community, that forms a relatively homogeneous cultural, ethnic and linguistic unit (Barbieri 1998: 11; Schuck and Münz 1998: xv). These conceptions of Germanhood and a German nation-state leave little space for Afghans and other foreigners to enter, “no matter how well they master the behavior, speech, and habitus of ‘the German’” (Peck 1995: 107). Around seven million non-Germans, among them second and third generations emigrants that were born and raised on German soil, remain socially and politically isolated as subordinate *Ausländer*, foreigners. To become German citizens, they have to pass severe bureaucratic and time-consuming hurdles that involve strict requirements and, until 1993, high administrative fees. Research by Weldon (2003: 22) shows that citizen regime policies have important implications for the populations’ tolerance of immigrants. In nation-states such as Germany that have more exclusive legal and cultural conceptions of citizenship, the general attitude towards immigrants is also more negative.

The Citizenship Act that was adopted in 1913 is based on the law of blood, *ius sanguinis*, and defines the citizenry as a community of common descent. It remained more or less intact until 2000, when the acquisition of German nationality was somewhat simplified (Giordano 1997: 180; Moore 2000: 170-171). In 2000, the standard waiting period for first-generation adult immigrants was reduced from 15 to 8 years. Applicants have to master the German language, prove good conduct, possess permanent housing, have a guaranteed income and receive no social benefits. A temporary dual citizenship was introduced for children that were born in Germany and having at least one parent who has lived in Germany for 8 years or longer. Between their 18<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> birthday, they have to choose between German and their other nationality (Rotte 2000: 381-382). Nevertheless, naturalisation “does not necessarily guarantee or even facilitate social integration. This is a bitter experience naturalized immigrants and their children [...] have faced,” according to Münz and Ulrich (1997: 103).

### **National Belonging and Citizenship**

“No matter if you have the German citizenship or not, you are only guests here and in the long run these will become a nuisance.”

(Narges)

As stated in Chapter 2, more than 36.800 Afghans have by now become German citizens. Many informants see a number of advantages in possessing a German passport. Acquiring German citizenship represents a level of security in their lives. Farshid:

“Now I feel less vulnerable. I have the same rights and responsibilities. You feel helpless if you are not allowed to leave Hamburg, when you are at the mercy of the *Behörden*... You don’t have any rights. Now I feel strong. In my situation, I am able to defend myself. I don’t feel like a German but like a German citizen, and I like that a lot. Pure biologically, I am not a German, but according to the constitution I am.”

According to Brnic, nationality can be looked at in two different ways. The first is an identification with a particular people and nation. The second is an administrative association to a particular state. These two are often intrinsically related. This, however, is not automatically the case. Brnic (2002: 8) argues that citizenship is “not necessarily a symbol of one’s sense of national belonging. It can simply be seen as a document that relates to one’s rights and to the state’s obligation to protect, or provide for, the individual.” Afghans clearly distinguish between the possession of a German passport and a national identification as German. Therefore, a desire by

Afghans to acquire the German citizenship cannot simply be taken as an indication of a loosening of ties to Afghanistan.<sup>7</sup> Two main reasons why Afghans distinguish between citizenship and a national identification can be identified. The first reason is the perceived pervasiveness of roots in Afghan thought (see Chapter 5). These more or less permanent and inborn identities and belongings are considered more important than acquired citizenship:

Rafiq Jan: "I have a German passport, but my heart belongs to Afghanistan." Rahima: "My *watan* is Afghanistan only and this identity can't be taken away by any passport of the world."

"I don't have German nationality," Ajmal says. "Maybe I'll decide to change my nationality at a certain moment in time, as it has some benefits to own a German passport. But even if I had a German passport, I would still say that I'm an Afghan when I would come somewhere."

A second major reason for this non-identification with the German nation is the strong belief that 'native' Germans will never perceive naturalised Afghans as being Germans and continue to identify them as 'others', because of, according to Afghans, their different physical appearance, religion and culture. These two reasons are likely to reinforce one another. Several scholars (Barnes 2001: 410; Kumar Behera 1999: 76; Valtonen 1998: 51) suggest that the experience of social exclusion from the mainstream society is likely to cause ethnic revitalization and a withdrawal of social and emotional commitment to the host society.

"A paper doesn't mean anything when you come into contact with people. There are three basic questions that I hear over and over again: 'Where are you from?' 'How long have you been here?' and 'When are you returning home?' It is very difficult to feel at home then." To Yama, these questions carry the message that he just does not belong, no matter how much he tries to integrate.

"I don't have a feeling of national belonging," Shafiq states, "Many Afghans hate me for saying that. I am a human being, a German citizen, and I feel like a European in Germany. Since 18 years, I have a German passport." His own identification, however, according to him, does not correspond with the perception that ethnic Germans have of him: "Whatever I do, I am always considered a foreigner. It happened more than once that I went to party conventions [of the German political party he is an active member of] and I was not allowed in. Colleagues had to come to accompany me inside."

"True, I have a German passport, but I cannot claim to be a German... simply because I am not accepted as such," Shahram asserts. "I feel well, I didn't experience any attacks by Nazis, never heard '*Ausländer raus*' - 'foreigners get out'. But indirectly at public offices you notice it... those feelings of rejection." He continues: "German society is a closed one, and the Afghan as well. From both sides, there is little motivation for integration. Most Germans don't feel the need getting to know foreigners."

Only a few respondents encountered overt racism. Many however believe they have fewer chances of finding employment and housing. Castles and Davidson (2000 in: Barnes 2001: 39) make a difference between formal and substantial citizenship. Formal citizenship is acquired by naturalisation. Substantial citizenship includes "equal changes of participation in various areas of society such as politics, work, welfare systems and cultural relations." Many informants believe that they have lesser chances in these areas. The feeling of marginalisation is probably strengthened by the fact that many refugees used to belong to the better-off and educated sections of their country of origin. A number of respondents, including Shahram and Farshid, believe that foreigners have to work much harder and prove themselves more in order to reach the same level as Germans:

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<sup>7</sup> As such, I do not agree with Omidian and Lipson (1997: 111) who state that among Afghans in the United States, the "attitude [of hoping for return to Afghanistan, or at least to die there of old age] is changing as more and more Afghans apply for U.S. citizenship." The contrary could be true: the paradoxical situation is that precisely those who change their official nationality by becoming Germans are better able to reconnect with Afghanistan. A German passport guarantees the legal right to travel back and forth between Germany and Afghanistan.

“Only a handful of foreigners have reached higher positions in Germany,” Farshid says. “Most of them are just vegetable sellers. You don’t see immigrants in government positions for example. In other European countries, it is different.”

“My children can’t move forward here. Germany takes from itself [out of the own population]. Because of their black hair they’re not given a good job.” Mister General – other Afghans address him with the title that refers to his former position in Afghanistan even though in Germany he works as a gardener - claims that this is even the case when they possess a German passport. “My son is a law-student but he has less chances. They give foreigners low-class work. Because Germans are born in their own *watan* they are given good jobs. That’s why it’s better *ke ensān dar watan-e khod bāshand* – that people live in their own homeland.”

Feelings of not belonging and being different seem to have increased since 2001. Many Afghans are very critical about the images of Muslims and Islam portrayed in the media. In the aftermath of September the 11<sup>th</sup> because the hijackers had been educated in Hamburg, Afghan mosques were subjected to investigation, and some houses belonging to Afghans were searched. Afghanistan was originally a country nobody knew anything about, but has now become associated by outsiders with terrorism, the Taliban, Bin Laden, *burqa*’s and other stereotypical images. Some Afghans have been called Bin Laden or Taliban at their work or at school. Several respondents state that for these reasons, it has become more difficult to identify with Germans or Germany.

#### 6.4 NEGOTIATING IDENTITY

“I have the feeling that I don’t belong anywhere. I don’t feel well... *zuhause*... anywhere. I just feel so different than others. I am searching and searching, but I don’t know exactly for what. I am on the run. I can’t find it in the *Heimat* [Afghanistan] and not in Hamburg. Not among the Afghans and not among the Germans. In the end, I might just be looking for myself.”

(Tehmina)

I considered it extremely interesting to talk with young Afghans about identity issues and their definitions and localisations of home. Most of the Afghans that are quoted here are in their late teens or their twenties. This does not mean that older Afghans do not question their identity and meanings of home, but among younger Afghans the influences of routes stand out much stronger, so that their negotiations between roots and routes lead to more ambiguous outcomes. It is drummed into their minds by the older generation that Afghanistan is the place where they really belong, but that place may appear far removed from their daily life in Germany. Young Afghans generally have a strong yearning to find a space of belonging, but not all of them manage to fulfil this homing desire. Several respondents who have no memories or only vague ones of Afghanistan, acknowledge that being Afghan for them consists mainly of a series of behavioural rules of which they do not know the background.

“I always say that I am an Afghan, but actually I don’t know the country at all,” Marzia says. According to Beltun, “Young people don’t feel German, but they don’t have concrete memories of Afghanistan. Or no positive memories.”

Girls in particular are expected to behave ‘Afghan’, but they are confronted with different and sometimes clashing values and expectations in their contact with non-Afghan peers and in their educational and professional lives. Three respondents even use the word schizophrenia to describe the way in which girls have to take up two

completely different roles. In complete contrast to the sense of pride that they are expected to display for their Afghan roots,<sup>8</sup> certain Afghan practises might embarrass young Afghans:

Mona shows me pictures of her family. A few of them figure her son as a toddler, dressed up in traditional Afghan clothes. Mona tells me that he is embarrassed to wear such clothes now that he is a 12-year-old. "He says to me: 'Mom, I am a German'."

Sahar is the only Afghan in her class. Her classmates started dating and she does not want to be seen as a curiosity. Instead of explaining to her friends that she is not allowed to have a boyfriend and that her parents will select her future spouse, she has made up an imaginary Arab boyfriend in France.

Farshid is used to listening to Afghan music while driving his car. He always turns his music down at the traffic lights: "I don't want to be looked at like I'm a monkey."

Having access to two different 'cultures' or nationalities is described as positive by some respondents, and as negative by many others, depending on factors such as upbringing and the number of years spent in Afghanistan. Some struggle to build a hybrid identity that allows them to belong to two countries and two cultures at the same time, adopting the best of both and switching codes according to the context. While a number manage to do so, in the end many are left with a feeling of being displaced in both societies:

"Our parents have their memories and know exactly who they are. For the Germans, I am too Afghan to be considered German... and for the Afghans too German to be considered Afghan. If you look at it that way I am either nothing at all or both of them. I try to be both, to unite the positive things out of both cultures into my very individual outlook. But for both sides I will always be too strange," according to the 15-year-old girl Djaheda. "It is written on our foreheads that we are foreigners and even if my German friends repeatedly try to persuade me that I am a German, they will pass comment about the smallest thing that looks strange to them: 'That is the way it is among you people, isn't it?'" (Hosain 2001: 32-33; translation MB).

"I am standing in between two countries, in the middle. Both aren't my *Heimat*," Asil says. I ask him if he feels to be a foreigner. "If I am a foreigner, then what kind of foreigner am I? I'm neither a German nor an Afghan. Simply in between, in no man's land."

Others find comfort in asserting a 'pure' Afghan identity and insisting on differences between them and Germans (see Chapter 5 for examples), albeit that in practise they might speak better German than Dari or Pashto, wear Western clothes and possess a German passport. The one respondent that stressed a cosmopolitan identity at first and claimed to be at home everywhere in a world with arbitrarily drawn borders, speaks of "we Afghans" on another occasion, thereby pronouncing an Afghan identity, and of a feeling of being a stranger, a *bigāna*, to both Germany and Afghanistan during another conversation. Although some respondents place an emphasis on the fact that they are German citizens or claim that in some contexts they feel German, all agree that they are not real Germans.

Azim (2003: 76; translation MB) describes it this way: "I think that almost all Afghan youngsters that grew up abroad have the problem that they don't have anything in which they can strongly believe – myself not unconditionally excluded. We lack fixed strongholds in life. We aren't completely Afghan and neither completely German. Often, we are not taken seriously, even when we want to be. Whatever we do, we are foreigners; *zu Hause* [in Afghanistan] we are '*kulturfremd*' [alienated from the culture]. That is actually the worst thing of all." Navid has a similar vision:

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<sup>8</sup> When, at a concert, a 17-year-old girl confesses that Afghanistan is a terrifying place to her because so many people have died over there, a friend of her mother that overhears the conversation calls her a *watanforush*, a betrayer (literally: seller) of the homeland. She does that jokingly, but it reflects the expectation of publicly maintaining pride about roots.

“We [the youth] are the ones that have lost the most,” Navid tells me. He is 25 years old now and was 15 when he left Afghanistan. “We don’t belong anywhere. In Afghanistan we are strangers too and in Germany anyhow. We are prisoners of ourselves.” “But many youngsters that I spoke to think they belong to Afghanistan,” I protest. “Those who say so don’t know life over there. As soon as they are there and have spent there a few weeks, they will miss Germany.”

What a number of young Afghans tell me is that they feel different from the older generation as well as different from their German peers. Young Afghans often feel left alone with their struggles and dilemma’s. Because there is hardly any space for open and critical discussions between the generations, parents are sometimes unaware of the problems their children are faced with, or do not take these as seriously as the youngsters would like them to. Establishing a sense of belonging to other young Afghans in the same situation can also be problematic. Out of mistrust and fear of gossip, many young Afghans are not able to share these problems with Afghans in their age group, even if these are likely to struggle with similar issues. Tamana tells me:

“The Afghan youth is jealous of other ethnic minorities, like the Greek and the Turks. Those stick together in groups, they have coherence. Afghan youngsters want that as well, but they suffer from distrust. They have a longing for *Heimat*, for *Zugehörigkeit*, affiliation, but *sie kriegen es nicht gebaeken*, they don’t manage to accomplish that.”

The ways in which young Afghans define and localise homes and non-homes are described in the next paragraphs.

## 6.5 DEFINING HOME

In the first stages of writing this thesis, I suggested a distinction between two kinds of home: a ‘symbolical home’ that offers a metaphorical space of belonging and identity and a ‘practical home’ as a lived in space where life-course needs are fulfilled. I called Afghanistan home in a symbolical sense, in the way that it offers a sense of belonging and identity, a continuum due to ancestry with its emphasis on blood and roots, and a homeland of nostalgia and collective and individual memories. In a practical and geographical sense however, I argued that Afghanistan is non-home. Present-day Afghanistan does not offer safety, economical security, education, and often no network of kin and friends. These practical issues are often much better met in Germany. I argued that Afghanistan as a home is the symbolic conceptualisation of where one belongs and not a physical space to inhabit in the near future. Voluntary returns to Afghanistan will only take place when practical homes can be established over there. Although this distinction still sounds reasonably plausible to me, there are two important points of criticism that I wish to address.

Calling Afghanistan home in a symbolical sense, a metaphorical space of belonging, is not without ambivalence. In Chapter 4, I argued that emic terms which point to spaces of belonging are not easily translated into the English concepts of home and homeland. In Chapter 5, we have seen that the Afghan word for ‘original home’ is *watan*. Narratives of *watan* and those of identity are intimately linked. As the former paragraph has shown however, not every individual identifies with Afghanistan to the same extent. Although Afghans generally do not identify themselves as Germans, several acknowledge that they are partly German or European, thereby diminishing the value of Afghanistan as a space of belonging. Because most of the interviews with younger Afghans took place in the German language, the central terms in these paragraphs are the German concepts of

*Heimat* and *Zuhause*. Other places than the place of ancestral origin can never become *watan*, but they can become for example *Zuhause* or *Heimat*. Likewise, in negotiations that take place in the German language, Afghans do not necessarily use a word that can be translated as home when speaking of their place of origin. A girl on an Internet forum wonders:

“Can I still see Afghanistan as my *Heimat*, after so many years? Well, I don’t know...”

This brings me to the second point: that of terminology. Several scholars employ interpretations of home that are similar to my initial ‘practical home’. One of the multiple homes that Graham and Khosravi (1997: 130) identify is “a place which fulfils a person’s practical needs.” Brah’s home as “lived experience of locality” (1996: 192) and Ahmed’s home as “the sensory world of everyday experience” have a similar connotation as the current place of residence and the familiar site of everyday life. What I miss in these accounts is the awareness of the possibility that this place might not be defined as home by the people themselves. To label the place where practical needs are fulfilled as home is definitely a researcher’s choice that does not necessarily correspond to the definitions of respondents. Most respondents acknowledge that Germany, or a specific location within Germany, has become the centre and stage of life in a practical sense.

Many do indeed use a label that could be translated as home: *Zuhause* or *Heimat*. A good example is Aryan’s case, described in paragraph 4.7. His understanding of *Heimat* could be translated as ‘symbolical home’. It is his place of origin that he does not know but to which he feels a strong sense of belonging and where he bases his identity on. He calls the place that is familiar to him and where he lives, works and his family and friends reside *Zuhause*. In this case, *Zuhause* could be translated as ‘practical home’. Not all respondents however use the concepts of *Heimat* and *Zuhause* in a similar way.

Some informants make a very clear distinction between living in a certain place and being used to life over there, and calling that place *Heimat* or *Zuhause*. A similar argument is made by Lam and Yeoh (2004: 153-155). In their research among Chinese-Malaysian migrants in Singapore and their understandings of home, respondents differentiated between their definition of home and their preference to live in a certain place. The place they called home was often not the place they preferred to live, whereas the place they preferred to live and that could fulfil their practical needs was only called home by a minority of 11.8%. This minority defined home as “the practical asset for changing lifecourse needs.” Lam and Yeoh conclude that “conceptions of home may not coincide with the practical needs for a suitable place to live yet cannot be fully divorced from them.” In the same way, Afghans might call Afghanistan their *Heimat*, yet prefer to live elsewhere because of practical considerations. That place elsewhere might be called *Heimat* or *Zuhause*, but it might as well be defined as non-*Heimat*. It has to have sentimental connotations as a space of belonging in order to call it *Heimat* or *Zuhause*. Amir and Zabi are taken as an example:

Zabi: “I know where I came from and I know where I belong. I could live in Germany for a hundred years more, but I would still feel to be a stranger, a foreigner. It won’t become my *Heimat*...” Amir says: “This will never become my *Heimat*, but I am accustomed to life here.”

Just like the concept of home, the words *Heimat* and *Zuhause* are subject to greatly diverging individual interpretations. In general it seems that *Heimat* is more often connected to a territory, state or city with clear-cut borders, whereas a sense of *Zuhause* is less place-specific; it is more often applied to a smaller space with

undefined borders of which the exact geographical location is often subordinated. Secondly, *Heimat* is more often linked to a national identification, whereas *Zuhause* and national identity can be incongruent.

## 6.6 INDIVIDUAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF HEIMAT AND ZUHAUSE

### Home at the National Level

The first two young men that are quoted here define *Heimat* in the sense of a nation-state or a national culture where they feel to belong to and that gives them an identity. Both have a feeling of *Heimatlosigkeit*, homelessness, and of being a stranger to both Germany and Afghanistan. For Mahdi, *Heimat* or *Zuhause* is necessarily composed of two components: the sensory world of everyday experience combined with a feeling of inclusion and national belonging. One without the other does not constitute a true *Heimat*. As Afghanistan only exists in his mind and he does not have the feeling of completely belonging to the German nation-state, he feels incomplete:

“I don’t know how it feels to be in your own country, and to be able to say ‘this is my country’. I don’t know how I would react when I would be on Afghanistan’s soil. I’m not a nationalist or something like that, but I want to have a *Heimat*. Up till now, I don’t have any. Only in my head.” I ask Mahdi if Germany could become his *Heimat*. “Yes, it is my *Heimat*, but still too many things are missing as to be able to say it is completely my *Heimat*. I can’t consider it my *Heimat* only because I live here. True, I feel *wohl*, at ease, here, but it is as if there is a hole in me that has to be filled. And the only thing that it can be filled with is Afghanistan.” I suggest that it might help him to visit Afghanistan once. “Yes, maybe. I was seven when I left Afghanistan. Now I am almost 25,” he says. “I think that if I was in Afghanistan, first of all I would kiss the ground. I think I would cry too.” Mahdi continues: “But what I wanted to say is that one must learn to value one’s *Zuhause*. Because he who doesn’t have any envies the others. I envy the Germans that are able to say ‘this is my country’.” I react: “Hey, but they only have one country. You’ve got two.” “No, it’s not like that,” Mahdi answers, “I have the other country in my imagination only. And in this one, I live as a foreigner.”

