

## **Borders**

Itineraries on the Edges of Iran

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# **A World In-between**

## **The Pre-Islamic Cultures of the Hindu Kush**

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**Abstract** The vast mountain area stretching east of the Panjshir valley in Afghanistan to the borders of Kashmir was, in pre-Islamic times, a homogenous culture area nested between the Iranian and the Indian worlds. Its inhabitants – speakers of a variety of Indo-European languages belonging mainly to the North-West-Indo-Aryan (or Dardic) and Nuristani groups – practiced related forms of polytheism differing in many traits but clearly united by a basic pastoral ideology encompassing all aspects of human life as well as the environment itself. The advance of Islam into the mountains, starting from the sixteenth century, gradually brought about the conversion of the whole area by the end of the nineteenth, with the sole exception of the Kalasha of Chitral who still practice their ancient religion to this day. Scholars who studied the area with a comparative approach focused mainly on the cultural traits connecting these cultures to India and especially to the Vedic world. Limited attention has been given to possible Iranian connections. The present article, on the basis of a recent in-depth investigation of the Kalasha ritual system, extends the comparison to other components and aspects of the Indian world, while providing at the same time some new data suggesting ancient Iranian influences.

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**Keywords** Kafiristan. Nuristan. Hindu Kush. Pre-Islamic. Kalasha.

### **1 The Kafirs of the Hindu Kush and the Advance of Islam in the Mountains**

The vast mountain area stretching east from the Panjshir valley in Afghanistan across the Northern Areas of Pakistan to the borders of Kashmir, was largely non-Islamic still at the beginning of the nineteenth century (Rennell 1792, p. 164; Elphinstone [1815] 1969, p. 618). Geographically, this area includes, to the west, the Afghan province of Nuristan, the Chitral-Kunar valley, the upper Dir and Swat valleys, in the Pakistani province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, with water courses all tributaries of the Kabul river; and to

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the east, the basin of the Gilgit river with the upper reaches of the Indus basin. In other words, the southern ramparts of the Hindu Kush chain and of the western Karakoram range. The inhabitants of the region, then called Kafiristan by the Muslims in all its extension, practiced archaic polytheistic religions which, though differing in many traits – such as the names of divinities, the morphology of religious festivals, the contents of the mythologies – had at their core a common symbolic system based on what has been termed a ‘pastoral ideology’ (Parkes 1987), which attached positive values of human solidarity and harmony with the spirits of nature to the male sphere of goat-herding deemed to be pure, and opposed negative values of individual appropriation and manipulation of nature to the female sphere of agriculture, considered impure; a dichotomy that was projected on the natural environment, consequently subdivided into ritually ‘pure’ and ‘impure’ spheres (Cacopardo A.M. 1985; cf. Jettmar 1975, pp. 216-220). Even if greatly diversified linguistically and ethnically, this vast mountain fastness was therefore characterized in pre-Islamic times by a certain degree of cultural homogeneity that allows to identify it as a distinct unit, a former ‘culture area’ to which, for the sake of convenience, we have elsewhere referred to as ‘Peristan’ (Cacopardo, Cacopardo 2001, pp. 25-28) (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup>

The languages spoken in Peristan (Fussman 1972; Morgenstierne 1974; Edelman 1983; Strand 2001; Bashir 2003; Kreutzmann 2005; Cacopardo A.S. 2013) belong mostly to the Dardic (or North-West-Indo-Aryan) and Nuristani groups, but the linguistic map of the region includes also a non-Indo-European tongue – Burushaski – unconnected to any known language, as well as some peripheral Iranian languages in the north, and, more recently, a major Iranian language, Pashto, which has been expanding from the south since the sixteenth century (Caroe 1958, p. 181), gradually penetrating the mountains. Indeed Peristan was a world in-between. Tucked in between the Iranian, the Indian, and the Turkic worlds surrounding it, for centuries it was reached only by the ripples of the waves raised by the turmoil of the plains, following largely an independent development until the advent of Islam.

If we consider how swiftly the Muslim religion spread in Central-Asian countries, its progress was extremely delayed in Peristan. Though the plains north and south of the Hindu Kush were in Muslim hands already at the end of the first millennium CE, Islam gained its first footholds in the Hindu Kush only in the sixteenth century<sup>2</sup> in an expansionist thrust

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1 There are significant indications that in earlier centuries this ‘culture area of the mountains’ was even broader, extending to the Western Himalayas (see Cacopardo A.S. 2010a, pp. 350-356, and Zoller 2010, pp. 248-249; Bhat, Wessler, Zoller 2014, pp. 115-121) as well as to the northern slopes of the Hindu Kush (Munphool 1869, p. 132; Wood 1872, pp. 187, 193, 198; Bellew [1891] (1973), p. 143; Robertson [1896] 1974, p. 406; Scarcia 1965, p. CX).

2 Sporadic attacks on the Kafirs are reported from much earlier: Mahmud of Ghazni plundered the Darra-i-Nur valley, in the lower Kunar (Raverty 1880, p. 141) and Timur



Figure 1. The Peristan area

of the Chagatai Khanate that between 1520 and 1550 CE brought armies from Yarkand to establish permanent sub-centres ruled by deputy governors south of the main Hindu Kush chain, seemingly in Chitral and Yasin. The Turks brought with them the Sunni persuasion, but the population remained mostly unconverted. Subsequently, a wave of Shiite refugees entered Chitral from Badakhshan, at the beginning of the seventeenth century. These were Ismailis, whose creed subsequently spread slowly to the east finally reaching Yasin and Hunza between 1792 and 1829.

Laing launched in 1398 CE an expedition against the westernmost valleys of Kafiristan (Masson [1842] 1975, pp. 198-202; Raverty 1880, pp. 135-138, 1896, pp. 69-74; Scarcia 1965, p. CXXXVII). Both conquerors failed to secure a foothold in the mountains.

But though the Ismaili religion was gradually adopted by the rulers of the princely states of the Gilgit basin, the population remained largely pagan, and it was only through the missionary efforts of the Sunni Kashmiri deputy Nathu Shah around the middle of the nineteenth century, that serious attempts were made at strict enforcement of Islamic tenets.

At the southern border of Peristan, after repeated but mostly unsuccessful attempts by the Moghul Emperor Akbar to extend his sway over the mountains at the end of the sixteenth century, the advance of Islam was mainly due to the pressure of the Pashtun tribes immigrated from Afghanistan, who managed to convert the Dardic locals between the end of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth.<sup>3</sup> The area corresponding to present-day Nuristan, then called Kafiristan by the Muslims, was thus left as the last stronghold of the ancient polytheisms of Peristan, until the crusade waged – with modern weapons provided by the British – by the Afghan Amir Abdur Rahman Khan in 1895 obtained the submission and the (at least formal) conversion of the last independent polytheistic communities, the mysterious ‘Kafirs of the Hindu Kush’, who had stimulated Kipling’s imagination.<sup>4</sup> A tiny shred of the polytheistic world of the Hindu Kush-Karakoram managed however to survive: the Kalasha people of southern Chitral, a population of only a few thousand, whose territory was left by the Durand Agreement of 1893 on the British side of the border, escaped the crusade and still practice their ancient religion to this day in the three small valleys of Bumburet, Rumbur and Birir.<sup>5</sup> Since all the speakers of Indo-European languages have long entered the orbit of one or the other of the great historic religions – Christianity, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Islam – the Kalasha represent not only the last remnant of the pre-Islamic cultures of Peristan, but also the last observable example of a ‘tribal’ Indo-European religion.

