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## Hunters' Lore in Nuristan

### Abstract

One way of classifying folktales is according to the milieu of their origin and performance, e.g., the tales of fishermen, miners, or hunters. Hunters' tales are composed along traditional lines in a given society, having a particular form and including particular topics. The hunters' folklore told in Nuristan (northeastern Afghanistan) is characterized by a strong emphasis on fairies and supernatural events. The fairies, who are believed to live in the high mountains, are of special importance for hunters, because they are said to be the keepers of the wild mountain goats (*markhor*), the Nuristanis' favorite game animal. Only a *markhor* that has previously been slaughtered and consumed by its owners, the fairies, becomes legitimate game for a human. Two hunters' stories from the village of Nisheygram, Nuristan, are translated and analyzed, and compared with a third tale from Iran. The article endeavors to show that the performance of hunters' lore traditionally had a meaning that transcended its mere entertainment value because it confirmed for the audience the archaic conception of the world prevalent in Nuristan before the advent of Islam in 1896.

**Keywords:** Nuristan—hunting—*markhor*—fairies—Lord of Wild Beasts

**N**URISTAN, SITUATED IN THE HIGH Hindu Kush mountains of north-eastern Afghanistan, has long been of special interest to students both of linguistics and of anthropology. The area has been defined linguistically as the one where Nuristani languages, a group of Indo-European languages closely related to the Indo-Aryan and the Iranian languages, are spoken. While there has never been total agreement among scholars on the exact position of the Nuristani languages in relation to these two branches of the Aryan family of Indo-European languages, it seems likely that they are in fact more closely related to the Indo-Aryan branch, but separated from Indo-Aryan in pre-Vedic times, before the migration of the Indo-Aryans into India (DEGENER, forthcoming). Even nowadays, Nuristan is occasionally called Kāfiristān (“land of pagans”), and its languages are Kāfir languages. Although the name “Kāfiristān” may be more widely known, it should be avoided (unless used exclusively for elements of pre-Islamic culture), for it is resented as an insult by the devoutly Muslim Nuristanis.

Nuristan’s unimportant geographical location between major trade routes and the poor accessibility of its V-shaped valleys granted its inhabitants relatively long cultural and political isolation. Only in 1896 was Nuristan conquered and converted to Sunni Islam by Afghan troops; since then it has been part of the state of Afghanistan. The conversion was achieved mainly by force. Before Islamization the population maintained certain economic and social contacts with its Muslim neighbors, but was generally regarded with awe and mistrust as barbaric head-hunters. Indeed, the Nuristanis had managed for centuries to preserve their traditions and status-enhancing activities like feasting and head- or trophy-hunting, keeping alive beliefs and ceremonies, some of which may be compared to those of Vedic India.<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, there are two social classes of Nuristanis in the Waigal valley: the ruling class of landowning livestock-herders (ca. 90 per cent), and the socially low-status, formerly enslaved, artisans and servants. The ruling class formed a basically egalitarian society with a strong emphasis on rank, corre-

sponding to merit achieved by warfare, social competence, and feasting.

In 1969 the Indologist Georg Buddruss spent a few weeks in the village of Nisheygram in the Waigal valley, Nuristan, in order to collect linguistic material as a basis for the better understanding of some of the little-known Nuristani languages.<sup>2</sup> Within the relatively short time at his disposal, he managed to collect over forty texts told by native speakers in the local language, *Kalaša-alā* (also called *Nišey-alā*), most of them dealing with various aspects of Nuristani life in former and in present times.<sup>3</sup> The language of Nisheygram is, like the other Nuristani languages, not a literary language, nor even a written language. The tales are thus testimonies of oral tradition in Nuristan. One group of stories deals with fairies and supernatural beings, the belief in whose co-existence and relationship with the human world was an unquestioned part of the Nuristani conception of the world before the introduction of Islam, and even in 1969 had not yet degenerated into "mere folklore." Hunters, the men who roam the mountains and forests and stay there alone, sometimes without meeting other human beings for several days, are—in Nuristan as elsewhere—most likely to experience manifestations of the supernatural world. Two of the stories from Nisheygram show how a Nuristani hunter would come into contact with the fairies,<sup>4</sup> who are believed to live high up in the mountains above the human settlements.

