

MAGATI: SOME NOTES ON  
AN UNKNOWN LANGUAGE  
OF NORTHERN AFGHANISTAN

In the summer of 1976, the Department of Ethnology of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan, Poland, organised an ethnological expedition to Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> In the course of fieldwork conducted in northern Afghanistan in the vicinity of Kaisor (Fariab province), the expedition came across an unknown and so far undescribed group which differed from the surrounding population in many ways. The men's main occupation was blacksmithing and they were also circumcisers for the region; they were endogamous and had distinct physical features; and they lived in a separate village and used a distinct language.

The ethnonym of this group is Haydari (plural *Haydarihā*). They number several hundred individuals and inhabit their own village of Haydarikhona and a part of a nearby village named Chor Tagou, though a few individual Haydari families have broken away from the community and live in Qaisar and other towns. They have very little land and occupy the lowest position in the local hierarchy. The keen awareness the Haydari have of their separate nature results from the particular nature of their existence and the attitudes of their neighbours, who treat them as a socially inferior group.

The Haydaris' nearest neighbours are the Qipchaqs, who consider themselves to be Uzbeks but at the same time are aware of

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This article is based on a paper entitled 'The Polish Discovery of an Argot-type Language in Northern Afghanistan', first presented at a meeting of the Oriental Studies Committee of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Cracow in November 1980.

<sup>1</sup> For a description of Polish ethnographic interest in Afghanistan, see Dzięgiel's article in this issue of *JASO*.

their separate ethnic origin. In the same area are villages inhabited by the Char Aymaqs. In the settlements near the bazaar in Qaisar live the families of merchants, craftsmen, clerks and other newcomers, who came there because of its development as a centre of trade and administration - Pashtuns, Turkmen, Uzbeks, Hazara and Tadzhiks. For many centuries the Haydaris have been linked mainly with the Qipchaqs - as servants living on their land - but their journeys to the bazaars in Qaisar and elsewhere have enabled them to make contact with other ethnic groups too. The Qipchaqs consider the Haydaris to be originally Baluchis from south-eastern Iran who brought blacksmithing with them and who settled on lands already occupied by the Qipchaqs. They also point to the dark skin of the Haydaris and say that twenty or thirty years ago they looked 'very black and ugly', but that nowadays they look less unattractive than before. Other views expressed by Qipchaq informants are that the Haydaris belonged to the Char Aymaq group or that they were Tadzhiks. Haydaris would rather see themselves as a Qipchaq clan and stated that they had arrived from somewhere in the direction of China, that they had lived on this territory before the Qipchaqs, and that they were told to learn blacksmithing.<sup>2</sup>

Haydaris refer to their separate and carefully guarded secret language as *zaboni magati*, 'human language' (*zabon*, 'language'; *magat*, 'man, human being', *magati*, 'of man, human'). I propose to adopt this name and use the term Magati. In contacts with outsiders they speak Persian (in its local Dari version), a language long known to the Qipchaqs, but they also know Uzbek. During a collective interview in Haydarikhona village, informants said that some thousands of people used a language similar to Magati in Kabul and Herat.<sup>3</sup> Qipchaqs stated that the language was neither Iranian or Turkic but somewhat similar to Urdu; they seemed to regard it as rather unpleasant on the ear.

While conducting their research on the Haydari group, members of the Poznan Expedition collected a small sample of linguistic data. It is not much to go on; but for the sake of the record I produce the entirety of what was brought back from the field, exactly as received (and transcribed, moreover, according to the rules of Polish orthography):

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<sup>2</sup> Interviews with Haydaris taped by the Poznan Expedition; see also Zbigniew Jasiewicz, 'The Haydariha, an Afghanistan Community of Blacksmiths: An Attempt to Change the Ethnic Situation and Social Position', Paper presented at the 10th International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, Wrocław 1978.

<sup>3</sup> Some informants I interviewed in Afghanistan in 1978 maintained that Magati speakers were also to be found in Mazar-i-Sharif.

1.

<i>magata miaz (bias?)</i>	see man
<i>magata miazem (biazem?)</i>	see that man
<i>katagi</i>	mature man
<i>mikim (bikim?)</i>	go
<i>al</i>	bread
<i>duka</i>	house, room
<i>gurak</i>	horse
<i>danameza</i>	boy
<i>buduku (budyky?)</i>	girl, daughter
<i>kalpuk</i>	dog
<i>chumszoch</i>	sheep
<i>kolin</i>	carpet
<i>hoisk</i>	hammer
<i>sandok</i>	chest
<i>ambur</i>	storeroom
<i>dam</i>	blacksmith's bellows
<i>lou</i>	iron
<i>ochangari</i>	smithery
<i>kategori</i>	father
<i>apa</i>	mother
<i>donom (danam?)</i>	woman, wife
<i>nadachszut</i>	man
<i>kucza</i>	road
<i>borgh</i>	orchard
<i>louza</i>	water melon
<i>jiryk</i>	money
<i>gadar</i>	donkey
<i>kaźloty</i>	sickle
<i>hurduk</i>	wheat
<i>gadarek</i>	barley
<i>dutki</i>	tobacco <sup>4</sup>

2.