The complex pre-Islamic world of Peristan raised the interest of British colonial agents, explorers and adventurers from the very beginning, when the area was still largely unknown to Europeans not only in its human, but also in its physical, geography. In the course of the nineteenth century these British envoys collected a wealth of data which are still precious today for anthropologists, linguists and historians.

Professional scholars started finally to investigate the region in the early decades of the twentieth century, but it was only after the Second

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3 For a detailed reconstruction, with indication of the sources, of the progress of Islam in the Hindu Kush see Cacopardo, Cacopardo 2001, pp. 25-39. Among the most important references are the works of the German historian Wolfgang Holzwarth (1996, 1998, 2006).

4 The reference here is to his famous novel titled *The Man Who Would be King* (1888), about two British adventurers in British India who become kings of Kafiristan.

5 In each valley, however, a varying percentage of the population has converted to Islam.

World War that research in the Hindu Kush really gained momentum. A concerted effort was carried out especially by German-Austrian scholars (van Skyhawk 2008) who studied at length the cultural history of the area, from Gilgit to Nuristan, while individual researchers from different Western countries conducted fieldwork in various parts of Peristan.<sup>6</sup> But though a lot of work has been done over many decades not only in Nuristan and among the Kalasha, but also in Eastern Peristan, by anthropologists, linguists, geographers and historians, only limited – though significant – steps have been made towards a comparative approach aimed at investigating the broader cultural horizons to which Peristan had to be in some way connected, either for distant common origins or, in spite of its historical isolation, for subsequent contacts.

The most immediate horizons of comparison are offered obviously by the Indian and the Iranian worlds; but the analysis could be extended further afield, to pre-Christian Europe and the proto-Indo-Europeans for parallels,<sup>7</sup> or to Central Asia for influences. Here we shall limit our investigation to the cultural worlds with which Peristan was more directly related, i.e. the Indian and the Iranian ones. However, being neither an indologist or an iranologist, I shall only try to offer some materials for future research from the perspective of a scholar of the Hindu Kush, without attempting to reach any solid conclusions. After a perusal of the steps made so far, I shall just try to add some new elements on both sides of the divide.

## 2 Comparative Research in Peristan: the Indian World

The attention of scholars who first embarked on the path of comparison focussed more on the Indian than the Iranian world. This is quite understandable if we consider that Peristan belongs linguistically with India: the Dardic languages are fully Indo-Aryan languages that only a few features keep distinct from the languages of the plains; and also the Nuristani languages, notwithstanding their peculiarities, are in the end closer to the Indian than to the Iranian branch (Buddruss 1973, pp. 38-39). The efforts of these early researchers initially concentrated especially on the pre-Islamic cultures of

<sup>6</sup> A concerted, and long-term, effort was also conducted by Italian scholars, particularly, but not only, in the field of archaeology through the IsMEO (subsequently IsIAO) Archaeological Mission based in Saidu Sharif, in the Swat valley, started by Giuseppe Tucci (Ghaniur-Rahman, Olivieri 2011).

<sup>7</sup> For a first, and limited, attempt in these directions see Cacopardo A.S. 2010a, pp. 357-413. See also Allen (1991) for an analysis of the main gods of the pre-Islamic religions of present-day Nuristan and an investigation of their Indo-Iranian counterparts in the light of a 'quasi-dumézilian' perspective.

present-day Nuristan, as the last polytheistic stronghold of the Hindu Kush on which, in addition to the eye-witness account left by the British colonel George Scott Robertson ([1896] 1974) – who spent a year among the Kafirs in 1890-1891, shortly before their forced conversion – other important data could be collected through interviews with elderly people who still had memory of the pre-Islamic world in which they were raised.<sup>8</sup>

The first steps were made in the field of historical linguistics. The Norwegian linguist Georg Morgenstierne, who did pioneer work in the Hindu Kush starting from 1924, investigated in many works<sup>9</sup> the etymologies of terms that could shed light on the cultural and historical background of the speakers of Nuristani and Dardic languages. His linguistic materials were used by Ralph L. Turner for his monumental work *A Comparative Dictionary of Indo-Aryan Languages* (Turner 1966).<sup>10</sup>

Morgenstierne's work was continued by the German linguist and indologist Georg Buddruss who extended his research to the field of mythology, attempting for the first time this type of comparison. He (Buddruss 1960, 2002) highlighted significant correspondences between Vedic cosmology and the cosmology expressed in the mythology of the Kafirs of the Prasun valley, held to be the religious centre of Kafiristan. He saw a correspondence between the celestial sea of the Vedic Cosmos called *ṛtasya sadana* (the abode of Truth) and the sacred *Sūjem* lake of the people of Prasun, which in their symbolic system represents the Beyond and in its very name recalls the concept of fair law, justice, which in the Vedic system is a concept very close to Truth (Buddruss 2002, p. 131). He found also that one of their main myths showed the imprint of the Vedic theme of the fight between Indra and the primordial monster symbolizing Chaos (Buddruss 1974). In this connection, an important finding made by Buddruss in the field of etymology is that the Prasun word *bem* could be «the only survival known so far, in a modern language, of the Rgvedic meaning of Sanskrit *brahman*-» (Buddruss 1973, p. 42), which did not mean 'the absolute' as in later philosophical speculation, but belonged semantically to the sphere of «religious hymn, poem, prayer» (Buddruss 1973, p. 41). Recently, Buddruss has given

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8 A written document containing such memories is the autobiography of Shaikh Muhammad Abdullah Khan Azar. The manuscript, bought by Morgenstierne in Chitral in 1929, was published only recently: see Cacopardo A.M., Schmidt 2006.

9 Especially in Morgenstierne 1949, 1951 and 1973 (Fussman 1977, p. 27 fn. 17). For a complete bibliography of his works from 1903 to 1972 compiled at the Indo-Iranian Institute of Oslo University by Knut Kristiansen and Inge Ross see Morgenstierne 1973.

10 Turner's dictionary contains 14,845 'headwords' which have the phonetic structure of the earliest recorded form of the language brought to India by the Indo-Aryans; the reconstructed forms are preceded by an \*. In this article, reference to this work will be made with a 'T-' followed by the number of the relevant 'headword'.

an invaluable contribution to Hindu Kush studies with the complete publication of his collection of Prasun texts (Buddruss, Degener 2015).