#### FIRST STORY<sup>5</sup>

In *Kalashüm*,<sup>6</sup> the hunters believe that male and female *markhors*<sup>7</sup> belong to the fairies, [because, as they say] the male and female *markhors* graze on the mountains, and the fairies also live in the mountain. When the fairies kill one of their *markhors* and eat its meat, they do not [as humans would] break its bones but collect them and put them back into the skin. When they then throw the carcass out of the door, the animal stands up and looks into the fairies' house from the doorstep. The fairies then address it, [pointing at a particular man and] saying: "You belong to such and such a hunter!" The *markhor* then goes to meet that person, and the hunter kills it.<sup>8</sup>

Here is the story of a *markhor* of those fairies: Once a huntsman went out to hunt. However, when he had made up his mind, thinking: "I will kill male and female *markhors*," the fairies surrounded him, then they came up toward him and made him go to the fairies' house. They came to a narrow cleft in the rock. The man could not pass through it, while the fairies went through without difficulty. The hunter stayed behind stupefied. One of the male fairies went into the house, brought out *sürmiyā* [collyrium; a kind of colored powder] and made the hunter rub it on his eyes. After he had rubbed the *sürmiyā* on his eyes the way into the rock was opened for him. He went up to the fairies' house.

The fairies were with him. When they came to the door, there was a giant bear tied to one side of the door, to the other side there was a leopard. Those were the fairies' dogs. When the bear got up to attack the hunter, the fairies said, "Sit down, sit down, this one belongs to us," and both the bear and the leopard became still as logs lying on the ground. The hunter's heart pounded with fear.

The hunter's fears may not be unfounded, but in this case he need not worry, for he is treated rather like a guest in a Nuristani village.

At last they got into the fairies' house. A stool<sup>9</sup> was placed before the hunter and he was told to sit down. He sat down and stayed there so quiet that one might take him for dumb. He was offered walnut kernels from the year before, and cooked millet mixed with walnuts.<sup>10</sup> Some of these he managed to hide in his clothes. Later, after he had returned to the village, he showed them to the people.

The fairies live in families like humans. Male and female, young and old fairies behave like human Nuristanis, eat the same food as Nuristanis, and obviously speak the same language, since the hunter has no difficulty understanding them.

The fairy men talked among themselves, the fairy women talked among themselves, in one place the fairy daughters danced, in another the children played, and the old and respectable people talked. The hunter sat motionless as if he had been cast into fetters. Later that night people came in leading a male *markhor*. They slaughtered it. It was so fat that a man could not even finish a morsel of it.<sup>11</sup> The old and venerated were given a piece of the neck, the young men were given the ribs, the hunter and some of the youngsters were given a piece of the thigh.<sup>12</sup> The hunter's piece was the upper part of a front leg.

So far the scene must have been a familiar one for the hunter. Now, however, something happens which he has not expected—the audience, of course, has been prepared for it by the informant's introductory words.

When they had finished their meal, the hunter broke the thigh-bone right in the middle. The fairies got up in alarm, shouting: "Don't do that, do not break the bones!" The hunter was at a loss what to do; he was afraid of what the fairies might be up to. At last he used a little twig from an olive tree as a splint and joined the broken bone with it. After the meal, those fairies who had come from other fairies' houses went home. All the bones of the *markhor* were collected, put back into the skin and then thrown out at the door. The *markhor*, thus revived, got up and looked into the house. The fairies told it: "You, *markhor*, belong to such and such a hunter." Then the *markhor* ran away. The hunter kept in his mind whatever the fairies said, until, a few days later, they let him go home.

The story does not tell us why the man was released from the fairies' imprisonment.

Back home in the village, the hunter heard that two other men had gone out hunting. Those two men returned with a male *markhor*. The hunter who had been taken prisoner by the fairies was among those invited to the house of one of the other hunters. In the evening, the *markhor* was skinned, cut into pieces and thrown into the cooking pot. Then, the meat distributor<sup>13</sup> sat down on the floor in the back part of the house<sup>14</sup> and looked down at the *markhor* in order to distribute the meat according to rank. There he saw the upper part of a front leg, the bone of which had been broken in the middle and had been joined by means of an olive twig. While the meat was being distributed, all the men present could see the broken thigh-bone. When the man who had been imprisoned by the fairies saw it, he said, "It was I who broke this thigh-bone, and I attached this olive twig to the bone." Since then people say that the male and female *markhors* are the livestock of the fairies.