For this young man on an Internet forum, there is no place to call *Heimat*. Apart from connecting *Heimat* to memories of childhood and important life-events, he connects it to a national identity. That identity is formed by culture, lifestyle and mentality. Because he is affected by both the German and the Afghan culture, he cannot shift over completely to one side. This gives him the feeling of homelessness, of not belonging to either country:

“I don’t know about the others, but I would lie if I would say that Afghanistan was my *Heimat*. I know a part of the Afghan culture, and internalised it. But also the German one. We all are partly German, partly Western. Even our parents! Our everyday way of living is extremely different from that of Afghans living in Afghanistan. I have spent my youth over here... my most beautiful and most important experiences took place over here... my memories of Afghanistan are very vague and paled, everyday a little bit more. Still, I feel *Heimatslos*! Yes, *Heimatslos*. No matter how much I would try to integrate, there will be a day, maybe not today or tomorrow, that I bump into misunderstanding and strange German sides. Exactly the same it is in the case of Afghanistan. Except from the language (that many of us do not master perfectly; a few can write, so we are illiterates), we do not have much in common with the people living in Afghanistan. The culture is different as well... everybody knows that the Afghans over here have changed extremely... took on a different mentality... I don’t know if that is good or bad... but just different. We will be put all together in a drawer... be it here or there... in both places, I feel like a stranger... a guest! But for my children I want something else... that they don’t have the feeling that they must sit between two chairs and still stand out in the end. That is why I would like to help Afghanistan to secure a safe future and to make a *Heimat* for the new generation possible.”

Sohrab also defines *Heimat* at the nation-state level. *Heimat* is the familiar place of lived experiences, and can thus also be located outside Afghanistan. Instead of not belonging to either Afghanistan or Germany, Sohrab

identifies two *Heimat*'s for himself, although the second *Heimat* is not a real one as long as he is not legally accepted there:

“Afghanistan is my first *Heimat*, my *Geburtsheimat* – my homeland of birth. Germany is my second *Heimat*, but not until I'm secure here. Now I don't know if I will be deported tomorrow or the day after.” I ask Sohrab about the meaning of *Heimat*. “*Heimat* is where you live and have lived. Originally, I am an Afghan. Now Germany is my *Heimat*, if only I were secure. The country of birth is something very different, but where you live at the moment is also *Heimat*. You just have to be able to speak the language and know the society and culture.”

### Smaller Levels of Home

A sense of belonging and identification can be addressed towards the host country or city and its mainstream society and culture in general, but as the remaining accounts demonstrate, it is a very real possibility that people construct smaller levels of home; attachments inside Germany that are not specifically directed towards the nation-state Germany. These accounts challenge conventional conceptions of the relation between place, culture and identity. Whereas Ajmal cannot identify with Germany as a *Heimat* because of the feeling of being an outsider, he is able to identify a *Heimat* and *Zuhause* on a smaller level: his own social environment of family and friends. This does not conflict with his national self-identification, which he bases solely on narratives of roots:

“I don't want to stay in Germany. I will return to Afghanistan, my *Heimat*, because over there, I'm not a foreigner.” Although Ajmal (27) has already lived in Germany for 14 years, he claims to feel like a foreigner, because he believes society will always think of him as such: “My hair is black, sometimes I am not allowed to enter disco's and it's difficult to find a job.” This is the message that Ajmal is fiercely expressing every time we meet, until the time of the official interview. My stinging questions about what he loves about Afghanistan, what being an Afghan involves and if he believes that Afghans in Afghanistan would see him as one of them make him pensive: “You really left me in doubts. Actually I can imagine living my life here as well. There are just a few things I don't like.” He admits: “I really feel *zuhause* in Hamburg.” When I ask him what is necessary in order to feel at home somewhere, he answers: “I grew up over here, my family and friends are here...” After a short thought, he firmly adds: “But I stayed an Afghan!” He continues: “I feel like an Afghan who lives in Hamburg. Hamburg is my *Heimatsstadt*, my *Heimat*-city. My city is Hamburg but my culture is Afghan, that is easy to combine.” I ask him if he would still be able to feel at home in Afghanistan. Much more carefully than before, he states: “I presume that in Afghanistan I will feel at home... I presume...”

A girl on an Internet forum associates the notion of *Heimat* with memories, childhood and lived experience. Lived experience is an important aspect of many of my respondent's definitions of *Heimat* or *Zuhause*, but as I have argued before, it has to be combined with a sense of attachment in order to become labelled *Heimat* or *Zuhause*. Many older Afghans feel strongly connected to Afghanistan because it is the place where they grew up, enculturated and have memories of. However, lived experience can also be gathered in Germany or a third country, especially in the case of Afghans who have spent an important part of their life there. This location can be the site of memories of a past life but also the current place of residence. For this girl who grew up outside Afghanistan, it is Germany instead of Afghanistan that answers to these associations:

“Germany too has become something like my *Heimat*. I grew up over here... spent the largest part of my life here... experienced good and bad times here... my memories of Afghanistan are like little pieces...”

Jamshid who holds a *Befugnis* has difficulties localising his *Zuhause*: he connects *Zuhause* with the presence of family, but also with a sense of security, inclusion and acceptance. There is no place that offers that second part. Both Germany where his future is insecure and Afghanistan where he does not see a future for him both fail to

meet these requirements. *Heimat* to Jamshid is the place of original belonging, but that does not necessarily involve the wish to live there:

“I don’t know where my *Zuhause* is. For now, I am allowed to stay, but maybe we will be sent back. I don’t know what I should do in Afghanistan... where my *Zuhause* is.” Although Jamshid (25) calls Afghanistan his *Heimat*, it is not a place he wishes to live: “It’s true that Afghanistan is our *Heimat*, but well...” I ask him: “When you were allowed to stay, do you think that Germany could become your *Heimat*?” “Germany can become my *Heimat*, and when I miss Afghanistan I will go there on a vacation.” He misses ‘his country’, especially the people, the culture and the climate. “But the Afghan people and Afghan culture can be found in Hamburg as well?” I remark. “I don’t see Afghans on the streets everywhere, you have to look for them. And the people have changed, albeit that they are not very well integrated into German society.” Notwithstanding these facts, he cannot imagine living in a conservative and insecure place like Afghanistan, now that he is used to the freedom that Germany offers him: “I can’t live there the way that I live here. Going to a disco, in Afghanistan that will take another hundred years.” He acknowledges: “One gets used to life in Germany, one learns.” Still, he considers himself to be an Afghan because of the short length of stay in Germany and the age of his arrival: “I am in Germany for only 4 or 5 years now, and I wasn’t that young when I came here.” Although his primary identification is Afghan, he states: “I want to live in such a way that I am accepted as an Afghan as well as a German, by both the Afghan and German society.” I ask him about the definition of *Zuhause*. “*Zuhause* is there where one feels *heimisch*, at home. Where one is... secure... no, where one has the feeling that one is there *wo man eigentlich hingehören möchte* - where one actually wants to belong.” According to Jamshid, the first requirement for a place to be called *Zuhause* is the presence of family members. “I am very lucky that my family is with me.” And if no other Afghans except for his own family were in that place? “When I would feel well there, protected, accepted...”

For Sabir, who is 26 and has lived in Germany for 13 years, Kabul or Afghanistan no longer represents *Heimat*, as he hardly has any memories of the place. The two other reasons he gives is that his close kin do not live there any more and that there is no tangible base to return to. He calls Hamburg his *Heimat* because he has very good memories about the years he lived in that multicultural city where his mother, sister and friends still live:

“I am living in Kiel for three years now, but Hamburg is my second... no... is my *Heimat*. I miss Hamburg when I am in Kiel. Not that I have many contacts to Germans, actually I haven’t, but Hamburg is my *Heimat*. In Hamburg I feel *zuhause*. *Wohl*, at ease. To tell you the truth, I don’t consider Kabul my *Heimat*. I don’t want to return to Afghanistan, at least not forever. Do you mind me saying so? Most Afghans lie about that. They don’t want to return either, but say they do. I haven’t seen much of Afghanistan. Actually I don’t know it. I don’t have many memories about Kabul any more. And I don’t have anything there any more. Our house has been sold, and our second house has been destroyed. My father lives in Iran. My mother and sister in Hamburg, and then there is some family in America.” Speaking about his identity, he says: “I am not proud to be an Afghan, but I feel comfortable being an Afghan. Only in the period of the Taliban it was hard for me to tell people that I am an Afghan. But no Afghan ever lies about his origins.”

In almost all of the above accounts, home and belonging are defined in terms of social relations, namely family ties and social networks. Many respondents say that they feel at home where their family and friends are. This is an extremely important definition of home that is encountered among Afghans of all ages. The quintessential bond of Afghan belonging emphasises blood relations and accountability to the *qawm o khish*, an extended circle of family and people who are ‘one’s own’. This is a more important level of belonging than to an entire nation of Afghans living inside and outside Afghanistan. Afghans who do not belong to this circle are encountered with much distrust and reservation. For the German-born Azim who wrote a novella about his life, *Heimat* is where his family and friends live: “I am happy to have my mother, my father and my brothers and sisters as well as friends close to me. Although essentially I don’t know Afghanistan, I feel very connected to this country. Yes, country, not *Heimat*. *Heimat* to me is that country where my family and friends are. I live in a mixture of German and Afghan culture” (Azim 2003: 8; my translation). If it is the case that close relatives reside in

Germany, respondents are likely to locate *Zuhause* or *Heimat* inside Germany, even if they do not identify with the German nation-state as a whole. Respondents who do not have close relatives nearby often express a feeling of isolation (see Habib's case in par. 4.3) or locate home elsewhere:

Shahram tells me about his trip to Afghanistan in 1997 to see his family. Since then, he informs me, he goes home, *nach Hause*, every year. I automatically assume he means travelling to Afghanistan once a year, until later on I realise that, for him, home is his family that now lives in Pakistan.

As Lam and Yeoh (2004: 150) argue, a family-centred definition of home can operate to both strengthen and weaken attachment to a particular place. The dispersal of kin and friends over the world or their re-grouping in Hamburg or elsewhere can make the territory of Afghanistan as a home complicated. Those Afghans who do not have relatives and friends left in Afghanistan often have a less concrete bond to Afghanistan. On the other hand, the symbolical meaning of Afghanistan as the land of memories may be high, memories of a time when the dispersed family was still together and of a past life that largely revolved around the extended family. It is important to realise that an attachment to Afghanistan is not just an attachment to the territory of Afghanistan. It is a sense of belonging to Afghanistan through a sense of closeness to family, culture and language, and as such, it can be found outside the actual territory of Afghanistan. In his novel 'West of Kabul, East of New York', Ansary (2002: 264) declares: "[A]lmost all of the Ansarys left Afghanistan and came to America. Maybe that's what gives me the impression that I lost track of Afghanistan. My Afghanistan came here." Especially younger Afghans say that they feel connected to Afghanistan through their family. Within the family context and the community, 'Afghanistan' is kept alive by stories and practises. In this way, an "*Ersatzheimat*" or replacement-*Heimat*, as Breshna (2000: 92) calls it, is created. An attachment to roots might thus not necessarily imply a wish or need to return to Afghanistan. Attempts to establish a sense of continuation with the past might primarily serve the purpose of creating a space, within another country, in which one can feel at home. Especially for Afghans that left Afghanistan at a later age, this way of creating a space to belong to plays a very important role.

Brah (1996: 193) argues that "It is quite possible to feel at home in a place and, yet, the experience of social exclusions may inhibit public proclamations of the place as home" in the sense of calling it 'one's own'. Someone might feel more at home in Hamburg than in Kabul, but resist against calling oneself a German. The above accounts clearly demonstrate that a resistance to call the nation-state Germany home does not exclude the identification of niches inside that country that offer some sense of home and belonging, which may or may not effect self-identification. For many Afghans, Germany has become the centre and arena of everyday life, although in the case of a few thousand Afghans this is severely hampered by legal barriers. The respondents above were able to create new localities, for which many used the label *Heimat* or *Zuhause*. These localities are based on familiarity, the presence of people that they feel close to, the fulfilment of life-course needs and the creation of a diasporic 'Afghan' culture. Although virtually all Afghans feel some sort of connection to Afghanistan, this varies between very weak and extraordinarily strong. The place where they are currently residing is a living reality that is likely to influence their identity, mentality and lifestyle. This has important consequences for the issue of return. Jamal's negotiations of home and belonging are a good prelude to the next chapter in which the central theme is returning to Afghanistan.

## Jamal: “Sometimes I Think That Here Is *Zuhause*”

Jamal (25) and I talk about Afghan music and I mention a particular traditional song I recently learned to sing, called “*Biya ke berim ba Mazār*,” “Come let us go to Mazar.” “Oh, I love that song!” he reacts. “Whenever I hear it, I remember *Nawroz*.<sup>9</sup> You get sad then. We celebrated that so nicely in Afghanistan. *Jegar-e man kabāb mesha* - I become so terribly sad<sup>10</sup> - when I think of the fact that I am not there where the others are celebrating. It reminds you that you are not there any more, with your family. That *Heimatsgefühl* that suddenly awakes... Living far away from the *Heimat*, that isn’t a good thing. Then you get sad, melancholic, a bit depressed. You realise you are far away from *Zuhause*. When you hear such a song, all those memories slip into your mind.” Not all of Jamal’s memories are nice. Jamal has very traumatic memories as well, for example of body parts lying scattered over the street after a rocket attack, and about his best friend who died a similar way. “When such a memory awakes, you can’t sleep for days.”



“Music is the umbilical cord to the homeland,” according to one of my respondents (Photo: Marije Braakman)

Jamal came to Germany ten years ago. He claims not to possess a sense of belonging towards the German society in general, and believes most Germans to be arrogant and ‘cold’: “*Ausländer*, foreigners, have to struggle for years to get acceptance from society.” That is why, during his first difficult years in Germany, he thought: “At some point I will return to Afghanistan because I’m not accepted over here.” But as the years passed, he created new localities and new senses of belonging: “I don’t have *Heimatsgeföhle* towards Germany. But I feel at ease here. I have friends here. I feel well in my own circle of friends. I’ve built up my own environment.”

“It is my dream to return one day and help my countrymen,” Jamal says, “I think it’s the duty of every Afghan to help.” But will he really return at some point in future? “I’m not a hundred percent sure if I will go. Life here is comfortable. I am honest, that comfort becomes something you get used to. Many don’t feel like returning. I just hope that one day I’ll be willing and able to return.” Due to his origins and memories, he feels a strong connection to Afghanistan that he calls *Heimat* and *Zuhause*, but at the same time he realises that present-day Afghanistan is not the place for him to live. The Afghanistan he longs for is an irretrievable period of childhood memories. His mother has passed away, his father and one brother live in Pakistan and the rest of his brothers and sisters reside in Germany and Holland. “I’m sure that I will be disappointed when I return to Afghanistan. I can’t live there any more.” He bases that on stories that he heard from somebody who has recently visited Afghanistan. After so many years, both Jamal and Afghanistan as he once knew it have changed. Both he and Afghanistan took opposite routes. Jamal’s centre of life became located in Germany: “Sometimes I think that here is *Zuhause*.”

<sup>9</sup> Persian New Year, celebrated on the 21<sup>st</sup> of March. The centre of the festivities is the Northern pilgrim city of Mazar-e Sharif, where the *janda*, a large religious banner, is raised in front of the shrine of the fourth Islamic caliph Hazrat Ali, to announce the beginning of spring and a new year. This festival is called *Gul-e Sorkh*, the Red Flower. Red tulips, blossoming abundantly around Mazar in this time of year, symbolise the blood of Hazrat Ali as well as a hope for prosperity.

<sup>10</sup> Literally: my liver becomes like roasted meat.

**Part III**  
**RETURN**



## Chapter 7

# BETWEEN DREAMS AND REALITY

*During these cookery sessions, we played a wonderful game. We planned the family trip to Afghanistan that always seemed to be just round the corner. How we would go back to Paghman, stroll in the gardens, visit our old family home and greet the relatives we had never met. When we arrived in the Paghman mountains, the men would fire their guns in the air – we shouldn't worry, that was the Afghan way of welcome and celebration. They would carry us on their shoulders, whooping and cheering, and in the evening we would eat a pilau that eclipsed even the great feasts of the court of our ancestors.*

*My mother's family background, which is Parsee from India, rarely got a look in. As far as my father was concerned, his offspring were pure Afghan. For years, the mere mention of the Return was enough to stoke us children into fits of excitement. It was so much more alluring than our mundane Kentish lives, which revolved round the family's decrepit Land Rover and our pet Labrador, Honey.*

*'Can we take the Land Rover?' asked my brother Tahir.*

*'We shall take a fleet of Land Rovers,' said my father grandly.*

*My sister Safia piped up: 'Can we take Honey?'*

*There was an uncomfortable pause. Even my father's flight of fantasy balked at introducing to Afghans as a beloved member of our family that unclean animal, the dog.*

*When I was fifteen, the Soviet Union invaded and occupied Afghanistan. During a pilau-making<sup>1</sup> session quite soon after that, I voiced an anxiety that had been growing for some time now. How could my father expect us to be truly Afghan when we had grown up outside an Afghan community? When we went back home, wouldn't we children be strangers, foreigners in our own land? I expected, and possibly hoped for, the soothing account of our triumphant and imminent return to Paghman. It didn't come. My father looked tired and sad.*

Saira Shah's *The Storyteller's Daughter* (2003: 6-7)

### 7.1 VOLUNTARY RETURNS

This chapter examines how Afghans think and speak about a return to Afghanistan, in particular a permanent return, and examines the way in which potential dreams of returning are likely to clash with practical considerations. On European, national and provincial levels, several return programs have been developed (see appendix III for an overview of the return programs of the IOM, the German government and the Hamburger municipality). Only a tiny proportion of the Afghans in Germany have joined such a program. In 2004, 71 Afghans without a secure legal status accepted the premium of €1.000 per adult and €50 per child granted by the Hamburger municipality, and returned to Afghanistan voluntarily. In 2003, that number was 60. The project was designed for the return of 8 thousand Afghans, and could thus be considered a failure (Hanauer 2005).

Tears come to our eyes, as memories return listening to a song  
About our beautiful Afghanistan, the land where we belong  
So much death, so much destruction, so much despair  
Sometimes I wonder if those left behind know we still care?  
But no matter how long from our home we remain apart  
Our land, our people, our history, remain dear to our heart  
Seems everyday news of tragedy and sorrow  
What can we do but pray for a peaceful tomorrow?  
We that are here must unite, and from mistakes learn  
For we will be the leaders to show the way, when we return

(Dr. Azim Azimi)

At this moment, hardly anybody is willing to take the voluntary decision to return permanently. As initial hopes following the fall of the Taliban have been shattered, most Afghans await the developments in Afghanistan

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<sup>1</sup> *Palaw* is a rice dish with browned onions and caramelised sugar. It comes in a number of variations.

sceptically. History has taught them that fragile peace can easily take a turn for the worse. Afghans will only return voluntarily if they see the prospect of building up a life and a future for themselves and their family, but in their eyes, such prospects barely exist at this point in time. While some have already given up hope about Afghanistan's future, others are optimistic. But even if Afghanistan's situation changes for the better, it cannot be predicted whether or not Afghans will really return. According to Skinner (1999: 447), diaspora-like populations such as the Chinese, Irish, Jews, Africans in America and Indians have seldom promoted or introduced large-scale return movements. Surprisingly, even incredible hardships in host countries have not led to return movements.<sup>2</sup> Instead of returning to the roots, their 'roots' may have been planted elsewhere and a return would mean a new uprooting. The changes that both Afghans in diaspora and their place of origin have undergone through the years have affected their senses of home and belonging, as has been argued in Chapter 6. This has important consequences for the likelihood of their eventual return. In the end, pragmatic concerns are likely to outweigh any nostalgic yearning. Beltun's story underlines some very essential dilemmas.

### **Beltun: "I Can't Find a Solution For My Family"**

Beltun, who has left Afghanistan in 1978, has a daughter who is in her twenties and a nine-year-old son. As a journalist, Beltun has visited Afghanistan in 2002. Although he considers the situation in Afghanistan to be very bad, dreams of return are on his mind. They clash with the reality of being a family father and breadwinner, responsible for the well-being of his family. His wife Sukria treasures a small glass bottle of earth from her parental house in Afghanistan. She has a longing to return to Afghanistan, but realises she has no future there. Although she has a university qualification, she is certain that she would not be able to find employment. A few days earlier, Beltun's daughter had replied to his question if she would want to return to Afghanistan with a meaningful silence. "Ask my son if he wants to go to Afghanistan," Beltun orders me. Nine-year-old Arman sits on the couch next to his father, absorbed in a Game Boy computer game. I ask him. He does not look up from his game and answers: "No." I ask him why not. "Because there are no swimming pools." "And if there were? Or only for a holiday?" I try. "No..." he whispers with certain unease.