After him, the greatest effort was made by the French indologist Gérard Fussman,<sup>11</sup> who argued (1977, pp. 24-25) that the connection to the Indian world was not only linguistic, but cultural as well; Iranian influences preceding the advent of Islam, according to him, are negligible.<sup>12</sup>

In his view even the last stronghold of Kafiristan, the region of present-day Nuristan, the westernmost and most isolated section of our area, did not belong to the Iranian world and – before it was encircled by Islam – was culturally a part of the Indian world, even if only a remote and very marginal one.<sup>13</sup> Through an etymological analysis of the names of gods and spirits he concluded that the most ancient stratum of the Kafir pantheon is Indian (Fussman 1977, pp. 33-34) and therefore comparable to the Vedic pantheon with which, on the basis of linguistic arguments, he highlighted several parallels. Yet, in his view, the roots of the cultures of Kafiristan are pre-Vedic, though post-Iranian: i.e. they date back to a time when the Iranian world had already begun to take form but the spiritual world of the Vedas was still not consolidated. In the centuries that followed, he believes, they developed in isolation without any contact with the Indian world, except through the Dardic domain which, in contrast, is wholly Indo-Aryan, linguistically and culturally (Fussman 1977, p. 35). In a later work Fussman (1983, p. 204) nuanced his position, recognizing that relations between Kafiristan and India had possibly been more complex than he had formerly thought, but he remained convinced that the proposals he had made in his 1977 article, were still valid.

Due to the fascination exerted by the larger and richer cultural context of Kafiristan, only limited attention was at first given by comparative research to the Kalasha, though their culture was the only one still observable of the many that once composed the complex constellation of Peristan. In fact, if in the field of mythology the Kalasha compare quite poorly with the pre-Islamic cultures of the speakers of Nuristani languages, the contribution their culture can give from the point of view of ritual – as we

**11** The possibility of relations with the Indian world had attracted also the attention of Max Klimburg who, in an attempt to interpret the meaning of some wooden images of intertwined couples found in South Nuristan, advanced the hypothesis of a connection between Kafir concepts and Tantric beliefs (Klimburg 1976; 1999, pp. 138, 313), a proposal already fleetingly aired by Edelberg (1960, p. 282).

**12** He (Fussman 1977, p. 25 fn. 14) quotes the Nuristani Kati term *nəməč*, ‘prayer’ as a rare instance of an ancient borrowing from Iranian.

**13** A view shared also by Morgenstierne (1947, p. 240). Some connection to the cultural universe of India appears indeed to have been perceived to some extent also by the population, because several early sources (Mohan Lal [1846] 1971, p. 342; Gardner [1869] 1977, p. 50; Goes in Wessels [1924] 1997, p. 15) relate that Hindu merchants were usually admitted, and well received, even in the heartlands of Kafiristan, where no Muslim had access.



shall see – has been unjustly overlooked. Only more recently has Kalasha material been taken into proper consideration by the German-American indologist Michael Witzel (2004) in an extensive study dedicated to the antecedents of the Rgvedic religious system.

Witzel refers in his comparison both to the pre-Islamic Nuristani and Kalasha religions, always specifying the position of each. Also, he analyzes the pre-Islamic religion(s) of the Hindu Kush as a system, considering not only the mythology, but also rituals and festivals. His conclusion is that «In sum, the Hindu Kush area shares many of the traits of Indo-Iranian myths, ritual, society, and echoes many aspects of Rgvedic, but hardly of post-Rgvedic religion» (Witzel 2004, p. 614). His endeavour ventures far back into the Indo-Iranian world – and beyond that, into the proto-Indo-European and even Eurasian universes – but the scope of his research prompts him to investigate more in depth the Indian than the Iranian side. The traits he enucleates as Rgvedic antecedents include the existence of a creator god like Imra whose name is connected – as Fussman (1977, p. 30), and Morgenstierne before him (1951, p. 163), had already pointed out – to Sanskrit Yama Raja; the preponderance in myth and ritual of the typically South-Asian number 7 in contrast to the Northern Eurasian 9; and, more importantly, the presence of an «Indra-like figure» appearing in various forms and under various names (Witzel 2004, pp. 606-607). Apart from the field of mythology, his contribution is particularly significant for what concerns ritual and festivals: in his view, ritual in Hindu Kush religion is still of the Indo-Iranian type but South-Asian and Vedic influences are remarkable. Among other features, he notes the exogamic rule mirroring the Vedic one, the importance of the concept of purity, as in India, which affects the status of women and prompts the exclusion from ritual of a group of artisan/serfs who form a caste of untouchables, like the Vedic Sudras; and he draws an interesting parallel between the role of virgin boys as semi-priests – they are the ones who materially perform rites – and that of the Brahmacharins of the Atharva Veda.

### **3 Comparative Research in Peristan: the Iranian World**

If parallels with the Indian world were sought somewhat selectively and just by a few scholars, Iranian connections were mostly only suggested (Tucci 1963, p. 158; Scarcia 1965, pp. CXVII, CLIV; Gnoli 1980, p. 70) and never came under systematic investigation. Wolfgang Lentz went just a step further by arguing in a brief note presented at the first Hindu Kush Cultural Conference held in Moesgård in 1970 that a number of mythological traits about the deeds of Imra, the supreme deity of the Kafir pantheon, have parallels in some features of the legend of Mithras (Lentz 1974, p. 37).

Only Jettmar, however, broached the issue in some detail (Jett-



mar 1974; 1986, pp. 135-137). In his contribution to that same conference, he gave some examples of what seemed to him «parallels between Iranian and Dardic institutions and ideas» that, in his view, were «not due to a common heritage going back into Indo-Iranian antiquity but to diffusion in the course of a long and complicated symbiosis» (Jettmar 1974, p. 40). But it is in the 1986 English edition (Jettmar 1986) of the volume of his *Die Religionen des Hindukusch* (Jettmar 1975) dedicated to the religion of the Kafirs – as the title reads – that he deals at length with the issue in relation to the pre-Islamic religions of the region of present-day Nuristan which, occupying the westernmost section of the Hindu Kush, was the area more exposed to possible Iranian influences. His point of departure is an analysis of the position of Imra in which he discusses some arguments put forward by Fussman (1977).

Fussman had noted, as mentioned, that Imra's name can etymologically be derived from that of the ancient Indo-Iranian divinity Yama. Since among Imra's names there is Mara 'the killer', which is also the name of the god of the Underworld, he (Fussman 1977, p. 49) had argued that the Kafir god had the same double position as that held by Yama who, in Vedic and Iranian texts, appears both as the King of Paradise and as the Lord of the Underworld. For him this contradiction was due to the existence among the ancient Indian populations of two distinct systems of beliefs, one centred around Indra and Brahma, the other one around Mara, who, in Mauryan times, became, as god of the heathens, the arch-enemy of the Buddha (Fussman 1977, pp. 50-51). In Fussman's view there are enough elements to assert that this twofold system dates back to Indo-Iranian times and he suggests that the presence of these two hierarchies must have something to do with the struggle between *Asura* and *Deva* and their inverted positions in the Indian and Iranian systems (Fussman 1977, pp. 58-59). Jettmar challenges this conclusion – which, he remarks (1986, pp. 53, 133), was also supported by Buddruss – arguing that, before the advent of Islam, «during the 'historical' period...in the times when states known to us by name existed outside the mountain region» (p. 137), Kafiristan was not as isolated from the world of the plains as Fussman believed, and as was actually the case after the permanent establishment of Islamic states. He notes in this connection that the Imra religion was not indeed equally rooted among the speakers of Nuristani languages, and that its diffusion is to all appearances due to the dominant position acquired in pre-Islamic times by the Kati speakers (pp. 133-134)<sup>14</sup>. From here he goes on to observe that the Kati were settled in the extreme western portion of

