Wooden Wares: An Archive of Loss

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INTRODUCTION

Nuristan, the Land of Light, was part of a larger cultural triangle known as Peristan in pre-Islamic times, characterised "by a certain degree of cultural homogeneity that allow[ed] to identify it as a distinct unit, a former 'culture area.'"[1] The Peristan region encapsulated, "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, [...] the Kabul river; [...] the Gilgit river [...and] the upper reaches of the Indus basin."[2] As the name indicates, Peristan, the Land of Fairies, is shrouded in myth and legend. With almost no recorded history, the region relies on vague oral traditions and archaeological excavations that archive human settlement from approximately 1000 BC. Although the bordering areas were vastly Islamised by 1st century AD, the Peristan region remained largely untouched by Islam till the latter half of the 16th century. Thus, the region began to be known by Muslims in the surrounding areas as Kafiristan or the land of infidels/idol worshippers.

The Kafirs were considered fierce warriors, feared by their Muslim neighbours. Often distinguished as *Siah-posh* (black clad) or *Safaid-posh* (white clad) due to their dark or light coloured smocks, they were able to defend their traditional and ancient belief systems until the later part of the 19th century. In 1893, the Durand Agreement between the British and the Emir of Afghanistan, Abdur Rahman Khan, rapidly altered the fate of the Kafirs. The Durand Line assigned the larger eastern region of Kafiristan to Afghanistan, while the much smaller Kalasha region remained under British control. As part of the treaty, the Afghan ruler received new artillery and modern warfare equipment and in 1895, the Emir sent large armies to convert the Kafirs to Islam by force. In less than a few years, the entire Kafiristan region—under Afghan rule—had been altered dramatically. Vast destruction of pagan heritage, the slaughter of tens of thousands of tribesmen and women, and large numbers sold into slavery, wreaked havoc in the region. Objects of religious and social significance such as "numerous temples, shrines and cult places with or without cult figures of deities, a great multitude of ancestor statues, many warrior poles topped by human figures and several 'gates of honour' were stolen or entirely devastated."[3] "The Kafirs were shocked, desperately clinging to their traditional beliefs and social systems."[4] By the early part of the 20th century, Kafiristan was absolutely converted to Nuristan.

Various academics divided the area into four distinct ethnographic zones: the Kati, Ashkun/

Waigal, Parun, and Kalashamun (occupying present day Kalash valleys). *The Kafirs of the Hindu Kush* by Sir George S. Robertson,[5] is the only detailed account of the region and its people before the rapid Islamisation. The Kafirs formed pastoral communities or tribes and followed an archaic form of religion that bares a striking resemblance to Brahmanism, Zoroastrianism, and early Vedic rituals.[6] Although the belief system will not be discussed at great length, it is important to note that the entire community is divided on a symbolic polarity view of pure and impure: male and female, mountain and valley, goat/markhor and cow/cattle, divine and demonic, etc.

The dramatic alteration of the cultural landscape resulted in an acute loss of tradition and subsequently of craft in the region. The complexity of design and motif making, the historic and traditional narrative that Kafir objects signified, lost their meaning and value among the community as rapid Islamisation in the region created an archive of erasure.

Representation of an unidentified female goddess on a pillar in an Assembly Hall in Dewa, Parun Valley. Notice the interwoven matt design on the headdress of the deity. Source: Maximilian Klimburg, "Male-Female Polarity Symbolism in Kafir Art and Religion: New Aspects in the Study of the Kafirs of the Hindu-Kush," *East and West* 26 (1976): 479-488.

KAFIR CULTURAL OBJECT ARCHIVE

Traditional Kafir society relied heavily on objects for rituals and the appearance of the homestead for social status. The presence of, "countless wood-carvings on the doors, pillars, other important parts of the house, and on the ceremonial chairs of honour illustrate two dominant themes in the Kafir's beliefs: the belief in the magical power of horns, and the need to represent certain images in doubles."[7] Horns of the local markhor goats were said to hold supernatural powers and only those who possessed extreme wealth—to afford lavish feasting ceremonies—or proved their virility by the slaughter of enemies, could ornament their homes with ritual objects and utensils with the symbols, and could own special ceremonial "horn chairs" or thrones. Carvings of straight or intertwined horns on doors, windows, and main pillars of the house represented the favour of male and female deities and the social rank of the owners. The appearance of human heads with *dandaku*[8] (ceremonial crowned head decorations) on pillars, hearths, shelves, and horned twin backed thrones are most prominent in the entire region. Often star shaped or shield motifs symbolised heroic deeds, while couples in passionate embraces symbolised the harmony of cosmic balance. Celestial figures were represented with phallic symbols, deities were depicted seated on horseback, goats, and stools with whips and weapons to show affinity and obeisance to the gods.[9]

Additionally, deceased ancestors were commemorated with wooden effigies honouring the life and deeds of the departed. The figurines known as *gandao* were erected at prominent positions near burial sites during ceremonial festivities that dotted the mountainous landscape to remind the Kafirs of their famous ancestors. Wooden poles of honour or warrior poles[10] were often decorated with ornaments as above but also bore a peg system for the warriors to keep count of the causalities of their battles. The rich symbolic nature of ritual and social objects primarily fashioned out of wood thus played an important role in traditional Kafir society.