"In Afghanistan I would be able to share my knowledge. But who will look after my family here? My son enjoys going to school and has German friends. I don't see a future for my children there. It is an issue of responsibility... responsibility for my wife and children. Who can sacrifice his children for his own goals and say: 'We are from Afghanistan and we will return to Afghanistan'. There, in the darkness where children live on the streets and where my children will be discriminated against. The children here don't feel so bad. They go to school, play football. My son loves to swim, and for him it is a big deal that there are no swimming pools in Afghanistan. Yes, there are some, but I would have to be aware all the time that my son wouldn't be sexually abused."

While walking me to the bus stop, he continues talking about his dilemmas: "I can't find a solution for my family. For thirty years I have been writing for and about Afghanistan. I had to flee Afghanistan. Now I have a wife and children. My articles are being published in Afghanistan. I am sitting and writing here. I would be able to sit and write in Kabul. But when I say 'Yes, I go', immediately the question of who will pay the house rent, and who will take responsibility for my wife and children arises. Do I have the right to take my child to Afghanistan, to misuse his future for my own desires? Take my wife her freedom away? Leave my daughter alone in Germany for years or forever? Separate my son and daughter? My son is nine years old. He doesn't know what Afghanistan is. Do I then have to prepare a kidnap, to put pressure on the family because I want to go to Afghanistan? What if my son gets 16 or 18 and says 'This is not my country, I want to go back to Germany'? I can't earn any money there as a writer. Newspapers can only offer ten dollars per article. How do I pay the rent, how do I buy my son a new pair of shoes, how do I pay for his school? My child can't decide, and I can't decide for him. I had a better life in Afghanistan than I have in Germany now. I have a lot of friends over there

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<sup>2</sup> The Irish that encountered much discrimination in America preferred to stay there, just like the Indians in the Caribbean and in South Africa did not attempt to return *en masse*. Even the large-scale massacres on Chinese in the Philippines in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century and Indonesia in the 1960's did not bring about a large exodus. Those Chinese that were expelled from the Philippines returned there as soon as the climate changed. Indians that were forced out of East Africa chose to flee to Britain instead of returning to India (Skinner 1999: 447).

that will help me building a nice life in Afghanistan. But can I lead a comfortable life, when in the same village people are living beneath poverty standards? And then... a better life for me but a shoddier life for my child? Do parents have to sacrifice themselves for their children, or children for their parents?"

## 7.2 THE 'MYTH OF RETURN'

"A fundamental aspect of exile is the remembrance of one's homeland and the idea of return; indeed, the existence [*sic*] of a powerful myth of return can be identified as one of the defining tendencies of diasporic populations. This myth maintains that at some future point refugee and immigrant groups will repatriate to that homeland from which they were expelled or migrated," Sorenson (1992: 205) claims. 'Myth of return' is an expression frequently used in studies of refugees and immigrants and has its roots in anthropology and sociology (Boano *et al* 2003: 35). It refers to a belief that it is the ultimate wish of all displaced people to return to where they came from, that is, to return 'home'. As such, it is connected to fixed and territorialized notions of belonging and identity (see par. 4.2).

Recent scholastic research has challenged the idea of the 'myth of return' and points out that the existence of the 'myth of return' is not universal among and within diasporic communities and thus cannot be taken for granted. Safran (1991: 91) argues that many people in diaspora have no desire to return 'home'. Some diasporas, like the Ismailis, do not even have a homeland or a common point of origin. Diaspora might not be about a longing for another space, but about an attempt to be part of the host country on one's own terms, as Clifford (1997), Gilroy (1987) and others have suggested (in: Pattie 1999: 2-3). The mere existence of emotive discourses on the place of origin does not necessarily imply a wish to return there. Such discourses might primarily serve the purpose of creating a space within another country, in which one can feel at home. An important argument is made by Brah (1996: 197). According to her, it should be realised that although a 'homing desire' is probably shared by all migrants, this is certainly not the same as a longing for a 'homeland' or an ideology of return. She suggests a distinction between 'feeling at home' and declaring a place as home.

According to Al-Rasheed, the presence or absence of a 'myth of return' is related primarily to the refugee's relationship with the home country and its population prior to the flight. Iraqi Arabs, who identified wholeheartedly with their country of origin but not with the present regime, regarded themselves as temporary 'guests' or 'parasites' in Britain and awaited the moment to return home. Iraqi Assyrians, a small Christian minority, felt alienated from the Iraqi nation and its mainstream population and saw their migration as a permanent solution. Britain represented the place where they finally found a home to start a new life (Al-Rasheed 1994). Ghorashi (2001: 129, 181), on the contrary, argues that the existence or absence of a longing to return is defined by feelings of inclusion and exclusion in the host society, instead of in the country of origin. For many left-wing Iranian women who felt isolated and excluded from Dutch society, a longing to return and dwelling on past memories had become a way to survive. 'Home' was a physical homeland left behind in which one is rooted and that has to be re-claimed. In Los Angeles, where extensive and differentiated networks of Iranians existed, most women felt socially included in the new society and hence less often felt a need to return.

In their approach, 'home' was a space in the here and now. It is not about claiming a physical place as home, but more about 'feeling at home'.

Zetter (1999) distinguishes between a 'belief' in return and a 'hope' of return. In the first approach, refugees have a firm belief, often pathological, that they will return and restore the past. A mythologized past overwhelms the present and rejects transition and building a life in the host country. The second approach enables a simultaneous existence of a wish to return and a development of strategies to integrate and build a future in the host country. Contrary to Ghorashi and Al-Rasheed, Zetter claims that criteria explaining which refugee has which approach towards return do not exist (Zetter 1999: 5, 15).

Among the Afghans I spoke with, there is too much variation in attitudes towards return for the term 'myth of return' to be appropriate. I consider the use of the word 'myth' problematic. Firstly, the phrase 'myth of return' is an etic construct, invented by researchers, and those refugees that have a desire to return might not consider this desire a myth. To speak of return as a 'myth' seems to implicate the idea that a return will never take place in reality. Moreover, the word 'myth' is a heavily-loaded concept within anthropology, and refers to a fantasy held by a collective. It is thus likely to overlook individual differences towards return within a certain diaspora. Instead of using the term 'myth of return', I chose to speak of a 'longing' or a 'dream of return'. Just like the word 'myth', 'dream' refers to the realms of imagination. However, whereas 'myth' refers to something that is unlikely to happen, "a nostalgic hankering after the unattainable" (Mouncer 2000), a 'dream' carries the possibility of its fulfilment. Secondly, the words 'dream' and 'longing' allow more individual differentiation. Some people might not have such a longing at all, some would try to make their dreams come true, while others realise that their dream of return will merely stay a dream, as it clashes with their pragmatic needs and everyday reality in their own lives as well as in Afghanistan. This girl on an Internet forum literally has a 'dream of return':

"Many times I dream that I am in the sky and all of a sudden [I am] on the ground. I walk on the dusty soil. I feel the earth beneath the soles of my naked feet. The earth is hot, the sun is shining, the sky is hot. I walk and stoop on one knee. Then I grasp the earth and take some of it in my hand. And then I wake up and know that I was in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, it was just a dream. A dream that was created by images on television, by my parents' stories and by my longing to the unknown *Heimat*."

### 7.3 LONGING AND BELONGING

"We have waited long enough and have longed long enough. We have spent the best times of our lives as visitors. It's about time to go home! Only the *khāk* [soil] of Afghanistan can accept you. There you took your first breath, your first step and there you will take you last *inshallah*."

(Quote from an Afghan-Dutch forum)

"Actually we have always talked about returning to our *Heimat*, to our roots. Although we are very well integrated in Germany and have many German friends as well, something has always been missing. On Sundays when the whole family was sitting together, we delineated how beautiful Afghanistan was. We talked about the salient seasons, about the summers that were extremely hot and about the winters that were icy-cold, about the towering mountains and the pure air. But in particular we missed the warmth of the people."

(Sabri in an interview with Afghanistan News 2002: 1; translated by MB)

In Chapter 4, *watan* has been described as a place of roots to belong and to long for. This longing varies from a ‘mild remembrance of a distant homeland’ (Zetter 1999: 5) to an almost pathological state in the case of two respondents. Certainly not all informants express such a longing to be united with the place of ancestral origin. For a few respondents, the territory of Afghanistan is a horrifying place of death and destruction that has nothing to offer them. In case a certain longing exists, it might spring from a variance of individual reasons.

Azim (2003: 13-14; translated by MB) was born in Frankfurt in 1985 and has published a book about his life as an Afghan teenager in Germany. He writes about a longing for Afghanistan: “In the evening, we watch wedding videos and talk about the past. The inducement is the wedding of a related Afghan woman who has now returned to Pakistan with her husband. Afghanistan appears

to be impossible as a *Heimat*, while this country has been destroyed over the years and is still being destroyed. That reminds my parents, my grandmother, my aunts and my uncle of the past,

*Har kasi ke dur mând az asl-e khish  
Rozgâri bâz juyad wasl-e khish*

Everyone who stays far away from his own roots  
seeks to get back to the day he was together with it.

(From Mawlana Jalalludin Rumi’ s *Mathnawi-ye Ma’anawi* I: 4-18,  
13<sup>th</sup> century)

of the life in their country – in Afghanistan. How much they long for returning one day. They tell old stories, can remember everything in detail, as if it happened not even a day ago [...]. At all times they would return and give up every life, no matter how comfortable. The trips to the mountains, Kabul, Masjid in Mazar-e Sharif and everything else, they wish to see it again – and I, on the contrary, newly explore it.” For Azim’s elderly relatives, the dream to return is a longing for a return to an Afghanistan of idealised memories. Such a longing might be found among those Afghans who claim to have had a better life in pre-war Afghanistan than they will ever have in Germany. Furthermore, male Afghans that experienced a loss of status and authority as head of the family as well as in their professional life may be prone to the idea of return, and also conservative Afghans who find it hard to cope with the German value system. Dreams of return seem to be especially strong among those Afghans whose family and friends still reside in Afghanistan and who feel themselves socially isolated in Germany. A number of young Afghans with very few memories of Afghanistan yearn for a feeling of belonging somewhere and project their homing desire on Afghanistan. Below are a number of citations expressing a strong longing for reunion with the place of origin:

“It’s a feeling that keeps telling you that you have to go back. A longing to your country of birth,” Elyas says. Sarah: “I would be so happy when one day I would be standing in Kabul and proudly say: ‘*Ich bin wieder Zuhause* – I am home again.” A girl on a forum states: “Unfortunately, I don’t have any memories about Afghanistan, but I am always told about it. Although I grew up here, I miss the *Heimat*. When I walk through the city, I feel like a stranger. Then I think about how beautiful it would have been when I would walk through the streets of our own *Heimat* and all people around me would speak the same language and wear the same clothes.”

Rahima (21) writes in an email: “It is true that I am happy that I am living here for six years now, in a country where I am allowed to go to school, to study, express my opinions, where I am looked at as a human being, where I have so many opportunities that I wouldn’t have had in Afghanistan ... I know how to value my fortune of being able to live here... But still, after finishing my studies I want to return... To the place where I once started to breath, to walk, to talk... The place from where my ancestors originated... The place where I went to school, where I feel at home, where I look around me and only notice Afghans around me... Where I see my *Heimat* “*watan*”...”

“Twenty-five years we were in war, we have fought. People have fled because of the war, and so have I. Now there is peace and I want to go *zurück nach Hause* - back home.” Hodayun (46) is unhappy in Germany. He clings to the dream of returning permanently to Mazar-e Sharif, the place where he was born and has spent his youth, even though he still suffers from horrible nightmares. These nightmares

are about the torture he underwent in prison, and the times he almost faced death as a Mujahed fighter in the mountains. “But you live in Germany for so many years now; isn’t Germany your *Zuhause*?” I ask. “No, it has never been. Although I have a German wife and children, Germany has never become my *Zuhause*. My *Zuhause* has always been Afghanistan.” Homayun’s wife interferences: “Afghanistan has always been in your heart.” Homayun adds: “And in my soul too... in my heart and my soul. I have lived in Germany for 22 years now, and in Afghanistan only for 17 years. But still, I long to go *zurück nach Hause*”

One pervasive element in virtually all the narratives that express a certain longing seems to be the idea that Afghanistan, and not the country they currently reside in, is the place where they ultimately belong. I believe that behind many dreams and longings lies a feeling of being deprived of something, a sense of not belonging to German society completely, and hence an unfulfilled homing desire. But is present-day Afghanistan able to fulfil such longings? These expressions of a longing connect issues of belonging to ideas of unchangeable roots. They fail to take into account the interconnected reverse side of the roots / routes homophobe: the routes both the individual and Afghanistan have taken that become apparent as soon as one thinks about how to put dreams of return into action.

## 7.4 DREAMS VERSUS REALITY

### “To Really Go and Live There Is Something Else”

“Many Afghans say: ‘Yes of course I want to return, it is our *Heimat*’. Maybe my daughter would say something like that to you when you would ask her. But to really go and live there is something else.”

(Rohila)

Turton and Marsden’s remark (2002: 26) is both humorous and accurate: “These refugees answered the question ‘do you want to return?’ in the same way that they might have answered the question ‘do you want to go to heaven?’ – yes, but not yet.” They conducted a research study among Afghan refugees in Pakistan and their stance towards return, and state: “All the refugees we spoke to in Pakistan were adamant that they wanted, and intended, to return to Afghanistan, but the strength of their insistence tended to be inversely correlated with the likelihood of their doing so.” Among Afghans in Germany, a similar disparity is encountered between speech and actual deeds.

“They all say to love their country, but when it comes to the point, nobody wants to return,” Shoaib says. “Most people fool themselves,” Farshid knows for sure. According to him, many Afghans swore to return to Afghanistan as soon as the Taliban would be gone. Now that they are, nobody is inclined to return: “Afghans are very family-oriented. There are no true patriots. When they are doing well, they don’t care a lot about Afghanistan. They listen to the news, but they are not really engaged. They just pretend to be real patriots.” He is sure that nobody would actually go to rebuild Afghanistan: “None of them wants to loose thousand euro a month. They want to continue working here.” Mahmud is even bolder in his statement: “All Afghans are lying,” he contends. “They say that they want to help their country and that they want to return. But when they really would have wanted that, the situation in Afghanistan wouldn’t be like this.”

Afghans that express a longing to return to Afghanistan often motivate this by stating that Afghanistan is their *watan*, the place they belong. However, a longing to *watan* is at odds with the acute awareness that present-day Afghanistan does not bear the qualities that make it a proper place to live. Paragraph 7.5 will clearly demonstrate

this. Images of *watan* are often nostalgic. It is a space in the minds of people rather than a concrete place somewhere on earth.

“All Afghans talk about returning... have Afghanistan in their hearts,” Abdurrahman says, “They say ‘I miss Afghanistan, I would like to return. But what do I have there to look for? I don’t have anything there’. Then they sit with tears in their eyes.”

*Watan* does not comprise all possible aspects that constitute a home. Most respondents can identify other senses of belonging that do not necessarily locate ‘home’ inside the territory of Afghanistan. Although other places than Afghanistan can never become *watan*, they can become for example *Zuhause* or *Heimat*. Whereas virtually all Afghans seem to resist identifying themselves with native Germans, they acknowledge that living in Germany has affected their identity, mentality and lifestyle, especially when speaking about the younger generation. A sense of home and belonging is also closely connected to a social network of kin and friends. This makes the territory of Afghanistan as a home complicated when these relatives and friends do not live in Afghanistan any more, which is often the case. Actual returns hardly ever take place, even if individuals express a strong longing to do so. Germany has become the centre and stage of life in a practical sense for many Afghans. At least for Afghans who have a residence permit, it is the place that offers a sense of security, an education for their children and economical prospects. Most Afghans have spent an enormous deal of money, time and effort in establishing a life in Germany, and not many are willing to give up these attainments suddenly, especially when they are not sure about their prospects in Afghanistan. Even living in suffering and fear in a German refugee camp is preferred above an uncertain future in Afghanistan.

A boy on a forum states: “In the past, it wasn’t an issue if I would return to Afghanistan or not. I would have answered the question with a firm ‘yes’... But through the years I noticed that the German society and German virtues had a great influence on me as well. It is a fact that I grew up in this country, and that my *Heimat*, that will remain Afghanistan forever no matter how long I will stay here, removes itself from me further and further. I would never see myself as a German, no matter if I am one on paper or not... my blood is Afghan but it is just that I have built up something in this country and it would be difficult to let that go. Don’t get me wrong, it is my plan to assist in the future reconstruction of my country, it even is my duty... but I would just miss so many things.”

“I want to stay here,” Farshid says. “A return would consume too much energy. I don’t know if I could bear it. It is difficult if you’ve built up an existence here, and to go there where you don’t have anything at all. I am used to going out in the evenings, sit in bars, order a beer. In Afghanistan that would be possible, but only secretly. Afghanistan is my first *Heimat*, and Germany is my second *Heimat*, and the centre of my life is Germany now.”

“I think it is difficult to say if one would go there again or not. Personally I think that I couldn’t imagine living there, because I’ve ‘built up’ a *Zuhause* here. I could imagine a loooong stay, but I should really reconsider moving there. Please, don’t get me wrong, Afghanistan is and will be my *Heimatland*, but now I live in Germany and I got used to this country!” a girl on a forum acknowledges.

Jabar shares his personal analysis with me in an email:

“The special thing about us Afghans is that we, or at least most of us, have an urge to think about our *Heimat* and also to return there at a certain moment in time,” Jabar (24) maintains. He himself came to Germany on his own, seven years ago, and consciously built up a social network outside the Afghan community. Still, a feeling of *Heimweh*, homesickness, recurrently suppresses him. “Idealised or realistic, we all have this longing to go *nach Hause*. No matter how well we are doing here, we miss the dirty smoky air of the streets of Kabul. It is like we are programmed to return to our ‘origin’ at a certain moment to spend the evening of our life there,” according to Jabar. “Yet, my present life looks different,” he admits. “Though I feel like an Afghan even if I have been far away from the *Heimat* for 18 years, at this moment there is not much Afghan-like inside of me.” That almost no one is actually returning is explained by him the following way: “Somehow I think that we will never experience peace. I don’t see Afghanistan as a role model country. It has never been like that, neither before the

Russians. I can't understand that idealised view that some people here have. It could be related to the fact that I haven't seen much of the country. I rather think that the idealised view that the adults have is a *Fluchtwelt* [escape-world, fantasy world], because they can't cope with the culture and the value system of the Western world. After the motto 'escape in the past and sunken in memories' they let the days pass by."

When it comes to taking a decision about an actual return in the near future, down-to-earth assessments of its implications tend to be far more important than any nostalgic longing. There was only one Afghan from all of the ones I became acquainted with who was planning a voluntary permanent return in the near future. This was Sohrab.

### **Sohrab: "Life Over Here Is Not That Special"**

Sohrab is a 27-year-old man who has a *Duldung*, a tolerated status. We meet a few times during spring. He is determined to leave Germany as soon as the summer is over. He left Afghanistan in 1997, when the Taliban were in power. Being a Panjshiri and a relative of Ahmad Shah Massud, the worst enemy of the Taliban, he felt his life was endangered. He realises that building up a life in Germany is nearly impossible. However, he sees a future for himself in Afghanistan: "Life over here is not that special. I can have the same life over there." He mentions three reasons that support his decision. Firstly, all of his close family is still living in Kabul, so unlike many others, he has a concrete place to return to. His mother begs him to return every time he speaks to her on the phone. Moreover, Panjshiris are in power now, he says.<sup>3</sup> With his ethnic background, he is optimistic about his possibilities to find a good occupation. Thirdly, his flight to Germany has not cost him a cent and therefore he is not indebted to anyone and did not give up as much as other Afghans did: "For me it is easier to return, because I came here for free." He worked as a steward with the Afghan national airways, and simply applied for asylum when they embarked in Frankfurt. Sohrab gives me his address in Kabul. I have to promise to visit him, should I ever come to Afghanistan.

The months pass. In September, I attend an information evening about the current situation in Afghanistan. To my big surprise, I bump into Sohrab. He tells me that in the meantime, he has abandoned his return plans that once looked so concrete. His friends have talked him out of it. "Non-Panjshiris are enemies of the government anyhow, but precisely because I am a Panjshiri it is even more dangerous for me." According to him, as a Panjshiri, he is expected to be loyal to the state and his critical political views will not be tolerated. He has always been interested in political philosophy, but it was not until he came to Germany that he was able to acquire knowledge and develop and express his own views. He is now a strong adherent of secularism, and an article he has written about the subject circulates in Kabul. In an interview soon afterwards he shares his realisation that life outside Afghanistan has changed his authentic Afghanness, and that it would be difficult for him to fit into Afghan society again. "Of course I am Germanised," Sohrab says. "It's impossible to stay a typical Afghan. It will be difficult to adapt myself in Afghanistan again. The poverty, the environment, the war... They who define themselves as winners fought for 25 years and only know war and AK-47s. Seven years I have been in Germany, and when I return to Afghanistan I will have a totally different view and attitude. I am a man who has lived in an open society, and I will return to a closed society. For my article on secularism I could be killed in Afghanistan."