14 This is confirmed by Klimburg (1999, p. 142) who reports that in the southern Nuristani valleys of Waigal-Ashkun, Imra, though quite popular, «was considered a deity of Bashgal, Kantiwo and Prasun». For Klimburg his place in southern Kafiristan was due to «the influence of the religious beliefs among the Kati Kafirs» (1999, p. 142). It seems also significant

the region, and therefore came in contact with Iranian populations who worshipped Yima (the Iranian equivalent of Yama) who «had many attributes which would predispose him to take the place of Imra» (p. 53). To their influence – as well as to «a negative reaction to Buddhist preponderance in the surrounding lowlands» (p. 135, cf. pp. 52-53)<sup>15</sup> – is possibly due in his view, the final promotion of Imra/Mara to supreme creator god, if maybe not the outright introduction of his cult. In sum, rather than focussing on ancient Indo-Iranian roots, and without denying that there might have been «various conceptions of the pantheon» (p. 135), he brings to the fore more recent Iranian influences.

Though Jettmar's idea of a «negative reaction to Buddhist preponderance» seems quite conjectural, and even doubtful (cf. Klimburg 1999, p. 355), his focus on Iranian influences does not seem out of place. It may be interesting under this regard – and without opposing the fascinating idea of the existence of two distinct systems of belief among the ancient Indian population – to elaborate on his proposal by highlighting the differences between the figure of Imra/Mara and that of Dizala Dizaw, the Supreme God of the Kalasha pantheon. Dizaw is a typical *deus otiosus* (Eliade 1976, pp. 51-56; Brelich 2007, pp. 32-37) who, after completing the task of creation, entered a state of permanent inactivity abstaining from any interference with human affairs (Morgenstierne 1973, p. 155).<sup>16</sup> His cult is consequently reduced to some rare ritual offerings and, in contrast to what is the case for the other divinities, there is no holy place or altar dedicated in his name. If we were to resume a distinction made by Raffaele Pettazzoni (1957, p. 91) – the prominent Italian historian of religions – more than half a century ago, between a type of Supreme Being characterized by omniscience and another characterized by creative power, Dizala Dizaw would belong to the latter. He has to do with the world and its origins, and not with human beings and their behaviour; he guarantees the permanency of creation, but he does not control and does not sanction human actions. Imra/Mara, in contrast, would definitely belong to the former type. He was sacrificed to very frequently, his temples were found in every village (Robertson [1896] 1974, pp. 388-389), and in myths and stories he interacts with humans and gods behaving at times with cunning, arrogance or even deceit (pp. 385-389; Jettmar 1986, p. 48), very much as a human

here, as Jettmar notes, that a secret 'language of the gods', used for cultic purposes, «turned out to be an archaic form of Kati» (Jettmar 1986, p. 134, cf. p. 33).

15 On this point see also Klimburg 1999, p. 355

16 The etymology of his name – from the root *D'iz* connected to old Indo-Aryan *dehati* 'makes, builds' (T-14621) – does not qualify him as a divinity connected to the celestial sphere like the main gods of many Indo-European pantheons, who are generally designated by names derived from the Indo-European root *\*deiwos*, 'luminous', 'celestial'; but lack of cult and absence from the annual ritual cycle usually characterize celestial gods (Eliade [1948] 1976, p. 51).

being might do. Yet, he is also the creator god whose place is in the sky, and he is depicted as «law-giver of the world» and as «cultural hero» who brought to men important innovations, such as the plough or the first mill; and it is said of him that after teaching humans he withdrew to his abode in heaven «never to be seen again» (Jettmar 1986, p. 49).

Peter Snoy, a prominent member of the German Hindu Kush research team, believed that Imra's role as a creator god had been exaggerated by the early Christian explorers and the Muslims who first came in contact with the Kafirs, but the comparison with Dizala Dizaw seems to indicate that that might in fact have been his original role. Indeed his figure includes the main traits of the Kalasha Supreme Being: a creator god whose seat is in the sky who, after creation, retires to a distant abode leaving human affairs to lesser deities; he is also connected to luminosity<sup>17</sup> and has therefore all the basic characteristics of an archaic sky god (Eliade [1948] 1976, pp. 61-65) who had become a *deus otiosus*. The coexistence of the two types of Supreme Being, especially in one and the same divine figure, is not so common because the two figures stem from different experiences and different needs (Brelich 2007, p. 37): the immobility of the *deus otiosus* has the function of maintaining unchanged, and of guaranteeing, the order he established once and for all (Pettazzoni 1957, pp. 90-91), while the active type of Supreme Being satisfies the need for permanent effectiveness in relation to human affairs; the former has to do with the origins, i.e. the past, the latter with the present, of a community. We may wonder whether in the case of Imra/Mara a transformation had taken place from a *deus otiosus* to an active divinity, a figure deemed on the other hand more typical of polytheistic systems (Brelich 2007, p. 33).<sup>18</sup> For the Kalasha a similar process has been witnessed in recent times: increasing contacts with the Muslims especially in the course of the last century has brought them, by now, to identify almost completely Dizaw with the God of the Muslims, to the point that his traditional name is rarely used;<sup>19</sup> he has become therefore a very active god. It is possible that a similar transformation concerned Imra in earlier times. If this is so, it is not inconceivable that it took place – as Jettmar supposes – among the western Kati under the influ-

17 In a Kati hymn he is surrounded by a golden aura (Morgenstierne 1951, p. 163).

18 The fact that the name Imra can be derived from Yama, who does not have the traits of a *deus otiosus*, does not seem of hindrance to this hypothesis: the etymological connection is likely to go back to a time well before the Vedas, when the figure of Yama could possibly have had different characteristics. It seems quite possible at any rate that, through the play of historical circumstances, etymologically related names end up designating different divine figures.

19 For the text of a prayer in which the name of Allah occurs see Cacopardo A.S. 2010b, p. 230. The name he is most commonly addressed with, however, is Khodây, a Persian term largely used by the Muslims of the surrounding areas.

ence of the nearby east Iranian world. Though we are here in the slippery field of conjecture, we could add to his hypothesis by suggesting that, if not by the cult of Yima, the transformation could have been triggered by the figure of the omniscient, all-powerful and very active supreme deity which arose in that area from the predication of Zoroaster.

