

Imaginations of a Country. Spatial Perceptions and Mental Mapping in Herat

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Summary

This article is based on field research carried out in Herat. It focuses on mental mapping as a means for the investigation of spatial perceptions and illustrates the importance of such perceptions in the context of the regional orientation of one of Afghanistan's key cities and its inhabitants. In discussing contrasts between individual perceptions and collective patterns of mapping, this contribution argues that collective mental maps do not exist, but despite individual dispersions many maps show also structural similarities often reflected by stereotypes. It describes two individual maps with different focus and structure according to time, age and spatial experience against the backdrop of 'collective' attributes in mental mapping.

Manuscript received on 2007-02-16, accepted on 2007-05-05

Keywords: mental mapping, Herat, spatial perceptions

1 Introduction

Afghanistan has often been called a colonial construct since its boundaries were drawn by Great Britain and Russia in the time of the Great Game. Since the establishment of the modern state of Afghanistan at the end of the nineteenth century, the country's various regions have been culturally and economically orienting towards different directions. This is caused by its geographical position between the large cultivated regions on the Indian Subcontinent (Punjab), Central Asia (Transoxania) and Persia (Khorasan). Thus, the regional belonging and loyalty of some parts of Afghanistan was already under question even before the outbreak of the Afghan conflict. One such region is Herat, located in the northwestern corner of Afghanistan. Herat holds a particular position within the country in terms of language and culture, first and foremost because of its geographic location and its role as a gateway to

In this regard, mental maps the images of places can be used on one side to assess the mental affiliation of certain spaces, and on the other side the spatial orientation and the sense of belonging and identity of their inhabitants. The topic becomes not only relevant for the examination of spatial orientation but mental maps allow results regarding preferences and common stereotypes. At the same time, they are closely interlinked to the sense of identity. The last point is crucial because the people of Herat have always been accused of having strong preferences towards Iran. Their Afghan identity has been doubted in general.

This article aims to answer the following questions: how are mental maps shaped; and which are the most important characteristics, preferences as well as coordinates and influencing factors. Although the existence of collective mental maps is a disputed subject, I will depict the most visible characteristics I observed during a six month field stay in Western Afghanistan. These common attributes will be illustrated and explained by a sample. Simultaneously, differences between collective and individual mental maps will be discussed.

2 Mental mapping in theory

Mental maps are to be seen as a means by which to understand spatial perceptions in a visualized manner. Mental mapping is a process which becomes relevant in the context of spatial experience and orientation. Originally, the term cognitive map was imposed by psychologists and was for a long time more widespread than the term mental map which was introduced by geographers. Cognitive mapping refers to the process of the perception of spatial order in the consciousness of human beings.¹ Commonly, both terms cognitive maps and mental maps are used for the structured illustration of one part of the spatial environment of human beings.²

Moreover, identity is inseparably connected to the knowledge of space surrounding the individual. Downs & Stea define mental maps as structural representations of space which an individual shapes and possesses. Such a representation illustrates the spatial environment and serves as equivalence as well as simplified model of it. The mental illustration can be saved internally and externally.

Whereas city maps or travel guides provide the external possibilities to store spatial data, the human brain keeps the information internally.³ At the same time, maps showing streets, metro lines etc. do not only serve as memory stores but transmit spatial data to the human brain and provide a useful aid for orientation. They can

¹ Hartmann, Angelika: "Konzepte und Transformationen der Trias 'Mental Maps, Raum und Erinnerung'. Einführende Gedanken zum Kolloquium", in: Damir-Geilsdorf, Sabine; Angelika Hartmann (Ed.): *Mental Maps – Raum – Erinnerung. Kulturwissenschaftliche Zugänge zum Verhältnis von Raum und Erinnerung*, Münster 2005, pp. 3-21; pp. 7.

² Downs, Roger M.; David Stea: *Kognitive Karten: Die Welt in unseren Köpfen*, New York 1982, pp. 24.