He has now decided to stay in Germany as long as he is able to renew his *Duldung*. He is not eager to return, but he says that he will go when he has to: "When I return, we all go together at once, all the Afghans that are getting thrown out. Until that time, I will work a few years [illegally] and earn a lot of money." His dream is still being allowed to live and work in Germany, and have the right to travel, so that he can enjoy a holiday in Afghanistan every year. I asked him what he misses about Afghanistan. "Everything. Afghanistan is the country of my birth. I miss my parents, my relatives, society, the mountains, the beautiful weather, the four seasons, the tasteful fruit that you can't find here. When the

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<sup>3</sup> Supporters of Ahmadshah Massud were over-represented in the interim government. Nepotism played a major role in the allocation of ministerial posts and positions of local representatives such as governors and mayors. At the time of the interview, the Panjshiri warlord Mohammed Qasim Fahim was still holding the position of vice president and minister of defence. Marshal Fahim was able to use international financial aid to build up a 'national army' that was in fact his own private militia of co-ethnics. Moreover, he appointed many fellow Panjshiris to high-level positions in the ministry. He was removed from power by Karzai in July 2004 (Tietjens 2002: 6; Website Human Rights Watch).

country is totally stable, I would love to return. But by that time, I'll be an old man." He wants to return to Afghanistan as soon as he receives his pension. "Even when my children are here, I will return. It will benefit the Germans as well when the elderly return to their homeland. I want to spend the rest of my life there and die there."

There are many things about Afghanistan that Sohrab misses, but a down-to-earth assessment of the present-day security situation made Sohrab revise his return plans. Interesting is his acknowledgement that the routes of his life have changed him and will complicate a return to the place of his roots. Germany is the place where his practical needs can be best fulfilled – even in this situation of legal insecurity. Still, he cannot fully opt for Germany, even if a miracle occurred allowing him to stay. A longing for the country of his roots remains. Ideally, Afghanistan would be a place for holidays and the place he wants to return to as an old man and die there. More about this dream to return to Afghanistan at an old age and die there is found in paragraph 7.7.

## 7.5 THE REAL AFGHANISTAN

"It is a pity that such a small number of people have come here this evening," a spokeswoman from the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees begins her welcome speech in front of an audience of around 30 Afghans. During an information event, the IOM, International Organisation of Migration, and the AGEF, *Arbeitsgruppe Entwicklung und Fachkräfte im Bereich der Migration und Entwicklungszusammenarbeit* [Association of Experts in the Fields of Migration and Development Cooperation] present their programs for voluntary return to Afghanistan. As soon as he has the opportunity, a man in the audience stands up and proclaims: "I know very well why such a small number of people have showed up. All of us listen to the news." Whereas the IOM is trying to sketch an optimistic picture of the reconstruction efforts taking place in Afghanistan, Afghans in the audience keep on bringing up facts about recent ominous political developments and events. At a certain moment, the organisers of the event seemingly become annoyed and request that further political discussions should be left out and the information evening should continue as planned. The listeners do not understand how the two topics of return and politics can be separated from one another. One of them rises and declares: "As long as the situation in Afghanistan is like this, your programs don't get anywhere. Leaving politics out is impossible. Our whole life is connected with politics. These programs are fruitless as long as there is no security in Afghanistan."

Numerous pages can be spent on describing how informants perceive the developments and circumstances in Afghanistan and how various political, economic and socio-cultural factors influence attitudes towards returning there. The following three pages will however be sufficient to understand how potential dreams of returning clash with the current reality in Afghanistan - or more precisely, the image that Afghans in Germany have of present-day Afghanistan.

The issue of security is the most immediate concern of almost all informants. Especially the safety of women and children is feared. Many have little trust in the Karzai government and are sceptical about foreign intermediates, especially the United States. They argue that the same Mujahed and Talibs that were responsible for the destruction of Afghanistan are now in power again, and that the country is controlled by "armed wild blood suckers," as Beltun calls them. The central government has little influence outside Kabul, and even in Kabul outbreaks of violence take place on a regular basis. Most people do not want to consider a return as long as warlords such as Dostum and Ismael Khan are still in command. The people that occupy influential positions in Kabul or elsewhere might be the very same tyrants that have committed crimes against them and forced them to seek refuge in Germany. Some respondents fear personal persecution because of their political background,

especially those affiliated with the former Parcham or Khalq regime. Others expressed the fear that they would be targeted as supposedly rich returnees from the West.

Furthermore, there is a need for a tangible base to return to. One requirement is a social network of relatives or friends, for the support and protection that the government is unable to offer. It differs in individual cases if such a safety net is still present or not. In Chapter 6 it has been shown how the notion of home or *Zuhause* is tied up to the presence of a circle of relatives and friends. There is a large probability that family and friends reside outside Afghanistan. The second necessity is a place to live (see also par. 4.3 and 4.4 on the *khāna* as home). Many Afghans have given up everything and sold their house and all other belongings in order to be able to come to Germany. Where should they live if they no longer possess a house? House prices and rents have increased dramatically, and in Kabul housing is scarce.

Reyhana (*Duldung*): “Afghans that have lived here for a long time and have earned money can return and buy a house. But those like us who just came here don’t have anything any more. No house, nothing. What is thousand euro?”<sup>4</sup>

The next point might be an important one for those Afghans who came to Germany in later years and now face expulsion. Many of them would not just return empty-handed but highly indebted. They had to borrow high sums of money to pay for the flight. Because of the restrictions they face in employment, they do not have the chance to earn much money in Germany.

“The people that escaped first were rich,” Asil tells me. “The people that fled for the Russians also. But the people that fled from the Mujaheddin and the Taliban couldn’t afford it and had to sell everything and put themselves deeply in debt. That is the main reason that those Afghans are afraid to return. They have high debts, thousands of dollars, and can’t pay them back.” Farshid tells me that his uncle’s family in Belgium had to pay the human trafficker a 100 thousand euro, and now faces a forced return. “Not even the great-grandchildren can earn that money back in Afghanistan.”

There is another factor that is important among those who fear a forced return. It is perceived as a large humiliation to have to return forcibly and empty-handed. Afghanistan’s society is highly stratified, and Afghans seem to place a high worth on returning in dignity. In Germany, many Afghans fulfill jobs that in Afghanistan were held by servants and lower-class people. This inferior status and employment in German society has been difficult to accept, but accepting an inferior status in Afghanistan is out of the question for those who once occupied influential positions.

“It is a shame, a big loss of face, to be send back,” Farshid says. Jamshed: “The neighbours will laugh at them because they were thrown out of Europe.” He also expects returnees to be seen as cowards by the people who stayed in spite of all the difficulties.

Tied up to the former argument is the necessity of an economical and professional perspective. Economic considerations weigh heavily when it comes to returning. The dire economic situation, the low wages and the high unemployment rate in Afghanistan imply that for most people there is nothing to return to. Opportunities for women to find employment are even scarcer. Those few Afghans that have decided to return did so after being offered a good position, usually within the government or an international organisation or company. The minister of reconstruction, Mohammed Amin Farhang, had lived in Germany for more than twenty years. People like him who possess a German passport always have the possibility to leave Afghanistan again. Initial hopes of

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<sup>4</sup> €1.000 is the amount of money that the Hamburger scheme for voluntary return offers each Afghan that takes part in this project.

regaining former influential posts are often shattered, as favouritism is rampant and membership of the right *qawm* or clique often appears to be more important than competence.

Beltun tells me: “I know an academic who has studied pedagogics and Germanistics and is excellent with computers. An Afghan minister who visited Germany promised him a job. With my help, he sent in an application, but it was turned down. He didn’t belong to the clique, the party, the right ethnic group and hierarchy.” Another example that Beltun gives is that of the Afghan intellectuals that formerly were ministers, generals or professors, and now work as taxi drivers in Germany. Regaining their former posts is hardly possible, and as a taxi driver in Kabul they would not be able to earn a living. Even if they could find work, for example as a doctor or a university professor, they would not be able to support their family with their monthly income of about \$50, Beltun argues.

The next important point that complicates a return is the fact that the issue of return involves more than the individual, as Beltun’s case at the beginning of this chapter has clearly shown. I encountered many families of which the different family members have different stances towards return. Gender and generation appear to play an important role. Beltun emphasises the issue of generational differences:

“For the parents and grandparents it was difficult, and it still is, to integrate here. Every single Afghan has problems. All of them have diabetes, heart diseases, problems with blood pressure... But in Kabul, their children would fall ill immediately. Already on the first day they will get diarrhoea, because their stomachs are not used to the lack of hygiene. There is no study material in the schools, there are no good schools, there’s no pedagogic experience. Every teacher hits children. Every father beats his children. In every family there is despotism and patriarchy. Girls wouldn’t be able to walk the streets.”

There seems to be a general consensus that children cannot be taken to Afghanistan. Abdurrahman claims:

“When I wouldn’t have had a daughter, I would have returned a long time ago.”

Farshid voices what I have repeatedly heard:

“Children can’t go back. They have a German or European mentality. That’s a totally different world to them. You can bring people out of a bad situation into a good one, but not the reverse.”

I am told of a woman who threatened to kill herself if she and her children would be forced to go back to Afghanistan. Her children, she argued, should be able to stay in foster care in Germany. Respondents name a number of reasons why children, and girls in particular, would face a dire future in Afghanistan: children are used to the luxurious life in Germany. They have developed a non-Afghan mentality and are not ‘real’ Afghans anymore. They have low educational opportunities in Afghanistan and are illiterate there. They also run the risk of being kidnapped, sexually abused or killed for their organs.



“Children can’t go back” (Photo: Marije Braakman)

Reyhana has four children. Her family is in threat of deportation. The two youngest boys were very young when they came to Germany, and Afghanistan is an alien concept to them. “I tell them that we have to return. They ask me: ‘*Mādar* [mother], are there cornflakes in Afghanistan too? ... And salami and cheese? ... And *Aldi* and *Penny*?’”<sup>5</sup>

On a discussion evening about the plight of Afghan asylum seekers, a man in the public stands up: “I have three children. They are 18, 17 and 10, and at home they speak German. They can’t speak ‘Afghan’, at least they can’t read and write it. They are used to the German culture and traditions. They are no Afghans any more. Should they return? Afghanistan is totally different. There is a different culture, a different mentality.”

<sup>5</sup> German low-budget supermarkets.

All the factors that have been accumulated in this paragraph explain why at the present time hardly any voluntary return takes place. Considering all the reasons stated above, it is not difficult to comprehend the enormous resistance against a return among Afghans without a secure status. In both Germany and Afghanistan they face an uncertain future. Instead of clinging onto a dream of return, they rather cling to the dream of being allowed to stay in Germany.

## 7.6 A DREAM TO STAY

“Who returns to hell voluntarily?”

(Beltun)

In reference to Germany, Agar states: “[T]hat exiles themselves cling to the myth of returning is due in part to the fact that the host society always perceives them as foreigners and, in the final analysis, as undesirable people” (Agar 1997 in: Ghorashi 2001: 141). There might be an element of truth in that statement, as I have suggested in paragraph 7.3. In its most extreme form however, my research findings suggest the opposite. The high majority of the Afghans that live in a limbo because of their legal insecurity are more willing to tolerate the hardships involved and stay in Germany illegally or take refuge in another country, than to return to Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup> Some women and girls even proclaim that they would prefer to commit suicide.

“We accept the difficult life here, without a *visa*,<sup>7</sup> in a camp,” Reyhana says. “It is better than going to Afghanistan. In Afghanistan we will have more problems than here.” “I hate Afghanistan,” Arezo proclaims. “If they force me to return, I will kill myself.”

Generally it seems that Afghans without a secure status talk more negatively about the present-day situation of Afghanistan than Afghans who do not live with the anxiety of being sent back forcibly.<sup>8</sup> Even if some of them acknowledge that they once led a very good life in a beautiful country, the fear of an irreversible expulsion seems to hamper and suppress nostalgic positive feelings towards Afghanistan. It is more difficult for them to come to terms with their traumatic experiences, also because they usually have more direct experiences of war, death and destruction than those who left Afghanistan in earlier years. Not knowing if they will be expelled today, tomorrow or next year, they lack the necessary distance to transform Afghanistan into a place of nostalgia.

It is a sunny Tuesday afternoon and the Herati women of the camp have invited me for a picnic with tea and homemade Iranian *sohān*, a leaf-like caramel candy. We sit on a carpet on the grass in front of one of the house blocks. As always, they are eager to learn German. This time they ask me to translate words and sentences that describe their view regarding Afghanistan, such as “*Dar Afghānistān amniyat nist*,” “There is no peace in Afghanistan” and “*Afghānistān khatarnāk ast*,” “Afghanistan is dangerous.” Next, we discuss the word *Heimweh*, homesickness. According to them, *deq shodan* [to become sad, depressed or melancholic, to miss something or somebody] or the Iranian equivalent *deltang shodan* [lit: to become ‘tight-heartily’] equate the German word the most. *Yād kardan* [to memorize] and *ehsās-e gharibi* [feeling of estrangement] are suggested as well. I ask them if they experience homesickness; a whole-hearted affirmative follows. “But,” they articulate, “towards the family, not towards Afghanistan.” Frozan declares: “In Afghanistan, there is nothing; no water, no roads, no electricity. We never want to go back.” Shabaneh suddenly says: “Don’t use the word *Heimweh* in the presence of the

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<sup>6</sup> In this chapter, it seems as if informants only discriminated between a dream to return to Afghanistan or a dream to stay in Germany. This is not the case. America as a dream destination was named several times, while others named Canada, the UK and Japan. This was often because of the presence of close kin, but also because they believed they would have better economical opportunities there. During the course of the fieldwork, one informant went to live with his family-in-law in Poland and another illegally escaped to France. One was considering claiming asylum in Norway or Denmark. Several times, I was interrogated about the chances of being granted asylum in the Netherlands.

<sup>7</sup> Afghans use the word *visa* for most kinds of residence permits, as they come in the shape of a visa-like paper stuck into an Afghan passport.

<sup>8</sup> I even encountered Afghans with a secure status that were in favour of forced expulsion of those without a status.

police<sup>9</sup>, because then they will send you back!” Everybody laughs. Ferozeh adds: “It is better not to learn the word at all.”

It is a bitter fact that exactly those Afghans that are pressed to return often lack the resources to build up an existence in Afghanistan. Most of them do not see any perspectives for themselves in Afghanistan and are less inclined to return to Afghanistan voluntarily. They generally had to spend all their money and sell their property and did not have the legal permission to acquire capital and professional experience in Germany. Their return would be irreversible. Research by the University of Hamburg showed that a readiness to return to Afghanistan is more often encountered among Afghans who have secured their residential status, which is often attached to a better social and financial situation: a prerequisite for acquiring a better residence status or the German nationality is being financially independent. Such Afghans can more easily afford to take the financial risk of trying to ground an existence in Afghanistan. Having the legal right to travel back and forth between Germany and Afghanistan gives them the possibility to return to Germany if things do not work out the way they were planned (Tietjens 2002: 39-40).



Demonstration against the forced return of Afghans, October 2003 (Photo: Marije Braakman)

## 7.7 OLD AGE AND DEATH

“I took my first breath there, and there I will take my last breath.”

(Yalda)

### Becoming Old in Afghanistan

As has been shown in the discussions with Afghans, the ideal of Afghanistan as a place of roots and belonging to long for clashes with the current reality in which life's fulfilments are much better met in Germany. This is often reconciled with a dream to return to Afghanistan after retirement. Many respondents express a longing to spend the sunsets of their lives in the country of origin, take their last breath over there and be buried in Afghanistan's soil. Behind this dream of return in a more distant future might merely be the hope that the situation in Afghanistan has then improved. Another reason might be congruent with the belief that the older one becomes, the more one is attracted to Afghanistan:

An Afghan girl writes on a Dutch-Afghan Internet forum: “If you get older, you unconsciously return to how you were in reality... that is, back to your ‘*asl wa nasab*’ [origin and roots].

At the same time, their current life in Germany can be continued without the need to make concrete plans for a return, but also not give up the dream of returning altogether. Many acknowledge that a certain amount of money

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<sup>9</sup> The *Ausländerbehörden*, the public authorities responsible for aliens, were referred to as *polis* or *polis-e khāreji*.

is needed in order to enjoy a comfortable ‘winter of life’ in Afghanistan. Some respondents are very sure about making that dream a reality, while others do not know if they will make this ideal conception a reality. A few young Afghans explain their wishes:

“I know that I will return. I’ll work until I am 50 years of age, I’ll collect money and then I’ll go to Afghanistan. Over there I want to die... My thoughts are like this. If I really do it like this... actually I don’t know,” Asil (28) tells me.

“Well, although I grew up here, I will become old in my *Heimat*, *da gehöre ich hin* - that is where I belong. I don’t fool myself; it will be very difficult, I know. I have adopted a lot from the German culture, a lot will be strange to me in Afghanistan. Yet I won’t return in the years to come; not until I have achieved something professionally and until I am sure that I don’t have to worry about my future children ... only then the time has come to return! I think, the older a person gets the more he is interested in his roots, his *Heimat*. A few years ago I couldn’t have imagined [me saying] this.” Fatema (23) has decided this after September the 11<sup>th</sup>; before that time she did not have any hope to be able to build a life in Afghanistan. Another reason for her decision that she mentions in her email to me is the following: “When I am with my German friends, there is a certain point in time *ab den ich einfach nicht mehr dazugehöre* - from which on I simply don’t belong to them any more ... and that in spite of the fact that have I adopted so much from the German culture!”

It is difficult to say if these dreams of returning in old age will be put into practise; if the dream of return will indeed remain a dream or will be rejected or transformed into action. Things might look quite different when old age has indeed approached. It will depend on both the circumstances in Afghanistan, which nobody can predict, and on the living conditions of the individual. The dream can however be tested against the choices elderly Afghans make in the present situation.

A retired man, who has worked as a general in Afghanistan and as a gardener in Germany, tells me: “Believe me, if tomorrow they would tell me that Afghanistan was peaceful, I would leave the same day. I am not happy here,” he says. “*Watan* is *watan*, and *watan* is better.” I ask him if he would only return if he would be able to lead a life as luxurious as in the past, when he was highly respected and had a large house and car: “I’ll be happy with a normal life in my *watan* as well. Now I’m too old to work.” He believes that most people of his age are inclined to return to Afghanistan. In his opinion, younger people have the duty to assist in the reconstruction of Afghanistan, but he realises that the greater number of younger people will remain in Germany. His own children only want to go to Afghanistan on a holiday. Just when I want to ask him if he would consider returning without his children, dinner is brought in from the kitchen and the interview comes to an abrupt ending.

Unfortunately, only a few elderly people are among my respondents so that most information is based on what younger Afghans say about them. Although nearly all respondents claim that many elderly women and men have a strong longing to return, this longing also seems to be outweighed by practical and rational considerations.

The elderly generally prefer to stay close to their children and other kin living in Germany. Returning elderly people should have a support network of kin in Afghanistan to take care of them. A ‘practical home’ like they have in Germany cannot be found in Afghanistan. Eventually, most will prefer the luxury of medical assistance, closeness of kin, warm water and radiators in preference to a return to Afghanistan. I have only heard of one incident, in which a father and a son returned to Ghazni and discovered that it was less affected by the war than other places. The father, who was unhappy in Germany, decided to remain in Ghazni. The son returned to Germany on his own.

*Marg-e nedaragem khalko*  
*Ka de watan pa hadeeroke khawre shoma*  
*Yao war me khpel watan ta boz’e*  
*Prade watan de marau qadre kamaweena*

O people! I am not afraid of death!  
 Provided I am buried and turned to dust in my own soil [*watan*]  
 Take me once to my own home [*watan*]  
 In a strange earth one’s dignity is decreased

(Fragment of a Pashto song by Farhad Darya)

“When I am old I would like to spend the remaining days of my life over there,” Farshid lets me know. “Elderly with a good financial background have the urge to return when it is peaceful.” But about his

own mother he says: “My mother feels well here. Not because she has a lot of contacts with Germans, but because my sisters live here. She can visit them all the time.” There is no close family left in Afghanistan. “My mother is more a pragmatic. I didn’t talk to her about it, but she will stay because her children have the German nationality.”

