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by Mikhail S. Pelevin, St Petersburg, Izdatel'stvo Sankt-Peterburgskogo Universiteta, 2019, 383 pp., 779 roubles (hbk), ISBN 978-5-288-05965-0

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BOOK REVIEW

‘Khatakskaia khronika’: korpus i funktsii teksta, by Mikhail S. Pelevin, St Petersburg, Izdatel’stvo Sankt-Peterburgskogo Universiteta, 2019, 383 pp., 779 roubles (hbk), ISBN 978-5-288-05965-0

Lamentations on the recent proliferation of lopsided studies of Afghanistan dealing with various policies have become a platitude. What is less obvious is a worrisome trend, even for serious academic research, that focuses exclusively on a select corpus of original sources while overlooking the largely untapped pool of medieval and early modern texts. These neglected sources provide a plethora of information on the little-known aspects of complex Pashtun history and society in the sixteenth–eighteenth centuries. Mikhail Pelevin’s book offers a long overdue remedy to this imbroglio. It is a thorough study of *Tarikh-e Murassa’* (The Ornamented History) (Afzal Khān Khattak 1974) by Khattak Chief Afzal Khan (1665/66–1740/41) and his grandfather, Khushhal Khan Khattak (1613–89), who was also a chief. This is the first purely prosaic collection of Khattak tribal histories, diaries, memoirs, letters and hagiographies in Pashto compiled over a few decades. It is partially based on the Pashto rendition of the Persian *Makhzan-e Afghani*, also known as *Tarikh-e Khanjahani* (Al-Haravī 1960–62) by Ni’matallah Haravi (1612/13), and well-known Mughal histories. Pelevin rightly singles out the sixth section (*daftar*) of the book – which he styles *The Khattak Chronicles*, independently authored by Afzal Khan and Khushhal Khan Khattak – that deals exclusively with Khattak tribal history as the most valuable both from a historiographical perspective and in terms of literary development. Since the advent of the Rawshani movement in the mid-1500s, and for a century thereafter, the Pashto literature had been mainly dominated by religious writing with Khushhal Khan Khattak, who is aptly described by Robert Nichols as the ideal-type militant poet–warrior (Nichols 2010, 216) and historiographer, breaking away from this fold with Afzal Khan following suit.

The book’s four chapters deal with the textual study of the *Chronicles* and the author’s views of Pashtun ethnicity, politics and religious authorities active among the Pashtuns. They also analyse narration devices and features.

In the introduction, Pelevin provides a brief overview of the development of the earliest Pashto literature, which is extensively dealt with in his previous book *Afganskaia literatura pozdnego srednevekov’ia* (Pelevin 2010).

Pelevin observes an interesting narrative device that he interprets as psychological profiling employed in the *Chronicles*, namely, a rendition of various characters’ speech or even alleged thoughts. That appears to be a common feature of early Afghan texts irrespective of their language; *Halnamah-e Pir-e Dastgir* (Mukhlis 1986) tells the story of the founder of the Rawshani movement in the same manner, though in Persian. Pelevin also scrutinizes other textual characteristics, such as folklore elements, poetic quotations and tropes.

Reflecting a rather hierarchical power structure of the Khattak tribe with the position of a chief resting in a specific clan (*khan-khel*), as opposed to the more egalitarian tribes where chiefs were more like *condottieri*, Pelevin notes Afzal Khan’s description of the three ways of acquiring the power of a chief (*riyasat*), including by consensual agreement (*ijma’i*) through the tribal assembly (*jirga*), hereditary, based on the primogeniture principle (*mirasi* or *mawrusi*) or usurpation (*taghlibi*). While Afzal Khan tacitly favours the second one, while paying lip-service to the first, he also endorses the last one as long as it serves the interests

of the people. That clearly reflects his family history with references to the Pashtun Lodi and Suri dynasties in India serving legitimizing purposes.

The promotion of the supremacy of the Khattak tribe *khan-khel*, serving as a recruitment pool for chiefs, was intended to legitimise a pattern shift from a more egalitarian political *modus operandi* to the polity dominated by chiefs occurring in the wake of a tribally initiated incipient state formation. This endeavour, however, failed with the demise of Khushhal Khan because the Khattaks were no match for the might of the Great Mughals, who eventually suppressed their aspirations to an embryonic statehood and integrated the Khattak chiefs into the imperial system that offered land tenancy in return for state services (*jagirdari*) and ranks determining allowances (*mansabdari*).

The *Chronicles* provide a lengthy description of Pashtun tribal genealogies where the Karlanay origin of the Khattaks is glossed over. In terms of perceived lineage, the Karlanay was only an associate division of the Pashtun ethnoses. Therefore, a conspicuous linkage with the Karlanay might have been detrimental for the ambitious Khattaks. By focusing on genealogies, the *Chronicles* follow a well-established tribal as well as a Sufi tradition of instrumentalising genealogies and local, often oral, histories. That refuted outsiders' (frequently the imperial ones) claims to superior religious and political authority. Pelevin identifies a multi-layered ethnic and tribal identity of Afzal Khan, noting the pre-eminence of the latter with the celebration of Pashtun political solidarity being less pronounced in his case than in the writings and activities of his grandfather who was famous for his ethnic sentiment.

Pelevin rightly maintains that the *Chronicles* represent an authentic source not only of historical information but also of the then contemporary interpretation. However, its standing as a primary source in comparison with Mughal histories and official documents is not weighed and scrutinized.

The 69-page-long appendices provide specimens of various genres found in the *Chronicles* that are meticulously translated into the Russian language with many terms also rendered in the original Pashto. Of particular interest for understanding the peculiarities of the position of religious authorities in the Khattak tribal environment are the sections dealing with the 1723–24 conflict between tribal religious authorities led by Sarfaraz Gul and Afzal Khan, the latter of whom was even ousted from power by the sheikhs for a short while. Afzal Khan's derogatory attitude towards Islamic actors reveals that at that time it was the Khattak tribal authorities who acted as agents of political consolidation and manoeuvring vis-à-vis the Mughal administration. Thus, sheikhs who were usually not part of the kinship-based segmentary tribal institutions should have been kept at arm's length, while in cases of supra-tribal unification that were legitimized by an Islamic agenda they might get an upper hand. As Afghanistan and wider Pashtun lands are a compendium of peripheries, Pelevin's book demonstrates that Islamic globalization failed to standardize local Muslim and governance practices partly due to the rather unique position that Pashtun Islam claims: there are no non-Islamic practices among the Pashtuns. Therefore, the Pashtuns long have augmented the resilience of their tribal institutions and way of life that safeguard their ethnic survival.


The book concludes with extensive indexes of individuals, geographical places, ethnonyms, titles of the texts mentioned in the book, poems and separate *bayts*, as well as a detailed glossary of painstakingly transliterated Pashtun terminology. That also makes the monograph a useful reference book. However, a more *problematique*-centred approach going beyond a meticulous study of the source by putting it in a broader historical, social and cultural context might be helpful.

Many medievalists engaged in the study of Afghanistan and its environs recognize that comprehending the present without a profound knowledge of the past is neither feasible nor viable. An appreciation of historical and cultural contexts provides a calibration tool for

the analysis of the here and now. Thus, any student of Afghanistan either of an academic or of a practitioner persuasion will assuredly benefit from this book, which navigates through rather uncharted deserts and mountains of medieval Afghan lands and fills several gaps in the scholarship on Afghan history and culture.

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