³ *Ibid.* p. 49/ pp. 90.

also be seen as a source transferring spatial data indirectly. Visual media, oral and written information etc. provide and transmit spatial information, in such cases the individual is not confronted with space directly but needs help for orientation.⁴

Downs & Stea describe mental or cognitive mapping as characterized by three main features: it is an interactive, selective and structuring process. Spatial data is received, structured, arranged and adjusted by the human brain according to the actual needs of the individual for orientation in a given environment.⁵ The final product is a mental map defined by Henrikson as "[...] ordered but continuing adapted structure of the mind – alternatively conceivable as a process – by reference to which a person acquires, codes, stores, recalls, reorganizes, and applies, in thought or in action, information about his or her large scale geographic environment, in part or in its entirety."⁶

The perception of space, and the image we form it in, is to a great extent influenced by a variety of factors, such as climate, landscape, culture, language, political attitudes, and accessibility. According to Gould & White, aspects of language and culture play a crucial role because they make events predictable. Other factors like sex, age, social roles, occupation and personality may also influence the structural outcome of mental mapping.⁷

There is a general dispute about the role of collective mental maps and whether they are likely to exist, or not. While Haynes argues that people sharing the same culture, age, sex and common values tend to perceive the world surrounding them in similar ways,⁸ Downs & Stea suggest that there is a universal ability to create cognitive

tion of Iran, particularly Mashhad and Tehran, on the other hand. The fieldwork was based on the following questions: How are single places and regions in Afghanistan perceived from the perspective of Herat, and which aspects do effect spatial perceptions? Do collective stereotypes regarding certain places exist? What could be possible reasons for the orientation towards Iran? Is the historical Khorasan reflected or illustrated by mental maps?

The fieldwork was largely based on qualitative methods such as participatory observation and semi structured interviews. While selecting the interlocutors randomly, I attempted to carry out interviews with people belonging to different ethnic, social and age groups in addition to different personal background. Although, conducting intensive interviews was not possible in many cases, but observations and informal talks led also to results in regarding the changeability of mental maps during a comparably short period of time. Nevertheless, I carried out interviews with as many informants as possible to come to reliable results regarding collective perceptions of space and shared patterns in mental mapping. I asked for preferences but never for rankings. Instead, some informants gave preference rankings voluntarily. Sometimes, I also asked my informants to describe certain places.

In the following sections, I will introduce and describe two individual mental maps. For visualizing preferences and perceptions, spaces with a positive image are marked in light gray and areas with negative attributes in dark colour. Both informants are originally from Herat, but patterns of mapping are different according to age. Both maps are perfect illustrations of the importance of crucial factors such as age, time and experience in influencing the outcome of mental mapping.

In a second step, I will show the most common similarities and characteristics of mental mapping in Herat. The main focus, however, will be on informants who are originally from Herat. Informants from other areas such as Badghis with whom interviews were also carried out, are not considered in this article. I will not only show attitudes and stereotypes in regard with certain places but also explain some aspects effecting processes of mental mapping.

3 Individual mental map focusing on Afghanistan

This section aims to illustrate the mental map of Ghulam Ahmad Ahmadi.¹⁰ At the time the interviews were conducted, Ghulam Ahmad was about sixty two or sixty three years old. The first and most striking characteristic of his mental map is that it does not show any preferences or spots in Iran. Ghulam Ahmad told me that he has never been there, neither as refugee nor for travelling. He said: "When the war in Afghanistan started, we could not afford going to Iran and taking refuge there. We

¹⁰ I carried out two interviews with Ghulam Ahmad Ahmadi on the 6th of March 2006 and on 14th of March 2006 in Herat. Besides these two interviews, a lot of informal talks with the informant followed during the field stay.

had not the financial means to go. Besides this, we had small children. Where should we have gone?" Thus, his family stayed in Herat. He has, of course, obtained some information about Iran through talking with family members and people who went there. In addition, he knows something about the country because of watching Iranian TV. He told me that he takes Iran for an improved and progressive country inhabited by very civilized people, but he has no spatial experience there. Indeed, Ghulam Ahmad was one of very few interviewed persons without any direct spatial experience regarding Iran.