“The older people have an inclination towards Afghanistan,” according to Beltun. “They want to go there, but they can’t, because their children are here. That would be against the oriental moral. You cannot leave your child in a strange country and return to the *Heimat* yourself. Even when you are 80 and your child 60.”

“My grandfather is 94. He liked life in Germany at first. He went out for walks. Now, he hasn’t been out of the house for a year. He says he wants to leave Germany. But life here is much better for him. If he has some health problem we can take him to the doctor straight away. In Afghanistan, such possibilities do not exist,” Marzia tells me.

Beltun has spoken to two old women about the issue of return. They are more than 80 years old, and fled from Bukhara and Samarqand [in the present Uzbekistan] to Mazar-e Sharif in the 1920’s or 1930’s. There they have lived until 1979. With their children and grandchildren, they escaped to Germany. According to Beltun, they said: “Here there are medicines. We have a house and a nurse who assists us at home. In Afghanistan you can ask: ‘What does a kilo of potatoes cost?’ but when a dead body is lying in the street nobody is watching. Nobody asks: ‘What does a human life cost?’ In Afghanistan, killing people is easy. We are not that stupid to return to Afghanistan.”

### The Ultimate Resting-Place

Akbar runs a fund to which people from all over the world who originate from the village of Zazai contribute monthly. From the money, development programs are funded, but in the future it will also be used to transport the contributors’ corpses to Zazai in the province of Pakhtia. Akbar himself wishes to be buried in Afghanistan as well.

Breathing out the last breath in Afghanistan implies the wish to remain there after death. Other respondents do not mention passing away in Afghanistan, but merely express the wish to have Afghanistan as their resting place. “My wish is to have your burned flag as a shroud around my body, and your soil as the ultimate resting place of my coffin,” a patriotic poem says (Rassa-Mansury s.a.).

Beltun tells me that a few weeks before, an old Afghan lady has passed away in Westfalen. All her children lived in Germany. Although the family did not have any relatives in Afghanistan any more, her last wish was to be buried over there. With the sack containing the mortal remains, one of her sons flew her to Kabul and laid her there to rest. A *fatiha*, a Muslim memorial service, was organised in Bochum.

Afghanistan is the ideal place of interment for many Afghans, but at this moment reality looks quite different. Transportations of corpses to Afghanistan are rare, firstly because this is very expensive and secondly because the deceased have to be buried as soon as possible according to Islamic rules. Furthermore, in the case of people whose relatives and friends are living in exile, the grave cannot be visited, nor can the ritual obligations of praying by the grave be fulfilled. There is a special section for Muslims in the immense Öjendorfer cemetery in Hamburg. According to Beltun, almost all of these graves belong to Afghans. Again, the ideal course of things seems to clash with reality.



Graveyard in Afghanistan (Source: <http://usuarios.lycos.es/fotocom>)

## 7.8 TEMPORARY RETURNS

“True, Afghanistan is our *Heimat*, but hmm... We can forget about Afghanistan, you can't live there any more... or very difficult. For a holiday it is fine, but not for a living”

(Javid)

“Many Afghans visit Afghanistan for two weeks and when they return they say ‘O, Kabul is so wonderful!’ But then, if I ask if they would like to return permanently, they say ‘O well... No’.”

(Hodayun)

A temporary return, in the form of a visit or temporary employment, appears to be a more realistic option than returning to Afghanistan permanently. Most respondents that express the wish to return to Afghanistan prefer to return for a few weeks, months or years, without giving up their life in Germany.

“We got our lost homeland back. We suddenly had a *Heimat* again. But nobody is actually returning,” Tamana says. “You see, somebody who has been living here for twenty years, and doesn't have people over there any more... I really like to help reconstructing, but I don't want to live there.”

“It will be difficult for me to go there. I'm fully integrated.” Rahmuddin (30, living in Germany for 10 years) cannot imagine a permanent return. However, he expresses his longing to visit Afghanistan for an *Urlaub*, a holiday, to visit friends and to see how people live. “After all, it is my own country. My roots lie there.”



“Return of Qualified Afghans”: Advertisement of the International Organisation for Migrations' programme for the temporary return of Afghan professionals.

In this paragraph, I will shortly address the possibility to take up temporary employment in Afghanistan. The International Organisation for Migration has a special program for qualified and highly qualified Afghans that wish to assist in reconstruction for a period of 6 to 12 months. Up to February 2005, 701 Afghans, 12.4% of which are female, residing in the EU had made an application. Two hundred and eighteen of these candidates reside in Germany. Statistics from January 2004 mention a total of 8 candidates from Germany that have been placed in positions in the public and private sector (Website IOM-RQA). A private arrangement of a labour contract is of course another possibility. Quite a number of respondents, especially younger Afghans, express the dream to contribute to the reconstruction and development of Afghanistan. Shahram, a medical student, is one of them:

“Every now and then, I have a longing towards Afghanistan. When I've finished my studies, I'd like to work in Afghanistan with the Red Cross or Doctors without Borders. Every time for a few months and then back again, to help the people there. It is difficult to imagine returning forever.”

But even accepting a temporary position in Afghanistan raises many practical problems and doubts:

“I really would like to help with the reconstruction. But I'm a bit selfish, that's what I adopted from this society. I want it to have advantages for me as well, financially.” Just like some other respondents, Asil is uncertain about a number of practical issues: “I don't know how I could legally live in Afghanistan. I have German nationality now. I will have to apply for a visa. That's easy, but it's valid for only three months. Am I allowed to work and be active in the commercial sector? What are the rules? What about insurance? That's what all people who want to return to build up something ask themselves. At the moment, there just isn't a structure, but maybe in the future?”

Many more practical barriers can be identified. Only those Afghans that are in possession of a German passport are allowed to remain outside Germany for more than 6 months. All Afghans that are still in the asylum

procedure or are temporarily tolerated, as well as those who possess a temporary or permanent residence permit based on their official recognition as refugees in accordance with the German asylum law [Big Asylum] or the Convention of Geneva [Small Asylum], are not allowed to travel back and forth to Afghanistan (see box 8.1 for an overview). Returning to Afghanistan would mean a one-way trip for them. The next issue has already been raised by Beltun at the beginning of this chapter. Afghan men who wish to work in Afghanistan but have a wife and children would probably prefer to leave them behind in Germany, especially when those children are attending school. These men would however still be expected to provide for their family. Although Afghans that are employed through the IOM-RQA programme receive a pay supplement of €300 for men and €350 for women in addition to the local salary, the total monthly income is not enough to support the family back in Germany. Their wives would have to apply for social aid or combine single parenting with earning an income. In the case of a potential returnee living on his own in Germany, can the residence he lives in be sub-rented during that period? For those Afghans who have a job in Germany, it might be difficult to take a few months or years off. Quitting that job places them in a difficult situation when they return from their duty period in Afghanistan. Most families would probably not allow a girl or woman to return to Afghanistan on her own to take up temporary employment. Those returning females that I met or heard about had close relatives in Afghanistan to take care of them. It is now clear that even a short-term return to Afghanistan involves many practical issues.

“Refugees, of all people, cannot afford to be starry-eyed romantics,” according to Turton and Marsden (2002: 26): “[A] nostalgic longing for home plays a part in all refugee returns, but the significance of this factor for most people must be outweighed by the results of more hard-headed calculations.” I believe that this chapter has illustrated this statement very well. Whereas only a handful of Afghans, most of them adult males who saw perspectives to re-establish themselves socially, economically and professionally, have taken the decision to return to Afghanistan permanently, the number of Afghans that return for a few weeks or months is steadily growing. The next chapter will focus on the experiences of people who have taken the opportunity to visit Afghanistan since the opening-up in 2001.

## Chapter 8

# TAKING A ‘ROUTE TO THE ROOTS’

*I wish that, like my grandfather, my own identity was so transparent to me that I could ignore it. But I need to know what is fact and what is fairytale more than I need the reassurance of the myth. Only truth can answer the questions that for years I haven't even dared to ask my own heart. Does the Afghanistan of our myths really exist? Are we still Afghans? And if I am not an Afghan, what am I?*

*There is one last place to visit. As I climb the steep mountainside to the Paghman plateau, I am gripped with fear. If the magical gardens my father told me of never existed, then part of me will be a lie as well.*

*I am standing upon a desolate plateau. No birds sing. The fruit trees have been cut down for firewood. The irrigation channels are bombed and the once-fertile soil is dry. All my life, I have carried a picture of this place in my heart. All my life, this is where I have most longed to be.*

*The ground is seeded with mines and strewn with the debris of its former splendour: the blue mosaic tiles, the broken watercourses and the dried-out fountains. The myth, at least, was true: in my mind's eye, I can reconstruct what once must have been a magical garden. [...]*

*Towering above me, unchanging, eternal, are the mountains. Down in the valley, a city of towers and minarets sparkles in the late-afternoon sun. Kabul jan – beloved Kabul – lies like a jewel at my feet. I know by now that its beauty is an illusion: close up, the city is in ruins, as shattered and broken as this garden. I have missed the golden age. I have come too late.*

*My journey here has taken me over twenty years. While I was making my way towards it, the place that inspired the myth has been destroyed. But only because of the myth – the map of tales my family drew for me all those years ago – can I recognize the beauty in this ruin.*

Saira Shah's *The Storyteller's Daughter* (2003: 53-54)

## 8.1 BACK TO AFGHANISTAN

### Shahram: “Tears Ran Down my Cheeks As We Entered Our Village”

Shahram, a 28-year-old medical student visited Afghanistan in days of the Taliban. At that time, he had not seen his parents for ten years. He was born and raised in Ghazni, a town about a hundred kilometers south of Kabul. Later, the family moved to Kabul. As the Taliban came to power, his parents who belonged to the Taliban-persecuted Hazara sought refuge in Ghazni again. “In 1997, I went to Afghanistan. Don't let the authorities know, because I didn't have permission. I had a refugee passport, which means that I am allowed to visit every country, except Afghanistan. I left my passport and documents in Pakistan. It was too dangerous to take them with me. When an officer would tear them up, I wouldn't be able to return. I would have to stay there. It was quite a risk. I had bought a turban, had grown a beard and put on Afghan clothes. I didn't manage to keep the turban on my head; it slipped down constantly. We were sitting in the bus. There was an inspection. A man in the bus took off his turban and placed it on my head. I held the slip of the turban over my chin to hide my beard, which was far too small. The Taliban said: ‘You came from abroad’. ‘No’, I maintained, ‘I just came from Pakistan. I was there to be treated for an illness’.” I ask Shahram how they knew that he had come from abroad. “I was too clean, even though I had made myself and my clothes dirty on purpose. The bus stopped constantly to let the passengers pray. I didn't know how to pray, and circled around the bus instead. The bus broke down a few times, and Taliban alongside the road were asked for help. They said: ‘Surely you didn't pray’. It is so sad that the Afghans are so superstitious. It was a bus for eight persons and we were thirty, of course the bus broke down.” I ask him which feelings he experienced during that bus trip. “I was too scared to experience other feelings too. But still, I had a wonderful feeling. Ooh, when I saw those mountains! Tears rolled down over my cheeks when we entered our village, and as I saw how much had changed. I came there after 14 years.”

“My parents didn't recognise me. I played with them. I knocked on the door, and asked for a piece of bread. My mother gave me some bread, and closed the door. Again I knocked: ‘I'd like to eat something better’. She swore: ‘You cheeky traveller!’ ‘Can I spend the night at your place?’ I asked. ‘No, go and

ask at the mosque'. She showed me the way to the mosque. Then my brother from Pakistan, who had accompanied me, said to my parents: 'What a mistake you are making, this is your son!' They burst out in tears. Inside, I laughed so much as I performed my play. But at the same time, I had tears in my eyes. What a horrible thing, when a mother doesn't recognise her own son!" Then the day came that he had to leave again: "Parting was the worst thing. I spent one month in Ghazni, and then I had to leave. I went without saying farewell to my mother. She couldn't. She fainted. I knew I would go to Germany again, but I didn't know if I would ever see my parents again. Only God knew if I would ever see my mother alive again."

As the repression against Hazara grew stronger, his parents fled to Quetta in Pakistan. Shahram was able to visit them almost every year. "This year, when the situation allows it, I will go to Afghanistan. Many of our relatives are still there, and I'd like to visit them. But it can be dangerous. Shall I go with or without my passport? When I go there with my passport, everybody knows that I came from abroad. They will think I have lots of money. But without a passport, I will have to pay high bribes at the border. It is all very complicated."

## Return Visits

"I am home now!" Sima proclaims the moment the airplane crosses the Afghan-Iranian border and flies above Afghanistan.

*(Netzwerk broadcasting 3. Februari 2004)*

Shahram paid a visit to Afghanistan at the time that the Taliban were still in power. Only a few Afghans in the West had the courage to do likewise. After the fall of the Taliban in the autumn of 2001, exiled Afghans were suddenly confronted with the possibility to travel to Afghanistan. For the first time in 24 years, direct return flights connect Germany and Kabul. Although hardly any Afghan has made the decision to return to Afghanistan permanently, a considerable number of Afghans have already grabbed the opportunity to visit Afghanistan, or consider doing so. Among my respondents, Kabul was the main destination. Not everybody however has the legal possibility to visit Afghanistan without giving up life in Germany. Afghans who are able to visit Afghanistan are mainly people who have been living in Germany for at least a decade, and have acquired the German nationality (see box 8.1 for an overview of legal statuses and travel possibilities). Such return visits differ in nature. Many go to visit relatives they have not seen for a long time. Marriage, business and trade,



Passengers of the first direct flight in 24 years between Düsseldorf and Kabul deplane at Kabul Airport (Source: *Tiroler Tageszeitung*, 6. August 2003)

temporary employment, reclaiming, renovating and selling land and houses, development work, curiosity about the present situation of Afghanistan, and an investigation of opportunities for a permanent return are other possible motives. Often, a decision to visit Afghanistan is based on a mixture of such reasons. Although one could very

well argue that these are all important factors in understanding the nature of the relationship between exiled Afghans and their country of origin, the limited scope and magnitude of this study does not allow a detailed analysis of the range of motivations behind returns to Afghanistan, or to go deeply into the actual activities of

returnees in Afghanistan. Only those factors that reveal information about the emotional issues that accompany returns to Afghanistan will be focused upon.

An Afghan psychologist in the United States claims: “To an Afghan everything in the homeland becomes glorified. All the difficulties and problems are forgotten and only the good things back home are remembered. It usually takes a trip home to bring one back to reality” (Azimi 2001). Much can be argued against this sweeping statement. However, visits back to Afghanistan often have a profound impact on the returning individual, leading to a reassessment of commitments to Afghanistan as well as Germany. They might act as reality-checks against images Afghans have formed of their country of origin while being in exile, as well as events that call for a renegotiation of feelings of belonging. The primary aim of this chapter is to describe how returnees visiting Afghanistan after a prolonged absence experienced the confrontation with Afghanistan and its inhabitants, and how this provoked feelings of identification and alienation. My purpose is not to offer a full analysis, but merely provide a colourful mosaic of individual cases, which demonstrates that giving a monolithic description of ‘the returnee experience’ is impossible. These cases are based on personal data collection as well as on interviews that were published in German magazines and newspapers. As will be seen, experiences of returnees vary greatly from very negative to very positive.

#### **Box 8.1: Which Afghans are allowed to travel to Afghanistan?**

- Afghans that are still in the asylum procedure and hence have a *Gestattung* are not allowed to leave the Federal State. Return to Afghanistan is only possible as a one-way trip. The same holds true for those who have a *Duldung*.
- Those Afghans who are in possession of a *befristete* or *unbefristete Aufenthaltserlaubnis* or an *Aufenthaltsberechtigung* according to the *AuslG* [Aliens Act] are free to travel to Afghanistan. Title and rights are lost when one leaves Germany for more than half a year.
- Those who are recognised as refugees according to the Convention of Geneva have a *Befugnis*, a refugee passport with which they can travel everywhere, except for the country of origin. As soon as they set foot in Afghanistan, the title is lost and generally a return to Germany becomes impossible.
- A refugee passport with an *unbefristete Aufenthaltserlaubnis* in it is owned by those who are recognised as refugees (Big Asylum) as well as those who originally were granted a Small Asylum and whose *Befugnis* has been changed after eight years. They can travel, but not to the country of origin. As soon as the German authorities find out that someone with a refugee passport has set foot in Afghanistan, this passport, and the rights that accompany it, are withdrawn. Travelling to Afghanistan is not impossible. Their asylum-based residence permit can be changed into a general one (according to the Aliens’ Act) by handing in the refugee passport and buying an Afghan passport. The *unbefristete Aufenthaltserlaubnis* or an *Aufenthaltsberechtigung* will then be stuck into this passport. However, the title and rights are lost when one leaves Germany for more than half a year.
- There are some special rules for individual youngsters or pensioners that fulfil a number of criteria.
- The only ones that are able to travel freely and leave Germany as long as they want are naturalised Afghans who are in possession of a German passport.

(Source: Tietjens 2002: 11-12)

## **8.2 THEORISING A RETURN ‘HOME’**

Within the field of refugee and migration studies, “*out* migration has traditionally been of far more interest to scholars and the international community than *return* migration,” according to Newman (2003: 10; italics in the original). Assumptions of fixed relationships between people, culture and place and territorialised notions of home play a role in this, which suggest that, as Newman (2003: 13) notes “migrants go home to the place where

they belong, and what necessarily follows are the natural processes of reconnection and reintegration of people to place.” The underlying idea is that once a displaced person has returned to his place of origin, the cycle of migration has ended, natural order is restored and, if the person remains there, he or she is no longer a threat to the international global order.

The frequently taken for granted ‘myth of return’ (see par. 7.2) to a specific ‘homeland’ is often translated by the UNHCR and the international community as ‘repatriation’. Rapidly rising numbers of refugees and asylum-seekers worldwide, and indurations of national and international laws trying to restrict the influxes of migrants and the granting of asylum during the last decade, made return migration an increasingly pressing phenomenon. Three so-called ‘durable solutions’ for refugees have been identified by policy makers as: voluntary repatriation to the country of origin, integration in the country of first asylum and resettlement in a third country. The feasibility and appreciation of these three durable solutions have varied over time, reflecting geo-political interests. During the Cold War, for example, resettlement and integration suited the purposes of the West best, while nowadays repatriation is considered the ideal solution by policy makers such as the UNHCR (Van Hear 2002: 3; Newman 2003: 11; Warner 1994: 160-161). Despite this growing importance of refugee repatriation, literature on the subject hardly goes beyond the scope of international agency and government reports, analysing practical logistics, international law and political and economical factors. In the same way that ‘the refugee experience’ is frequently universalised and generalised, return seems to be perceived as, according to Sepulveda (1995: 84), “a unified, monolithic experience in policy, practice and research.” The personal experiences and meanings of returnees themselves attached to the processes of re-integration have hardly been explored. As Warner puts it (1994: 161), “although much attention has been given to aiding people to return home, there has been little investigation of what it means to return home in and of itself for refugees.” Such a “return to ‘home’ may in fact be just as complex an experience as that of refugee resettlement or immigration to a foreign country,” Newman (2003: 19) states. Returnees, especially the ones that are not just visiting the country, can expect to face adjustment problems. Returnees often face difficulties in re-establishing themselves professionally, socially, educationally, politically, as well as mentally, into mainstream society (Doná and Berry 1999: 187). According to Doná and Berry (1999: 190), the degree of readjustment problems varies according to “cultural distance (migration to the West or to a neighboring country), length of stay abroad, type of return migration (individual or group) as well as individual circumstances.” Warner argues that “[r]efugees involved in voluntary repatriation are not returning home. They are, in fact, returning to their country of origin, but no more” (Warner 1994: 170).

Exiled people as well as the place of origin itself have travelled along a ‘route’ in time. Former ‘homes’ have unavoidably developed alien and strange elements in the eyes of those who migrated abroad (Al-Ali and Koser 2002: 8). Returnees might experience marginalisation and alienation in an unfamiliar environment (Doná and Berry 1999: 186). Barton (1986: 20) suggests that returning refugees might “find themselves isolated once more – almost like foreigners – in a world which is familiar but where they practically know no one anymore.” Not only the place of origin, but the refugees themselves are likely to have changed in exile, be it consciously or unconsciously, for example in mentality and lifestyle. They might be considered different by the indigenous population, or even unwelcome.

