

The "Enclaved" Culture of Parun in Former Kafiristan

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The former region of Kafiristan or "Land of Heathens", renamed Nuristan or "Land of Light" after its forced Islamisation at the end of the 19th century, is a special case in virtually all respects – firstly because of its long survival as an "enclaved" cultural retreat in the midst of the Islamic world with strong "anti-heathen" attitudes, and secondly due to its general cultural peculiarities and the amazing ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity that existed. For this reason I have introduced the concept of three cultures, named in accordance with the linguistic or geographical classification of the three main Kafir or Nuristani languages or language groups: the Kati, Ashkun/Waigal and Parun cultures. The three languages – the closely related Waigal and Ashkun tongues have been grouped together here – are not mutually intelligible, and Paruni features a host of linguistic peculiarities. The Kati language, spoken by the largest ethnic group, was the *lingua franca*.

With respect to types of cultural diversity other than the linguistic one, I have placed the rather aggressive and highly status-orientated, Big-Men-dominated Ashkun/Waigal culture in sharpest contrast to the Parun culture; the Kati culture in eastern Kafiristan appears somewhat more stable, more stratified and "status-secured", and also somewhat more religious-based than that of the Ashkun/Waigal culture. The Kati speakers in eastern Kafiristan, i.e. the "eastern Kati" (see below), were visited by a British medical officer, George Scott Robertson near the end of the 19th century, shortly before the conquest by the Afghan Army and ensuing conversion to Islam.¹ Theirs is the only culture in Kafiristan that is somewhat known to us through a Westerner's eye-witness report.²

¹ While stationed in Kamdesh in the Bashgal Valley for roughly a year from 1891 to 1892, Robertson, a British medical officer, undertook brief trips to the northern Bashgal Valley and the Parun Valley, but did not see any other parts of Kafiristan. In 1896, when his book *The Kafirs of the Hindu Kush* was published, Kafiristan was already conquered, most of the Kafirs' material culture destroyed and the process of Islamisation in full swing. Very recently, the translation of a manuscript on Kafir traditions written in Urdu by Azar, a former Kati Kafir from upper Bashgal who had fled to Chitral with

With good reason, one could call the whole region of former Kafiristan an enclave of ethnic minority groups adhering to a "heathen", animistic, polytheistic religion and featuring well-developed defence mechanisms, in particular their "blood-thirsty" hero cults, for withstanding the high pressure and cultural defamation exerted by the Islamic outside world. The extent to which the somewhat "embattled", truly isolated existence of Kafiristan may have led to distinctive cultural features is a fascinating topic that can only be dealt with in the future, however, and even then in only rather hypothetical terms once the research on all the different Kafir groups has been completed. Its aspect of "enclavation" already appears to be clear from different viewpoints, according to the definition of the term.

First of all, let us take the more general meaning of the term "enclave", as frequently used worldwide in the geographical, administrative and political sense. In an ethnological context, an enclave is probably best defined as an endangered community surrounded not only by geographical and political, but also by high ethnic and socio-cultural boundaries amounting to an "invisible cultural wall". All this – with the exception of political boundaries – is the case with reference to the Parun culture in the Parun Valley. A highly isolated, very small, peaceful and nearly defenceless community had built itself a strong and socially binding culture there that was partially its own and based on an egalitarian and co-operative societal structure – probably more or less out of fear of the surrounding, much more martially orientated societies of the Kati-, Waigali- and – somewhat further away – the Ashkun-speaking Kafirs.

Geographically speaking, the north-south orientated Parun Valley with the eastern of the two main sources of the River Pech is surrounded by high mountains opening only along the river to the south. The passes to the east and north, the latter across the main Hindu Kush mountain ridge, are at an altitude of around 4,500 m, while those to the southeast and west are somewhat lower. Usually, access is from the south, travelling up along the River Pech and then its eastern headstream.³ On the other side of the dividing mountain ranges and in the lowest part of the Parun Valley the following groups of inhabitants can be found (moving in a circle): the (non-Kafir) Munjani speakers to the north, Kati speakers to the east, Waigali and Ashkun speakers to the south and, again, Kati speakers to the west. Accordingly, Parun con-

his family from the invading Afghan Army, was published; see A. M. Cacopardo and R. L. Schmidt 2007.

² The small culture of the Kalasha Kafirs in southern Chitral, related culturally with those in former Kafiristan, but mainly featuring characteristics of its own, survived due to political circumstances, but is much exposed to mounting pressure from already Islamised communities living next to them.