<i>Man magateəm</i>	I am a man
<i>Man bozor mikinəm</i>	I am going to the bazaar
<i>Tu bozor mikini</i>	you are going to the bazaar
<i>U bozor mikina</i>	he is going to the bazaar
<i>Mo bozor mikinəm</i>	we are going to the bazaar
<i>Šumo bozor mikinid</i>	you are going to the bazaar
<i>Onho bozor mikinən</i>	they are going to the bazaar
<i>Man bozor bikimidəm</i>	I went to the bazaar
<i>Tu magata miyazi</i>	you see a man
<i>In magata biyaz</i>	look at that man
<i>Man dina čakuš pušbuldam</i>	yesterday I bought a hammer
<i>Čakuš mušbulam</i>	I am buying a hammer
<i>Indžo butəm</i>	I am sitting here <sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Material gathered by Professor Zbigniew Jasiewicz from children aged 8 to 12 years; ch=[kh], sz=[sh], ź=[zh], ł=[w], j=[y].

I was given this data by Professor Zbigniew Jasiewicz, head of the Poznan Expedition, with a request to identify the language it belonged to. After an initial examination, it was clear to me that the grammatical system was very similar to that of a Persian dialect, whereas the vocabulary seemed to be of mixed origin (from the Indian Peninsula, from dialects of Asiatic Gypsies, Turkic languages, Persian, Arabic and others). Further investigation led me to the conclusion that it is a hitherto unknown argot or secret language. Such languages have a very special social function, namely to protect the interests of the group. The term 'argot' is often confused with 'jargon' (incidentally the two terms come from the same source), but unlike the usage attaching to 'jargon', 'argot' does not have a pejorative meaning. Until now, information has existed on only one argot from Afghanistan, namely Zargari; others have never been collected.

It seems that Magati is very similar to the argot or secret language Chistonegi, which is used by members of the Chistoni group, weavers of sieves living scattered over the territory of the Tadzhik and Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republics. Analogies between Magati and Chistonegi in morphology and vocabulary are beyond doubt. For example:

Chistonegi	Magati	
<i>mekiməm</i>	<i>mikimim</i>	'we are going'
<i>bəkim</i>	<i>bikim</i>	'go'
<i>danawak</i>	<i>danam</i>	'woman'
<i>gadar</i>	<i>gadar</i>	'donkey'
<i>gulak</i>	<i>gurak</i>	'horse'
<i>kalpuk</i>	<i>kalpuk</i>	'dog'

As well as Persian words (e.g. *zabon*, *duka*, *ambur*, *kucza*, *chumszoch*, *borgh*, *ochangari*, *kolin*), the Magati terms listed contain borrowings from Turkic (e.g. *katęgi*, *jiryk*, *kaźloty*), as well as vocabulary from the Indian Peninsula (e.g. *gadar*, *gurak*, *al*, *lau*). However, it cannot be definitely established which language this latter group of words comes from, since many Middle and Modern Indic languages have similar forms. For example, there is a striking similarity between many Magati words and some found in the dialects of Asiatic Gypsies (e.g. *gadar*, *lau*, *magati*, *gurak*). Words of Indian origin in Magati belong, most probably, to the oldest vocabulary items and were taken from the former ancestral homeland situated in the Indian Peninsula. One may regard the words of Persian and Turkic origin as more recent, since they were adopted during the group's wanderings and after settlement on their new territories. In addition, words of Arabic origin (e.g. *kalpuk* and *haydari*) have found their way into this language. Several items of the vocabulary (e.g. *hoisk*, *nadachszut*) are similar to words used by a medieval Central Asiatic guild group called Sasyans, as is borne out by the book *Kitab-e-Sasiyān*, written in 1344.

<sup>5</sup> Material gathered by Andrzej Ananicz, again following Polish orthography, except for č as [tsh], š as [sh], ž as [zh], and ə.

The physical features of the Haydari group, who clearly differ from other groups because of their darker hair and complexion, and the Indic, possibly Gypsy elements of their vocabulary, may suggest a Gypsy origin. Yet on the basis of such scanty linguistic material it is impossible to establish the exact place in the Indian Peninsula which they once inhabited. It is possible that the ethnonym Mugat, once used by the Central Asiatic Gypsies and a name the Haydaris would have had to abandon on accepting Islam and which can still be traced in the name of their language, *magati*, is somehow connected with Magadha, the north Indian state and province which still existed in the tenth century, and with the Middle Indian language, Magadhi.

Further research on Magati would obviously require the collection of much more extensive material, which can be undertaken only in the Haydari community, and this is at present completely ruled out by the current political situation in Afghanistan. We do not even know whether this group still exists. There may be a chance of finding some representatives among the Afghan refugees and in Pakistan or Iran, since it is known that the number of non-Pashtun refugees has recently started to increase, and many have been coming to Pakistan from the north of Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This is a subject I have discussed elsewhere, e.g. 'Ethnicity among Afghan Refugees', Paper presented at a seminar in the Refugee Studies Programme, held at Queen Elizabeth House, Oxford, in March 1986.