The relationship with an inaccessible ‘homeland’ can change enormously when it is suddenly possible to go there. One of the few studies carried out about visits to a ‘homeland’ is the one by Shami on Circassians. These Circassians, who originated from an area in the North Caucasus but had been scattered over Middle Eastern and Balkan countries, were not able to visit their Circassian homeland for decades. This area was opened up after the break-up of the Soviet Union, and Circassians suddenly had the possibility to return. The ‘homeland’ transformed from an abstract concept into an everyday reality. As long as it was inaccessible, the ‘homeland’ was perceived of as a space out of time, symbolizing Circassian identity and an immemorial past. Encounters have brought the space back into time and have made it into a territory with clearly defined geographical features and boundaries. Such journeys and encounters with the ‘homeland’ and with Circassians living in other countries challenged notions of identity, culture, history and tradition (Shami 1998: 617, 643). It can easily be argued that the case of Afghans is different from those of Circassians who have lived in diaspora for decades. Most Afghans still have rather concrete memories of a life spent in Afghanistan, and Afghanistan had less chance to be transformed into a timeless space in the minds of exiled Afghans. Still, real-life encounters with Afghanistan can have a stunning impact on individuals, and even on those who stay ‘at home’ and are confronted with videos, stories and pictures of returnees upon their return to their current places of residence.



Kabul 2004 (Source: <http://www.epiphytes.net>)

### 8.3 ‘REALITY CHECKS’

“She couldn’t cry, she couldn’t laugh, she was just like paralysed,” Tamana describes the first feeling her friend Hosai experienced when she arrived in Kabul.

“After my arrival in the middle-age-looking airport of Kabul, in spite of the chaotic situation, I had a feeling as if I had landed in paradise. My melancholic state of mind brightened in a flash and turned into euphoria; I was endlessly happy,” Sabara writes about her visit to Kabul (Djallalzada 2004: 22).

The experiences of Afghans that return differ greatly. Generally, they evoke a mixture of positive and negative emotions, and feelings of belonging as well as non-belonging or estrangement. For some, the reunion with Afghanistan is an unwelcoming and alienating experience, while others feel it as a ‘homecoming’. Which emotions dominate depended on many factors, for example the specific encounters, the nature of the trip, personal characteristics and the kind of memories one has of Afghanistan. The expectations one has beforehand seem to play an important role as well. This paragraph focuses on frictions between an imagined and a real Afghanistan.

#### “One Goes There Only for the Memories”

It is possible that returnees have an idealised image of Afghanistan in their mind. This image of Afghanistan is often nostalgic and associated with the ‘good old days’ of youth, the absence of adult responsibilities. When such an individual does eventually go back, the result can be the experience of a ‘reverse culture shock’. According to

Ivy (1995: 10), the retrieval of an object of nostalgic longing can be an unwelcoming experience. In Beltun's words:

*“Jeder hat eine Neigung die eigene Vergangenheit wieder erleben zu wollen - Everybody has a longing to re-experience the own past. In the past there was this and that, we did this and that; see how it is now. One goes there only for the memories, not to live there,”* Beltun says. “I have so many good memories. Everybody has a longing, but when they return now, there are disappointed from the start. Now, everything is different.”

“No,” says Hodayun, “disappointed is not the right word. They will probably become sad, because the people have changed. The people from the past are not there any more. They are all dead or abroad.”

Many Afghans visiting Afghanistan go to see places that they connect with their memories. As has been narrated in paragraph 4.4, an important place is the house and neighbourhood they have lived in. Such experiences can evoke a range of emotions. For some, the house represents the lost ‘home’, strongly connected to memories, a symbol of a past era, and therefore a place infused with feelings of nostalgic yearning. Reality might sometimes clash with images that have been idealised in exile:

Hodayun is a middle-aged man torn apart by homesickness. He longs to see his parental house; a house, that in his memories is enormous. His brother though, who has already been to see the house, was struck by the same shocking realisation as Sima in paragraph 4.4. When he came back from his trip, he allegedly told his brother: “Hodayun, our house is not big. We were small.”

A trip to Afghanistan is for many, in a way, a trip into the past. Most of them realise that this past was not always that wonderful, and that present-day Afghanistan is very different anyhow. The realisation that Afghanistan is no longer the place one remembers it to be might however lead to an acute feeling of homelessness. For many Afghans who belonged to the modernised elite of Kabul and left the country before the civil war started, present-day Kabul might be unrecognisable. The places where they came from have been destroyed, and the people they knew are not there any more.

Hodayun: “In Kabul, there is a street of money exchangers. My aunt worked over there. In the past, it was crowded with life. I saw that same street in a documentary on television and I cried. I cried in front of my wife and children. It was desolate. Only two people walked around. I probably won't go there. I would not be able to bear the sight of it.”

Sadri, a man in his fifties, returned to Kabul after 25 years. He failed to recognise the city centre or the way to his old school, which made him feel *orientierungslos*, disorientated: “It has changed so much. I was shocked.” Sima (*Netzwerk* broadcasting 3. Februari 2004): “I cannot live here the way I lived here before. It has gone back a hundred years. Nobody dresses the way we dressed 23 years ago.”

Some returnees, however, are prepared for the worst. Their images of Afghanistan are formed by horror stories and the media, which tend to show only the most devastated areas. They are happily surprised when things turn out to be better than they had expected. Also those who have experienced civil war, death and destruction from close-by are more optimistic about the present situation. Some areas have been less affected by the years of war.

“I know a mechanic from Ghazni who said that nothing had changed over there. He went there with his father. His father has stayed,” Ahmed tells me. Then he informs me about his own relatives. Ahmed's mother and brother returned to renovate and let their former house and to visit his aunt and uncle. Other relatives have returned as well: “My relatives all came back with very positive experiences, because their expectations weren't high. It's nicer than one expects it to be, when you compare it to the way it was when we escaped [12 years ago].”

Hodayun's impression of Kabul was predominantly positive, Tamana tells me. “Some parts of Kabul were destroyed, but some are just the way they were before the war. Everything is in the process of reconstruction.” It surprised Hodayun that “from children to old people, they can all speak English.” She

noticed that there are many employment opportunities for women, and sees a chance for herself as well: “If you are ready to give up some things, you can very well live over there.”

### “Happy on the One Side, Sad on the Other”

For the majority of returnees, the encounter with the place of origin evoke mixed emotions:

In a group of women, picnicking in the garden, Nuria tells about her brother who is visiting Kabul after twenty years. On the one hand it is very “*jaleb*” [interesting, nice] to him, but at the same time he experiences *jegarkhuni*<sup>1</sup>, deep sorrow. It hurts him to see the poverty; the poor people without work and no income. He went to see Microrayan, the quarter he had left when it was still untouched by the war. According to Nuria, he was shocked to see what is left of it.

Samim’s parents were able to return to Afghanistan after 40 years. Samim recalls: “My mother has cried. After 40 years, she has seen her brother.” I ask him how his parents felt to be back. “An undefined feeling. Happy on the one side, sad on the other.”

Rahman tells me: “Last year, after 40 years, I returned to Afghanistan. I had a feeling of *Sehnsucht* [hankering]. In a way, one is happy when reaches the object of *Sehnsucht*, may it be a person or a country. At the same time, as I got off the airplane, I was hit by the poverty, the beggars. I felt like in a cloud, experienced everything like a bad dream. I was almost like paralysed. I was there for four or five weeks and did a lot, but it appeared to me like living in a haze, a dream. I was very sad to see the destroyed buildings, the misery, and was unable to be happy. But at the same time I was so happy about having been able to return. I never thought that ever in my life I would have been able to go to my country, my country where I was born and where I grew up.”

### “Ooh, When I Saw those Mountains!”

“With every step, you feel that it is your own soil”

(Rauf)

When respondents are asked about what they miss or like most about Afghanistan, reference is often made to Afghanistan’s beautiful pure nature and landscapes. Images of Afghanistan often invoked in songs, poetry, pictures and drawings, as well as in conversations, sing the praises of sky scraping mountain ranges, green valleys full of flowers like the *gul-e lāla* [red tulip], fruit trees, gigantic melons, pure air, four distinct seasons each with its own beauty, green parks with fountains and roses, refreshing rivers and sources with water so pure that it is believed they have healing powers, family *mella*’s [picnics] near the waterfall of Paghman, in the shadow of verdant trees. One respondent claims never to have fallen ill in Afghanistan, whereas from the moment he came to Germany, he is suffering from sicknesses and allergy. Reality in Afghanistan does not always correspond with these images of a pristine nature. In the second half of the 1990s, Afghanistan was tormented by severe drought that hardly gave green fields and colourful flowers a chance to grow. A great deal of the greenery has returned now, but the *karez* water infrastructure system is left shattered by years of war,<sup>2</sup> and millions of landmines lay scattered around in fields



Boys in the Panjshir valley (Source: <http://www.epiphytes.net>)

<sup>1</sup> *Jegar* means ‘liver’ and *khun* means ‘blood’. *Jegarkhuni* thus literally means ‘liver bleeding’. The word is used to express deep sorrow or grief.

<sup>2</sup> In 2002, no more than 38% of the urban and 17% of the rural population had access to a basic water supply system (Gujja 2002). In 2004, 60% was using unsafe drinking water (UNDP 2004: 6).

and mountains which puts a serious blot on the 'innocent' picture. Famous picnic spots like the ones in Paghman have been destroyed, although some parks are emerging again, especially in the city of Herat.

Gisela, a German girl married to an Afghan, tells me that her sister-in-law has a two-year-old son who suffers from epilepsy. She wants to take him to Afghanistan: "She is sure the pure air will heal him."



Qandahar (Source: <http://www.epiphytes.net>)

Returnees longing to inhale the clean air of the homeland may be disappointed when arriving in the capital. Kabul has become a heavily polluted city. Surrounded by mountains, the exhaust fumes of the thousands of taxis that block the streets of the capital linger on in the form of harsh smog. Kabul does not have a system of waste management nor one of sewers, and many returnees were struck by the lingering stench of waste and excrement. The air is full of dust and sand because the streets have been destroyed. One Afghan man I heard of had been sick all the time because of the *khākbād*, winds of dust, he had inhaled.

Lack of hygiene and clean water makes almost all visitors fall victim to diarrhoea and stomach problems. During the war, different factions had poisoned the wells and water sources in an attempt to eradicate the enemy:

Mahmud's brother has visited Afghanistan. "He said you couldn't drink from the sources any more. They are full of chemicals."

However, some of the images become true indeed.

Samim, a 26-year-old boy born in Hamburg, was taken to Afghanistan by his parents for the first time in his life. He did not like Kabul very much, but is lyrical about Takhar, the northern province his parents originate from: "Over there, the best water is said to be found. You can just hold a glass into the source. The water cures all illnesses. Everything is green over there and there has never been a foreigner."

What Salem liked most about Kabul were the sun and the sky:

"The weather is beautiful when you wake up in the morning. Over here, the sky is never really blue. Over there it is. And the sun is shining. But Kabul is really crowded now."

## 8.4 ENCOUNTERING THE LOCAL POPULATION

Encounters with people and their ways of life are more ambivalent than encounters with landscapes and nature. Do returning Afghans feel that they belong to the Afghans living in Afghanistan, or do they feel different? If the answer is yes, is that because they realise that they have changed while living in exile, or has Afghanistan's population changed? How does the local population look upon Afghans that return from the West? These questions will be dealt with in the next two paragraphs. Both local Afghans as well as Afghans coming from a Western diaspora hold stereotype ideas about each other, which might change when these groups come into contact with each other. Respondent Zohra speaks of "parallel processes of getting to know each other."

Since they have left the country, the composition of Afghan society has changed. The educated and modern upper and middle classes largely reside abroad. The people that have remained belong to subordinate layers of

society that these well-off Afghans hardly interacted with when they were still living in Afghanistan. At the same time, a new generation has evolved that grew up with war and hardly received an education. According to Amiri (2004: 16), the present population of Kabul mainly consists of people with a rural and traditional background, making Kabul a “large village.” The people that influenced the cultural life in the 70’s have left, and the very few that have remained have to be reserved and careful vis-à-vis the current population, who form a majority and are backed by the conservative political factions. However, Amiri observed that a new wealthy and consumption-oriented class is arising. For Afghans who belonged to the upper classes, Kabul might have become a strange city:

Zohra (22) visited Afghanistan with her aunt, who left the country more than twenty years ago. Her aunt had always moved around in Kabul’s intellectual and Westernised environment. That was the Afghanistan she once knew and hardly recognised upon return. Zohra’s images of Afghanistan were not formed by such memories, but more by contemporary media images. It was much easier for her to adapt to present-day reality, for example to dress codes and codes of behaviour. About the adults, Zohra says: “They didn’t know those [dress codes] in the past. It was their *Heimat*. They had their own living world, their elite environment of university and a few places. That population has left. Now, all of a sudden, there are different modes of behaviour. For adults it is difficult to behave like villagers. They want to recognise their *Heimatsstadt*, their home city, but that’s not possible.” It was Zohra who had to correct her aunt constantly, for example by saying that the split in her aunt’s skirt was too large and she could not leave the house like that.

Marjan and Ziba’s legal status prohibits them from visiting Afghanistan, but their views regarding Afghanistan’s current population make it clear that they do not have the urge to return:

“Afghanistan is the dirtiest country in the world,” Marjan, who has worked for the Parcham government, says to me. “That’s kind of logical, after so many years of war, isn’t it?” I reply. “No,” is her reaction, “it was already like that in the past. All those children with dirty clothes and dirty hands... But not we, we came from a well-to-do family.”

Ziba and her husband Ghasem belonged to the upper shift of Afghan society. Ziba’s father was a doctor. She has memories of a European-like Afghanistan. “The people that now live in Afghanistan are *washi*, savage. They came from Pakistan and *Arabistān*. They are *chatal*, dirty, and have a *lungi*, turban, on their heads. They eat with their hands.”

Encounters with long-lost relatives are often very emotional in nature, such as Shahram’s encounter with his parents. Other kinds of emotional reactions are caused by the confrontation with poor and suffering people. Returnees are the most negative about encounters with the ruling people and employees, and speak of corruption and favouritism:

Twenty-five-year-old Harun returned to Afghanistan after 15 years to repair the old family house. Just as in the case of many other returnees, the encounter evoked a mixture of emotions: “At the one hand it was super cool, at the other hand very shocking. There are too many uneducated and wild people in power.” It was different from what he expected it to be: “So much was destroyed and the population is completely another one. The people at the market place were very friendly, but at offices they were totally unfriendly. Only through corruption you can work your way up. And there is a lot of poverty. Above all, seeing the children hurt me. And at the airport at the desk you find people that can’t even read. Where shall that lead us to? And then they expect us to have a visa for Afghanistan, although it is



Kabul 2004 (Source: <http://www.epiphytes.net>)

clearly written in our passports that we were born in Afghanistan. But those people got their jobs through contacts.” He continues: “Do you want to know what shocked me the most? Some people wished that the Taliban would return, because they were fed up with these Panjshiri people. At the moment, everybody does what he wants, at least at offices. At the streets, most of them are Panjshiris and when they say left you have to go left, and when right, you have to go right.”

“Afghanistan is Afghanistan, Kabul is Kabul, but the people are totally different now,” Manizha says, “The people are kaput. Corrupt.” Twenty-six-year old Samim is born in Germany. Recently, he has visited Afghanistan for the first time in his life. He experienced how different he is from people over there: “Everybody my age is a thief or a murderer. Everyone defrauds the other.”

“It was much more advanced back then,” Shahram (28) tells me. “There was discipline and a real state, that is what I miss now.” He continues: “Now it makes an illiterate impression on me. A whole generation is illiterate, all those of my age. Those who have studied are becoming old. I had a friend in Afghanistan, my cousin. We went to school together and we shared the same dreams. Now he is an illiterate. He only became a carpenter. He was very proud of me, that I managed to come so far, but he was sad about himself, that he’s only a burden to society.”

The above cases are all examples of negative and alienating experiences. Other stories however relate the enormous hospitality and social warmth, and the feeling of ‘coming home’. Particularly the experience of meeting relatives and friends can be overwhelming and deeply moving:

Roya, initially concerned if people would still accept her, was received with open arms and speaks highly of the heartiness of the people: “After one day, I felt so much at home, as if I’d never been away. *Heimat ist Heimat*, homeland is homeland, no matter after how many years you return.”

Hosai felt an instant connection to the people of Afghanistan: “People have changed. They have become *washi* – wild. But they still speak the language of the heart, the language of my own blood. We understood each other.”

Zohra and Salina are both in their twenties and Afghanistan was an unknown country to them. Their stereotypical ideas about Afghan women, formed by Western media, turned out to be wrong. Salina was surprised about the way women behave when they are amongst themselves, and about the way they dance and celebrate. These were the wildest and most sensual dances she had ever seen. It was during her stay in Afghanistan that Zohra first learned how to use make-up and how to dance. In the same way, the Afghan women were surprised that she, coming from Europe, did not know how to use make-up and how to dance. Nazira is 32 and had not been in Afghanistan for twenty years. She was also surprised about the level of openness among women, and the lack of taboo on subjects that Western women would not talk about.

Maryam was fascinated about the level of politeness and respect that people treat each other with. According to her (Afghanistan News 2002: 1), despite their poverty, people mutually help and support each other to such an extent that it makes a German look very selfish in comparison. Fatima was also interviewed by Afghanistan News (2004: 1): “Because I went there completely without expectations, I was surprised in many ways.” Her ideas about local Afghans were predominantly positive and it was her experience that: “In spite of the strikes of destiny, they have an enormous will to live [...] Although they are poor, the people are extremely polite, hospitable and grateful for everything.”

## 8.5 EXPERIENCES OF BELONGING AND NON-BELONGING

While Afghans in Germany might think of themselves as Afghans, it often requires an encounter with Afghans in Afghanistan to make them realise how much the society they live in has influenced them. At the same time, local Afghans might not consider them as ‘real Afghans’ anymore and presuppose Afghans in the West to have adopted different lifestyles and mentalities. They might be treated differently, although this is not necessarily seen as negative by the returnees themselves:

Nazira (32) was not expected to live according to Afghan rules, as she had lived abroad for such a long time. Rather than feeling excluded, it felt to her like a relief. For example, she was glad that nobody expected her to wear a headscarf.

It can however be an alienating experience when the place one feels to belong to confronts him or her with social exclusion, in the form of a message that he or she does not belong there any more:

Beltun tells me the story of a man who went to Afghanistan and was forced to stop by a bearded Mujahed, who allegedly said: "I fought for twenty years, and you have escaped. You have shaved your beard and took your wife to the sauna." It made the man shed tears: "I am not allowed to live in Afghanistan because I don't have a beard."

### **'Walking Wallets'**

The friend of Nazhla's father cried when he returned, Nazhla (12) tells me. The poverty had touched him deeply. Everybody had asked him for money as they all considered him to be a rich man. Nazhla: "In Afghanistan, one euro is a lot of money."

Afghans who live in Western countries are considered rich by those living in Afghanistan. One is expected to assist one's relatives through remittances and gifts upon return. These high expectations are the reason why Homayun, currently unemployed, is obliged to delay his return visit:

"The air travel costs are 750 euro, but you need to take at least 3000 euro with you." He tells me that all relatives, even distant ones, expect the returnee to pay them a visit and bring money, because he or she lives in a rich country.

Many returnees indeed seem to return with quite an amount of money, which also seems an important instrument to establish or re-establish their social status and to display their real or imagined economical success in exile. There might be a fear of 'losing face' and suspicion of economical and social failure if someone returns empty-handed.

Latif is preparing himself for a holiday in Mazar-e Sharif. Relatives from all over the world will gather there to celebrate a wedding. He has already been working for two years to collect as much money as possible: "I want to take 20 thousand dollar, just like that, to spend over there and have a nice holiday. I can't go there empty-handed."

Mirwais has established a small charitable organisation that collects donations in Germany and transports them in a van to Herat. Proudly, he tells me about the good feeling he gets when he is able to distribute the goods: "I am welcomed like a God when I arrive there with my stuff."

The other side of the medal is that there are indications that returnees are targets of people whose only interest is their money, which raises safety issues. Several respondents express a fear of robberies.

### **Shame and Fear**

Some respondents speak of a fear of being seen as betrayers, *watanforush*,<sup>3</sup> by the people who stayed. They have abandoned the country when the situation was difficult, only to return when things look better. A feeling of guilt often accompanies such fears. This feeling of guilt bothers Homayun:

"What should I say to the poor Afghans over there? How comfortable my life is over here? With my microwave and my central heating..."

Sima Calkin (*Netwerk* broadcasting, 3. February 2004) returned from the United States with the intention of helping the women of Kabul, and became overwhelmed by a feeling of shame when she

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<sup>3</sup> Literally: seller of the homeland.

realised what those women had gone through: “I couldn’t look them in the eyes. I was too ashamed and embarrassed. I had left them alone. I just wanted to hug and kiss them all. They saved the country for us.”