The second attribute of Ghulam Ahmad's map is a small cluster of positively perceived areas in the northeastern part of the country, in Baghlan and Kunduz. He noted that he worked in the sugar factory in Baghlan more than thirty or thirty five years ago. The old man remembered this time as one of the best in his life: "I was working in the sugar factory in Baghlan for three years. They used to bring the turnips in the morning and than we made sugar from it. [...] I had a regular income and it was a very good time." Later he also mentioned that he visited Kunduz and watched the Buzkashi in the plain of Khanabad." Given that these places, and the time he spent there, seemed even now to be alive and present in the memory of the old man, Baghlan and the other spots can be interpreted as spaces of memory possessing positive attributes.

Some fractures on his map can be observed in the south. Ghulam Ahmad perceives this areas especially parts of Hilmand in negative terms as many people in Herat do. This bad image Ghulam Ahmad possesses regarding southern Afghanistan rests upon direct spatial experience there. He told me: "When I was a soldier, I was first stationed in Helmand in the south. There, I was employed as a watchman in a jail. It was a very bad place, it was extremely hot and I was not able to understand the people because they speak Pashtu. At the end, I applied to be transferred to another place and they sent me to Kabul where I met my wife and got married."

Another space of memory on Ghulam Ahmad's mental map is Kabul. He told me that he lived there forty years ago for more than one year. That time he married a woman from Kabul and lived in the house of his sister. Ghulam Ahmad did not describe his time in Kabul in great detail, he only remembered that it was a good place and he was not facing particular problems during his time there.

Meanwhile, Ghulam Ahmad lives in Herat with his family. He has not returned to Kabul since the time he left the city approximately forty years ago. He stated that he believed that during this period, Kabul was a pleasant place, but during an informal talk at the beginning of September 2006 he told me that he surmises that the city has changed a lot and he would no longer be able to recognize the streets and areas. Since he planned to travel there, Ghulam Ahmad implied he would be afraid of losing his way in Kabul because of no longer being familiar with the city. At the end, he travelled to Kabul with his nephew who has been grown up there.

Fig.1: Mental map of Ghulam Ahmad – Status September 2006



Consequently, Ghulam Ahmad's mental map has changed over time. Kabul appears as a space of memory but the old man could not remember particular places and streets within the city. The former image has faded after not having been there for a long time. This lead to the conclusion that time and age are crucial aspects that strongly effect mental maps.

Summarizing the mental map of Ghulam Ahmad, one can say that it is a perfect example for a map with main emphasis on Afghanistan. Furthermore, it is characterized by dispersions which stand in contrast to the common attributes of Herati mental maps. The most visible characteristic is, however, the absence of spots and preferences in Iran because of his individual background. Although he told me to have a rather positive image concerning Iran, this does not coincide with actual spatial experience. Instead, Ghulam Ahmad's mental map focuses on Afghanistan. The spaces of memory in the northeast and the rather positive image regarding the capital are signs of the former political stability and unity of the country. Journeys inside Afghanistan had been usual as well as living on other places for better job

opportunities. Consequently, the map can be seen as the result of political stability but it also reflects the statebuilding in the middle of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, the image of the space of memory may be faded or overlaps with the common image certain places bear today. The fact that Ghulam Ahmad was not able to remember the road network of Kabul and details about the places anymore, leads to the conclusion that mental maps need to be updated regularly, otherwise they do not coincide with current conditions. Moreover, the image that is bestowed to a space of memory may differ with the current image the individual has about this place.

Finally, Ghulam Ahmad's mental map shares the negative stereotype regarding Kandahar and the south shown as places to be avoided. Aspects of language and culture may be the reasons for this perception which is today common among the urban population of Herat.

