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# Scrutiny

A Journal of International and Pakistan Studies



National Institute of Pakistan Studies  
Quaid-i-Azam University  
Islamabad / Pakistan

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## **Authenticity and Uncertainty: The Spring Festival *Taghm* in Shimshal**

**Martin Sökefeld**  
LMU Munich.<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

*Taghm* in Shimshal is much more than simply a ‘traditional’ or ‘authentic’ spring festival in a ‘remote’ high-mountain village. It has become the focal point of intersecting discourses and struggles addressing sentiments of uncertainty and nostalgia, of ambiguities and anxieties that at least partly are mirrored in the invocation of a past when ‘people took care of one another’. My brief exploration of the festival in the valley uncovered a considerable complexity of diverse positions and assessments among its people. Interestingly, in spite of the uncertainty voiced in the days before the *taghm*, the festival itself could be read in an almost Durkheimian manner as a ritual recreating community, for in the festival itself no friction became apparent. On the contrary, the Shimshalis celebrated *taghm* with joy and fervour. Moreover, as *thumon* blew in the right direction, there was hope for a plentiful harvest that year.

### **Introduction**

I am intrigued by *taghm*, the joyful festival that marks the beginning of the agricultural season in the Wakhi-speaking villages of Gojal. During *taghm*, a man dressed up as a bull (*druksh* in the Wakhi language) carries a sack of wheat to a field where the first ploughing and sowing symbolically take place. Gojal is a large but very sparsely populated sub-district of Hunza in the Karakorum Mountains of Gilgit-Baltistan, northern Pakistan. All of its inhabitants belong to the Ismaili branch of

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<sup>1</sup>This is an extended and revised version of a photographic essay published in *Tsantsa – Revue de la Société Suisse d’Éthnologie* (Sökefeld 2018).

Islam.

*Taghm* means ‘seed’, and it is the prerogative of a special group of people who are said to be the descendants of the original settlers of a village – of those who have built terraces on the slopes and dug water channels to irrigate the terraced fields. In Gojal, these people are called *shogan ptük*<sup>2</sup> – those who are in charge of beginnings. *Taghm* is a festival that invokes fertility and needs to carry out in order to ensure a plentiful harvest.

### **Gulmit and Shimshal**

Over the last seven years, I have spent as much time as possible in Gojal in order to research the consequences of the Attabad landslide (Sökefeld 2012a, 2012b, 2014). In the course of this research, I have enjoyed the opportunity to observe *taghm* three times in Gulmit, the administrative headquarters of Gojal, which is situated at 2,500 m above sea level. While I was fascinated by the festival’s intricate rituals and symbols, I was often told that *taghm* in Gulmit was only a diluted version of what it had once been. Nowadays, *asl*, the real *taghm*, takes place only in Shimshal, people would inform me. In Gulmit, *taghm* is celebrated on the first or second Sunday of March, while in Shimshal, a cluster of four settlements, it usually takes place around 1st April, as Shimshal lies higher up in the mountains, at an altitude of 3,000 m.

In spring 2017, I had the opportunity to go to Shimshal for *taghm*. Shimshal is a place celebrated by Western visitors, starting with the British explorers, for its remoteness, roughness and authenticity (Butz 1993). It is a “village in the middle of

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<sup>2</sup> *Shogan* means ‘beginning’, and *ptük* are different kinds of things that are regarded as auspicious, for instance markings of wheat flour that adorn the beams of a house or which are put on people’s heads and shoulders at auspicious events. Sometimes, *ptük* is also simply translated as ‘tradition’.

nowhere”, as Hussain (2015: 137) calls it. Only in 2003, a narrow jeep road was completed to connect the area through the gorges of the Shimshal River with the Karakorum Highway (KKH). It took eighteen years to build the road, and the Shimshalis did much of the construction work themselves as communal labour (Cook and Butz 2011).<sup>3</sup> The road thus became a strong symbol of the community’s determination to take their destiny into their own hands.