Be that as it may, Jettmar's overall idea that influences from the civilizations of the plains, before the advent of Islam, did reach the mountains, seems reasonable. It is perhaps only in this light that the highly specialized craftsmanship of the artisan class can be explained, as well as the presence – as Jettmar (1986, pp. 136-137) points out – of technological achievements like metallurgy that produced refined items such as the famous silver cups,<sup>20</sup> or the sophisticated irrigation techniques, the high-quality wood-working skill, and the horizontal water mill. Indeed traits such as these are typical of those socio-cultural universes which used to be called 'civilizations' – meaning by this term societies that knew writing, the State, money, social stratification, metallurgy etc. – as opposed to 'primitive cultures', characterized by stateless political organizations, social structures based on kinship, merit feasts, and the presence of shamans. Even polytheism itself, in fact, according to some prominent historians of religions (Sabatucci 1998, pp. 16-19; Brelich 2007, pp. 31, 115-117), is found typically in complex societies that know writing – such as those of Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, Rome, pre-Christian Northern Europe, pre-Columbian Mexico, etc. – rather than in the so-called 'primitive' societies, where it is absolutely exceptional. The pre-Islamic world of Peristan is a rare example of the merging of traits belonging to both models: under this respect as well, it was a world in-between. Considering that the plains surrounding the Hindu Kush saw the rise and fall of some of the greatest civilizations of the old world, this may not be so surprising: their influences, faint as they may have been, in the course of the centuries must have reached the mountains. That some of these influences should have come from the Iranian world, especially for what concerns the western part of Peristan, seems only logical. But to detect them with accuracy is a task that only a specialist in Iranian studies can carry out in full.

For our part, we shall now try to facilitate the work of Iranian specialists and indologists by providing an inventory of the Indian and Iranian traits we have been able to detect in the traditional symbolic system of the Kalasha on the basis of data collected during fieldwork we conducted on ritual texts and practices. Since in its basic core, the Kalasha system can be considered quite representative of the pre-Islamic world of the Hindu Kush – multifari-

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20 First mentioned by Elphinstone ([1815] 1969, p. 626), they were seen for the first time by a European researcher over a century later (Edelberg 1965).

ous as that was - we trust our research will provide some useful hints for specialized scholars. We shall first consider the Indian elements in Kalasha culture, which are more evident and easier to enucleate, and we will proceed subsequently to the investigation of the more elusive Iranian traits.

#### 4 Kalasha Religion. A Comparative Approach: Indian Traits

If we look at the Indian universe, the most manifest connections in the Kalasha system are with the Vedic world.

The names of several divinities are etymologically connected to those of the Vedic pantheon, and especially to Indra. This is the case of the two main gods of the Birir valley, Warin and Praba, whose names, for Ralph Turner (1966), can be derived respectively from *\*aparendra* (unrivalled Indra) (T-444), and *prabavhra*, one of the names of Indra (T-8782). The very name Indra has also been preserved in that of the god Balimain (*bal'ima-in* most powerful Indra<sup>21</sup>) - the deity believed to visit the Kalasha valleys on the night of the winter solstice - who is often invoked in ritual as Indr (Wutt 1983, pp. 123, 132; Loude, Lièvre 1984, p. 261). Indeed he presents many traits of the Vedic Indra: as did originally Indra (Stutley, Stutley 1980, p. 170), he personifies the power of generation and fertility; and just as Indra is considered in Indian epic literature the founder of the New Year celebration (Dumézil 1929, pp. 11, 122-124), so is Balima-In seen as the re-founder of the Chaumos winter solstice festival in one version of Kalasha mythology (Jettmar 1975, pp. 354-355; Snoy 2008, pp. 50-64; Cacopardo A.S. 2008, pp. 102-104, 2010a, pp. 300-302) in which he is said to have taught the new rules of separation and to have instructed the people about the rituals to be performed. Interestingly, another Vedic divinity is associated with Balima-In: the servant of the god is called Pushaw (*p'ushaw*), a name we can easily connect to the Vedic Pushan, a god in his turn associated with fertility and the sun (Stutley, Stutley 1980, p. 350) who, in a Vedic hymn (RV, VII, 35, I), is merged with Indra in a dual divinity, Indra-Pushan (Stutley, Stutley 1980, p. 174). Other Vedic connections indicated by Turner concern the goddess Jeshtak, who presides over family relations and rites of passage, whose name may be derived from that of the Rgvedic goddess *dēSTRī* (T-6556) or, possibly from *jyeSTha*, the first, the elder (T-5286); the *JaC* spirit(s) connected to agriculture whose name is etymologically related to the Sanskrit *yaksha*, a term designating spirits venerated since pre-Vedic times who were possibly vegetation dei-

21 *bal'ima* is an epithet borrowed from Kati, the geographically closest Nuristani language, meaning 'most powerful' and used in hymns as an attribute of gods (cf. Morgenstierne 1951, pp. 180, 184; Jettmar 1975, p. 358), *in* stands for Indr. This is in my view the most likely etymology. Informants gave no explanation of the meaning of the god's name.

ties of rural communities (Stutley, Stutley 1980, p. 502; T-10395; cf. Morgenstierne 1973, p. 156); the name of the *s'uci* mountain spirits derivable from *sucikā*, one of the Apsaras (T-12510) or from \**suvatsika*, a goddess (T-13514); as well as, last but not least, the two terms designating the gods: *d'ewa*, manifestly connected to Sanskrit *deva*- (T-6523), and *dewal'ok* derived from *devaloka*, the abode of the gods (T-6539).

Equally important connections can be found in the field of ritual. From Sanskrit is derived the name of the main event of the whole Kalasha ritual cycle, the Chaumos (*caum'os*) winter solstice festival. The connection is with the *cāturmāsya* (T-4742) festivals which, in Vedic times, were celebrated every four months in spring, in summer during the rainy season, and in autumn (Sergent 2005, p. 388). In fact the Kalasha ritual cycle itself appears to correspond quite closely to the Vedic one because it is subdivided in three great ritual sequences taking place in spring when the transhumance of the herds starts, in late summer when the fruits of pastoral and agricultural activities are collected, and in winter when their consumption begins and the regeneration of the world is celebrated (Cacopardo A.S. 2010a, pp. 111-121). Obviously, due to the climatic differences, the position of the three Vedic festivities in the year cycle does not coincide exactly with the Kalasha pattern, but the etymology of the name Chaumos seems enough to confirm that the connection exists. A further interesting correspondence in the field of ritual, is that of the term *diC*<sup>22</sup> designating the holiest period of the winter solstice festival when, to restore a state of purity, separation of genders is enforced, the men retire to the goat-sheds, and all outsiders are ousted from the villages. *diC* is related to the Sanskrit term *diksha*, designating the elaborate preparations of the great Soma sacrifice (Dumont, Pocock 1959, p. 16). *diksha* is associated with the concept of rebirth, attained through sacrifice, and it has the meaning of 'initiation', 'dedication', 'consecration' (Stutley, Stutley 1980, pp. 114-115; see also Kuiper 1970, p. 117). Though the context is not the same, the Kalasha term appears to cover the same semantic field, a period of preparation in the wake of a ritual event consisting in a rebirth: of the novices initiated during the festival, and of the community at large that celebrates its own rebirth with the rituals of the New Year.

At the social level, an important trait connecting not only the Kalasha but the whole of Peristan to the Indian world is the exogamic rule - already present in the Veda (Witzel 2004, p. 615) - forbidding marriage between two people who had a common ancestor in the male line up to the seventh ascending generation, which governs the formation and the evolution of the patrilineal lineages. Lineage exogamy is indeed widespread in

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22 In our transcription of Kalasha words, capital letters indicate a retroflex articulation.