4 Individual mental map focusing on Iran

This chapter is concerned with the mental map of Sulaiman Muhammadi.¹¹ He is a young man who was twenty one years old when he was interviewed. He has been living in Herat for more than one year at the time of the interview. The young man was born in Mashhad in Iran, as his family sought refuge there in the first phase of the Afghan conflict.

Sulaiman Muhammadi's mental map is different from that of Ghulam Ahmad. First, there is an out-spoken preference for Mashhad, the place he spent his childhood. Sulaiman Muhammadi told me that he really misses Iran and feels even home sick, particularly because his mother still lived in Mashhad at the time of the interview. He mentioned that he was very happy in Iran. He had been schooled there and had many Iranian friends but he was compelled to come to Afghanistan for educational reasons.¹² Although, complaining about the restrictive policy of the Iranian government regarding Afghan refugees, he purported to be absolute familiar with Mashhad and its surroundings. His entry into Afghanistan one year ago was his first. All his memories with regard to his life in general and his childhood in particular are attached to Mashhad. Accordingly this city has become a space of memory and the most important point of reference on Sulaiman Muhammadi's mental map, even more important than Herat.

The second visible feature of this individual mental map is the negative image of the south. During a journey to Kabul by land approximately six months after he entered Afghanistan, Sulaiman Muhammadi got his first experiences outside Herat. He reported that after passing Shindand he perceived the environment not only as very different from his home town, but that he thought he would never understand the

¹¹ The Interview with Sulaiman Muhammadi on the 9th of March 2006.

¹² Afghan refugees are not permitted to study on Iranian governmental Universities. Many young people returned to Afghanistan for this reason.

mental setting, the culture and the behavior of the Pashtuns. The young man noted that he became frightened whilst traveling through the south, particularly after the car was stopped by armed men bearing long beards near Kandahar. The strained security situation in the south in connection with the insurgency of the Taliban might have also contributed to this feeling. Altogether, Sulaiman Muhammadi's perception of the southern provinces was that of hostile regions with negative attributes.

Arriving at Kandahar he was shocked by what he faced. Sulaiman said that he had never seen such horrible people with big eyes staring at him. He further complained that he could not understand the language of the local population. He added that: "There were pieces of meat hanging outside a butcher's shop in the street. The meat was totally covered by a mass of flies. One could not see the meat, it was just a black mass, and when somebody moved near the shop all the flies flew away and only then could one recognize that it was meat." His descriptions regarding the hygiene in Kandahar coincides with common stereotypes about this city that almost all people in Herat have in mind.

When he was in Kabul, the young man said that he saw an Indian town which stands in stark contrast to Herat. Sometimes he had problems in understanding the local dialect because he speaks Iranian Persian. Altogether, Sulaiman expressed a negative attitude towards the Afghan capital and stated that he does not like it at all.

Obviously, this mental map (Fig. 2) has another focus than the first one. It shows a large preference regarding Iran – here Mashhad serves as main coordinate and space of memory because the young man spent his entire life there. In contrast, the space of movement and action within Afghanistan has been very limited at least until the time of the interview. He perceived large areas in the south negatively and as totally different from his social and cultural environment after he experienced this region through travelling. Apart from Herat, his mental map does not show any places seen in positive terms within Afghanistan. Sulaiman's mental map shares its main patterns with the maps of other young people in Herat who often have preferences towards Mashhad and are not very familiar with Afghanistan. Instead, they feel not only much closer to Iran, but in most cases all their relevant spaces of memory are located there. Many of them even reported to became shocked about their country, when they moved out of Herat the first time.¹³

Sulaiman Muhammadi's mental map shares its main characteristics with a majority of the maps owned by young people who spent their lives in Iran. Indeed, it does reflect general changes in the perception of Afghanistan and marks a shift towards the neighbouring country. It can also be seen as the result of the long term war which forced many people to leave the country. Thus, the second individual map is influenced by the war and the life in exile.