### Harvest Failure

On the jeep ride to Shimshal a week before *taghm*, I heard a story about the previous year’s celebration: a woman had taken the wheat seeds out of the bag that had been brought to the field by the *druksh* and gave it to the sower. Normally this task is the sole domain of a man, but a local committee had decided that this woman should do it instead. The harvest was a complete failure, and so, during the coming festival, the seeds would be taken by a man again. As this story was narrated I thought the emphasis was on the fact that a woman had taken the seed instead of a man, and I conjectured about gender relations in Shimshal.

I did so, but I did not get very detailed descriptions about what had happened. The people I asked answered rather briefly, changed the topic, laughed or asked in return who had told me this story. However, I learnt that the controversial issue was not so much that a woman had taken the seed, but that she was not *shogan ptiik*. Her natal family was indeed *shogan ptiik*, but she had married into another family. Among Wakhis, a woman acquires membership of her husband’s *ktor* (patrilineal clan) through marriage but loses membership of her natal group. And indeed, the previous year’s harvest had been devastated by

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<sup>3</sup>According to a local anecdote, Shimshalis approached the government of Zia ul Haq in the 1980s regarding the construction of a road linking the village to the KKH. The then military dictator replied, it is said, that it was impossible to build a road there, and he suggested instead resettling the Shimshalis in the Punjab.

thunderstorms, plant disease and, finally, a plague of locusts. While some people did link the destruction of the harvest to the woman, others laughed at the notion, pointing out that thunderstorms and locusts were just natural phenomena, completely unrelated to the details of a sowing festival. A few people also told me why this woman had taken over the role of a *shogan ptük* man: in a dream, the saint Khidr had appeared to her and commanded her to take the wheat. This dream had impressed many people, and some had asked her to do as the saint had told, and yet I was also told that not everyone had been enthusiastic about this change of procedure; in fact, the large majority had been against it, one man emphasised. However, they still let it happen.

### Preparing the Druksh

In Gulmit, the *shogan ptük* have always ushered me to enter the old house, one large room with a fireplace in the centre, in which a man is transformed into a *druksh*. On the morning of *taghm*, at around 9 am, the *shogan ptük* start gathering in this house, and after some time it is crowded with around thirty *buzurg* (elders) and a few younger men. Some women prepare tea, which they serve alongside *semen*,<sup>4</sup> a sweet dish that is specially prepared for *taghm*. Usually, one or two of the *buzurg* deliver a short speech about village affairs, and a *mukhi*, the prayer-leader of the Ismaili Jamaat Khana (prayer house), says a prayer. While all this happens, the *druksh* is prepared in the background. He puts on a coat made from animal skin, dons a fur cap and his face is whitened with wheat flour. A bag filled with wheat grains is tied to his back, a few willow twigs with catkins sticking out of the bag as symbols of fertility. A bit of *spandr*, an auspicious mountain herb, is burnt and the wooden pillars of the house are adorned with *ptük*, dots of wheat flour. Finally, large branches of juniper (*yarz*) are thrown into the

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<sup>4</sup>*Semen* is made from sprouted wheat that is dried and ground and then cooked for hours over an open fire.

house from the opening in the flat roof, the *ritsn*. In a traditional Wakhi house there are no windows; the *ritsn* is the only opening through which light comes in and the smoke of the hearth fire escapes. The evergreen branches of juniper, another symbol of fertility, are burnt on the hearth and quickly produce thick smoke, *thumon*, which fills the entire house. Outside of the house, people watch to see in which direction the smoke is blown: if it blows towards *qibla*, in the direction of Mecca, this is a good omen for a plentiful harvest. When the smoke becomes unbearable in the house, everybody leaves, and on stepping out of the house they are adorned with *ptük* on the cap or shoulder. In Gulmit, there is always a unique atmosphere of seriousness and excitement in the house.

### Outsiders

While attendance at the gathering is not limited to *shogan ptük* and I have always been allowed to join, most of those present in the house actually belong to *shogan ptük* families. I have wondered whether the *shogan ptük* of Shimshal would allow me to witness this, too. While some people simply said that I would be allowed in, some *shogan ptük* emphasised that I would have to ask permission.

