



MORGENSTIERNE, GEORG VALENTIN VON MUNTHE AF

MORGENSTIERNE, Georg Valentin von Munthe af, Norwegian linguist and Orientalist, specializing in Indo-Iranian languages, particularly those spoken in Afghanistan, the Pamirs, and the northwest of the Indian subcontinent (b. 3 January 1892, d. 3 March 1978; [FIGURE 1](#)). He was born in Oslo (then Kristiania), to a family that had for generations served the Danish and Swedish-Norwegian kings as government officials both in Norway and Denmark. After matriculation in 1909, Morgenstierne studied classical and comparative Indo-European linguistics in Oslo, but he became more and more attracted by the culture and languages of India. From 1914 to 1917 he studied Oriental, mainly Indian, philology in Bonn and Berlin, but also Persian, and he tried to study the Sogdian texts in the Berlin collection. In 1918, he took his doctorate in Berlin, with a thesis on an Indological theme, the relations between Śudraka's drama *Mr̥cchakaṭikā* "The Little clay cart" and Bhāsa's recently found play *Cārudatta*. As a secondary subject he chose Tibetan, and worked for some time on Tibetan manuscripts in London. However, he gradually became absorbed in Iranian linguistics and began to study Pashto, which became the center of his scholarly life work.

In 1923, Morgenstierne visited India and spent the following year in Peshawar studying Pashto with a native scholar while collecting linguistic data from Pashtun tribesmen speaking Afridi and various other Pashto dialects. Then he went to Kabul and stayed for some months, primarily to get a general survey



of the linguistic geography of Afghanistan, especially the northeastern area. This was a pioneering attempt, as Afghanistan had been linguistically almost a *terra incognita*. Additionally, he collected materials on Dari (Persian of Afghanistan), Shughni, and Ormuri. It was during this period that he rediscovered Parachi, which [Bābor](#) (r. 1483-1530), had mentioned in his memoirs but had thus far remained unrecorded. On the Indian side, he studied the Dardic languages, mainly Pashai and Khowar (see [DARDESTĀN ii.](#)); but it was the Kafiri languages of Nuristan (Kafiristan) that engaged his interest most, despite the fact that the political situation did not permit him to go to this area. Nevertheless, Morgenstierne's work on the Dardic and Kafiri languages made it possible for the first time to define the historical relations between these linguistic families (see below).

In 1929, Morgenstierne returned to India. In Quetta, he worked on Brahui and Balochi, and especially, on the Pashto dialect Wanetsi. He continued his work in Peshawar, collecting information on the Pashai dialects. He spent several months in Chitral, where he worked on various Indian, Iranian, and Kafiri dialects, some never before recorded. He also gathered information about the mythologies of the last pagan tribes of the Kalashas. In *Report on a Linguistic Mission to Afghanistan* (Oslo, 1926) and *Report on a Linguistic Mission to North-Western India* (Oslo, 1932) he gave an account of his investigations during the two trips. In 1927, he published *An Etymological Vocabulary of Pashto* (Oslo), that he was preparing for a revised edition (publ. 2003) at his death. In 1929, the first volume of his *Indo-Iranian Frontier Languages (IIFL)*, (Oslo) appeared, in which Parachi and Ormuri were treated. This monumental series appeared in 3 volumes, 1929-67.

In 1930, Morgenstierne was appointed to the chair of Sanskrit and Indo-European linguistics at the University of Gothenburg (Sweden), and in 1937 he succeeded Sten Konow as professor of Indian language and culture at the University of Oslo, a position he held until retirement in 1963. During the 1930s, Morgenstierne published a number of monographs and articles on Iranian, Kafiri, and Indian languages. In 1938 appeared the second volume of *IIFL*, containing texts and grammars of various Pamir languages (Yidgha-Munji, Sanglechi-Ishkashmi, Wakhi).