³ Over the years, the French NGO MADERA built a "jeepable" track along much of the River Pech and up to the inhabited part of Parun, which was reached in 2003.

stitutes a different ethnic entity "squeezed in" between the two larger areas of Kati speakers, thereby dividing them into a western and an eastern half.⁴

Living in extreme isolation and under constant threat from unfriendly visitors, the Parun population⁵ in the 19th century may hardly have been more than 2,000 people settled in six villages at altitudes of 2,500 to 2,900 m above sea level, with the largest settlement, Pashki, lying at the lower end and Shtiwe (or Ishtewi) at the higher one. As the high altitude of the settlement area impedes two annual harvests, the Parun economy relied even more than elsewhere in Kafiristan on animal husbandry dominated by cattle raising, as is still the case today. In order to avoid conflicts, the annual move of co-operating groups of flock-owners to higher-lying grazing areas still follows very carefully determined routes and timings based on a calendar system, which is far more detailed than those elsewhere in Nuristan or former Kafiristan. In the cultural sense, the Parun people were similarly isolated. Most importantly, their language differs a great deal from the other tongues spoken in Kafiristan/Nuristan. It has a large number of archaic features and many peculiarities⁶ that are difficult for outsiders to understand. Strangely, many Kati words were used out of apparent context in the secret language spoken by the Parun priests at rituals, thus constituting a specific "cult language".⁷ Visiting Kati Kafirs must have been much surprised when they heard some familiar words embedded in a language totally foreign to them. This feature may even have increased their general disdain of the Paruni people due to their shorter stature, their cultural strangeness and their lack of interest in martial qualities and achievements.

A Parun cultural enclave also exists in the religious field. Again, probably from fear and in reaction to the negative attitude of the Kafirs around them, the Paruni had made themselves the true believers "par excellence". They had such a strong preoccupation with religious concepts and myths (mainly dealing with fights between deities and giants or with encounters that humans had with deities)⁸ that Robertson quickly noticed "a distinct atmosphere of religion" in the valley, which he visited –

⁴ While much of the eastern Kati has been documented, virtually nothing is known about the western Kati, who had rebelled and were then forced to live in exile for some 20 years in areas not far from Kabul. The Afghan anthropologist A. Raziq Palwal visited their valleys briefly in 1971, but then lost his field notes to thieves in Teheran while on his way back from the United States to Afghanistan in 1977.

⁵ This is the widely known name given by the Pashtuns living further down in the valleys, while the eastern Kati name them Prasun and they call themselves Vasi.

⁶ The Indologist Georg Buddruss, virtually the only living expert on the Paruni language (termed Prasun by him and by philologists in general), has been struggling to understand Prasun's structure and present a properly understood linguistic analysis of it.

⁷ This information was imparted to me by Buddruss.

⁸ A stunning wealth of myths, some of them very long, were still remembered when Buddruss undertook a long field trip in 1955-56. Even in 2000-2002 it was still possible to record some of those myths, but musical accompaniment was already taboo due to the recent re-Islamisation of much of northern Nuristan in the Wahhabite sense. Short versions of the main myths are given in Snoy 1962 and Jettmar 1975 and 1986.

unfortunately only very briefly – in 1891 (p. 379 f.). The Parun Valley was Kafiristan's "godly valley", a pure and holy land vis-à-vis the more "polluted" areas inhabited by all the other Kafirs.

The purity and holiness of the valley was upheld by all possible means. For example, to avoid any defilement from the outside, the Kafir craftsmen or *bari*, were kept more or less as slaves all over Kafiristan, but as they were considered impure ethnic outsiders, they were not allowed to enter the valley except by observing the greatest precautionary and purifying measures. Lacking the *bari* artisans, the Paruni men did all the woodwork and wood-carving themselves. Most importantly, the artisans among them carved the numerous religious images once found in temples and open cult places. The Parun craftsmen therefore held a unique position in Kafiristan due to their ability to carve deity figures and wooden cult vessels free of impurity. These objects were much in demand in all of Kafiristan.

The valley must have been dotted with temples and shrines dedicated to a host of deities (mostly known under different names from the Kati-speaking areas). Most of these deities were goddesses. They were dominated by the god Mara (corresponding to the god Imra or Yamrai elsewhere in Kafiristan) who was imagined as sitting on horseback. Mara had a large temple called *Maka* dedicated to him, which indicated the importance of Mecca in Islam. Located in the centre of the valley in the village of Kushteki,⁹ it was by far the biggest temple in Kafiristan, probably being close to the size of the impressive defence towers of the Parun villages. Reportedly also housing a large number of effigies of other deities, the temple was widely known in Kafiristan and attracted many pilgrims as long as people dared to leave the safety of their home area. However, it was probably only those in dire circumstances or in a low social position, i.e. those who did not have much to lose, who undertook the risky trip.