Two days before *taghm*, a group of twelve Japanese arrived in Shimshal together with their local guide. The Japanese had booked a tour of cherry blossom in Hunza and Gojal, and *taghm* in Shimshal marked a highlight of their trip. On the evening of that day, walking through the village, I met a man I had not met before. When he asked where I came from and what had brought me to Shimshal, I told that I had come to see *taghm* and the *druksh*. The man, Afzal, exclaimed:

You will not be allowed to see it! This year, nobody will be allowed into the house [in which the *druksh* is prepared], not any outsider! Last year, the Japanese entered the house; they took photographs and disturbed the festival. The smoke blew in the opposite direction and the harvest became a disaster, it was destroyed by billions of locusts! The Japanese filmed the whole

ceremony. And they did not even donate a single rupee! Because of them, we are not eating our own wheat now but have to buy flour from the shops. It was a disaster.<sup>5</sup>

I was taken aback a bit by this emotional outburst and discussed it later with another man, Mirza Shah, who agreed with Afzal. He said: “Afzal is right! It’s about the people’s belief [*aqida*] and we have to respect this. The guide of the Japanese group is only working for his own advantage. Last year a musical evening was organised for the Japanese, but he did not give even a single rupee for that. And now everybody is angry. Afzal is my neighbour. I saw him threshing last year. He only got a handful of wheat [because the harvest was so bad] and he wept.”

### **Pirkitn**

The day before *taghm* is called *pirkitn*, which means ‘stirring’, because the sweet dish *semen*, which is prepared on this day, needs hours of cooking and stirring. Beside land and labour, water is the most significant resource for cultivation in Gojal. Agriculture depends fully on irrigation, largely provided by glacial meltwater. Cultivation can start only when the temperature increases so that enough water runs from the glaciers into the *nahlas* (streams), from where it is diverted into the irrigation channels. In Shimshal, the *nahla* from which the central settlement is irrigated remains frozen until late March. *Pirkitn* is the day when water is first diverted into the channels that have been cleared of the previous year’s sludge. Again, it is the right and duty of the *buzurg* of the *shogan ptük* to open the channel. Early in the morning, I went to the place where the channel starts from the *nahla*. There, the road from one part of Shimshal to the next crosses the *nahla* on a suspension bridge. A few boys and girls were playing there. As part of the event, the

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<sup>5</sup>My translation from Urdu. Quotations are slightly shortened and edited.

*shogan ptük* pour water into vessels that the children then take home. One part of it is used for the preparation of tea and *semen*, and the other part is sprinkled through the *ritsn*, the smoke outlet in the roof.

More and more children arrived on the spot. Beside their vessels, they had brought small plastic bags filled with wheat flour, which they threw at one another, mocking *ptük*, the auspicious dots of flour used to decorate the interior of houses. After some time, a group of nine *shogan ptük* also arrived. They cleared the entrance to the channel, and then twenty metres into it they built a small dam, to divert that water back into the *nahla*, because the cleaning of the channel had not yet finished.

They also built a small pile of dry twigs that would be used to burn *spandr*. One of the *shogan ptük* had brought a tray with flat bread, a bowl of fresh milk and some flour, all wrapped in cloth. When they had finished their preparations, they simply stood there, talking and waiting. Nothing happened. Wondering why they did not continue, I asked them after some time when they would eventually burn the *spandr*. One of the *buzurg* replied: "We have to wait for the Japanese! They had a long and tiresome journey yesterday; they cannot get up so early!"

I was stunned. The *shogan ptük*, the masters of ritual, waiting for Japanese tourists to start their ritual? This was exactly what they did. After a short while the Japanese arrived, led by their guide. As soon as they appeared, things became hectic. One of the *shogan ptük* literally gave stage directions and ordered the children to line up on the bridge. He asked the Japanese, politely, to cross the *nahla* and watch from the other side. One *buzurg* of the *shogan ptük* lit the fire and burned *spandr*, and then all of them formed a semi-circle, facing the Japanese on the other side. The *mukhi*, also a *shogan ptük*, said a prayer and the Japanese started taking photos and shooting videos. A bit of milk and flour was sprinkled on the ground of the channel. Several *shogan ptük* took shovels, and by moving a few more stones they let the water into the channel. Then the *shogan ptük* dipped small pieces of the flat bread in milk and ate, before also offering the Japanese pieces of the bread. Finally, the *buzurg* filled the vessels brought by the children. All

of this was accompanied by the Japanese frenetically taking photographs – and by me taking photos of the Japanese taking photos. When we walked back to the village, I tried to talk with one of the Japanese, but he spoke very little English. I only learnt that this was his fourth time in Pakistan but his first visit to Shimshal.

