

# Afghan Folktales from Herat

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Persian Texts in  
Transcription and Translation

Youli Ioannesyan



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Summary: Presents a collection of folktales in the Herati dialect of the Afghan Persian language, in Latin-based transliteration and English translation, supplied by phonetic and grammatical commentaries, explanations of cultural terms, and preceded by an introduction with a review of the Herati dialect. Based on academically informed fieldwork and presented in a scientific fashion, the materials were collected by the author during field research in Afghanistan in the 1980s from illiterate dialect speakers (a category which has preserved the dialect the most in terms of purity and entirety).

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*To my wife, Linda, who was behind this work*

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## PREFACE

The purpose of this book is to present folktales in the Herati dialect of the Afghan Persian language of modern Afghanistan as spoken by the sedentary population of the region of Herat (Herat city and some adjacent districts) in the northwest part of modern Afghanistan. “Afghan Persian” is used to designate the Persian of Afghanistan, otherwise known as “Kabuli Persian (in the broader sense)” or “Dari.”

Linguistic, cultural, and ethnographic studies in the region of Herat are of great importance. For centuries, Herat was one of the main cultural centers of Khorasan province, which played a significant role in the development of the Persian classical language and literature. According to the reliable historic source the *Târikh-i Sistân* (The history of Sistan), it was in Herat that the first poetical piece in New Persian (Farsi) was composed. A great number of the most prominent Persian (Persian-speaking) poets, such as Ferdowsi, F. ‘Attâr, and Khayyâm, came from this province (Khorasan), while some of them, like Jâmi and Ansâri, were originally from the Herat area (their shrines are located in the city). The language of the Persian classical literature is deeply influenced by

“Khorasani features.” The fact that poets coming from this region spoke their local Khorasani dialects in their everyday life is well attested to by the *Tabaqât of Ansâri* (eleventh century AD), written in “the old language of Herat,” published by V. Ivanow in 1923. Hence a diachronic study of the Khorasani dialects in general and Herati in particular, which have still preserved many archaic features, would cast considerable light on the formation of the language of the Persian classical literature—a common heritage of the peoples of Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia (Tajiks).

The Herati dialect’s linguistic importance from the synchronic perspective is based on two key factors. As one of the Khorasani dialects, which I classify as “central” within the continuum of modern Persian-Dari-Tajiki dialects (Ioannesyan 2007), it serves as a bridge between the Persian dialects of western Iran and the Tajiki of Central Asia, while given the geographic position of Herat as a city (situated on the border between modern Afghanistan and Iran), its dialect shares many common characteristics with both—the Persian dialects of Iran and those of Afghan Persian (Kabuli Persian/Dari)—and in this sense serves as a bridge between the Persian and Afghan Persian languages. Though historically the name “Khorasan” in a broader sense can be applied to a vast region stretching from the territory of modern eastern Iran farther eastward and embracing the whole of modern Afghanistan, from a synchronic linguistic standpoint, this term is applied to “minor Khorasan,” which covers the northeastern part of Iran (Khorasan province) and the northwestern part of Afghanistan (mainly Herat and Ghur provinces). Accordingly, the “Khorasani dialects” imply the Persian and Afghan Persian dialects of this area.

The region in question, as a result of its long political instability and constant wars, has never been open to field research, especially by westerners. My monograph, *The Herati Dialect of the Dari Language of Modern Afghanistan*, based on the materials collected by me in Afghanistan, provides the first and only systemic synchronic study and description of the dialect so far. The book (which is in Russian and is not translated into English) contains a supplement consisting of original texts about everyday life, but it leaves out the large amount of folklore texts I collected in Afghanistan.



## Preface

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The gap is being filled by this book, which presents these folklore texts to the reader. It includes the original tales in Latin-based transliteration and English translation (supplied by phonetic and grammatical commentaries) and explanations of cultural terms and is preceded by an introduction with a review of the Herati dialect. The introduction ends with a vocabulary of dialectal and common words. The words in the vocabulary are presented in the form (or forms) in which they appear on the original tape-recordings, with a reference to a published source (where possible). Throughout the book, the literary Afghan Persian form of the word to which a dialectal term corresponds is given where necessary, while the literary Persian form of the respective word appears only in special cases.

