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NURISTAN

NURISTAN (Nurestān), the "Land of Light," a region to the northeast of Afghanistan, imbedded in the Hindu Kush valleys to the south of its main ridge. It was earlier known as Kafiristan (Kāferestān), land of the non-Islamic and thus "heathen" (*kāfer*), until its enforced Islamization in 1896 brought "light" or "enlightenment," (*nur)*, to the area.

Until the winter of 1895/96 the population of the region still preserved its old culture with roots in the very distant, pre-Christian, past. The people had succeeded in holding on to their ancient beliefs and "primitive" traditions while surrounded by a hostile Islamic world until the end of the 19th century. No doubt, the cultural survival of Nuristan was made possible primarily by its isolation in steep, wooded valleys remote from the important trade routes linking Central Asia and India. In addition, the homicidal reputation of its men also helped to keep out potential invaders.

This noteworthy presence of pre-Islamic cultures, with a population reputed to be "savage idolaters," amid the Islamic world was brought to a dramatic end when the Afghan Amir ʿAbd-al-Raḥmān sent his army into the region with the task of destroying the old religion and substituting Islam for it. The temples, shrines, and cult places with their wooden effigies and multitudes of ancestor figures went up in flames, and only a few effigies were saved as trophies. (More than thirty such wooden figures were brought to Kabul in 1896 or shortly thereafter, fourteen of which went to the Kabul Museum and four to the Musée Guimet and the Musée de l'Homme in Paris; see Edelberg 1960). Muslim clergymen were brought in to re-educate the population who, for the

most part, showed much adherence to their traditional beliefs and social systems. Their homeland was then renamed *Nuristan*.

By coincidence, in that same year of 1896, Sir George Scott Robertson's *The Kafirs of the Hindu Kush* was published in London. It is the only detailed description of the Kafirs, and was based on Robertson's residence in 1890-91 in the village of Kamdesh, located in the eastern-most valley of Kafiristan. The Englishman was acting independently but with an understanding with the British-Indian Government. He later lectured about the Kafirs in London, showing lantern slides he had taken (and which are apparently lost), and wrote a personal narrative interspersed with many non-analytical observations on the local Kafirs' belief systems, customs, and everyday life. Unfortunately, he dealt nearly exclusively with the Bashgal valley and the local Kati speaking population, leaving out the greater part of Kafiristan. As the first and only eyewitness account of the Kafirs, the book enjoyed a great success. Robertson provides such a captivating image of the people and their culture that, despite all their reported homicidal tendencies, the loss of Kafiristan meant to many in Europe the loss of a remarkably vital and thrilling "primitive" culture.

There were no further ethnologically relevant visits to Nuristan until 1935 when a multidisciplinary German expedition, sponsored by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, was allowed to crisscross the region but was hindered by the presence of an escort. Among its findings, published in 1937, geographical-agricultural and physical-anthropological data collected in search of genuine Aryan features, predominate. There is also, in addition to general ethnological information of little value, the first effort to document and interpret the various intricate local calendar systems, with that of the Prasun Nuristani representing an exceptionally detailed order (see Lentz, 1939).

Only after World War II was scientific field research undertaken in the area, with Danish scholars leading the small group of ethnologists and philologists. The foremost scholars involved in this research were, or are, the Danish botanist Lennart Edelberg, the Norwegian Indologist G. Morgenstierne, the German Indologist Georg Buddruss, the American linguist Richard Strand, the American anthropologists Schuyler Jones and David Katz, and Max Klimburg, an Austrian art historian and ethnologist, whose field research lasted intermittently from 1971 to 2002. Klimburg was the first to undertake a comparative study of all of Kafiristan/Nuristan with the exception of the

northwest with its Kati speaking population, and his studies show the great cultural differences that once existed among the main Kafir groups. He thus refutes the hitherto generally accepted notion of a single Kafir culture.