In the evening of *pirkitn*, the *shogan ptük* distribute *stors* to the villagers. In Gulmit, *stors* is a short piece of willow branch of about 1 cm in diameter, the end of which is sharpened. It symbolises the plough. In Shimshal, small branches of juniper and unworked willow twigs are distributed instead. Before sunset, mostly children gathered at a garden in the centre of Shimshal, where the *shogan ptük* handed out *stors*. The Japanese came, too, bringing with them sky lanterns made from coloured silk paper, which they attempted to fly but were unable to do so, due to strong winds. The lanterns burned out quickly and the place was soon littered with shreds of parched paper. Seeing this, some of the bystanders became angry and ordered some of the children to clear the field of the paper.

### Taghm

The next day, finally, was *taghm*. After a few cloudy days, the sun was finally shining and the sky was blue. On the way towards the house in which the ritual of the *druksh* would take place, I met Afzal again. He reminded me that I had to ask permission to enter the house. While we were talking, Bilal joined us, a student from Islamabad who had arrived the night before. Bilal had told me that he wanted to take photos of *taghm* for his travel blog. When Afzal asked him why he had come, Bilal answered: “To see *thumon!*” Afzal burst out angrily: “We won’t let you in! We won’t give you permission!” Taken aback, Bilal asked: “Why?” Afzal exclaimed: “Many people have come, people from outside, from Japan, from Islamabad, to see *taghm*. And last year, the harvest was very bad, we had to buy flour from the shops. Because of them, they have destroyed our rituals!” Afzal did not mention me, the anthropologist from



Germany, because perhaps after our previous meeting he no longer considered me a stranger. From afar, I could see the Japanese approaching.

Bilal tried to argue: “But I have come from very far to see *taghm*, you cannot bar me from that!”

Afzal: “Yes, we can!”

Bilal: “But I have come to take photographs, I will show these photos to many people and then many more will come to see *taghm*!”

Afzal: “I do not want more people to come! Why should I? What is the benefit for me? The tourism people will profit from that, but not people like me, not the common people – to the contrary!”

Bilal: “But it is good when more people come to see *taghm*!”

Afzal: “No, it is not good, not for all of us. It is good only for those tourism people who just care about their own profits.”

Bilal tried once again to explain the benefit of many people seeing pictures of *taghm*. After a while, Afzal calmed down and the two talked about Islamabad, which Afzal had visited several times. I left them to their conversation, because I saw the *buzurg* of the *shogun ptiik* approaching the ritual house. I joined them, we talked a bit and they gave me permission to enter the house. A group of *buzurg* was already sitting inside. I sat down in the background. Slowly, more Shimshali men entered. After a while, there was a big commotion and the Japanese burst in, followed by two Koreans who had arrived just that morning. We were served tea and biscuits, not *semen*, and then an iron fireplace was prepared in the centre of the room, below the outlet in the roof, where two large juniper branches were burnt. Every moment was captured by more than a dozen cameras. The Shimshalis, with their smartphones, took pictures, too. When the house filled with thick smoke, the *buzurg* fled, and as the outlet was opened finally and the smoke escaped, I followed them. The smoke blew in the right direction, towards *qibla*.

Suddenly, the *druksh* emerged from the house. I had not seen his preparation; it must have happened in the rear chamber of the house, perhaps intentionally out of sight. The *druksh* took

a bag of wheat, went to the field and sat on top of a large heap of *khat* (dried animal dung). Repeatedly, he rolled down from the heap and threw *khat* at the spectators. Finally, he settled calmly on top of the *khat*. The Japanese came closer to take pictures. Meanwhile, a Korean had started up a drone to shoot the event from the air. Suddenly, two Japanese women sat on the *khat* heap together with the *druksh*. They were joined quickly by two more women until, eventually, the *druksh* was surrounded by Japanese women. Enthusiastically, more pictures were taken. Some Shimshali men stood in front of the *druksh* and the Japanese women and took selfies with their smartphones.