The materials were collected during my field research in Afghanistan in the 1980s from illiterate dialect speakers (this is the category which has preserved their dialect in its most purity and entirety). All the texts were first recorded on tapes and then transliterated. For studying and translating the texts, I also used the help of educated dialect speakers (Afghan college and university students of Herati descent in Leningrad/St. Petersburg). The tales presented in this book were recorded from three dialect speakers: tales 1–6 from Habibolla—a native of Hajmamad-Istâd village in Pashtun Zarghun district (located to the southeast of Herat city); tales 7–10 from Abdol Hamid—a native of Injil district (to the north of Herat city); and tale 11 from Karim—a native of Gaza village in Ghoryan (Ghurian) district (to the west of Herat city).

Since the tales are not told by “professional” narrators but by average dialect speakers, who have been exposed to fewer outside influences, they are characterized by features typical of common colloquial illiterate speech. They lack consistency and contain repetitive phrases and expressions. The narrator may drop the sentence in the middle and either leave it incomplete or start it again from the beginning. Sometimes he would go back a few sentences, breaking narrative logic, and retell the whole portion with a slight change of vocabulary. I have intentionally preserved the original texts in their dialectal purity the way they appear on the tapes. As for translation, I tried to reduce “redundancies and repetitions”

where possible and also to a certain extent diversify the words introducing direct speech (which is always introduced by the verb “to say” in the original): “said,” “told,” “asked,” “replied.”

The publication of these materials—given the cultural, historic, geographic, and ethnographic importance of the region (the border area between Afghanistan and Iran), scarcity of information about it, unavailability for modern scholarly research resulting from the unfavorable political and military situation, and the gradual disappearance of local dialects in Afghanistan, like everywhere in the world—will fill up a big vacuum in Iranian and Afghan studies. The book will be of interest primarily to linguists and language learners, and those studying Afghan Persian. It will also be useful as a language learning aid for intermediate and advanced students of spoken Afghan Persian in general and of Persian (in the broader sense) dialectology in particular, as well as foreign NGO workers or interpreters/translators who find themselves in the field in western Afghanistan or far eastern Iran. Though the present book is by no means a study in folklore literature or anthropology, these texts containing ethnographic data may be useful to folklorists or ethnographers.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Dr. F. Lewis, Dr. J. Perry, K. Popp, and N. Ackerman for their help when this book was being prepared for publication.

#### **STUDIES IN THE DIALECTS AND FOLKLORE OF HERAT AND ADJACENT REGIONS**

From a linguistic perspective, the region of Herat (Herat province of modern Afghanistan) is closely connected with Khorasan province of modern Iran, while its dialect shares all the basic features of the Khorasani group within the continuum of Persian-Dari-Tajiki dialects (see the previous comments). On the other hand, Herat has been part of Afghanistan since the inception of that country and therefore has for centuries been linked together with the rest of the Persian dialects of Afghanistan and subjected to their strong influence, primarily to the influence of the dialect of Kabul—the capital of Afghanistan. Considering these factors,

it would be proper to define the “adjacent regions” as Khorasan province of Iran and the whole of the Persian-speaking part of Afghanistan and, accordingly, briefly review some scholarly publications on the dialects and folklore of this area for the last century.

The first half of the twentieth century was marked by the appearance of a number of works on the Persian folklore and dialects of Khorasan, among which were “Rustic Poetry in the Dialect of Khorasan” and “Persian as Spoken in Birjand” by V. Ivanow. The former contained original popular quatrains with an English translation, while the latter presented folktales and quatrains in the original and in English translation. Both had a grammatical review of Khorasani dialects. Ivanow’s works, which contained many valuable observations, have maintained their significance for scholars up to now. The aforementioned author’s attention was centered primarily on southern Khorasan, while the northern part of that Iranian province became the focus of “Contes en Persane Populaire” (Tales in colloquial Persian) by H. Massé. It consisted of folktales in the dialect of Mashad and a French translation supplied with a grammatical review of the dialect.

Iranian Khorasan, and especially its southern part, remained in the attention of Iranian and western scholars all through the twentieth century, as is evidenced by the appearance of a number of publications, such as the following studies in Persian: *Osul-e Fonoloži va Tatbigh-e ân bar Guyesh-e Ghâyen* (The basics of phonology and its application to the dialect of Qâyen) by R. Zomorrodian and a more recent comprehensive description of the dialect of Birjand, *Barresi-ye Guyesh-e Birjand* (A study of the dialect of Birjand) by J. Rezaee.