For Roya, Nazira and Maryam, these fears proved groundless:

Roya was born in Herat and moved to Kabul when she was young. She went to Afghanistan to open an orphanage: “After 40 years I have seen Herat. I was so afraid. I had an awkward feeling. To visit this city after 40 years... How would the people react? What would they say to me? ‘What have you done all these years, what are you doing in Germany’? But believe me, the people were so happy, grateful and polite, and I was ashamed of myself. They thanked me for coming.”

Nazira was so afraid that people would ask her where she had been all those years, and wondered how people would react on her return now that the war was over. But nobody has asked her such questions. Her relatives were extremely happy just to meet her again, and were very curious to hear about her life in Germany.

Maryam, doing an internship for a medical NGO in Kabul, was received with open arms: “They are really excited about every single person that returns and they think it’s great that I want to help the country and the people. Nobody was jealous of my easy life in Germany. They all thanked me for my efforts” (Afghanistan News 2002: 2; translation by MB).

## 8.6 RENEGOTIATIONS OF IDENTITY

Although Sayed Hashmatullah Moslih wore Afghan clothes and tried to take up Afghan habits, he proclaimed to be considered a foreigner by the local Afghans. Nonetheless, he himself does not question his identity: “I am aware that my image of Afghanistan is romanticised. Still, I want to help. Maybe I came here to finally have an identity. Everywhere, I was a refugee. Here, I discovered who I am: an Afghan.” A Dutch newspaper journalist (Kuitert 2001; translation by MB) spoke to Moslih, who had left Afghanistan as a child and has now left his wife and children in Australia to take up a job at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. His mind was troubled by the question if leaving his children was the right thing to do. The economist Ali Akbar had always stayed in Afghanistan and shared his opinion about Afghans returning from Western countries with the journalist: “They have trust in me. That folk that now return just want good jobs, preferably with a UN salary. That’s what people think about them.” At the same time, he realised that Afghans in the West are needed to build up Afghanistan because they have the education and skills that the left-behind Afghans lack. Still, he considered them to be ‘second choice’. Akbar was also asked about his identity: “Who am I? An economist running a shop, an old Mujaheddin. All those folks from abroad are talking about their identity. I have never known the luxury to occupy myself with such things.”

Being ‘Afghan’ emerges as a field of complex renegotiation within the country of origin. Especially for Afghans that left the country of origin before adulthood, a return visit might function as a journey in search for roots and identity:

Fatima (27) explained her motivation to take up a one-year job in Kabul, after having lived in Germany for 23 years (Afghanistan News 32: 2004) by saying: “There was always this longing to get to know my Afghan roots.”

“When it really came to the pinch, I was a foreigner to them,” Maryam experienced:

Maryam had left Afghanistan when she was six years old. After 21 years, she now had the chance to work for a medical NGO in Kabul. At a seminar in Iserlohn after returning from Afghanistan, she tells the audience: “Only for six years in my life I knew what I was: an Afghan. These were the first six years of my life, when I was a little girl.” She lacks a feeling of completely belonging to Germany: “I am happy that I live here, but there is no real acceptance.” A search for identity has played an important role in her return: “I went to Afghanistan with the question ‘What am I’ in my head. I felt like an Afghan there. But when it really came to the pinch, I was a foreigner to them, a *khāreji*.” She wonders how the people knew that she came from abroad: “I tried to dress and behave as other women. I wore a

veil, hardly washed my hair and blackened my eyes with *sorma*<sup>4</sup>. But I walked differently, looked around too much. I am an Afghan. My roots lie in Afghanistan. I have black hair and dark eyes, but in the end... I'm a foreigner to them."

Maryam continues narrating: "I was in Kabul in the period of Ramadan. My Afghan colleagues were very surprised that I took part in the fast. 'Of course', I said. 'And if you return to Europe, do you continue fasting?' they asked in disbelief." Faranaz, one of the participants of the seminar recalls a similar experience she had when she visited relatives in Iran: "They gave me a Christian cross as a gift. They couldn't believe an Afghan in the West to be a Muslim."

Salina's (24) knowledge of Afghanistan was based on the stories her parents had told her. She was too young to have any personal memories. Seeing Afghanistan had always been a dream:

She had hoped to experience the feeling of being *Zuhause*, being in her own *Heimat* again. Although she calls the weeks she spent in Kabul as the best of her life, she was disappointed not to have become an instant *Heimatsgefühl*, and experience feelings of *Heimat*. "Unfortunately, Afghanistan was a strange place to me," she says. Afghanistan turned out to be a third world country full of misery and poverty, where the local population saw her as a guest or a stranger instead of one of them. She thinks that a feeling of being *Zuhause* can only develop slowly, after living there for a while. The first months after returning from Afghanistan, Salina daydreamed about Afghanistan day and night. She has a stronger emotional connection to Afghanistan and to her parents than before. She still feels that neither Afghanistan nor Germany is completely her *Heimat*, but at the same time, having concrete knowledge and experience of Afghanistan gives her a sense of pride: "Now I have a *Heimat* too."

"I felt at home in a country where I had never been," Zohra (24) says:

Zohra, born in Germany, had denied her Afghan origins for years. She has been raised freely in a non-Afghan environment, where she "wanted to be like the others." Except for her family, the only contact she had with Afghans was at weddings and celebrations. Accidentally, as she says herself, she landed in Kabul, where she did an internship. There, her feelings changed: "I felt at home in a country where I had never been." To her surprise, she recognised much from music videos, clothing and weddings; things that she had come in touch with during her life in Germany and that had unconsciously influenced her. Since then, her Afghan roots play a more important role in her life. After the first discovery of common ground with the people in Afghanistan, more intensive contact and time brought the discovery of divergence. The second time she came to Afghanistan, she had to let go of some of her initial euphoria. She experienced a feeling of being torn between two value systems and realised how much she had been influenced by Western values. She did not know to what extent she had to adapt to Afghan gender roles. She then realised that a sensibility for cultural and gender issues can only be learned and developed slowly.



Kabul 2004 (Source: <http://www.epiphytes.net>)

Schulz (2003; translated by MB) interviewed 27-year-old Ghesal, the founder of an international network of young Afghans. Since the fall of the Taliban, she has visited Afghanistan twice:

"I didn't have any expectations, because between my parents' stories and the present thirty years have past, of which twenty years of war. Because I expected the worst, I was positively surprised, for the most part. The country is completely destroyed, there's hardly anybody who isn't traumatised, but for me personally it was an unbelievable experience to be there again amongst, so to say, *Meinesgleichen*, my equals. They all looked like me, listened to music that I like to hear, spoke my language [and] the food was the food I love the most. It was as if inside me a bridge was built between my two identities, by having been able to experience life over there for once."

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<sup>4</sup> Mascara made of pulverized antimony.

## 8.7 BACK IN GERMANY

“How much did Afghanistan fit in with the myth? As much as a medieval map with "Here be monsters" and mountains and so on accords with the real world; in some ways, helpful, in some ways, completely different. When you encounter the real thing, you get increasing layers of subtlety; in fact, one of the things I had to let go off reasonably early was the myth and the romance that goes with it, so that I could experience a different kind of romance, perhaps of a more grown-up variety [...]. I had to work through all this nonsense, and soon realized that in some ways I am not Afghan, and in some ways - if loving a place and understanding some things about it count at all - I am an Afghan. It is much more subtle; reality is much more subtle than the myth.

(Saira Shah in an interview, Shaikh 2003)

To what extent does an encounter with ‘the real Afghanistan’ change ideas about belonging, identity and returning permanently? Unfortunately, my initial plan to conduct at least a few interviews with people before as well as after a return visit to see if ideas had changed could not be carried out within the limited period of my fieldwork. This final paragraph therefore does not aim at giving an exact analysis. It only aims at showing that outcomes fluctuate strongly. While some respondents realised during and after their journey that they cannot live in Afghanistan any more, others now have a strong wish to settle there. Some found their Afghan selves strengthened and their previous level of affiliation to Afghanistan increased, while others became more aware of their life routes, their changes and adaptations in exile, that have led them away from their roots and made them unable to fit neatly into Afghan society again.

It can be said that a return visit placed the ‘homeland’, imagined from a distance, back in time and geography. A more realistic view of Afghanistan brings a more realistic vision about, among other things, the possibilities and wishes for a permanent return.

Her experience in Kabul made Salina realise how difficult it would be for her to live in Afghanistan again: “It would be a giant load.” A slow acclimatisation would be a prerequisite: “I should just work there for a while and then return to Germany to rehabilitate and reconstruct myself, and then return again.”

The following dialogue is a discussion in a chat box, translated from German, between Harun who has just returned from a trip to Afghanistan, and Homira, a girl with an idealistic view of Afghanistan who longs to return:

Harun: “Too many Panjshiri people, too much destruction, misery and needy children, very sad. But it was an experience *wieder Heimatluft zu schnuppern* - to inhale the air of the homeland again, after such a long time. Although the people who have the power are not exactly ‘the real thing’. At least it was worth the experience.”

Homira: “I want to go too. I miss Afghanistan a lotttttt. I can’t deal with these people [Germans].”

Harun: “It is difficult to live under the circumstances that prevail, at least for me. I don’t know if you can deal with corrupt and partly stupid people.”

[...]

Harun: “When you are there, the *Sehnsucht*, longing, for Germany becomes strong again.”

Homira: “No, when I go I won’t come back.”

Harun: “Ooh don’t jaw like that.”

Homira: “Do too.”

A few weeks later in the same chat box, I talk to Harun about his experiences in Afghanistan. Harun is a 25-year-old man who had returned after 15 years: “At the moment, I can’t imagine a [permanent] return for myself.” When talking about young people like Homira that say they want to return he says: “Ach,

more *Schein* [appearance] than *Sein* [being in reality]. They should just go to Afghanistan and live there for a month. Then I'd like to see who of them still has the wish to return."

Their experiences made Harun und Salina realise how much they have become used to life in Germany, and how difficult a life in Afghanistan would be for them. But the opposite opinion is also encountered. Some respondents return from Afghanistan with a strong wish to re-migrate to Afghanistan:

Tamana tells me about her friend Hosnia. As soon as she entered Afghanistan, she had the feeling she had 'arrived at home' and she knew that this was the place she wanted to return to after finishing her studies: "She has finally found inner peace. There always was an empty feeling inside her. She was looking for something, but never knew for what." The friend who accompanied her on her journey gave up his life and job in Hamburg and re-migrated to Afghanistan shortly afterwards. About a year later however, Tamana informs me that the friend moved back to Germany again.

Elyas' sister was the one who protested the most when she was told that the family, living in the Netherlands, would travel to Afghanistan to the wedding celebrations of her brother Wais with one of his cousins in Kabul. After returning a few weeks later, she is the one that cannot stop thinking about the wonderful experience, spending hours on the telephone with her cousins in Kabul, and fantasizing about returning again.

People that travel together do not necessarily share the same experiences. In this case a husband and wife:

Selsela and Abdul's sister recently went to Kabul with her husband and two children to visit her husband's relatives after an absence of eight years. Abdul: "My sister told me that there are no schools and there is no work. From the viewpoint of the people who live there, the situation has improved. But for people who got used to life over here..." Selsela adds: "My sister said that she will never go again. Her little daughter fell very ill. She didn't eat a thing and lost 10 pounds. There were no places for children to play. She said that everything was very different now. She was in constant fear. It was dirty, destroyed and the people were different." As much as she hated the city, her husband loved it: "He said: 'O how beautiful, let us return to Afghanistan'."

Akbar realises that 'his own country' has become a strange country to him. Because of his change of lifestyle brought about by the German environment, he does not fit into Afghanistan any more. Still, Afghanistan offers aspects of home that Germany does not offer him. Alcohol and soft drugs deaden the pain over this impossible situation to find a place where he can feel completely at home:

"Germany is my second *Heimat*," Akbar (28) tells me. "I could return, but it would be difficult. The culture is my culture, but I feel strange over there." Afghanistan is at the same time a place of belonging and of non-belonging: "Over there [in Afghanistan], I experience a lot of love and joy, but modernity is lacking. I feel bored there. I was 16 or 17 when I came to Germany, still a child. I found many friends and went out in the evenings. There is no such thing there. When I came to Afghanistan, I thought 'I am in a strange country'. But of course it was my own country." In the end, he cannot choose between life in Afghanistan and life in Germany. It is a choice between different aspects of home, all of which are unsatisfactory. This causes a great deal of stress: "I am *zuhause* here [in Germany]. When I go there, I miss this place. But when I am here, I miss my family. It is such a pity that I have to live here. Germany is my *Haus*, my home, but I am alone here. I can't visit my relatives." After a short hesitation, he concludes: "That's the reason I smoke and drink."

A visit to Afghanistan not only implies viewing the distant place of origin from near by, but also experiencing Germany from a distance, and rethinking the bonds with both countries. Many might realise that both life's roots and routes have had an influence about their ideas about where they belong:

Yama has left Afghanistan as a child and he has never occupied himself much with his country of origin. Then, after 14 years, he visited Afghanistan: "Oh, the smell of that dust!" he exclaims. The trip strengthened the Afghan side of his identity. Still, he cannot choose between the two: "I can't imagine staying in Germany for the rest of my life. But neither can I imagine living in Afghanistan. I think I will just keep travelling between places."

Sabara (Djallalzada 2004: 23; translation MB): “I was thrilled unendingly that I was able to visit my *Heimat* Afghanistan; I was very glad as well, however, when I reached Germany again, which has become my second *Heimat*.”

Monir writes to me: “Four years ago, I went to Afghanistan. I spent six very nice weeks in the *Heimat*, but I can’t completely live there any more. When I arrived at Frankfurt Airport, I felt *als wäre ich wieder zuhause* - as if I were home again. A few days later I again missed my *Heimat* Afghanistan in all its beauty and poverty. I think we Afghans that grew up here in Germany will never be able to fully choose one side. It’s just like a little child that has to choose either its mother or its father.”

### **Naima and Nadra: “We Can’t Live There Any More”**

I conclude with a case in which two informants, Naima and Nadra, talk about the return visit of a woman they know, giving rise to a discussion about the issue of cultural change and return. The case combines several important themes that have arisen throughout this thesis. It acknowledges the routes that both Afghans in diaspora and Afghanistan itself have taken, which complicates a seamless return, especially in the case of children that are thought to have changed most of all. Although a permanent return to Afghanistan is considered nearly impossible, Afghanistan is still considered *watan*, a symbolical place of belonging. This sense of longing and belonging is channelled into a desire to visit Afghanistan for a short period, without giving up life in Germany. Reality in Afghanistan does not correspond to Naima and Nadra’s ideal notion of *watan* at all. They were members of the communist party and think of themselves as civilized, enlightened and emancipated women, and feel alienated from present-day Afghanistan. They therefore transfer the wish to visit their *watan* into a far-away future.

Over a cup of cardamom-flavoured green tea, Naima tells Nadra and me about an acquaintance that has visited relatives in Kabul with her child that was born in Germany. The little boy strongly disliked Afghanistan. He considered the Afghans on the street *washi*, savage, and refused to leave the house. Although he could speak Dari, there were a lot of words and expressions he did not know. He could not behave in an Afghan way and could not say *assalamualaiki*<sup>5</sup>. Life was hard and most women were veiled outside the house. “Some families can live a reasonable *ārām*, quiet, life, but we can’t live there any more. Children that are born and raised here can’t go back. A hundred percent impossible.”

A discussion evolves about the *farq*, difference, between the Afghans here and those in Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan. “We forgot our culture” and “God, have we [Afghans in Germany] changed, *taghir shodim*,” they proclaim, but during the whole discussion, no real sounds of regret over cultural loss can be noticed – quite unlike my arguments in Chapter 6. According to Naima and Nadra, the women and children in Afghanistan are under a lot of pressure, *feshār*. They cannot speak and laugh loudly and are expected to offer tea and refill cups automatically. Whereas the children over there have to be *chop*, silent, not to disturb the elders, the children here are emancipated and even have their own computers, which is a large contrast. Besides that, Naima and Nadra consider the way of eating and dressing very different, and the lack of hygiene poses serious problems for returning Afghans: “We can’t do without water and we can’t deal with the dirt over there.”

It is clear that leaving Germany to return to Afghanistan is not a serious option to be taken into consideration. I ask them if they would consider visiting Afghanistan instead. “At the moment absolutely not. The situation is very bad,” is their answer. “But in the future, of course, why not. *Watan-e khodemān ast* - it is our own *watan*. *Watan* is *watan*..”

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<sup>5</sup> *As-Salamu Alaikum* is the official Arab greeting. What Naima meant to say was that the child was not able to perform the extensive Afghan greeting rituals that are important in showing respect, in which at a quick pace civilities are bandied, and inquiries into one’s health, one’s soul and one’s family are made. Instead of answering these questions, one thanks and poses counter-questions. Children are expected to kiss the hands of the elderly in order to show respect. In general, children should be polite, quiet, keep their opinions to themselves and obey everything adults say.



# **CONCLUDING REMARKS**



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*In their own ways, all these Afghans had selves as fractured as mine. The world is full of such Afghans now, as I've learned since September 11. Afghanistan itself, or at least the one I knew, is like a glass vase pounded by rocks for twenty-three years. For all of us, surrendering to diversity is probably the only plausible path left to attaining unity. The international community is supposedly committed to helping the country rebuild, but the lost world will not be reconstituted. Whatever rises from the rubble will be something new, and I suspect I may not have to decide who I am in order to take some part in this impending Afghanistan, because I am a kaleidoscope of parts now – and so is Afghanistan. So is the world, when you get right down to it.*

Tamim Ansari's *West of Kabul, East of New York* (2002: 284-285)

### **The Complex Roots and Routes of Home, Identity and Belonging**

The aim of this study was to explore the ways that Afghans living in Germany construct notions of home and belonging from negotiations between roots and routes, and how these are related to their attitudes towards returning to Afghanistan. The experience of Afghans in Germany provides a cogent example of the complex and contested geographies of home and identity and the multiple experiences of displacement. Due to time limitations, my research data could only offer stances at particular moments in time. I could not follow people over a period of time and show the complex processes of identity formation and evolving notions of home and belonging. I hope however that I have been able to show that these continuous negotiations between roots and routes processes can be differentiated in many ways and lead to various meanings and experiences. Two variables that generate interpersonal difference and that received some attention in this research are age and residential status. More research is needed to investigate the role of other variables, particularly that of gender.

Within contemporary anthropology, there has been a shift away from traditional images of a natural bond between people, place and culture. Ideas of fixed roots are exchanged more and more for ones that emphasise routes, hybrid and fluid identities, globalisation and transnationalism. Hall (1995: 207) for example claims that a growing number of people “are beginning to think of themselves, of their identities and their relationship to culture and to place, in [...] more ‘open’ ways.” Although I can only welcome the critical attack on previous assumptions, I consider it incorrect to focus solely on routes and hybridity, because such theories do not reflect the way that ordinary people and nation-states themselves think and speak about identity, culture and place. We have experienced that a few decades of globalisation have not lead to the development of cosmopolitan hybrids and a post-national world of limitless mobility, but rather to the reinvention of nationalism, boundaries and distinct identities. Nation-states are increasingly occupied with closing their borders, defending ‘home’ and territory against the invasion of ‘the Other’, and restricting their legislations about who, and who not, is allowed to belong. In times of rapid changes across the globe, roots offer an illusion of stability and purity, and an anchor to hold on to. My research has indicated that ideas about an inborn and unchangeable identity connected to a certain territory and culture remain very much alive among both Afghans and the German nation-state. Afghans themselves use arboreal language when they speak of their roots, a culture that is in their blood, a connection to Afghanistan’s holy soil, and when they compare Afghanistan with a nurturing mother figure. When I speak of

roots, I do not mean to say that these are naturally and primordially given. Ideas of roots rest upon inventions and imaginations. It is important to realise however that they appear to be natural and authentic in the minds of people.

My research data has shown a strong interconnectedness of discourses of both roots and routes. Identity and connections between people and place can neither be seen as primordial and unchanging, nor as infinitely flexible. Claims of roots play an important role among Afghans in diaspora, but they are weakened by the recognition that routes also have had an influence on their identity, culture and attachment to territory. Paradoxically, it were these experiences of change and displacement and uncertainties about identity themselves that generated the longing to cling to an anchor of roots in the first place.

Being Afghan might mean something vastly different for people in diaspora than for those inside Afghanistan. A remarkable comment was made in Chapter 8 by an Afghan who had never experienced displacement: “All those folks from abroad are talking about their identity. I have never known the luxury to occupy myself with such things.” For diasporic Afghans, Afghan identity is formed in direct contact and contrast to non-Afghans. Practises and beliefs that used to be simply a part of life have become conscious symbols of Afghanness, even if these had to be moderated and adapted to the new environment. To be an Afghan means belonging to a family that has been broken up and scattered all over the world. It means having been displaced from one place to another, and having memories of childhood, landscapes, war, loss and flight.