The Nuristani fairies, although they are not expressly designated as such, represent collectively what has been called the "Lord of Wild Beasts." In stories from the Northern Areas of Pakistan we find similar beliefs and the same type of hunter's story as in Nuristan:

Of course, the *peri* do not cede to the hunter an intact animal, one full of vitality. Before they give up an animal they establish their own rights as herderesses of the Mayaro [the pure animals of the mountain heights]. It is said that the *peri* kill the Mayaro animals and eat them themselves. Afterwards, however, they put the carefully collected bones into the skin, and the animal "seemingly returns again to life." Deprived of its essence, the animal is now ceded to human hunters to be killed and used.... Narratives belonging to a topos of wide distribution serve as proof that humans can kill only those animals that have already previously been killed and then been revived by higher beings. It is described in every detail how a hunter is invited by the *peri* to a meal, but disregards their request not to break any of the bones or throw them away. The *peri* have to replace the missing bone with a piece of wood when they revive the animal. The hunter then finds this piece of wood in his quarry. (JETTMAR 1975, 246–47)<sup>15</sup>

Among the Shina speakers of Pakistan the goat-keeping fairies are female, but in Hunza and among the Burusho there are also accounts of a male "Lord of Wild Beasts" (see JETTMAR 1975, 284; SKYHAWK 2000).

In the Nuristani stories from Nisheygram there is never mention of a

single lord or king in the context of hunting, although the fairies, always pictured as being of both sexes, do have a king.<sup>16</sup> The reason is probably that the fairy community is a more or less faithful copy of the human community. Social structure and organization within the Nuristani communities of Waigal (see KATZ 1982, 85–118) is based primarily on relations of consanguineal or fictive kinship. The frame in which social interaction takes place and which serves as a basic concept for self-definition is the *deš*, “village” or “community.” Any individual success of a villager would bring benefit to the entire community. Consequently, in pre-Islamic times, in a harsh and perilous sociopolitical environment, those men who were most successful in terms of martial prowess or institutionalized generosity would be most respected as heads of the basically egalitarian society of the ruling class of landowners who formed the majority of the village population. More recently, as Max KLIMBURG (1999, 63) points out, to the institution of these “Great Men” whose authority was based on their merits as warriors and feastgivers has been added that of “Big Men” whose social position and political power is based rather on political and economic cunning. In any case there is no one single leader as there is in, for example, the neighboring Pakhtun communities.

In the second story we learn less about the fairies’ family life, but more about how the supernatural can become manifest, and about possible strategies to gain the release of a person who has been imprisoned by fairies.

## SECOND STORY

This story is from the time when Islam had not yet come<sup>17</sup> to Nuristan. The story is as follows: There was a man called Jānerā from the Kusog-darē clan.<sup>18</sup> He had seven sisters, he himself was his father’s only son. He was a huntsman. He had a cowshed<sup>19</sup> up in Jög. There was also his field.<sup>20</sup> One day, in the late afternoon, when he had gone to the field on look-out [to protect the crops against birds, etc.], he took his gun and went hunting. Going up as far as the region below the top on this side of the mountain Nolüm [west of Nisheygram],<sup>21</sup> he saw a male *markhor*. The *markhor* was a fine, strong animal. When he raised his gun and aimed at it, the *markhor* turned into a dog. The man lowered his gun. When he aimed again, he saw that the animal had turned into a fox and was looking at him. Then the animal grew as large as a giant. While it kept growing, fairies surrounded the hunter from all sides. They forced him to go toward the mountain Nolüm. On the way, the fairies said amongst themselves: “This man wanted to kill a *markhor* we had not eaten before. Why don’t we imprison him here for a few days to make him feel sorry for it? When we hear his seven sisters lament for him, let us listen!”

Whereas in the first story, the hunter had not (yet) attempted to shoot a *markhor* belonging to the fairies, the hunter in the second story did in fact take aim at a fairy animal, even if he was not aware of doing anything illegal. In both cases the fairies do not speak of killing the offender but just plan to incarcerate him for a few days.<sup>22</sup> This is in accordance with other stories about human encounters with fairies, where the fairies are not presented as really malevolent, provided they are not offended. Even if they pursue human beings they seem to do so for fun rather than in order to harm or kill them.<sup>23</sup> This is not, however, how the other party would see it. For human beings, dealings with the fairies are dangerous. The imprisoned or persecuted person would be scared, the relatives of a man abducted by the fairies would worry and even believe him to be dead, and this is well known and anticipated by the fairies who enjoy it to a certain degree—"Let us listen to his seven sisters' laments." Marriages between humans and fairies do occur, but are never wished for on the human side. People who are forced to marry and live among fairies are dead to the human world. Fairies can also become quite hostile once they are actually annoyed. We do not know what would happen to a hunter who managed to kill an animal not assigned to him by the fairies.<sup>24</sup> One of the texts from Nisheygram<sup>25</sup> tells about a house in that village which had been newly built so as to block the traditional path of the fairies. The inhabitants of that house were continually harassed and troubled by the fairies until the house was finally given up and rebuilt in another place.