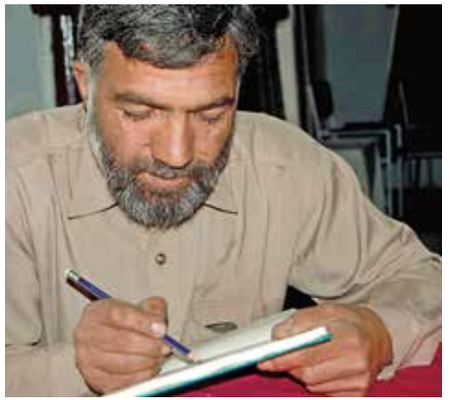
As observed by Robertson, the tribes had a clear status distinction and thus roles were often divided based on the following priority:

1. The clansmen belonging to important clans.
2. Men belonging to very small clans or groups of families.
3. Men of distinctly inferior family, but free men.
4. Slaves.[11]

Traditionally, it was the slaves or *bari* that were artisans, preparing everyday objects and architectural elements for buildings. They were considered impure and disreputable in Kafir culture, as their occupation as weavers, blacksmiths, carpenters, cutlers, etc. were thought of as discreditable. The *bari* lived outside the village and were isolated from the remainder of the community. In the case of Parun Kafirs, the *baris* were not allowed to fashion religious or ritual objects due to their status.[12] Theoretically, the Islamisation of Kafiristan freed the baris from enslavement, but it did not do much to their social standing. Many fled to the surrounding regions and into modern day Pakistan looking for opportunities, only to face extreme competition in the market for their trades.

Today, the Kafir valleys are stripped bare of these ritual objects. Landscapes that were once dotted with fierce *gandaos*, warrior poles, exquisitely carved temple colonnades, and ornamented homesteads, now lie barren. Kalasha children who attend school at the Kalasha Dur Museum and Cultural Centre are taught about their ancestors through archival images of the past, when ancestors openly performed archaic rituals and rites. They are shown the once rich landscape that has been robbed by researchers, museum officials, and exotic culture enthusiasts for private and public collections around the world. Objects that hold strong cultural meaning for the

surviving community can be seen across the Chitral region, hiding in plain sight, in 5-star hotels, museums, and private homes. And while the last remaining Kafirs in the Kalasha valleys fight for their survival, objects that archive their ancient past lie unattended in the open.



Abdul Jabbar during his discussion with the author. March 2016. Photograph by Mariyam Nizam.

ABDUL JABBAR, THE *BARI* ARTISAN?

Abdul Jabbar is 45 years old and owns a small wood workshop in the valley of Ayun, Chitral District. Working with three younger artisans in training, he fashions various wooden members for buildings and interiors, while also producing various furniture pieces. His workshop is similar to several others in the vicinity but his peers consider him as one of the finest Nuristani master artisan. He traces his family lineage to Nuristan and takes pride in stating that the intricately carved patterns and motifs on his masterpieces are all traditional Nuristani designs. These include relief style rosettes, an interwoven matt design (much like a basket weave), and various other linear geometric shapes and patterns. Using ancient wood curing methods and rudimentary tools, Abdul Jabbar can produce several hundred variations of motifs for ornamentation on his wooden masterpieces. Much like other artisans in the area, he too, has learned the craft from his ancestors.

But upon deeper discussion, Abdul Jabbar is diffident in stating the traditional and symbolic meanings of his craft. His archive is a mere catalogue of motifs that do not epitomise the

(Top) Images in classroom depicting traditional *gandao* or ancestor effigies that once dotted the Kafir landscape. Bumboret Valley, Chitral. March 2016. Photograph by Mariyam Nizam.

(Left) Traditional temple pillars and *gandao* lie in the open area at the Chitral Museum. March 2016. Photograph by Mariyam Nizam.

(Centre Right) Classroom at the Kalasha Dur Museum and Cultural Centre where students are taught about Kafir culture through archival images. Bumboret Valley, Chitral. March 2016. Photograph by Mariyam Nizam.