Many Afghans believe that German society puts up barriers against integration, but at the same time they themselves resist socio-cultural integration and identifying themselves as Germans. My informants themselves view their Afghan identity as inborn and inescapable. This biological inheritance through blood and genes must however be accompanied with cultural inheritance. Due to the above-mentioned importance of cultural practises and memories in conceptions of Afghanness, Afghans are afraid that their ‘natural’ identity as Afghans will fade away if they do not do the things that make them Afghan and do not remember ‘where they came from’. Respondents acknowledge that living in another society necessarily involves change, but adaptation to life in Germany can constitute a moral and ideological conflict. Children and young Afghans in particular are considered susceptible to change due to their lack of memories of Afghanistan and their exposure to different values and lifestyles, with the result that the older generation does not consider them to be ‘real’ Afghans and they themselves often struggle to define their identity.

My research has paid attention to the ways in which the diaspora imagines their differences and similarities in regard to the local Afghan population, as well as to the question of if the local population would regard them differently if they were to return there. One respondent spoke about the “parallel processes of getting to know each other” that occur when members of the two groups are confronted with the stereotypical images of each other. A shortcoming in the field of diaspora studies is that the relation between a diaspora and a country of origin is rarely regarded from the viewpoint of the latter. A suggestion for further research would be an investigation into the way that the resident population imagines what the identity and lifestyle is of Afghans in

the West. A related and highly important question would be if members of the Western diaspora would be welcomed back.

### **Terminology**

This study has not only become an evaluation of the definitions and localisations of home for Afghans in Germany, but it has also severely criticized the scholarly definitions of home and homeland. Implicit in the concept of homeland is the idea of an emotional link between a diaspora and its place of origin. Rather than presupposing such an emotional attachment and regarding a diaspora as a homogeneous entity, my research aimed at questioning the specific nature of that link in the case of various individuals. Diasporic communities are extremely heterogeneous in terms of internal differences among their members. Even more alarming is the use of the concept home. Home has become a fashionable concept within the study of displacement, but there is still no consensus about its meaning. It is usually the ultimate power of the individual researcher to decide what to classify as home and what not. This arbitrariness is even more pressing in cases where interviews and other forms of data collection have taken place in a language in which there is no clear equivalent for the English word home. Due to its density in referents and connotations in the Anglican cultural-linguistic context, home is not easily translatable into and from other languages without running the risk of imposing one's own meanings and ignoring meanings that are specific to the research population. This may in turn lead to different choices of translations and hence different research outcomes, thus threatening research validation. The same holds true for the term homeland that is also infused with emotional connotations and therefore hard to translate. A researcher has the right to employ theoretical concepts that the research group would not have used and aggregate more than one emic term into a single theoretical concept, but this was not what I preferred to do in my study. I decided to rely on the terminology that my respondents themselves used, that have cognate meanings but are not exact equivalents of the English concepts. The concepts that received attention were *watan* and *khāna* in Dari (or *kur* in Pashto), and *Heimat* and *Zuhause* in German. While discourses of *watan* reflected ideas of roots and an original home, the other concepts were useful in discussing the influence of routes.

### ***Watan***

One kind of home that Afghans identify with is named *watan* and refers to ideas of roots. The term *watan* is reserved for the place of ancestral origin. Implicit in the notion of *watan* is a certain emotional value that is differently constituted for each individual. In the ideal conception, *watan* is a geographical and social area where one feels at home and can base one's personal identity upon, where family and friends live, where one can rely on the people and where one experiences security, social warmth and a strong connection to the soil. These ideal qualities call upon many attributes that contemporary Afghanistan in reality does not offer. The people that one feels close to may be dispersed all around the globe, and protection and nourishment are not guaranteed on Afghanistan's soil. Interestingly, a love and pride for *watan* can continue to be expressed no matter what cruelties are taking place in Afghanistan. *Watan* itself is not to blame for this, and is imagined as a female and innocent victim, 'raped' by malevolent people and weaponry. Because of this rift between the ideal and reality that forces Afghans to live *dur az watan*, far away from the *watan*, discourses of *watan* are infused with a high level of tragedy, nostalgia for the past and a sense of loss or even homelessness. Encounters between the imagined and the real Afghanistan evoke mixed emotions.

The importance of *watan* as a home for displaced Afghans lies in its metaphysical resource of identity and feelings of belonging, and not so much as an actual place in the here and now to which one must return at all costs. A feeling of belonging to Afghanistan is not just a bond to the Afghan territory, but is often based on a sense of closeness to a social network of relatives and friends, personal and collective memories, language, and cultural products and practises. Because these aspects are not necessarily bound to a specific place and can be recreated in Hamburg and elsewhere, there is no pressing need to return. Although a sense of longing accompanies the notion of *watan*, there are large interpersonal differences in the strength of this longing, as well as a huge gap between nostalgic longing and efforts to transform this dream of returning into a reality. For Afghans without a secure residential status, returning to Afghanistan is not a dream but a nightmare. Instead, they generally cling to the dream of being allowed to stay in Germany.

## **Return**

The role of a nostalgic longing for roots in the decision to return must not be overestimated. The decision whether or not to return is first of all the outcome of pragmatic considerations. The needs of economical security, education for the young generation, housing, medical care, safety, the comfort of running water, electricity and heating, and closeness of kin may be fulfilled better outside Afghanistan. Afghans may label the place that fulfils their practical needs home, but this is not necessarily the case. Rose (1995 in: Osborne 2001: 4) notes that: "One way in which identity is connected to a particular place is by feeling that you belong to that place. It's a place in which you feel comfortable, or at home, because part of how you define yourself is symbolized by certain qualities of that place." My study has shown however that the place that is turned to for identity resources may not be the place in which one feels most comfortable and thus the place one prefers to live. In the words of one respondent: "*Watan is watan*, but still we want to live in Germany."

The answer to the question if Afghans will eventually return to Afghanistan depends initially on the economic and political prognoses of the country. Safety is an important issue, but it would also depend on the availability of work, housing, education and health care, and on the development of democracy and human rights - especially women's rights. In all these areas, Afghanistan still has a long way to go. However, if Afghans from Western countries would return, this should not be seen as a 'restoration of natural order', as such returns are likely to raise questions about the relationship between the returnees and the local population. Tensions between returnees and local Afghans could form yet another fault line in Afghanistan's fractious society. Skinner states that conflicts between returnees and resident populations are not uncommon, especially when larger groups return (Skinner 1999: 430). Afghans who have resided in Western countries are used to a higher standard of living and comfort and will probably not be satisfied with a low local salary. Their lifestyle and ideas about the state constitution and society might clash with those of conservative and rural Afghans. Azimi's poem in Chapter 7 ended with: "We will be leaders to show the way, when we return." It is a real possibility that the local population does not welcome such guidance by Afghans who wish to return to take up influential positions.

However, even if Afghanistan's situation changes for the better, I consider it unlikely that large-scale voluntary returns will take place. World history has shown that while most diasporas maintain an interest in their ancestral 'homelands', the bulk of the people remain in the countries they have immigrated to. Instead of returning to the

roots, they prefer to imagine their roots from a distance, grounding them in other soil and mixing them with other kinds of belongings. A return would mean a new uprooting.

### **Multiple Senses of Home**

An unambiguous sense of belonging, solely based on discourses of roots, is difficult to maintain. *Watan* is not the only building block that constitutes identity and notions of home and belonging. Tamana's account clarifies how the ideals of roots intercede with current German and Afghan realities:

"*Watan* expresses a very strong feeling of longing," Tamana says. "Afghanistan is in my head exactly the same as I left it." "Idyllic," she typifies it. "*Watan* is connected to memories... with images of certain places... with celebrations. The whole family was together and we celebrated *Eid* together." She also strongly connects *watan* with music and language. She then focuses on the routes that both she and Afghanistan have taken and which complicate a reunion with Afghanistan: "Here, I am confronted with totally different values. I'm not a real Afghan girl any more. We can't practise the real Afghan culture here. It's truly a clash of two totally different worlds." She feels uncomfortable with a hybrid identity, and longs to have an unambiguous sense of belonging and to know exactly who she is and where she belongs. This is why she tries to grasp onto her roots and to idealised images of *watan*. But she cannot escape the fact that living in another society has influenced her to a large extent. Although she does not define herself as a German, Germany is the place that she is familiar with, where her family and friends live and where she has established a life. Contemporary Afghanistan is an alien place to her, far removed from everyday reality in Germany. Would she like to return? "Yes, I would like to go to Afghanistan. I have a strong longing. But Afghanistan is not the same any more. It is a completely new Afghanistan... It has changed so much." She concludes: "I don't know if I could live there... Certainly not forever."

The influence of routes becomes apparent when respondents reflect upon their identity and their personal meanings of *Heimat* and *Zuhause*. Their testimonies highlight other levels of belonging and home which show both the large interpersonal variation in definitions and localisations, and the multiple and fragmented senses of home and belonging within the individual. Young Afghans in particular define identity, home and belonging in creative ways that refute simplistic answers to questions about the connection between place, culture and identity. Afghans have not so much been lifted from their local and familiar places and thrown into the global post-modern whirligig, but they are constantly concerned with the creation of new localities and niches. Unfortunately this process is severely hampered by German legislation in the case of many of them. For thousands of Afghans in Hamburg without a secure residence permit, the search for a safe and stable place to call home continues to this day.

### **Return Programs**

The increasingly restricted asylum, naturalisation and repatriation policies complicate Afghans' identification with the German state and nation, and might amplify the importance of roots and their own ethnic community. However, Afghans are more likely to persevere in creating niches to build up an existence in Germany than to decide to return to Afghanistan voluntarily. Exclusionist policies aimed at discouraging immigrants to settle in Germany permanently do not seem to have led to the desired results.

Hamburg's immigration department is increasing its pressure on between five thousand six hundred and fifteen thousand Afghans that live in a constant state of insecurity to choose between deportation and its so-called 'humane alternative' of voluntary return. Afghanistan's Minister for Repatriation and Refugees, Mohammed Azam Dadfar, requested the Hamburg interior minister Nagel to "abandon any such plans." Dadfar told the

German Spiegel magazine: “We take the people back, because it is our duty, but I explicitly said that we cannot assume responsibility for them,” and called the repatriation plans “counter-productive.” He also said that the financial grant that voluntary returnees receive is just enough to cover a few months in Kabul (Dahlkamp 2005). One could seriously question if mass-scale returns of Afghans from Hamburg and other places would benefit Afghanistan’s fragile peace and development processes. The Afghans who are not allowed to remain in Germany do not have the legal possibilities to gather working experience and qualifications in Germany and would return nearly empty-handed and probably highly frustrated. They have not much to offer Afghanistan, and in their view, Afghanistan has not much to offer them.

Practically all the German and European return programs are designed for a permanent return, but this is not the option that Afghans themselves prefer. More interest in returning might be shown if Afghans have the opportunity to contribute to the reconstruction of Afghanistan without jeopardising their residential status and giving up their life in Germany. Even those Afghans that call Afghanistan their true and only home would probably prefer to return to Afghanistan with a German passport safely tucked in their pocket, working for an international company or organisation instead of a local one. With the entire educational elite present in Europe and other countries in the West, and a new Afghan generation educated abroad, there should be a considerable potential for the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Due to the diaspora’s internal fragmentation, Afghans have not yet managed to combine their forces. A high level of distrust has to be overcome in order to make cooperation possible, and to attain that they firstly have to work through the traumatic events that have led to their dispersal all over the world. I met a great number of Afghans who showed an interest in assisting in the development of Afghanistan, but they were very unsure about how to arrange that in practise. It would be a good thing if the international community, the Afghan government and the diaspora made a joint effort to investigate the possibility of deploying the knowledge, skills and patriotism of diasporic Afghans in order to make Afghanistan into a future ‘home to live in’, and diminish the need for Afghans to claim asylum elsewhere. In my eyes, that would be a more durable solution than forcing unwilling Afghans who have been living outside Afghanistan for years to return ‘home’, since my research has clearly shown that this current ‘durable solution’ is based on a false understanding of home.

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Afghan-German Online	<a href="http://www.afghan-german.de">http://www.afghan-german.de</a>
AfghanMania	<a href="http://www.afghanmania.de">http://www.afghanmania.de</a>
Afghansite	<a href="http://www.afghansite.com">http://www.afghansite.com</a>
Anwaltsteam	<a href="http://www.anwalts-team.de">http://www.anwalts-team.de</a>
Arbeitsgruppe Entwicklung und Fachkräfte im Bereich der Migration und der Entwicklungszusammenarbeit	<a href="http://www.agef.net">http://www.agef.net</a>
Die Ausländerbeauftragte des Senats der Freien und Hansestadt Hamburg ( <i>dissolved</i> )	<a href="http://www.hamburg.de/Behoerden/Auslaenderbeauftragter">http://www.hamburg.de/Behoerden/Auslaenderbeauftragter</a>
Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge	<a href="http://www.bamf.de">http://www.bamf.de</a>
Bundesregierung Online	<a href="http://www.bundesregierung.de">http://www.bundesregierung.de</a>
Central Intelligence Agency	<a href="http://www.cia.gov">http://www.cia.gov</a>
Deutsche Auslandschule am Netz	<a href="http://www.zfa-kabul.dasan.de">http://www.zfa-kabul.dasan.de</a>
Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Holland	<a href="http://www.minbuza.nl">http://www.minbuza.nl</a>
eBay	<a href="http://www.ebay.com">http://www.ebay.com</a>
Epiphytes.net	<a href="http://www.epiphytes.net">http://www.epiphytes.net</a>
Hamburg.de	<a href="http://www.hamburg.de">http://www.hamburg.de</a>
Hamburger Hafen und Lagerhaus AG	<a href="http://www.hhla.de">http://www.hhla.de</a>
Human Rights Watch	<a href="http://hrw.org">http://hrw.org</a>
Info4Alien	<a href="http://www.info4alien.de/stat.htm">http://www.info4alien.de/stat.htm</a>
International Organisation for Migration	<a href="http://www.iom.int">http://www.iom.int</a>
IOM - Return of Qualified Afghans	<a href="http://rqa-iom.org">http://rqa-iom.org</a>
Lonely Planet	<a href="http://www.lonely-planet.org">http://www.lonely-planet.org</a>
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Statistisches Bundesamt	<a href="http://www.destatis.de">http://www.destatis.de</a>
Tema Modersmål	<a href="http://modersmal.skolutveckling.se">http://modersmal.skolutveckling.se</a>
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees	<a href="http://www.unhcr.ch">http://www.unhcr.ch</a>
United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants	<a href="http://www.refugees.org">http://www.refugees.org</a>
ZAV Internationale Arbeitsentwicklung	<a href="http://www.zav-reintegration.de">http://www.zav-reintegration.de</a>

## Appendix I TYPES OF RESIDENCE PERMITS

<b>Aufenthaltserlaubnis – unbefristet</b> (§ 24 AuslG [Aliens Act])	For those who are recognised as refugees and who have the right of asylum according to §16a GG (constitution).	Also called ‘big asylum’. Refugee passport: one can travel anywhere except to the country of origin.
	For quota refugees that were invited by the German government.	Access to employment and education.
	Issued under certain conditions (housing, no social welfare, knowledge of German, no crimes) after 5 years of <i>Aufenthaltserlaubnis – befristet</i> .	Can be withdrawn if political conditions in homeland change.
	It might be issued after 8 years of <i>Befugnis</i> (§ 35 AuslG).	
<b>Aufenthaltserlaubnis - befristet</b> (§ 15 AuslG)	Residence permit that is not bound to a specific cause, e.g. issued in cases of a family reunion.	
<b>Aufenthaltsberechtigung</b> (§ 27 AuslG)	Issued under certain conditions after 8 years of <i>Aufenthaltserlaubnis</i> or in some <i>Bundesländer</i> after 5 years of <i>Aufenthalterlaubnis - unbefristet</i>	Most secure status. Can only be withdrawn after commitment of serious crimes.
<b>Aufenthaltsbewilligung</b> (§ 28 AuslG) Valid for max. 2 years	Bound to a specific cause, i.e. study, internship or seasonal employment. When that cause is omitted, the foreigner has to leave Germany.	
<b>Aufenthaltsbefugnis</b> (§ 30 ff. AuslG) Valid for max. 2 years.	Temporary protection issued on pressing humanitarian or political grounds. For certain groups of refugees and victims of civil war according to the 1951 Geneva Convention (§ 51 AuslG), and in cases where a forced return would mean <i>refoulement</i> (serious safety risks) (§ 53 AuslG).	The ‘weakest’ title, also called ‘small asylum’. Refugee passport: one can travel anywhere except to the country of origin. Can be withdrawn if political conditions in homeland change. Family reunion is not allowed. Aliens act allows employment; employment bureau does not.
	In exceptional cases it is issued after 2 years of <i>Duldung</i> (§ 30 AuslG).	
<b>Duldung</b> (§ 54 ff. AuslG) Valid for max. 6 months	After rejection of asylum application if obstacles to deportation exist.	Not a residence permit. Person is legally obligated to leave Germany, but deportation is deferred for humanitarian or practical reasons. Person is not allowed to leave the area he/she is confined to. No or limited access to labour market (max. 2 hours a day). Family reunion is not allowed.
	Another type of <i>Duldung</i> is issued to those who did not ask for asylum but cannot be expelled. This type can never be ‘upgraded’ to a more secure status.	
<b>Aufenthalts gestattetung</b> (§ 55, AsylVfG [Asylum Procedure Code]) Valid for the length of the asylum procedure	Status during asylum procedure.	Possessor is not allowed to leave the area he/she is confined to. No or limited access to labour market. Family reunion is not allowed.

(Source: Website Anwaltsteam; Müncher Flüchtlingsrat)

## Appendix II MAP OF HAMBURG



(Source: Hamburg.de)

## **Appendix III PROGRAMS FOR VOLUNTARY (PERMANENT) RETURN**

### **Reintegration and Emigration Program for Asylum-Seekers in Germany and Government Assisted Repatriation Programme (REAG/GARP)**

- Administered by the International Organisation for Migration on behalf of the German Ministry of Interior and the Federal States
- Full payment of transportation costs
- Travel assistance and an initial start-up cash of €500 per adult and €250 per child (< 12) paid on arrival in Kabul (max. €1.500 per family)

### **'Return to Employment in Afghanistan' (REA)**

- Administered by AGEF by order of the Central Office for Employment Mediation (ZAV), and funded by the Ministry for Economical Cooperation and Development (BMZ)

#### **For unqualified Afghan nationals:**

- Possibility to apply for jobs through the AGEF office in Berlin, or after arrival through one of six AGEF-offices in Afghanistan
- 3 months' 'training on the job' as artisan
- 'Employment Promotion Package': 1 year practical and theoretical training while working for a local company
- 10-day business course: marketing, accountancy, calculation, and development of a business plan, with the possibility to receive a start capital from the German Society for Investment and Development
- Possibility to receive an English, computer or accountancy course at the Employment Promotion Centre in Kabul, Herat, Jalalabad, Mazar-e Sharif or Qandahar

#### **For qualified Afghan nationals:**

- In possession of a secure residence status and
- With 2 or more years of professional experience in Germany and/or a work contract in Afghanistan
- That are willing to take up employment in Afghanistan
- Transportation and start-up financial assistance

### **Return, Reception and reintegration of Afghan Nationals to Afghanistan (RANA)**

- Administered by the IOM and funded by the European Commission and the German government
- Travel assistance for 5.000 Afghans who return from Europe
- 1.500 of them have the opportunity to receive a three month's training course in a training centre in Kabul, e.g. computer training, English language and various crafts; boarding and lodging possible for males
- €1.500 start-up assistance for a number of returnees that want to set up their own businesses
- Reception modalities at Kabul Airport; assistance with custom formalities and information on housing, landmines, education, insurance, etc
- Medical assessment and assistance on arrival
- A 1 or 2 nights' hotel stay if necessary
- Onward transportation to final destination
- Eight IOM offices in Afghanistan offer information services

### **Special Migrants Assistance Program (SMAP) - IOM Program for self-paying migrants**

The IOM offers reduced airfares and books the flight for those who are not eligible to receive direct assistance through the REAG/GARP programme

### **Programme for voluntary return funded by the municipality of Hamburg**

- Start-up assistance of €800 – 1000, dependent on the legal status of the returnee
- 50% of the travel expenses; the other half is paid by the state within the REAG/GARP-programme

(Sources: Websites AGEF, IOM, ZAV; oral information gathered during fieldwork)