¹³ Interviews carried out on second/ 9th/ 15th/ 26th & 27th of March/ 3rd and 17th of July 2007.

Fig. 2: Mental map of Sulaiman Muhammadi – Status September 2006



5 Common patterns of mental maps in Herat

The following sections are an attempt to describe visible similarities of mental maps shaped from the viewpoint of Herat. The sample is not a collective mental map, it only aims at summarizing common characteristics shared by a large number of interviewed people. Areas that own a negative image are grey spotted, whereas regions that were perceived in positive terms are coloured in general light grey.

5.1 Herat – the image of a city as space of action and orientation

According to Downs & Stea people tend to bestow meaning and identity to places by using certain positive attributes. We automatically ascribe characteristics and stereotypes to places¹⁴ and tend to exaggerate the importance of our home town. Those stereotypes are often not only common, they are reflected and shared by a

¹⁴ Downs; Roger, David Stea: p.157.

majority of mental representations of space.¹⁵ The same holds true in the case of Herat which is the most important coordinate on each and every mental map. The placement of Herat as central point on mental maps is a sign of the importance the place of residence and birth for the individual. The city is located in the north-western fringe of the country near the border to Iran and Turkmenistan. Herat serves as the main focal point forming a space of action and orientation for its inhabitants. Furthermore, it generates a sense of belonging and local identity.

Today, most of the people favour their home town over other localities of the country. Particular attributes are ascribed to the city, referring to its role as old cultural center of ancient Khorasan in history. The minarets of the Musallah, the Great Mosque and the Fort of Herat are spatial symbols of *Herat-i Bastan*, the ancient Herat. Due to its role as capital of the Timurid Empire it is still considered as *Shahr-i elm-o farhang* (City of Science and Culture) and *Mahd-i tamadon-i Afghanistan* (The Cradle of Afghan Civilization) whose minarets and old mosques are the signs giving evidence of a great past. Another title of Herat is *Shahr-i Auliya* or *Khak-i auliya* – the soil of the saints. This expression relates to the countless holy shrines which cover the city and the whole province like a network of holy places as visible signs and symbols being characteristic for the city and its surroundings. The most popular shrine is of course that of the Pir-i Herat, Khwaja Abdullah Ansari, attracting many pilgrims from every part of the country. Additionally, the city and the whole province are commonly being called *Herat-i aziz*, the beloved Herat, being special and different from other places in Afghanistan.

5.2 Proximity to Iran – Mashhad and Tehran as spaces of action and memory

Since many Heratis lived as refugees in Iran during the time of the Soviet occupation (1979-1989) and the following civil war, the overwhelming majority of the interviewed people expressed a preference for the neighboring country despite widespread discrimination against Afghans in Iran. At least more than three fourths of my informants had either lived in Iran for a couple of years or are still frequently travelling there. Ghulam Ahmad Ahmadi was one of the few interviewed persons without any preference there. However, three fourths of the interlocutors shared these preferences, especially young people who have grown up there, as we have seen in Sulaiman Muhammadi's case. There is a "mental" proximity to Iran which coincides with real geographic distance; the border point Eslam Qala is just one hundred kilometers away from Herat and easy accessible. Due to the low geographic distance to Iran and the influence of Iranian culture, many returnees decide to settle in Herat despite not having family ties there. The contrast between Herat and other parts of Afghanistan becomes more visible to them when they leave the city and

¹⁵ Gould/White: pp. 22-25.

visit Kabul or other places in Afghanistan for the first time in their life. As another young informant told me: "When leaving Herat one actually faces the real Afghanistan."¹⁶

Additionally the complete destruction of the Afghan infrastructure limited the range of action within the country. It fostered furthermore not only the orientation towards neighboring Iran, it has led to an increase of perceived geographic and spatial distances between Herat and other Afghan towns which have become less attractive for commercial and travel activities. The overwhelming majority of the Herati still solves their problems in Mashhad or Tehran. There are less incentives for orientating towards other Afghan towns, especially since the security situation declined during the last years.