India, and it is codified in the *sapinda* system, which is based essentially on the same rule (Karve 1953 in Berreman 1972, p. 158; Nicholas 1981, pp. 371, 377; Goody 1990, p. 157).

If, finally, we consider the Indian system as a whole, the most significant affinity with the pre-Islamic cultures of the Hindu Kush is maybe the central role played at the symbolic level by the pure-impure polarity. The opposition has been developed in Hinduism in a very complex system that is obviously very different from the Kalasha and the Peristani ones in general: a system reflecting a highly stratified society which new writing, the State, and money, and had a class of priests and sacred texts. But an analysis of the articulation of the polarity in the two systems indicates that those very different developments are the fruit of opposed applications of one and the same principle. A comparison between the Indian caste system and the Kalasha system has been recently carried out by Alberto M. Cacopardo (2009, pp. 163-169)<sup>23</sup> on the basis of the famous work by Louis Dumont, *Homo hierarchicus* (1979). The central thesis of Dumont's book is that the dichotomy pure/impure encloses the hierarchical principle which, with those of separation and interdependence it subsumes, represents the fundamental principle of Hindu society:

Cette opposition sous-tend la hierarchie, qui est superiorité du pur sur l'impur, elle sous-tend la separation parce qu'il faut tenir séparé le pur de l'impur, elle sous-tend la division du travail parce que les occupations pures et impures doivent de même être tenues séparées. (Dumont 1979, p. 65)

Alberto M. Cacopardo argues that the same conceptual tools have been used, in the two cases, for radically diverging ends, because in India they generated the highly stratified caste system, while among the Kalasha they were put at the foundation of an essentially egalitarian system. The principles of hierarchy, separation and division of labour in the case of the Kalasha – he observes – have been used to found the distinction between genders, instead of that between castes<sup>24</sup>. The opposition 'onjiSta-pr'agata (pure-impure): a) puts the male gender in a condition of ritual superiority; b) founds the separation between genders by denying access to the goat-sheds to women and by segregating them in the *bas'ali* house during menstruation and parturition; c) establishes the division of labour between genders on the basis of the relative purity of their respective occupations. The result is the exact opposite of what happened in India because, by

<sup>23</sup> Alberto M. Cacopardo is brother of the author and director of the various research projects the two researchers conducted in Chitral under the aegis of the Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente (IsIAO, ex-IsMEO).

<sup>24</sup> A similar remark was made also by Jettmar in his main work on the religions of the Hindu Kush (1975, p. 464).



confining the distinction pure-impure to the sole field of gender relations, the effects of the hierarchical principle are limited to that sphere and the principle of equality is conversely, and consequently, affirmed within the genders. Even if in the disparity between men and women, the hierarchical principle is therefore rejected as a principle of social organization. The fact that, in spite of this fundamental difference, the two systems are based on a common core of symbols is indicated, Alberto Cacopardo also observes, by the circumstance that, in both of them, the prescriptions concerning purity have to do with the organic aspects of human life, which for Dumont (1979, p. 70) are the immediate source of the notion of impurity. Indeed among the Kalasha, as is the case in India (Harper 1964, pp. 158-169; Dumont 1979, pp. 72-73; Nicholas 1981; Levy 1990, pp. 388, 455), impurity is connected to menstruation and childbirth, as well as to death: women are segregated in the focal moments of their reproductive activity, and, as in India (Dumont 1979, p. 74), the relatives of the deceased are temporarily impure and they do not shave for the whole period of mourning. Further, Alberto Cacopardo notes, just like commensality is forbidden between untouchables and the 'twice-born', so are Kalasha women forbidden to eat from the same plate as men and they do not touch with their lips the drinking vessels used by males. The opposed application of the pure-impure polarity made by Brahmanic India has evidently much to do with power, because the ritual hierarchy replicates in the symbolic sphere the hierarchy established at the economic and political levels, founding the alliance and the complicity between kings and priests on which is based, as Dumont argues, the whole history of India (Cacopardo A.M. 2009, pp. 165-166).

If Kalasha society and the known Peristani systems in general<sup>25</sup> tend to reject hierarchy as the founding principle of social organization, they do not totally expel it from their horizon - we may add - because the pure-impure dichotomy, apart from founding the ritual subordination of women, founds also a division known throughout Peristan between free-men and artisan-serfs. If among the Kalasha these were serfs, among the speakers of Nuristani languages, in pre-Islamic times, the members of this group were mostly true artisans (*bar'i*)<sup>26</sup> specialized, as mentioned earlier, in advanced techniques which included wood-carving, metallurgy, and ceramics. This subordinate minority was undoubtedly a caste: they formed an endogamous group, deemed inferior, connected to specific occupations; physical contact with its members could contaminate free men, and commensality was therefore forbidden; finally, it was an unchangeable status

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25 An exception is reportedly (comment by Max Klimburg) represented by the pre-Islamic society of the Parun valley, in Nuristan.

26 A lower class of serfs, called *shūwala* also existed (see e.g. Klimburg 1999, pp. 69-70).

acquired by birth.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, at variance with what is usually the case in class societies, where the groups of higher status are also the less numerous, here we have a vast majority of free men and only a small minority of serfs (Robertson [1896] 1974, p. 102; Duprée 1971, p. 8; Jones 1974, p. 95; Klimburg 1999 p. 62), an inversion that, according to Leach (1969, p. 4), is typical of caste societies. The pure-impure polarity did therefore lead in Peristan as well to the emergence of the notion of caste but, nevertheless, Alberto M. Cacopardo again argues, the principle of hierarchy was not developed in the mountains in the same direction as in the plains: in spite of the presence of this caste of untouchables, Kalasha society and the other known pre-Islamic societies of Peristan in general, remain fundamentally egalitarian because the principle of hierarchy – outside the sphere of gender relations – had only a very limited application. For certain, we are not dealing with caste systems. The presence of a small caste of untouchables is not enough to qualify them as such: as observed by Dumont, a society may be so qualified only if in its whole it is divided in a series of castes; which is definitely not the case for the Kalasha and for the other societies of Peristan (Cacopardo A.M. 2009, p. 169).<sup>28</sup>

From what remarked so far it appears that the Indian traits in Kalasha culture are due to common origins rather than to subsequent historical contacts. We do find nevertheless some stray traits indicating more recent Hindu influences. Of these the most prominent is the name of the god Mahandeo, which was a honorary title first of Vishnu and then of Shiva (Stutley, Stutley 1980, p. 249; Gonda in Jettmar 1986, p. 60), a divinity whose connection to our area, according to Tucci (1963, p. 160), is quite certain. Traces of more recent Hindu influences have been found also among neighbours of the Kalasha (Cacopardo, Cacopardo 2001, p. 160) and even in Kafiristan-Nuristan where we find the seven Paneu brothers (Jettmar 1986, pp. 75-76) that for Morgenstierne (1951, pp. 165, 174-175) are etymologically connected to the Pandava brothers of the Mahabharata,<sup>29</sup> or the Kamdesh god Arom who's name, according to Strand (2001, p. 220 fn. 390), is probably derived from Rama. Quite predictably, more Hindu

27 We are referring here to the definition of caste given by Hutton (in Leach 1969, pp. 2-3).

28 *Pace* Fussman who in his 1977 article extended his comparative effort beyond the pantheon to the social structure suggesting that, among the speakers of Nuristani languages, pre-Islamic society was divided in groups strongly reminiscent of the four original Indian castes (the *varna*); data subsequently acquired showed instead that ancient Kafiristan was not a society based on castes (Klimburg 1999, pp. 62, 346-348; Cacopardo, Cacopardo 2001, pp. 43-44).