(Bottom Right) An original *gandao* or ancestor effigy lies in the corner at one of the 5-star hotel resorts in Chitral. March 2016. Photograph by Mariyam Nizam.

Kalasha Dur Museum and Cultural Centre, Bumboret Valley, Chitral. March 2016. Photograph by Mariyam Nizam.

significance of his people or their historic narrative. Much like most Pakistani craft, the ornamentation is represented as geometric and Islamic. The rich cultural diversity of representational art and craft, as practiced by his ancestors, has become archaic and taboo. Traditional Kafir culture did not recognise the effort or craft of the *bari* artisan; while current societal pressures create an arena of fear resulting in minorities who are unable to express their true cultural and religious affiliation. Thus making artisans like Abdul Jabbar, a mere instrument in creating aesthetically pleasing craft, without the traditional or conceptual paraphernalia that was so important in the objects of yore.

During the construction of the Kalasha Dur Museum and Cultural Centre, Abdul Jabbar along with other master artisans was appointed to create the traditional architectural members in the scheme. Detailed studies of traditional objects and material culture were undertaken, resulting in a hybrid structure that utilised Nuristani designs and motifs in the elaborate wooden elements used along the façade and interior of the building. Although aesthetically pleasing, the motifs did not bring to light the complexity of motif selection and placement, as was so ominously present in the objects in traditional Kafir culture. The representation of form and the interrelation of pattern and object have been erased to promote objects that merely "look" Nuristani.

The demolition and destruction of Kafir material culture in the wake of the 20th century—before detailed documentation of the area—left a gap in understanding the social and communal structure of the region and its people. The radical Islamisation of the Kafirs meant that individuals in the communities that once understood the symbolic references of ornamental motifs and patterns were lost. The once intricate weave—representing the hair and headdress of deities—has now evolved into the famous Nuristani matt design, while symbols representing heroic deeds and virility are now read as mere rosettes or floral and geometric motifs. The representation of cosmic balance through the inclusion of human heads and figures has completely vanished. And feathers and fruits only appear in low counts.

Detail of woodcarvings undertaken by Abdul Jabbar and his colleagues at the museum in Bumboret. Bumboret Valley, Chitral. March 2016. Photograph by Mariyam Nizam.

For Abdul Jabbar—who does not answer to which region of Nuristan his lineage hails from, whether his family was of *bari* origin—the symbolic representations of his Kafir past hold little meaning. His craft has become a mere shadow of the archive that his ancestors once possessed. Still in his masterpieces, lies an archive—a shadow of the past—where the indigenous culture was represented without fear or taboo, where the form and representational power of an object transcended aesthetics and mere motifs, where craft objects symbolised the passing of tradition and a celebration of heritage.

Notes

1. Alberto M. Cacopardo and Augusto S. Cacopardo, *Gates of Peristan: History, Religion and Society in the Hindu Kush* (Rome: Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente, 2001), p. 25.
2. Augusto S. Cacopardo, "A World In-between: The Pre-Islamic Cultures of the Hindu Kush," in *Borders: Itineraries on the Edges of Iran* edited by Stefano Pellò, *Eurasiatica* 5, Edizioni Ca' Foscari, 2016, pp. 243–244.
3. Maximilian Klimburg, "The Arts and Societies of the Kafirs of the Hindu Kush," *Asian Affairs* 35 (2004), p. 366.
4. Ibid., p. 368.
5. Sir George Scott Robertson (22 October 1852–1 January 1916) was a British soldier, administrator, and author who wrote about his year long journey to Kafiristan in the book titled *The Kafirs of the Hindu Kush* (1896). He was the commanding officer of the British forces during the famous siege of Chitral.
6. T.H. Holdich, "The Origin of the Kafir of the Hindu Kush," *The Geographical Journal* 7 (1896), p. 42.
7. Maximilian Klimburg, "Male–Female Polarity Symbolism in Kafir Art and Religion: New Aspects in the Study of the Kafirs of the Hindu-Kush," *East and West* 26 (1976), p. 485.
8. Ibid., p. 486.
9. Klimburg, "The Arts and Societies of the Kafirs of the Hindu Kush," p. 378.
10. Ibid., p. 375.
11. George Scott Robertson, *The Kafirs of the Hindu Kush* (London: Lawrence & Bullen, Ltd, 1896), p. 85.
12. Klimburg, "The Arts and Societies of the Kafirs of the Hindu Kush," p. 378.

Cacopardo, Alberto M. and Augusto S. Cacopardo. *Gates of Peristan: History, Religion and Society in the Hindu Kush*. Rome: Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente, 2001.

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