In 1942, Morgenstierne published two articles of great consequence. The first was his study "Orthography and Sound System of the Avesta" in *Norsk Tidsskrift for Sprogvidenskap [NTS]* (repr. in his *Irano-Dardica*, Wiesbaden, 1975, pp. 31-83), the first comprehensive phonetic and phonemic analysis of



Avestan. In it he criticized F. C. Andreas's theory of the Avestan text, which had dominated Avestan studies in the first decades of the 20th century (see [ANDREAS iii.](#)). According to Andreas, the Avesta had been set down in writing in the Arsacid period in a simple consonant script of the Aramaic-Pahlavi type, which created faulty pronunciations when unskillfully transcribed into the elaborate Avestan alphabet specifically invented to record phonetic features and usages of the Sasanian redactors. Morgenstierne argued that the Avestan alphabet was invented by Sasanian priests in order to record an orally transmitted liturgical text with its phonetic nuances; in other words, the first notation of the Avesta text must have been a Sasanian archetype in an orthography indicative of a number of features of purely phonetic, non-phonemic nature. The use of individual letters is analyzed from a phonetic point of view with regard to their phonemic interpretation. Where the Avestan language differs from theoretical Old Iranian, the differences are comparatively regular and can mostly be accounted for by phonological laws. The vacillations and incongruencies of the manuscripts are easily explained as scribal errors, chronological or dialectal differences, or by the different linguistic strata of the scribes. East Iranian languages, in particular Pashto, are frequently referred to, as well as tendencies in non-Iranian languages. Thus, e.g., instead of original **iw* we find written *uu* (Hoffmann's transcription): *juua- *jīwa-* "living," *cuuant- < *ciwant-* "how great." This represents a sound change that is also found in Pashto and other East Iranian languages. The velar nasal *ŋ* is found to be phonemically significant. As to the development of medial *ŋ* before *r* Morgenstierne refers to Pashto *nwar* "sun" < **hwar-*, a postvocalic sandhi form, and *cūŋ(-sū)* "400" < **čataŋrō*. Morgenstierne concluded that the Avesta vulgata reflects a linguistic reality. How far the liturgical pronunciation of the Sasanian priests conformed to that of the original authors remained an open question; but, on the basis of his analysis, Morgenstierne presented tentative phonemic consonantal and vocal systems of both the Gathic and the Young Avestan dialects.

Morgenstierne's second important publication in 1942 was his "Archaisms and Innovations in Pashto Morphology," which still remains one of the few studies devoted to Pashto historical grammar.

In 1944 came his collection of Pashai texts (*IIFL III/2: The Pashai Language, Texts and Translations*); his Pashai dictionary (*IIFL III/3: The Pashai Language, Vocabulary*), appeared in 1956, and the grammar in 1967 (*IIFL III/1: The Pashai Language, Grammar*). The series was concluded in 1972 with *IIFL IV*:



The Kalasha Language; and the next year the whole series was re-issued with additions and new materials (2nd rev. ed., 1973, 4 vols. in 6, totaling some 2,100 pages).

Morgenstierne visited Afghanistan in 1949 and on various later occasions, and was always received with great honors as the leading European Pashto scholar (FIGURE 2). He was the first foreigner to be elected a member of the Pashto Academy in Kabul. His first visit to Iran was in 1954, to attend the Avicenna Jubilee in Tehran. In co-operation with E. Benveniste he had an opportunity of working for a few hours with a native speaker from Semnān, a town some 200 km west of Tehran, who continued to send him more words and grammatical forms. The results appeared in 1958 as “Notes on Sāmnani” and “Additional Notes on Sāmnani,” in which Morgenstierne discussed the phonetics and phonology of the dialect, gave a brief survey of the nominal and verbal inflections, a short list of verbs, and a few annotated texts, including some letters from his informant. He was able to modify somewhat previous studies of the dialect (primarily A. Christensen’s *Contributions à la dialectologie iranienne* II, Copenhagen, 1935).

The term Kafiri (later termed Nuristani) designates a group of Aryan languages (Kati, Prasun, Ashkun, Waigali, Tregami, if the latter is not to be regarded a Waigali dialect), spoken in small communities in Nuristan (formerly Kafiristan) in the Hindu Kush valleys of northeastern Afghanistan. The Kafiri-speaking population had preserved their ancient pagan religion until the end of the 19th century, when they were conquered and forcibly converted to Islam by the Afghan Amir ‘Abd-al-Raḥmān (r. 1880-1901). Morgenstierne’s attention was early drawn to these languages and their historical background. He was led to the conclusion that, whereas the Dardic languages (spoken in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Kashmir) are undoubtedly Indo-Aryan, the Kafiri languages form a distinct branch of the Aryan family. He first advanced this theory in 1926 (*Report on a Linguistic Mission to Afghanistan*), and later elaborated in a number of publications, most recently in an article (based on a lecture given in 1968) in his *Irano-Dardica* (Wiesbaden, 1973). He argued that the ancestor language must have branched off from proto-Aryan before, or a short time after, the division into Indian and Iranian, because the affinities are much closer with Indo-Aryan than with Iranian. These affinities must be very old, despite the millennia-long bilingual contacts with the northwestern Indian (Dardic) languages, which have resulted in extensive borrowings and typological influence. On the other hand,