The cultural characteristics of the Kafirs, from their languages and religious beliefs to their individual forms of arts and architecture, were narrowly regional, even more so than one would expect considering the relative isolation of the valleys from each other. In accordance with the four main languages spoken, which are classified as ancient Indo-Iranian tongues, one can discern three distinctive regional cultures: that of the Kati speakers in the northwest and northeast, representing the largest group; that of the Waigali and Ashkun speakers in the southern part of the region; and that of the comparatively few Prasun speakers (properly named Wasi) living in the Prasun valley (better known as the Parun valley) between the two groups of Kati. There is a fifth regional language and a fourth Kafir culture represented by the Kalasha Kafirs, who speak an Indo-Aryan language belonging to the Dardic group. Living outside of Kafiristan/Nuristan in Chitral, northwest Pakistan, they escaped enforced Islamization by the Afghan army. They continue to provide researchers with living examples of customs somewhat similar to the now extinct cultural traditions of the eastern group of Kati Kafirs living on the other side of the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

It was this eastern Kati population in the Bashgal Valley that became known worldwide through Robertson's detailed report. In addition, Robertson had paid a brief visit to the Prasun (Parun) Kafirs, a visit too short to provide more than a few observations and a detailed description of Kafiristan's main temple, which once stood in the central Prasun hamlet of Kushteki. Very little was known of the Waigal and Ashkun Kafirs until field research started in the 1960s. The western Kati Nuristanis, who share a border with the Tajiks of the Panjshir Valley, were left unstudied, as they attracted less attention due to their early loss of older traditions, resulting from a long, forced exile in and around Kapisa Province, not far from Kabul.

The different Kafir cultures are, in general, characterized by polytheism, animism, shamanism, strict concepts of purity and impurity, and a highly developed system of feasts-of-merit in association with a warrior cult featuring aspects of head-hunting, whose main victims were their Muslim neighbors. The role of religion and the importance of social status, however, differed markedly among the cultural regions. One can even speak of polar

contrasts, if one juxtaposes the Prasun culture with that of the Waigal and Ashkun Kafirs. The Kati culture should be located between the two others, sharing important features with both. The Kalasha Kafirs in Chitral had developed their own cultural concepts with some features taken from the Kati Kafirs.

The Kafirs believed in a multitude of deities whose names often recall those known from old Iranian, Vedic, and Hindu sources. There was a supreme deity named Mara or Imra, plus a multitude of lesser gods and goddesses known locally as Mandi or Moni, Wushum or Shomde, Gish or Giwish, Bagisht, Indr, Züzum, Disani, Kshumai or Kime etc. Each village and each clan had its tutelary deity, with shamans advising the help-seekers and priests presiding at religious services. The cult centered on the sacrifice of animals, mostly goats, and on the purifying, god-pleasing effect of bonfires with their smoke of burning juniper leaves mixed with the smell of burnt blood and butterfat.

The belief systems were based essentially on the view that held the world to be animated by the intercourse between the two sexes and that the two sexes also represent the two concepts of ritually “pure” versus ritually “impure,” or, similarly, “mountain” versus “valley.” Men and goats, especially the wild mountain goats of the markhor kind, were classified as pure, with the purest of all being those boys or men who had not yet had sexual relations with women. Women, generally seen as impure, became regularly, even ritually, “polluting” at times of menstruation and birth. At those times they had to move to special, secluded menstruation and maternity houses built on the lower outskirts of the villages and off limits to all males.

The Kafirs, thus, held that pious recognition of these two concepts or “worlds” and the observance of the laws of purity were preconditions for the divine support needed for social or material success. Even today, livestock raising is a uniquely male occupation, and only men may accompany the animals, primarily goats, to the mountain pastures and into the world of the indigenous markhor, which by reputation is a particularly pure and sexually potent animal. Women must remain inside the “impure” valleys and busy themselves with farming and all the “dirty” household chores.

The most pious among the Kafirs were the Prasun people who had such a strong interest in religious concepts and myths that their valley, presently inhabited by some 3,000 people living in six villages, had “a distinct atmosphere of religion” (Robertson, 1896, p. 379). There was a general

preoccupation with the upper world, envisioned as ruled by a multitude of often quarrelsome deities and giants (*yush)*, as told in numerous long myths recorded especially by Buddruss (short versions of them are published in Snoy 1962 and Jettmar 1975/1986). The Mara temple in Kushteki in the valley's center, which was seen, but not entered, by Robertson (1896: 389 ff.), was by far the largest religious building in Kafiristan. It attracted pilgrims from all over the region wanting to perform animal sacrifices in the god's name.