In addition to the many important cult places scattered across the valley and also in the mountains, in principle each of the lineages or clans – from two to ten according to the community's size – owned a clan temple called an *amol*. It housed the lineage's tutelary deity, represented by a wooden effigy, *diz*, which was kept in storage except when it was exhibited in special dress and worshipped on ritual or other special occasions.¹⁰ Each *amol* was inhabited temporarily by a respected man (and his family) who acted as a priest, *münd*, and who had to leave the house as soon as the people decided on someone to replace him. Many such clan temples survived until recently, but in general their posts – carved with anthropomorphic figures representing deities – were replaced by less "provokingly carved" ones soon after

⁹ The temple was seen by Robertson, but only from the outside as he was not allowed to go in (1896, pp. 389 ff.). As he only left us a description, but no photos, we only have a vague idea as to the temple's appearance. (He was an ardent photographer, but lost a large number of pictures due to his films being exposed in the field.)

¹⁰ For photos of such effigies brought to Kabul as trophies by the Afghan Army, see Edelberg 1960.

Islamisation. In two villages, however, as I had the good fortune to discover in 1972, a number of *amol* had preserved those posts, though much disfigured by axe blows.

In the socio-political context, Parun had some additional features of an enclave. Based on strong egalitarian feelings and certainly also stimulated by the strong communal attachment to religious and mythical, i.e. socially binding, concepts, the Parun people developed an extraordinary sense of community and solidarity across their lineage and communal boundaries. Characteristically, each of the villages had two community centres; one was half or totally underground, equipped with posts carved with religious imagery and off-limits to women; the other was a rather normal house serving as a meeting and dancing place for both sexes, with a platform attached for dancing outside. There were annual feasts binding the communities together, whereby the extremely detailed calendar of each village, in tune with the local climatic conditions (which vary somewhat between the upper and the lower parts of the valley), helped in synchronising the religious and other feasts meant to take place simultaneously or in some consecutive order in the whole valley.

There were major community undertakings for jointly building temples, open cult places, defence towers, places for taking refuge when under threat of attack¹¹, bridges across the river, irrigation channels and the like. One can even find a monumental wooden staircase in a steep rocky canyon built to enable cattle to move up to higher grazing areas. Recently, as noticed during my visits in 2000 and 2002, this sense of community in a country where normally the opposite dominates made it possible to construct tiny power stations – without any help from outside – providing electricity not only used for lighting the houses, but also for operating community-owned threshers.

Achievement-motivated men of high merit by virtue of generous feasting of their communities, honorificly entitled *kshte* or *numkshte*, were considered particularly pure and noble, and they had to show modesty and pay tribute to a certain lineage in Ishtewi, thereby recognising the leading position of that lineage's headman. As this leadership was inherited, based on the claim of descent from a demigod, the Parun socio-political organisation recalled that of a theocracy.

Elsewhere in Kafiristan such subordination did not exist. There the local Big Men and Great Men were virtually free to compete for higher status by virtue of feasting and heroism, enjoying self-serving ostentation of their merit and power. In particular, they were free to secure the much coveted honour of having large, triumphal hero-posts¹² erected for them during their lifetime or wooden figures set up in their

¹¹ The refuge in the rocky cliff high above Kushteki reminds one of a large, nearly inaccessible bird's nest, ingeniously built in front of a small cave. See Edelberg 1972, fig. 9, and Edelberg 1984, fig. 190.

¹² Called *dāl* in the Ashkun and Waigal areas, these long posts topped by a figure representing the heroic Big Man featured holes meant for pegs, each of which indicated a homicide.

names next to the cemeteries some time after their death. In contrast, there were no such ancestral effigies in Parun.

In summary, the Parun Valley offers the picture of an "encapsulated" Kafir culture enclosed by high mountains and an "invisible cultural wall", both of which shielded it somewhat against powerful potential enemies surrounding the valley. The Paruni's claim of purity and special links to the upper world, their subordination to a descendent of a demigod in terms of recalling a theocracy, as well as their great sense of modesty, community and solidarity may well have developed in response to their great isolation, the small size of their population and their weakness regarding martial activities. They were keen on presenting the image of a united, peaceful and highly religious-minded people with strong cultural features, willing to provide spiritual assistance to all those visitors coming from potential enemy territory, be they travellers or pilgrims. Parun thus appears to be a model form of a culture enclaved geographically as well as ethnically, culturally and socio-politically in spite of its (defensive) claim to be *the* religious centre of Kafiristan.

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