before the conversion to Islam the Iranian influence was unimportant.

The evidence for this is mainly based on historical phonology. Due to the loss of final syllables, the morphology of Kafiri has undergone such fundamental changes that we cannot expect to find many traces of old features. In phonetic matters Kafiri mostly agrees with Indo-Aryan. As in Indian (in contrast to Iranian), the internal Indo-European (IE) *ə laryngeal is not lost: Prasun *lūšt* “daughter” < **dužitā*, Skt. *duhitar-*, but Old Av. *dugədar-* (2 syllables), Y.Av. *duyδar-*. IE *s has been retained as opposed to Iran. *h*: Waigali *sōt* “seven,” Skt. *sapta*, Y. Av. *hapta*; *mās* “moon,” Skt. *mās-*, OPers. *māh-*. Kati, Prasun, Ashkun, Waigali *-miš* < **masi*, Vedic *-masi*, Av. *-mahi*, 1st person plural ending. In the development of dental + dental, Kafiri seems to agree with Indic; whereas these groups in Iranian resulted in *st*, *zd*, Indic has *tt(h)* *dd(h)*: Kati *bədi* “thought” (< **bodh-* “to notice”), Skt. *buddhi-*; Waigali *ūttula* “high,” Skt. *uttha-* “arising,” *ud* “up.”

A few Kafiri words seem to be closer to Iranian than to Indic: Kaf. **ven-* “to see,” Kati *wār-*, Waigali *wrē-*, Ashkun *wīn-*, cf. Av. *vāen-* “to see” but Skt. *ven-* “to long for.” However, in this case Iranian and Kafiri have probably retained the original meaning. Kati and Waigali *ew* “one,” cf. Av. *aēuua-* but Skt. *eka-*. However, it is likely, as Morgenstierne frequently stressed, that in proto-Aryan an absolute borderline never existed between an Iranian and an Indic dialect, and that we have to presume various dialectal intersections. Nevertheless, the Kafiri languages do not share certain features with Indic. The *tenuēs* (*ph*, *th*, *kh*) and *mediae* (*bh*, *dh*, *gh*) *aspiratae* have lost their phonemically relevant aspiration: Ashkun *betō* “understood” < **butta-*, Skt. *Buddha*; *lotā* “found” < **lapta-*, Skt. *labdha-*. However, the de-aspiration goes further than in Iranian: Kati *kur* “donkey,” Av. *xara-*, Skt. *khara-*. The Kafiri have developed no spirant phonemes (*f*, *θ*, *c*). The Dardic languages show a tendency to de-aspiration of the *mediae aspiratae*, but this development is evidently late and not total, whereas in Kafiri it is absolute and old.

The development of the IE palatal and (labio)velar stops shown in Table 1 plays an important part in the argumentation for the position of the Kafiri languages as a separate branch of the Aryan family.

Table 1. Development of IE palatal and (labio)velar stops



1. IE *k' > Kaf. c	Ind. ś	Iran. s
2. IE *g' > Kaf. j/z	Ind. j	Iran. z
3. IE *g'h > Kaf. j/z	Ind. h	Iran. z
4. IE *gw > Kaf. j/ž	Ind. j	Iran. j (before front vowels)
5. IE *gwh > Kaf. j/ž	Ind. h	Iran. j (before front vowels)
6. IE *sk' > Kaf. c	Ind. ch	Iran. s

However, IE *k' is represented in Kafiri, not only by *c*, but also by a palatal sibilant, as in Indic, but the distribution in the individual languages is uneven: Waigali *dōš*, Ashkun *dus*, but Kati *duc* “ten,” Skt. *daśa*, Kati and Waigali *wac*-, Ashkun *was*- “to bellow,” Skt. *vāś*-. There is apparently no phonetic reason for this fluctuation. Morgenstierne tentatively suggested some kind of sandhi in the sentence (*Report*, p. 58). In later studies he explained Kaf. *š* as due to the influence of, or borrowings from, Indic (Dardic); it is remarkable that such *š*-words are especially common in Ashkun and Waigali, which have been more strongly influenced by Indic (Dardic) than the sister languages have been.