In addition, smaller temples, shrines, and clan-temples (*amol)* existed everywhere. Such an *amol* was a clan-owned house where the (only temporary) clan-priest (*münt)* was allowed to live and provide religious services in the name of respective clan tutelary deities, mostly goddesses. Free-standing effigies of them served as cult figures set up and dressed up for the cultic occasion. They were shown seated on goats or stools, but the supreme deity, Mara, was represented on horseback. Most of the posts inside the *amol* also showed figures of deities. The figurative style, generally featuring huge, shield-like heads on top of stocky, neckless bodies, gave Robertson the impression of being "marvelously grotesk" (1896, p. 496). Surprisingly, many of these *amol* survived intact until the 1970s, complete with their posts bearing carvings of deities, albeit much mutilated by ax blows.

In nearly complete contrast to the religious zeal of the somewhat introverted and peacable Prasun people, the rather extroverted and militant Waigal and Ashkun Kafirs were primarily interested in social status. The men, much concerned with their appearance and malehood (e.g. refusing to carry anything on their backs), outbid each other with great feasts and warrior deeds in order to become respected "big men." If both the customary feasting and homicidal requirements had been met, establishing a man as a great feast giver (*malda,atabutwre, urta,mou)* and as a courageous warrior (*batur)*, he could then take pride in the erection of a tree-high triumphal post (*däl)* topped by a stereotyped human figure. Pegs were hammered into the sides of the posts depicting the number of humans killed: enemies, or easy victims such as women and children. The top "big men" also had triumphal gates and house-like tombs built in their names, and had the facades and the interiors of their houses richly carved. In particular, the four supporting posts around the hearth and the rear wall of the house served to display status motifs, most prominently human heads and horn-like head decorations, and also, in more recent carvings, shields. Other prestige-enhancing possessions were throne-like "chairs of honor" with twin backs, three- and four-legged wrought-iron

stands, which recall objects produced in classical Greece, and large silver wine goblets, which are among the most prominent objects of the Kafir festal culture. Discovered in 1955 and published in 1965 (see Edelberg 1965), they attracted much attention not only because of their cultural sophistication, but also by their resemblance to goblets depicted in Central Asian wall paintings of the 5th to 8th centuries C.E., illustrating banquets of the Sogdian aristocracy. The whole material culture was thus geared primarily to making known as convincingly as possible the principal's rank that had been achieved by meritorious deeds.

In the case of the Kati culture in the eastern part of the region, power, worldly status, and heroism were manifested in a different, more sophisticated manner, with an emphasis on family-based elitism. In general, three large feasts were hosted by the affluent men to establish them as *mümoch*, "*mü*-man," and good warriors were known as *lemoch* or *shurmoch*, "good man" or "brave man." The elite families sought to impress others by the size and rich intricacy of the interwoven, carved decoration of their houses rather than by any motifs specific to the owner's rank. Life-sized ancestor figures of both men and women, the *mute*, shown standing, seated, or (men only) on horseback next to the respective cemeteries, held particular significance for proclaiming affluence, family traditions, and a firmly established social status. Large feasts had to be organized on the occasion of the erection of a *mute* within a year after the person's death. A somewhat similar cultural picture seems to have predominated in the western Kati area. In contrast, in the Waigal and Ashkun areas, where social status was easily lost, only "big man" figures on top of *däl* were known, but no ancestor figures. In Prasun only one family had a genuinely high status, naturally accorded by the supreme deity, with no other families able to compete, and thus there were no ancestor figures but only those of deities.

One feature unique to both the Ashkun and the western Kati cultures are carvings of pairs of interlocked or standing figures in sexual embrace. In several cases the figures are clearly shown as male and female, while in others they are sexually indistinguishable. Fifty to sixty cm. in size, they crown posts which once formed part of larger-than-normal "chairs of honor" or "benches of honor." As no such object has survived intact, one can only assume that the posts were parts of "benches of honor," whose purpose was to enable the wife, if sufficiently meritorious in her own right, to occupy a place at the side of her "big man" husband. These representations of loving couples exemplify the

once omnipresent sexual symbolism of the Kafirs and the importance given to the interplay between the two "worlds" (see above).