The city of Mashhad, the center of the *Khorasan-i rezawi* province in eastern Iran, is besides Herat the second important coordinate on the maps of the sample. Almost every younger interview partner like Sulaiman stated to be absolutely familiar with the city because he or she has been born in Mashhad or has at least grown up there.

Besides this, the Iranian capital can be described as a far remote outpost and integral part of many mental maps because it was also a place where many refugees lived. The number of respondents who lived in Mashhad or Tehran was almost equal. Since many former refugees have already returned to Afghanistan after 2002, Mashhad, Tehran and other Iranian towns have turned from spaces of action into spaces of memory. Accordingly, sometimes a nostalgic attitude towards Iran was observable. Although some people complained about discrimination against Afghans, many of the interviewed planned a trip to Iran and some of them travelled there in the time of the field stay. Mashhad still serves as space of action for a number of people in Herat. Many strong incentives exist for travelling there: people go to Mashhad to pay a visit to relatives, but also for vacation, pilgrimage, medical treatment and business. An elderly respondent stated that: "Afghanistan is now inseparably connected to Iran as well as to Pakistan. These ties can never be broken."¹⁷

5.3 Perceptions of northwestern Afghanistan

Many of the interlocutors seemed to have a clear and well structured image from the surroundings of Herat in mind. This image rests either on direct spatial experience due to travel and business activities in this region or on general information people have about this part of the country. I observed a strong tendency to perceive the areas north and northeast of Herat including large parts of Badghis up to the Morghab river in positive terms, at least until spring 2006. The Morghab formed a sharp edge of this positively perceived space. The areas adjoining the river in the north are

¹⁶ Interview with Reza Ataee on 26th and 27th of March 2006.

¹⁷ Interview on 23th of März 2006 with Haj Muhammad Karim Tawaen in Herat.

largely unknown. Not one interviewed person had direct spatial experience with, and, therefore an accurate image regarding the areas beyond the river.

The region west of Herat up to Eslam Qala the border point to Iran is also well known, because all people travelling to Iran take the way by land via Eslam Qala and Taybad on the Iranian side. Visiting Mashhad frequently, most people know the way as well as with the territories adjacent the border up to Mashhad.

While a positive image of the territories and districts north, northeast and west of the city was dominant during the field stay, the districts south of Herat were perceived in negative terms. The extent of the areas perceived positively ends at some point between the Pol-i Pashtu (the Pashtu bridge) at the southern edge of town and the airport located in the Guzara district. The respondents in Herat expressed a negative feeling in regard with the districts of Adraskan and particularly the Shindand area that forms the southern border of the province.¹⁸

The mental map of Sulaiman Muhammadi also shows this negative image. Some of the interviewed admitted to be afraid of widespread robbery in the Shindand.¹⁹ A lot of informal talks lead to the same result. In this case, we deal with some kind of negative stereotype that is very common in Herat.

The provinces of Ghor and Farah despite bordering Herat in the south and the east were mentioned very seldom. Almost nobody of the interviewed people noticed the both provinces. Ghor is an inaccessible area without infrastructure, and Farah was at the time of the field stay frequently troubled by growing instability and Taliban activities.

5.4 Possible spaces of action in the northwest

The region surrounding the city is not to be understood as a space of action, it seems to be rather an environment which was perceived positively by the majority of the interlocutors. I identified a number of possible spaces of action located in the northwestern part of Afghanistan. Two of them are the border towns of Eslam Qala at the Iranian border and Torghundi at the Afghan-Turkmen border. Here, the aspect of trade and the transnational relationships are, in-turn, determining aspects for the spatial orientation of the local population.