While his seven sisters composed an elegy in his honor<sup>26</sup> and began the funeral rites, weeping and wailing, the husband of one of them, who was acquainted and able to converse with the fairies, was told about it. That man made up his mind to speak to the inhabitants of Nolüm [the fairies] and to get Jānerā freed. Before that he slaughtered a hornless goat in the name of the inhabitants of Nolüm, calling their names. In consequence, Jānerā was released, he came back down to the village.

Contact with fairies is never without risk, even if the fairies are not malicious beings by nature. A few persons only, not necessarily priests, are able to negotiate with them in case of conflict. Jānerā's brother-in-law, who has this ability, is distinguished in the story by the honorific designation *sučā-mili meloda* "having [the ability of] speech with the fairies." It seems that only he is entitled to make the traditional sacrifice of a hornless goat as a kind of ransom for the imprisoned hunter. The fairies like the smell of the burnt offering. In pre-Islamic Nuristan they and the Kafir gods were regularly offered both slaughtered animals and burnt offerings made of twigs from a particular bush, vinegar and butter. These sacrifices were performed by a Kafir

priest. The gods and fairies would be attracted by the smell and approach the sacrificial places on paths that led right through the village.

For the hunter in the second story from Nisheygram it was mere luck that the fairies agreed to negotiate with his brother-in-law and accepted his sacrifice. In order to see what might replace the topos of fairy imprisonment if the local philosophy does not allow for such a solution, the Nuristani hunters' lore above is compared below with a similar account from a tribal village in southern Iran, which was recorded in interviews with an old hunter in 1971 and 1976 (LOEFFLER 1988, 141–43).

### THIRD STORY (FROM IRAN)

[My uncle] went hunting one day and came across a herd of wild goats. Spotting a big buck of seven years among them, he stalked it and, when close enough, took careful aim with his muzzle-loader, and fired. At this moment, a greyhound sped between them and the bullet grazed its nose. The buck was hit in the thigh and took off. My uncle took after it and suddenly found himself in a camp—a camp of jinn. They looked like people and had tents and everything exactly like we do. An old woman was tending the wound of the buck he had shot, and the greyhound's wound was being dressed too. Then the greyhound changed into a young man and said, "Why did you harm the buck of the old woman? It was the breeding buck of her herd!" At that, my uncle fainted. He was later found and brought to the village and died after three days.

While the jinn in the Iranian story do not differ in language or appearance from the human beings, just like the fairies in Nuristan, the old hunter introduces a third party in the shape of a greyhound. The hunter explains the mediating character of this person by distinguishing two kinds of jinn, the beautiful, Muslim jinn, and the hideous unbelievers.

The greyhound was a Muslim jinni. He knew that the buck belonged to the old woman's herd and that a hunter who shot it would be doomed. When he saw that my uncle did not know this and wanted to shoot it, he felt pity for him, turned into a greyhound, and tried to cover the buck with his own body, ready to give his life for my uncle. He didn't succeed and, once the buck was wounded, he couldn't save my uncle any more.

The age-old belief in a "Lord of Wild Beasts" has here become overlaid with Muslim ideas. While the original dualism was probably that of human vs. non-human, it has now become that of Muslim vs. unbeliever: the Muslim jinn help their human coreligionist even at the risk of his life. Protection against supernatural interference will accordingly be possible through Islamic measures:



Before we do such things as shooting game or killing a snake or pouring out ashes, we have to say, "In the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate!" This will cause them to disappear. If we do not say this and hurt them, they will send misfortunes, accidents, troubles, diseases, or they exchange our children, or strike a person with insanity. In most cases there is no remedy for these afflictions; but a sayyid in a nearby village has a written prayer with which he cures insanity caused by the jinn.