After that, the first sowing went almost unnoticed. A *buzurg* of the *shogan ptük* took wheat out of the *druksh*'s bag and distributed it to the bystanders, who held the wheat for a few minutes before handing it back. Then he gave the seed to the *mukhi*, also a *shogan ptük*, who folded the lower part of his *choga* (a long, woollen coat) like a bag in which he carried the seed. He said a prayer. A ploughman drew a rather symbolical furrow by a wooden plough dragged by two small oxen.<sup>6</sup>

The *mukhi* followed behind and threw the seeds. He then put the remaining wheat back into the *druksh*'s bag. Young boys adorned with festive woollen caps were brought by their fathers to touch the wooden plough as a token to ensure that they would become prosperous farmers. Meanwhile, people from all over Shimshal had brought pots with *semen* and other dishes and trays with bread that were collected beside the field where men and women sat separately on tarpaulins. The food was distributed. Another *mukhi* said a prayer and the people started eating. With this meal the 'traditional' part of *taghm* ended. In the afternoon, the final match of the cricket tournament followed. I could not watch the match, because I had to leave Shimshal. The Japanese, the Koreans and the young Punjabi left,

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<sup>6</sup>In Gojal, fields are tilled with tractors, and only on *taghm* is a wooden plough drawn by two small cows used. Often, this creates confusion and fun, as neither the animals nor the ploughman actually knows how to handle the plough.

too.

### **Authenticity and uncertainty**

I had gone to Shimshal to see *taghm*, because the people of Gulmit told me that the real *taghm* takes place there. They did not use the word ‘authenticity’, speaking of *asl* (real) *taghm*, but this was what they meant: authentic *taghm* – untainted and unaltered by cultural change and outside influence. In social and cultural anthropology, authenticity has been discarded largely as an analytical category, knowing that cultural forms and practices always change and often are actively and intentionally altered. There was never a pure, original version of a cultural phenomenon, except, perhaps, in the case that some phenomenon was consciously ‘invented’ (Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983). But then the concept of cultural invention sits quite awkwardly with the idea of authenticity (Theodossopoulos 2013: 347f). On the other hand, claims to authenticity are often significant political and economic resources. Struggles of identity politics often insist on authenticity and originality, in the case of indigeneity, for instance, in order to claim certain rights. Furthermore, in the realm of economics, a claim to authenticity is an important marketing strategy and greatly enhances the value of goods that are considered ‘genuine’ and not ‘forged’. This also applies to a certain strand of tourism, where promises of experiencing authentic, exotic cultures attract customers. Academia also cannot totally do without authenticity, as distinguishing between ‘real’ and ‘fake’ artefacts or artworks lies at the very heart of the craft of archaeology or the history of arts, for instance.

I did not go to Shimshal to see ‘authentic’ *taghm*, but still I wanted to see the difference between the ceremonies held in Shimshal and in Gulmit. Of course, *taghm* in Shimshal was by no means unchanged. Although the Shimshalis themselves contributed strongly to the discourse of authenticity, they themselves perceived – and often deplored – many changes. Thus, there is a multi-layered understanding of authenticity, in

that while for the Shimshalis (and the people of Gulmit) *taghm* in Shimshal is more authentic than *taghm* in Gulmit, the Shimshalis see very well that *taghm* in Shimshal is also not what it supposedly used to be.

The first thing I heard when I travelled to Shimshal was that the previous year a non-*shogan ptiik* woman had assumed a role in the ritual she was not supposed to take. Subsequently, I learnt that there were more changes. It was pointed out to me that the house in which the *druksh* was prepared was not the 'old' house in which the ritual had used to take place. That old house had been destroyed a few years before, because the owner wanted to build a new one. Furthermore, the sowing did not take place on the field where it had been carried out 'traditionally' but had been moved to another field that was situated more conveniently in the centre of the village, and the water channels were not cleaned in time because the young men preferred a cricket tournament to community work.