Other possible spaces of action which were mentioned by some but not all informants are Karukh, Obe and Chisht-i Sharif situated east of Herat. These small towns and their surroundings (especially Karukh) are often used as weekend destinations and favoured by many Herati families. Whereas Karukh and Obe are seen positively due to favorable geographic conditions, Chisht-i Sharif and its holy shrine attract many pilgrims.

¹⁸ Forces loyal to Ismail Khan, the former governor of Herat and followers of his rival Amanullah have been engaged in fierce fighting over the control of Shindand since the fall of the Taliban in 2001.

¹⁹ Interviews on 9th/19th / 25th & 26th of March and 12th of July 2006.

5.5 Kabul – space of action and memory

With regard to the image of the Afghan capital, two main tendencies were observed. Firstly, Kabul is the only big city within the country and is better connected to Herat than any other Afghan town. There is large Herati community mainly engaged in commercial activities. In addition, some others are linked to Kabul through family ties or they decided to settle in the capital for better job opportunities. But nevertheless, one part of the Herati population – particularly the youth who have grown up in Iran like Sulaiman Muhammadi – is not in favour with the capital. Almost every young informant admitted to feeling uncomfortable there because of a lack of familiarity with the social surroundings in the overcrowded city. Some of them reasoned the negative image with the fact that the majority of the indigenous population moved away during the war and have been replaced by refugees coming from other provinces and Pakistan. A cultural mixture which is not seen in a favourable light is now prevailing in the capital area. As we have seen in the above described individual map of Sulaiman Muhammadi, the youth have a rather negative image of the Afghan capital in mind.

Elder people perceive the city differently because their image of Kabul rests upon memories on journeys and travels they had undertaken before the war, but often this image has faded and blurred. The former space of experience turned into a space of memory with rather positive attributes, interviews with other elders lead to the result that their image of present day Kabul may differ from the image of the city in the past. All of them obtained information about Kabul and have made up their current image through watching TV or talking with people who have actual and direct experience with present day Kabul. As Ghulam Ahmad mentioned, some of them have difficulty remembering places and the road network in Kabul.

5.6 The image of Kandahar and the Pashtun Belt

In general, a negative image is attached to the Pashtun areas by the urban population of Herat. Even Pashtuns who have been settling there since generations stated to have the same negative image about these regions in mind.²⁰

Despite their awareness of being Pashtun, they are no longer able to speak the language of their ancestors and have became thoroughly assimilated into Herat's urban environment which is dominated by Persian language and culture. Thus, they share the viewpoint from which mental maps are shaped with Tajik and Farsiwan in Herat, and, have the same stereotypes regarding the south.

Some of my informants told me that areas inhabited by Persian speakers are generally safer and to be preferred in contrast to those which are largely dominated by Pashtuns. Nevertheless, Badghis with its large Pashtun population was not seen in

²⁰ Interviews on 4th/17th of March; 12th of April; 3rd of July; 27th and 30th of August 2007.

that way. In contrast, Kandahar in southern Afghanistan is also perceived in negative terms by most of the people in Herat. This is not only the result of the strained situation in the south but aspects of ethnicity, language, and culture do definitely play a role in creating such an image.

Fig.3: Sample of mental maps in Herat – status March/ April 2006



Nowadays, there is a general tendency to perceive the own culture traditionally effected by the closeness to Iran and the Persian language as superior. In contrast, Pashtun culture and language are seen lower in status and prestige. The reports of Sulaiman Muhammadi and Ghulam Ahmad are in accordance with statements of all other interviewed persons who complained about not understanding Pashtu. Many informants reported misunderstandings and difficulties because of a lack of language skills regardless differences in age and individual spatial experience. Accordingly, more than ninety nine percent of the informants bestowed a bad image to Kandahar regardless age and experience.