29 Some doubts are however expressed by Fussman (1977, p. 34) from the semantic point of view, though he recognizes that phonetically the etymology is perfectly viable.

influences are to be found in Eastern Peristan among the Shina speakers,<sup>30</sup> the alimentary prohibition of beef (cf. Göhlen 1997, p. 165; Cacopardo, Cacopardo 2001, p. 137) being the most conspicuous example. In spite of geographical isolation, some contacts with the Hindu world must indeed have occurred before Peristan became encircled by Islam, and even after that. Ruins of a temple of the Hindu Shahi period, from the eighth or ninth century, were found as far west as the Kunar valley immediately to the south of Chitral (Lohuizen-de Leeuw 1959), and we know that still in the nineteenth century a sacred spring in Bajaur, just south of our area, formed a pond that once a year attracted many Hindus from the surrounding areas for a ritual bath (Raverty [1880] 1976, p. 183).<sup>31</sup>

Such traits however are few. It seems quite clear that the affinities and connections linking the Kalasha and Peristan to the Indian world point much more to the old Indic world than to Brahminical India. Fussman, apparently, was not mistaken when he stated that

les religions des pays de langues kafires sûrement, et de langues dardes probablement, étaient des religions indo-ariennes, mais des religions qui n'auraient pas connu l'élaboration théologique brahmanique. (Fussman 1976, p. 205; cf. 1977, p. 25)

In fact, already the world of the Vedas, as noted earlier, appears to reflect a society that had undergone developments unknown in Peristan: it was a stratified society, with a nobility and a class of priests who had knowledge of writing. If we consider the Kalasha pantheon, the circumstance may be indicative that we find there the figure of a Creator god like Dizala Dizaw, a *deus otiosus* who recalls Dyaus Pitar,<sup>32</sup> the archaic sky-god of the ancient Indo-Aryans (Sergent 2005, p. 348), whose memory only faintly survives

30 Here, in Gilgit, was stationed as British Political Agent Major John Biddulph who, in an influential work, argued in favour of strong Indian influences on the region before the advent of Islam: he believed that Buddhism had been the religion of the area before it was superseded by forms of Hinduism brought by the Shina, whom he saw as immigrants from the south (Biddulph [1880] (1986), pp. 109-115). Subsequently, Jettmar came however to the conclusion that the pre-Islamic religion of the Shina was «very distant from the essential beliefs of Hinduism» (Jettmar 1975, p. 291) and, though Hindu influences may have been more evident among them, it is quite clear now that the pre-Islamic culture of the Shina-speakers was of the Peristani type: see Jettmar 1975, pp. 215-220, and Cacopardo, Cacopardo 2001, pp. 27-28.

31 Morgenstierne (1944, p. VII) even thought that the pre-Islamic religion of the Pashai of Afghanistan, speakers of a Dardic language in the south-westernmost portion of Peristan, might have been a form of Hindu-Buddhism; but his idea has been proved to be unfounded (see Cacopardo, Cacopardo 2001, pp. 37-38).

32 The two names, however, are not etymologically connected because one derives, as we have seen, from the root *Diz*, to make, build, while the other comes from the Indo-European radical *deiwos*, sky (Eliade [1975] 1979, p. 209).

in the Vedic texts (Eliade [1975] 1979, pp. 219-220). If Kalasha religion undoubtedly echoes many aspects of the Rgvedic religion (and very little of post-Rgvedic), its roots appear to be even older than that, for they hark back to an Indo-Aryan past preceding the emergence of the Vedas. As we have seen Fussman concludes (though with some caution for the Dardic domain), this may be said of the pre-Islamic religions of the Hindu Kush in general. Many elements seem therefore to indicate that the cultures of Peristan were unique examples of Indo-Aryan cultures that, left aside by mainstream Hinduism, followed largely an independent development. But while for Fussman they belong to a post-Iranian, though pre-Vedic, phase, for Witzel, as mentioned, their roots may go further back, to the undivided Indo-Iranian past. A glance at the Iranian side will help us to see whether our data give any support to this hypothesis.

## 5 Kalasha Religion. A Comparative Approach: Iranian Traits

If we turn to the Iranian side of the comparison the new elements we can offer on the basis of our study of Kalasha ritual are much fewer. They amount just to two, but we believe they deserve some attention.

The first one consists in the name of a divinity invoked in a hymn, sung by women in a chorus, during the most sacred days of the Chaumos winter solstice festival. The texts of this type of chants can be very old because, since they are always sung in a chorus, the lyrics are common knowledge and tend therefore to be deeply embedded in collective memory. In this case, the archaic character of the text is indicated by the name of the divinity invoked: Bidrakalen (*bidrakal'en*). A god with this name does not appear in any other context. There is no myth, story, or prayer, in which such a name is mentioned. To our questions people (in Birir, where the text of the chant was recorded)<sup>33</sup> only answered that Bidrakalen is the god who descends in the Kalasha valleys for the Chaumos festival. Etymologically, it seems, the name may be linked to Vṛtra, the Vedic monster obstructing creation. A plausible hypothesis in this direction could be *b'idra-kal-en*, where the second element would be a temporal reference (*k'aw/k'aluna*, in the Kalasha language 'year', 'in the year') and the third would be a locative.<sup>34</sup> The semantic result would be 'in the time of Vrtra', i.e. the time of the beginning, and the name would then mean 'the god of the times of the beginning'. In alternative – perhaps an even more fascinating hypoth-

<sup>33</sup> For the transcription of the text of this hymn, recorded by the author in the Birir valley in 2006, see Cacopardo A.S. 2008, pp. 88-90.

<sup>34</sup> A proposal for which I must thank Pierpaolo Di Carlo, the linguist in our team, who has studied at length Kalasha ritual texts.

esis – we could think of a derivation from *Vrtraghan* or *Vrtrahan*, ‘killer of Vrtra’, an epithet of Indra which, for Witzel (2004, pp. 599, 601), goes back to Indo-Iranian times (cf. Sergent 1997, p. 293): a solution consistent with various ritual elements which indicate, as we have seen, that the god of Chaumos is none other than Indra. Both hypothesis, at any rate, are quite consistent with the context: a reference to the time of Vrtra when initiations are about to be celebrated and the community is preparing for a new beginning, is certainly appropriate; and even more appropriate would be a reference to the ‘killer of Vrtra’, i.e. Indra. In this latter case, the connection to the Indo-Iranian world (if confirmed) would be of special historical interest, for it could give support to Witzel’s (2004, p. 614) idea that the pre-Islamic world of the Hindu Kush brings us back, not only to a pre-Vedic Indo-Aryan past, but to the still undivided Indo-Iranian world.