#### ANALYSIS

For the Nuristanis, who are nowadays as pious Muslims as the Iranians, the situation is nonetheless different. Islam was introduced only some 110 years ago. The missionaries sent by the Afghan authorities were not interested in integrating autochthonous beliefs but opposed and suppressed them as hostile to both the official religion and the Afghan state. The Kafir world is understood as something belonging to the past, sometimes seen with pride, also with nostalgia, but lost for good. Therefore many of the stories about fairies or other supernatural forces draw attention to the fact that "this story is from the time before Islam came to Nuristan." Only the fairies were able to survive to a certain extent, as they were identified with the jinn whose existence was sanctioned by the Koran.<sup>27</sup> Not surprisingly though, the introduction of Islam has not totally changed the concept of the world as it was handed down for centuries. The world system as the Kafirs saw it was characterized by a radical dualism of sacred and profane, or pure and impure, and consequently male and female, high and low, right and left, animal husbandry and field work. Everything in the valley is subject to this concept. The mountain tops are considered more pure than the valleys, wild goats more than domestic animals, the back part of the house more than the front part, etc., as pointed out by KLIMBURG (1999, 286–87):

Basic to the Kafir concept of the system of the world is the sacred-profane dichotomy in general and the male-female polarity in particular. The union of the two forces was seen as being the driving force behind all quests for wealth and power, provided the blessing of the deities is given. All this, in particular in Waigal and Ashkun, conditioned a pervasive dual organization of the community and a pertinent sexual symbolism.... The world was thus divided between the sacred-pure versus the profane-impure.... The specific polarity of male-female...was closely associated with upper-lower, mountain-valley, right-left, light-dark, cold-hot, raw-cooked, etc.—as met with in many societies world-wide. The high, light-filled, "pure" zones of the world, in prox-

imity to the deities with their “pure” animals, in particular the *markhor*; were considered the male realm, while the “impure” low zones of the valleys and streams were regarded as the female spheres. Accordingly, a rigid division of labour assigned the tending of animals, especially goats, dairy production and, naturally, all the public, political, religious and martial activities to men. When staying with the animals on the high mountain pastures the men believed they went through a purifying phase, ridding themselves of the pollution from life down in the communities, a life full of strife and refuse, permanently exposed to disruption and contamination. Women had to stay in the villages and valleys to perform farming and household chores. Sacred areas, houses, and objects as well as goats were taboo for them and for members of the lowest classes, especially the “impure” outcast and slave-like *bari* and *shüwala*.

This dualism is what constitutes the background of the hunters’ stories and their true meaning: on the one hand, there is the pure world of the fairies and their animals, on the other hand the impure world of the village. The hunter as a man who roams about in the high mountain regions is by definition a person who will transgress the bounds between the pure and the impure and is therefore especially endangered. Since all the stories told about hunters’ adventures consist of more or less the same topoi and the style of their performance can hardly be called artful, the interest aroused by these stories must be explained otherwise. In fact, these traditional stories presuppose the imaginary dualistic world outlined above which is essential to the audience’s social and cultural identity. By telling the story along the lines prescribed by tradition, the storyteller conjures up the ideal world order of which the audience is actually a part. In this way the audience actively participates in the story, reenacting and confirming their own role within the Nuristani system of the world. Recounting hunters’ lore is thus more than a pastime. As long as the cultural background is unquestioned common knowledge, hunters’ lore provides for both the speaker and the audience a means to experience themselves as part of the cosmic order as they would see it.

Beliefs which center around a “Lord of Wild Beasts” are known from various regions in northern Asia, America, Africa, and Europe:

These are supernatural owners of the natural and created world. The “Lord of Wild Beasts” occupies a prominent position in the thought of hunters: he is the owner of the game animals that can be hunted; he is the one that guards and leads the game animals. The game animals of the hunters are the domestic animals of the “Lord of Wild Beasts”....

The "Lord of Wild Beasts" knows the number and names of the animals, and takes revenge should animals be killed without his permission.... But the "Lord of Wild Beasts" also regulates the relationships of the hunter with his game animals by allocating to the hunter the animals that can be hunted, and, in general, by issuing the permission to hunt. (RÖHRICH 1976, 142; cf RÖHRICH 1961, 341)

