

# On the Cultural Heritage of the Pashai

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The Pashai-speaking people is a linguistic group of about 100,000 persons who live in eastern Afghanistan; they inhabit a number of side-valleys to the main Panjshir, Kabul, Kunar, and Pech valleys, from Nijrau and Tagau in the west to Kodar in the north-east. Their neighbours to the north are the Nuristani who were, until their conversion to Islam in the late 19th century, the "Kafirs of the Hindu Kush" (Robertson 1896).

The particular distribution of the Pashai-speaking groups, and the peculiarity that the many local communities live "isolated" from one another by virtue of the presence of the Pakhtuns who inhabit the main valleys, has had consequences both for the self-perception, or ethnic consciousness, among the Pashai and for the development and orientation of the scholarly investigations devoted to the Pashai within the fields of linguistics, history, and anthropology. It is the aim of this paper in the first place briefly to examine the possible relationship between the distribution pattern and the conclusions reached by historical-linguistic scholarship regarding the distant past, or "origin," of the Pashai groups; I shall argue, following the lead of Lincoln Keiser (1974), that the former has unduly influenced the latter. Secondly, I shall present an account of the more recent past of one particular Pashai group, based on ethnohistorical data collected during anthropological fieldwork<sup>1</sup> and my anthropologi-

cal interpretation of these data as well as of the few available historical sources.

In the critical attitude towards some of the results of previous scholarship, this paper may be seen as a sequel to an earlier publication (Ovesen 1983a) in which I examined the historical circumstances which led to the emergence of ethnic identities among the Nuristani and the Pashai, and, among other things, questioned the pertinence from a historical-anthropological point of view, of the sharp linguistic division between the Dardic and the Nuristani languages. These arguments will be only briefly alluded to here.

## 1. Morgenstierne's Hypothesis

Even though the name "Pashai" was first mentioned in the Western literature by Marco Polo, it was only with the publication of Vol. 8 of Grierson's *Linguistic Survey of India* (1919) that the linguistic unity of the various Pashai dialects was established, i. e., that Pashai was classified as a separate language of the Dardic group of the Indo-Aryan branch of Indo-Iranian. Soon after, Georg Morgenstierne (1926) began what was to become a life-long devotion to the study of the Dardic and Nuristani languages, one major result

Council for the Humanities. – When referring to contemporary phenomena, the present tense is the "ethnographic present" of my fieldwork, i. e., prior to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. – In my efforts to think systematically about my field material, I have benefitted from conversations and correspondence with a number of colleagues; in relation to the contents of the present paper I would especially like to thank the following: Asger Christensen, Kirsten Hastrup, Lincoln Keiser, and Michael Meeker. A first draft of the paper was read by Josef Elfenbein, Peter Snoy, and Bo Utas, to whom I am most grateful for their both critical and encouraging comments; the responsibility for not following all their suggestions is, of course, my own.

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<sup>1</sup> Fieldwork among the Pashai was carried out in March–April 1977 and February–September 1978. I gratefully acknowledge financial support from the Danish Research