However, be that as it may, in the representation of the IE voiced and voiceless palatals (Table 1, nos. 1-3, 6) as dental affricates (*c*, *j*) and the voiced (labio)velars (Table 1, nos. 4-5) as palatal affricates (*j*), Morgenstierne saw archaisms that, besides other phonetic features, make the following conclusion logical: the Kafiri languages constitute a third branch of the Aryan linguistic family, and they originated from a proto-language which shared a number of isoglosses with Indo-Aryan, and that down through millennia has been exposed to a strong influence from the Indic neighbor languages.

In spite of some criticism, most scholars who have specialized in the investigation of the Kafiri languages have supported Morgenstierne's theory (see in particular G. Fussmann: *Atlas linguistique des parlés dardes et kafires*, Paris, 1971, II, and Georg Buddruss, “Nochmals zur Stellung der Nūristān-Sprachen des afghanischen Hindukusch,” *MSS* 16, 1977, pp. 19-38).

As a student, Morgenstierne was trained in the methods of the Neo-Grammarian school of linguistics, and these methods remained his theoretical basis. The Neo-Grammarian school, which originated among German linguists (K. Brugmann, H. Osthoff) in the 1870s, reflected the historicism of the late 19th century. These scholars were particularly interested in historical phonology. Sound changes were considered regular processes which take place according to laws that permit no exceptions. The same sound will always develop in the same way in the same environments, although analogies are



admitted. This means that systematic sound correspondences between languages, not merely individual cases of similar phonetic shape, are the proof of their historical relatedness. Most linguists of Morgenstierne's youth adhered to these principles. His own main interest was always just historical phonology.

The structuralist methods of the 1920s and 1930s also left their mark on his linguistic thinking. The influence of the Prague school of phonology is evident in his article about the sound system of the Avesta. The Prague school of linguists was a group of Czech and other scholars who were centered around N. Trubetzkoy (professor in Vienna, d. 1938 and who published the series *Travaux du cercle linguistique de Prague*. Their program was put forward in Trubetzkoy's *Grundzüge der Phonologie* (1939). The Prague linguists devoted their interest mainly to phonological theory, elaborating the concept of the phoneme. They treated the phoneme as a complex phonological unit realized by the speech sounds. Each phoneme was composed by a number of distinctive features, each feature standing in opposition to its absence or to another feature in at least one other phoneme in the language. This analysis of speech sounds into their component articulation features revealed the complexity of phonological systems. Phonemes "enter into different systems of relations in different positions. /p/ and /b/, /t/ and /d/, /k/ and /g/ contrast as voiceless and voiced initially, medially, and finally in English words, but after initial /s/ the voice-voiceless contrast is non-operative or "neutralized," since only one plosive can occur at each point of articulation. To express this, the term *archiphoneme* was formed, comprising just the features still distinctive in these positions of neutralization (i.e. bilabiality, etc. and plosion)" (R. H. Robins: *A Short History of Linguistics*, 2nd ed., London, 1969, p. 205).

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Literary estate. Morgenstierne's unpublished manuscripts are preserved in the Norwegian National Library, including his preparatory notes for the revised edition of *An Etymological Vocabulary of Pashto* and seven envelopes containing Kati materials. There is also a great collection of ethnographic and archeological photographs from Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan (Chitral), as well as sound recordings and a film taken at the Kalasha spring festival (*Joshi*) in Chitral in 1929. For selections from the audiovisual and photographic materials, as well as a timeline of his life, see the Internet site developed by the Norwegian National Library: "Om Georg Morgenstierne": [http://www.nb.no/baser/morgenstierne /english/aboutm.html](http://www.nb.no/baser/morgenstierne/english/aboutm.html).

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