Karl JETTMAR classifies both the pre-Islamic Nuristanis and the neighboring Dardic peoples of Northern Pakistan and Afghanistan as typical exponents of megalithic culture,<sup>28</sup> and tries to show that there are more than secondary or accidental connections between the hunters' lore current among these peoples and the megalithic system. He suggests (1960, 130) that the megalithic system itself was introduced as a kind of compensation in a time of social and economic change: "Was the megalithic system perhaps an unconscious attempt made by those hunting peoples who had already begun to turn to agriculture to absorb the consequences of the 'neolithic revolution,' and to remold them into a preserving principle of life?" He also points out that head- or trophy-hunting is quite different from territorial warfare but similar to hunting. In fact, the techniques of head-hunting and game hunting are so much alike as to be hardly separable. Hunting in Nuristan and Dardestan could consequently be seen as just one form of the typical megalithic culture triad of memorials, feasting for merit, and trophy-hunting. Without referring to Jettmar, Mircea ELIADE (1978, 29) supposes that the belief in a Lord of Wild Beasts came about in an environment typical of the Mesolithic in Europe "when the retreat of the glaciers brought on a migration of the fauna toward the northern regions." The hunters followed the game, but the stock of game animals would diminish and the cult of the Lord of Wild Beasts would be explained by the memory of a sort of hunters' paradise in the Ice Age.

Provided Eliade is right, Jettmar's words might be reformulated against the background of the Ice Age theory as follows: When groups of hunters, faced with diminishing stocks of game animals and changing social and economic conditions, turned to livestock-herding and farming, they compensated for the supposed lost paradise by building up the cultural values of a megalithic society, preserving ancestral memories of a hunters' paradise in the form of their belief in a Lord of Wild Beasts. In this way the Nuristanis, famous for their cultural conservatism which enabled cults of pre-Vedic times to survive in the mountain retreats of Nuristan, would have preserved another archaic feature.

Whatever the origin of the hunters' lore may be, its cultural affiliations are clear. JETTMAR has demonstrated (1960, 128) that the hunters' lore of the

southern, Caucasian-Iranian-Dardic area, which includes Nuristan, differs from that of the Eurasiatic North in several points: only in the South are the animals previously slaughtered and consumed by the Lord of Wild Beasts, who is described as a herdsman; and only in the South is the skin used for revitalization as well as the bones.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

In Nuristan as in most regions of this area, hunting in the twentieth century has become more and more difficult. On account of the rugged terrain, hunting has never been an easy task in the mountains of Nuristan, but nowadays with the use of high-powered rifles the animal population has so diminished that animals are even more difficult to hunt now than in the past. Since hunting plays a less important role in modern Nuristani society, hunters' stories are also losing their meaning. However, it is not only the diminishing stock of game animals that reduces the lore of the mountain fairies to fairy tales. In the past, the hunters' lore was part of the Kafir outlook upon the world, permitting both the storyteller and his audience the reenactment of their social identity. The fairies were part of the concept of a pervasive dualism of sacred-pure versus profane-impure, representing the pure counterpart of the impure human inhabitants of Nuristan. The hunters' dependence on the fairies' goodwill was taken for granted. The traditional Nuristani audience had the background essential to reinvesting the simple form of the hunters' stories with its inherent meaning, as long as the tradition was intact. This traditional background of the hunters' stories has decreased in significance since Nuristan has been incorporated into the Afghan state. While the old division into pure/impure is still valid for many aspects of life, the fairies have degenerated to folkloric accessories in a philosophy of life dominated by Islam. Today hunters' lore is still transmitted among Nuristanis, but it is regarded as a thing of the past.

#### NOTES

1. FUSSMAN 1977 points out some striking parallels in Kafir myths, religious vocabulary, and social stratification with those of Ancient India.

2. The contemporary ethnic and social identity categories in the Waigal valley have been examined by KATZ 1982; the art and its relevance to society in Kafir times are comprehensively described in KLIMBURG 1999.

3. The texts are edited with a German translation in DEGENER 1998. The articulation of the less common characters used in my transcription is as follows: ċ – a voiceless dental-alveolar affricate; ç – a voiceless retroflex affricate; ŋ – a palatalized voiced retroflex nasal; ʃ – an alveolar approximant; ʂ – a voiceless retroflex sibilant fricative; ʈ – a voiceless retroflex plosive. The tilde combined with a vowel indicates nasalization.