Starting with the first half of the last century, Afghan Persian as one of the two official languages of Afghanistan began gradually to attract researchers’ attention, too. Some observations and comments on the peculiarities of its dialects, including Herati, were made in *Report on a Linguistic Mission to Afghanistan* by G. Morgenstierne. The same author also collected and published specimens of Afghan Persian in “Persian Texts from Afghanistan.” Basic differences between the Persian of Iran and the Persian of Afghanistan were outlined for the first time in “Stray

Notes on Kabuli-Persian” by L. Bogdanov. The main characteristic of the Western authors writing on Afghan Persian during that period was their very general approach to that language without an attempt to distinguish and specify its dialects.

The second half of the last century was marked by an increased interest in Afghan Persian dialects and the appearance of some major publications. First and foremost was the comprehensive description of the dialect of Kabul in *Le Persan Parlé en Afghanistan. Grammaire du Kâboli* (Persian as it is spoken in Afghanistan. The grammar of the dialect of Kabul) by A. Farhâdi. The book presented a very detailed picture illustrated by abundant examples. Of special importance was a table of the correlations of vowels and diphthongs among the dialects of Kabul, Herat, and Tehran. A significant event in the field of Afghan Persian studies was also the coming out of the *Loghât-e 'Âmiyâna-ye Fârsi-ye Afghânestân* ([Dictionary of] colloquial terms of the Persian of Afghânestân) by A. Afghani Nawis (in Afghan Persian). The dictionary, first appearing in 1961, was reprinted in 1985. It covered a wide range of colloquial words, expressions, and idioms primarily but not exclusively of the dialect of Kabul. The reprinted edition under the English title *A Dictionary of Afghan Persian Slangs* contained a “Supplementary” (with added words and expressions) by H. Farmand. *Le Persan Parlé en Afghanistan* and *Loghât-e 'Âmiyâna-ye Fârsi-ye Afghânestân* are still highly valuable sources for any study in the dialect of Kabul and Afghan Persian in general.

The Afghan Persian dialects of the people of Hazara were also in the focus of scholars’ attention. One of the publications on this subject was *The Hazaragi Dialect of Afghan Persian: A Preliminary Study* by G. Dulling.

Along with studying the peculiarities of the dialects, attempts were made to collect and publish folklore in those dialects. Examples of such publications (in Afghan Persian) are *Tarânahâ-ye Kohsâr* (Songs of the Mountains) compiled by A. Sho’ur and *Namunahâ-ye Folklor-e Dari* (Samples of Dari folklore) by R. Rehman. The former contained popular poetry (quatrains) while the latter (in three volumes) consisted respectively of folktales, poetry, and proverbs recorded in different regions of Afghanistan, including Herat province.

An important step forward in Afghan Persian dialectology was the appearance of the *Loghât-e Zabân-e Goftâri-ye Herât* (A vocabulary of spoken Herati) by M. Fikrat. It primarily included nouns, adjectives, and verbs. A prominent place was given in it to terms denoting items of everyday life, articles of domestic utility, and traditional foods and agricultural terminology. A big advantage of the book was the differentiation between the specifically Herati (or Khorasani) dialectal words and the common Afghan Persian colloquial vocabulary. The study of the Herati dialect was later continued in the book *Geratskiy Dialect Yazyka Dari Sovremennogo Afganistana* (The Herati dialect of the Dari language of modern Afghanistan, mentioned earlier) and a series of articles by Y. Ioannesyan, among which are “Situating the Khorasani Dialects within the Persian-Dari-Tajiki Linguistic Continuum” (in English) and “Jâygâh-e Guyesh-e Harâti dar Miyân-e Guyeshhâ-ye Goruh-e Zabâni-ye Fârsi-Dari” (“The Position of the Herati Dialect within the Dialects of the Persian-Dari Linguistic [Continuum],” in Persian). Both articles are focused on placing the Khorasani group of dialects in its proper position on the basis of the recent studies, and accordingly, a correction of the existing classification of the dialects within the Persian-Dari-Tajiki linguistic continuum is suggested (in the former article).

The most recent significant contribution to studies in Afghan Persian has been the *Encyclopædia Iranica* article “Kâboli Persian” by A. (R.) Farhâdi and J. Perry.

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