The manual workers were (and still are) classified as ethnically different and fundamentally "impure." Called *bari*, they lived in a form of bondage and were kept largely isolated from village life, residing below the houses of the "genuine" Kafirs. However, the Prasun Kafirs kept them out and engaged themselves in wood carving. Thus in general, the Kafirs' material culture, especially their carved wooden effigies and objects and their elaborate metal items, with the exception of the many "unpolluted" deity figures, wooden bowls, and pitchers made by the Prasun, are the products of "impure" craftsmen. Unfortunately, very little is left of all that. After the destruction that accompanied Islamization, decades of massive sales to antique dealers, and the deliberate discarding of items (mainly house posts), only a few of these examples of the impressive Kafir material culture have survived in place.

In 1984 or 1985, in a move aimed at winning sympathy, Afghan President Babrak Karmal agreed to the creation of a province named Nuristan, but it included only the northwestern region of the original Nuristan. In 1993 the *mojāhedin* government in Kabul founded a Nuristan province comprising the whole area (formerly partitioned by the provinces of Kunar and Laghman), with Pashki in the Parun valley as its capital. The province covers an area of some 12,000 square km., bordering on Pakistan to the east and the Panjshir Valley to the west. Drained by the Alisheng, Alingar, Pech, and Bashgal rivers and their tributaries (moving from west to east), the area is furrowed by countless steep valleys surrounded by ever higher mountains when approaching the main Hindu Kush ridge with peaks above 6,000 m. The population, at present amounting to probably more than 150,000 persons, lives in the five large villages of Kamdesh, Nisheigram, Waigal, Wama, and Zhönchigal, each with 300 to 500 houses, and in a multitude of smaller settlements.

Most of the villages are built step-like on often steep slopes, thereby sparing land good for cultivation. Constructed from a once generous supply of nearby Himalaya cedars, the usually square, one-room houses (with cellars) have a wooden frame which in most areas employs a scaffold-like bolting system. The houses are thus well suited to withstand earthquakes. The economy is based primarily on herding and agriculture, with only one harvest a year in the higher valleys. The men take care of the livestock, consisting mainly of goats fed in winter on leaves from holly oak trees. In the higher valleys the breeding

of cattle dominates. Each summer the men move with their animals to the high meadows and in autumn back into the valleys in accordance with a sometimes very detailed calendar system. The men used to enjoy that season of migration with its plentiful supply of milk, butter, and cheese, but nowadays interest in the herdsman's life is waning. Women, rarely assisted by men, perform the agricultural activities. In the mostly steep southern (lower) valleys they cultivate tiny terraced plots, unsuitable for the use of ploughs, with traction forks.

The lack of a central authority for decades has led to the reappearance of self-regulating, mediational bodies comparable to those that existed in the Kafir past, but with little chance for lasting solutions. Fights regularly result over scarce irrigation-water resources, a scarcity aggravated by the increase in population and the expansion of arable and pasture land at the expense of forests. Once densely wooded with holly oak, pine, and Himalaya cedar (the latter providing excellent wood for construction), the current, large-scale logging by the people and, even more so by Pakistani timber merchants who bribe locally influential men to get what they want, seriously threatens the livelihood of Nuristan.

Fundamentalism and "re-Islamization" have been on the rise in Nuristan since the 1960s, and the northern valleys have been converted to Wahhabism imported via Pakistan from Saudi Arabia. Mosques and religious primary schools have proliferated in villages, and one now finds an ever-increasing number of hajjisand of mullahs, educated in madrasas in Pakistan and mostly unemployed. Amusements are hardly tolerated, and especially music and dance, once much cherished and widely performed, are suppressed nearly everywhere. However, the memory of the Kafir past and its liberal and vivacious lifestyle is still very present in spite of its being denounced as "evil."

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