4. "Fairy" is masculine *suča* in the language of Nisheygram, feminine *suči*, of unclear etymology. There are male and female fairies. They were generally thought of as beautiful beings, and a text from Nisheygram mentions the "beauty of the fairy girls." Besides fairies, there were other supernatural creatures in Kafir times: *yoš* "giant," *wōtri* "wind's daughter," and various gods. All of these have been successfully fought by Islam, and contemporary Nuristanis know hardly anything about them. The spirits most alive are the fairies, who could be reinterpreted as the Koranic jinn or Persian *pari*. When another text tells about a fairy with protruding teeth clad in a black gown, the picture has possibly been influenced by local versions of the Arabian Nights tales (references from DEGENER 1998).

5. The translation is fairly close to the original, but has been slightly edited for clarity. A more literal translation can be found in DEGENER 1998.

6. *Kalašim* refers collectively to the nine villages of the Waigal valley, including Nisheygram.

7. "The dominant large animal in the mammalian fauna is the *markhor* (*Capra falconeri cashmiriensis*, Schraubenziege, in the language of Nisheygram *čōw* "male *markhor*," *mraŋ* "female *markhor*"), the wild mountain goat species featuring large, twisted horns.... Highly esteemed because of its meat, hide, and decorative horns which often cover parts of the house façade, the large number of these animals in the past was greatly reduced by extensive hunting. In the northernmost zones the Siberian ibex moves in and out between Nuristan and Badakhshan" (KLIMBURG 1999, 41).

8. While the inhabitants of Nisheygram earn their living primarily with goat-breeding and farming, the fairies keep as domestic animals the wild mountain goats. Only after the animals have been consumed by the fairies do they become lawful game for the humans. Conflicts arise when a hunter unknowingly pursues a *markhor* that has not been assigned to him.

9. In their houses, Nuristanis do not sit on the floor like most west Asians, but on low stools (*nišā*). Special chairs of honor were granted great feastgivers as a status object (KLIMBURG 1999, 209–10).

10. Millet is the staple food in Nuristan. Wheat, a more prestigious cereal, is also grown, as well as barley and maize, while rice must be brought from outside Nuristan. In the fields grow different kinds of pulse, melons, gourds and onions, and there are various fruit trees such as walnut, apricot, jujube, mulberry, and fig. Some of the trees are covered with grapevines, and in former times the Nuristanis loved to make wine (on agriculture see EDELBERG and JONES 1979).

11. The *markhors* of the fairies must obviously be of gigantic size, for what the humans take for a *markhor* is literally nothing but a bag of bones, deprived of its vital energy. That the lack or possession of vital energy is the essential difference between the fairies' wild goats and those among them that become human hunters' game is confirmed by texts of the Burusho in Hunza, Pakistan, who share similar beliefs about the real origin of wild game. The Burusho even claim that whenever a person dies, his or her soul (*rūu*, a loanword from Urdu-Arabic *rūh*) is carried away in the shape of a goat. This goat is slaughtered and consumed by fairies (*bilās*), then the bones and what remains of the flesh is collected in the skin and comes back to life. Shortly afterwards, however, the human being whose soul has thus been eaten will die (BERGER 1998, 19).

12. "The distribution of meat, whether raw or cooked, was a very sensitive issue, as the meat portions given had to reflect the status of the receiver. Therefore the meat had to be divided carefully into pieces of the same quality and meat piles of the same value, before it was distributed among the socially established males including boys.... Prestigious feastgivers received especially large portions of choice cooked meat, while great warriors were entitled to extra portions of raw meat" (KLIMBURG 1999, 85). "Each part has a name and is considered appropriate for

a person of a particular status.... The names of the pieces, the number of pieces, and the ranks entitled to receive each piece vary somewhat from village to village” (JONES 1974, 180).

13. In Kalāṣa-alā he is called *mañida*; cf. JONES 1974, 180: “At all public feasts there is a man who plays a role of central importance. His position requires a highly specialized knowledge of the rank-status of everyone present at a feast. ...his task is to make certain that each person receives the piece or pieces of meat to which he is entitled by virtue of his rank or the rank of his father, this being both an acknowledgment and a confirmation of the status of the recipient.”

14. “As the only ‘living room’ used for cooking, eating, meeting, entertaining, sleeping, and once also for minor ritual practices, the *amā* [the typical Nuristani house] is not only the central place in the people’s life, but once also represented, and to some extent still does, a microcosm of the Kafir’s dualistic belief system. Correspondingly, the room was divided into right versus left and upper versus lower sectors. The right half was assigned to the men, while the left half was reserved for the women. The back of the room was essentially out of bounds for women. Any trespassing and resulting in pollution by them had to be atoned for by the sacrifice of a goat. The front area was open to everybody, including *brōjan* [members of the artisan class] men” (KLIMBURG 1999, 194; cf. also EDELBERG 1984). Apparently the fairies’ houses are built in the same way.