The second new element we can present concerns a specific ritual which had never been documented before. This is the celebration of the New Year in the Kalasha valley of Birir. The ritual is part of the winter ritual sequence, which is the longest and more complex of the three composing the Kalasha ritual year. Starting at the beginning of December, it culminates in the Chaumos winter solstice festival to continue, at intervals of days or weeks, until the end of February (Cacopardo A.S. 2008, 2010a, 2010b). When in 2006-2007 we followed the whole sequence we found out with some surprise that the beginning of the new year did not coincide with the winter solstice, though this was grandly celebrated for seven days in a row. It was a distinct, and quite separate, ritual event, called *salgher’ek* which, in 2007, took place on 31 January and 1 February. The time of the celebration, we were told, coincides with the full moon of the lunar month following that of the solstice.<sup>35</sup> A beginning of the year in February is not something unusual. Quite appropriately Dumézil (1929, pp. 6-10) remarked long ago that the winter period, with the pause (in temperate climates) in agricultural activities, though typically a time of intense social life, does not offer, for religious celebrations, those fixed points of reference that are provided in the other seasons by the rhythm of work in the fields. Lacking a direct connection with productive activities, ritual events, comparatively considered, show «incertitude de date» (p. 6) and tend to fluctuate under the influence of historical circumstances. In the Indo-European world, however, Dumézil notes, New Year celebrations are always included in the two thresholds of winter, that is between December and March.

If a New Year celebration in February is hence nothing exceptional, we may still wonder, however, why in Birir it does not coincide with the

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<sup>35</sup> In fact in 2007 *salgher’ek* was held a couple of days before the full moon, probably because the exact time of ritual events – as reported by Parkes (quoted just below, in the text) – is determined not by the phases of the moon, but by the observation of the place where the sun sets on the mountain crests closing the valleys to the west.

winter solstice, especially since this is celebrated with a festival of the grandeur of Chaumos. The logic may be that the end of a cycle must be kept separate from the beginning of the new one, for beginning and end, though connected, are not the same thing. Therefore, a period of margin (Van Gennep [1909] 1981, p. 157), a crepuscular phase, is inserted between the two events.

Even if celebrated still in winter, *salgher'ek* appears to be a spring celebration. This can be inferred from the name of the main ritual – *b'asun don*, 'spring bullock' – and from the fact that it is placed right at the end of the coldest period. A spring-time new year, as opposed to a winter-time one, was a tendency prevailing in the Iranian world, whose influence appears to be indicated also by the very name of the ritual event: if *gher'ek* is a Kalasha term, *sāl* is the Persian word for 'year' which is never used by the Kalasha in everyday speech. Possible Iranian influences, however, do not appear to be related to the official Iranian New Year (*No-ruz*, *Norouz*, *Naw-roz*), hailed on 21 March, which, already celebrated by the Achaemenians (Eliade [1975] 1979, pp. 346-348) and promoted to national holiday under the Arsacids, is in its roots a ritual of royalty (Gnoli 1980, pp. 196-197, 217) that has little to do with the world of the Kalasha. We should rather look at the festival called *sada*, celebrated in many places on the 10th of the month of Bahman, a date that corresponds to 30 January and coincides, therefore, almost exactly, with the date of *salgher'ek*. The Iranian *sada* is an ancient pastoral festival (Cristoforetti 2003), including themes possibly even of pre-Zoroastrian origin. Though not considered as such, it has the traits of a New Year ritual complex, in which bonfires are lit and the end of the coldest time of the year is celebrated. We have here a further lexical correspondence: in Iran *sada* marks the end of *čilla-yi buzurg*, great *čilla*, and the beginning of *čilla-yi kūčak*, little *čilla* (Cristoforetti 2003, p. 75). In the same way the Birir celebration takes place at the end of the period called *gh'ona cil'a*. The first word is the Kalasha term for 'big' 'great', while the second one – which was interpreted by informants as meaning 'cold' – is quite manifestly the Persian *čilla*, meaning 'the forty days', which was used to subdivide the Iranian sequence of winter pastoral feasts (Cristoforetti 2003, p. 75). It seems quite significant, therefore, that between the end of Chaumos and *salgher'ek* there is an interval of just about forty days.

Such a surprising correspondence may be taken as an indication of further parallelisms between the winter feasts of the Kalasha and the ancient Iranian pastoral winter cycle, which would be indeed an exciting discovery. In no other instance, however, do we find mention among the Kalasha of the term *cil'a*, nor have we heard any reference to subdivisions of time in periods of forty days in winter or, for that matter, in the rest of the year. The Kalasha have a lunar-solar calendar that divides the year in 12 months – for which the same term as 'moon' (*mastr'uk*) is used – with names mostly coinciding with those of the main seasonal festivals. Accord-

ing to Peter Parkes (1983, p. 183), who has conducted a year-long systematic investigation of Kalasha time-reckoning in 1975-1977,<sup>36</sup> the count of the days starts with the new moon, which is said to remain 'hidden' for a period varying from 1 to 3 days, with the result that the number of days in all months may vary from 28 to 31.<sup>37</sup> While the progression of the year is generally followed by the people by keeping track of the moon cycles, the exact timing of religious celebrations is determined by observing the place where the sun sets along the crest of the mountains closing the valleys to the west. The dates, therefore do not coincide in the three communities, but they can be predicted in advance by observing the setting of the sun with reference to specific landmarks on the mountain ridges. Parkes (1983, p. 183) relates that the observation is entrusted to some specifically appointed elders (*suri-jagaw'au*) and it is conducted with the aid of 'sun pillars' (*s'uri thū*) erected in a few goat-sheds in each valley. The elders, after comparing their observations, reach an agreement on the date for the beginning of the festival, which is then officially announced.<sup>38</sup>

Though we have no knowledge of any other instance in which the term *cil'a* appears in the Kalasha ritual cycle, the possibility of some sort of parallelism with the ancient Iranian pastoral cycle deserves nevertheless to be investigated: that we are dealing here with an Iranian element seems out of the question, but we may wonder if we are faced with a trait that should be attributed to an ancient common heritage, or rather, as may be more likely, to less remote historical relations. Whether the former is the case, or when and how these may have occurred, are open questions for future research. We only hope that the data we make available here, will offer some support to a similar investigation.

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36 More generic data collected by us through informants in 1973 coincide pretty much with his.

37 He adds that «there seems to be a hiatus in reckoning days after the end of the Chaomos festival at the midwinter solstice; and there is some suggestion that an intercalary month is (or was) inserted every seven years at the Dewaka rite in January» (Parkes 1983, p. 183); Dewaka is the name of a sacrifice celebrated in the Rumbur valley at the end of January, like the Salgherek of Birir.

38 Parkes (1983, p. 183) notes that the system is quite accurate because the climax of the Chaomos celebrations always coincides with the winter solstice and the dates of the other main seasonal festivals have only varied in a range of 3 or 4 days in the 40 years preceding his observations. In 2006-2007 (the year of our last fieldwork), however, fixed dates had been introduced in the two northern valleys of Bumburet and Rumbur, but not in Birir, where the traditional system was still in use.



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