Presently, there is an increasing tendency to avoid travelling through or going to Pashtun dominated regions. The aversion to those regions refers not only to aspects of language and ethnicity influencing the structure of mental maps but they are also the result of the current conflict between the government forces and the Taliban in those regions. Many negative stereotypes are attached to Kandahar and the entire south, the scene in front of the butchers shop in Kandahar as it was reported by the young man, perhaps meets one of the most common stereotypes in connection with this place. The only exception among my informants who were originally from Herat was just one elder woman who had a different image in mind. The woman remembered travelling to Kabul via Kandahar in former times. In this case, Kandahar is to be seen as space of memory characterized by a positive image.²¹

5.7 Does Khorasan still exist?

Perhaps this is the most interesting question in regard with mental maps in north-western Afghanistan. Nevertheless, I could not observe any tendency to revive the old concept of Khorasan during the field stay. When speaking about the history of Herat people sometimes mentioned the term Khorasan in a nostalgic manner. Apart from this, it was neither a subject of discussion nor mentioned by informants. Obviously, Khorasan as term or territorial concept disappeared and does not play a role anymore. The political status of Herat as an integral part of Afghanistan was never questioned by its people. Of course, the relationship and influence of Iranian culture in western Afghanistan was always strong because of its geographic position and the closeness to Iranian towns such as Mashhad, Birjand, Khaf or Torbat-i Jam in eastern Iran. These towns are geographically closer to Herat than any other Afghan city. As we have seen, the ties with Iran became weak during the first half of the twentieth century. Simultaneously, the Herati orientated themselves much more within their own country. This process was interrupted through the conflict which forced many people to leave Herat. When the old town became destroyed by fierce fighting between the Red Army and the Mujahideen, the old relations with eastern Iran, particularly with Mashhad, were refreshed, although the belonging of Herat was never questioned by its inhabitants.

6 Conclusion

The question of whether collective mental maps exist or not and the discussion about the possibility of such collective images illustrate how contested the topic is. Although, a lot of common characteristics in mental mapping and even stereotypes could be observed and identified during the field work but as we could observe in case of the both individual maps not all patterns of the sample are shared by individual maps. Both of the examples show deviations from the sample according to age,

²¹ Interview with Golsun Salehi on second of March 2006.

time, personal background and political conditions. Collective maps do not exist, but some similarities are likely to be observed. The most striking and visible attribute is, of course, the image of the south which is largely negative. The stereotype in connection with the Pashtun belt and Kandahar relates to categories such as ethnicity, language and culture but also politics and the security situation.

The perspective from which mental maps are shaped is important as well. The areas and places close to the place of living are perceived as being more important. People tend to have much more information about these places than about those which are far away. History and the historical role of places seem to have also an impact on the perception and assessment of places and spaces. The fact that people perceive and describe their place of living in the same way regardless ethnic affiliations proves the thesis of Gould & White concerning the importance of small spatial units and the place of living for the individual. The examination of mental images in regard with small spatial entities like a neighborhood or a certain way has to follow in this regard. Differences in mental mapping largely depend on a variety of aspects such as place of living and perspective, individual background, events, geographic conditions etc. As we have seen in the individual cases, age and time play also an important role. There are striking contrasts between mental maps owned by members of different generations. Perhaps the most visible result of the long term war is, of course, the postponement in focus and emphasis of mental mapping. Before the break out of the conflict, the people of Herat orientated much more within an Afghan context. Although sometimes travelling to Iran the spatial orientation towards Afghan destinations prevailed. The war led to structural changes and a general shift in terms of orientation since many people have lived in exile in Iran for decades.

The sample as well as the individual maps show the importance of other factors effecting mental maps besides age, experience and time. Ethnicity, language, geographic conditions and the security situation may influence mental mapping; for example, at the end of the field stay I observed a change in the perception of Badghis after sporadic clashed between governmental forces and the Taliban in the districts of Qurmach and Morghab. Suddenly, many informants stated that the province is not safe, whereas the opposite was true at the time of the commencement of the field research. Thus, mental maps are not fixed and stable constructs but flexible and likely to evolve over time.

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