15. This and other quotes from German sources were translated by Peter Knecht.

16. One story (DEGENER 1998, text 9) tells about a king of the fairies. However, it is probably significant that the word for “king,” *pāçā*, is borrowed from Persian *pādšāh*, and he is assisted by a (Perso-Arabic) *wazīr*.

17. Literally, “come up-valley,” i.e., come up along the rivers Pech and Waigal toward Nuristan.

18. In Nisheygram (in other communities of the Waigal valley the situation is similar) there are eight maximal agnatic groups (*maṭa*) among the free landowning class, each of whom has a “family name” ending in *-darē*. “These are defined as all males and females who trace descent through males back to an apical ancestor who lived seven or more generations ago. Formerly strictly exogamous, this prohibition has been relaxed recently.... *maṭa* are the only agnatic units recognized in *deš* (village) affairs.... *maṭas* share responsibility for contributing labor, costs and material to community projects and activities. They also receive a portion of any surplus in the community treasury collected from fines, fees, and other sources. *Maṭa* decide among themselves who will assume the responsibility of *malavē* [annually elected village magistrates and watchmen] and who will serve in the military” (KATZ 1982, 86–88).

19. “The *šāl* [stable] is not only the goats’ and cows’ pen on a mountain pasture, but also includes a hut or cave for the herdsmen, their implements and utensils, and their stock of curds, cheeses, and ghee.... Each *šāl* belongs to a certain man, who has either built it or has got it by inheritance, but it may be used by the several families constituting a cooperative *palae* [herding cooperative]” (EDELBERG and JONES 1979, 82–83).

20. The small terraced fields for arable agriculture on the mountain slopes near the village must first be prepared by forest clearing, then laboriously constructed by in-filling to a horizontal level behind stone walls and then watered by a complicated system of open irrigation channels and wooden aqueducts leading from the rivers or from the tributary streams. The field work is done by women (EDELBERG and JONES 1979, 50–64; KLIMBURG 1999, 46–47).

21. The informant tries to enhance the plausibility of his story by referring to well-known local names (Kusog-darē, Jög, Nolüm).

22. JETTMAR (1975, 223–24) tells about abduction and imprisonment by fairies as reported by speakers of Shina (Pakistan): “The ibexes of the Barai are assumed to be red, blue or black,

and of an enormous size. If they are killed by a hunter, he always finds a much smaller animal. The Barai have, in the meantime, taken their part. Most of the time they are benevolent, but occasionally they abduct humans. If they do not release their victim early, that person will die after he is returned to the village."

23. The Nuristani fairies seem on the whole to be both less differentiated and less malicious than the fairies of Shina and Burushaski speakers, with whom they otherwise share many features.

24. In a Burushaski text from Hunza a hunter who has unintentionally killed an animal of the fairies is threatened with death: "Hey, hunter, what have you done? Why did you shoot our goat? You did not have our permission, therefore, we are going to kill you now!" (BERGER 1998, 35).

25. DEGENER 1998, text 31.

26. Songs in honor of living or dead persons are composed even nowadays (on Nuristani music see Thomas Alvd, in EDELBERG and JONES 1979, 141–47, with more references). The language of the songs composed by inhabitants of Nisheygram is not their own mother tongue, but always the dialect of the neighboring village of Waigal.

27. The word jin(n) is used interchangeably with *suča* in one of the texts from Nisheygram (DEGENER 1998, text 31).

28. "It is common to consider the Kafirs of the Hindukush as a megalithic people. In fact, it is possible to make out among them a triad of characteristics that consists of the erection of monuments, feasts of merit, and head hunting" (JETTMAR 1960, 121). Of course, this ethnographic classification does not imply that there is a continuity from an unknown period B.C. down to contemporary Nuristani society, but it does not exclude this possibility; cf. ELIADE 1978, 123–24: "Robert Heine-Geldern... held that the two groups of megalithic cultures—those of prehistory and those of cultures at the ethnographic stage—are historically connected.... But his hypotheses concerning the unity of ancient and contemporary megalithic cultures are today disputed, or simply ignored, by many investigators. The problem of the 'continuity' of the megalithic complex is substantial and must remain open.... In any case... it is impossible to speak of one megalithic culture."

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