My own implicit notion of authenticity was revealed by my response to the *shogan ptiiks* waiting for the Japanese before starting the *pirkitn* rituals at the *nahla*, and by their arranging of the events in a way that enabled the Japanese the best position to take photos. My immediate reflex was to see this as a 'performance' and 'staging' that contradicted the authenticity of the ritual event. In my perception, then, the *buzurg* did all this largely 'for the tourists' and not simply 'for themselves', and this, for me, to some extent turned *pirkitn* into a touristic event. For the Shimshalis, however, there was no necessary contradiction. When we walked back from the *nahla*, I asked the Shimshali guide of the Japanese whether there was such a 'performance' every year for the tourists. He did not consider the events 'just a performance', though, telling me: "This is what we always do, it is our tradition, and we only show it to the Japanese. If we do not show our traditions, will my son still know in the future how we do these things? Perhaps the tradition would then stop." When I narrated the event to Mirza Shah, he laughed a little but did not find it disturbing. Still marvelling at what had happened at the *nahla*, I talked with one of the *buzurg*

who had been part of the events and asked him whether the tourists should not have waited for the *shogan ptiik* to start, instead of the other way round. He replied: “Yes, *asl me* [actually, normally],” and laughed.

Still, not all people in Shimshal were simply indifferent about the way events around *taghm* were performed. While for them authenticity in itself did not matter, perhaps uncertainty did so. And there was also the open question of whether or not the ‘correct’ performance of *taghm* had an impact on agriculture and the harvest. For many people, this was a rather awkward question, as became obvious when I tried to enquire about the previous year’s issue of the woman taking the seeds. People were clearly uneasy about my question, and while some of the people I talked with scandalised the woman’s role, others tried to hide or gloss over it. Few people expressed a firm belief that the alteration of *taghm* had caused the harvest failure, and yet all were clearly very uneasy. Such a failure of crops is a huge disaster for the valley. While nobody had suffered from hunger, buying flour instead of living on one’s own wheat meant additional expenditure, and when people have to spend more money on food, they lack the means to invest in other things, most importantly their children’s education – and Shimshalis unanimously regard good education, including university education, as the most important prerequisite for a secure and prosperous future. On the other hand, education strongly contributes to changes, also in *taghm*. While *semen* is regarded as the proverbial dish of the festival, in Shimshal it was prepared by a few households only. A great deal of labour is required, not only for the many hours of cooking itself but also for collecting the necessary firewood, but because of outmigration, in many cases as a consequence of education, many households have been depleted and lack the required (wo)manpower. Even in the house where the *druksh* was made, people were served biscuits instead of *semen*. In Gulmit, this would be unthinkable.

When people discussed *taghm* and the total failure of the previous year’s crops, these changes were mentioned by some as possibly having an impact on agriculture. After all, *taghm* marks not only the beginning of the agricultural season, but it is also

meant to ensure fertility and a rich harvest. Some argued that *taghm* should move back to the original house and field, but this did not happen. The intrusion of foreigners added to the issue. Many households depend on local agriculture, and after the previous year's devastation, they were highly worried. Some considered the correct performance of *taghm*, according to 'tradition,' as a precondition for a plentiful harvest, and a few of them, like Afzal, tried explicitly to prevent disturbances to the festival, albeit without success. For them, there was a palpable uncertainty, and according to what I learnt, this uncertainty had prevailed the year before, when people discussed whether or not the aforementioned women should take the wheat, as she had been instructed in her dream. Many people told me that they silently objected but did not intervene. Mirza Shah, for instance, said: "Everybody has dreams and everybody can claim to have dreamt something. Most people did not accept this and were quite worried, saying *toba* [God forbid]!"

Talking about *semen*, the sweet dish, I realised, however, that the sentiment of uncertainty and loss in the present went far beyond the issue of how to perform *taghm*. It is not only the lack of workforce that impedes the preparation of *semen*, but also friction among the villagers – the sweet dish is exchanged among kin and neighbours as a token of reciprocity. One Shimshali, Nazir Hussain, told me that he was not on good terms with his neighbours because of disputes over water for irrigation. He partly blamed out-migrants for the deterioration in social relations in Shimshal. Being Ismailis, Shimshalis enjoy many opportunities provided by the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) and are generally highly educated.<sup>7</sup> Nazir Hussain said that many people had left Shimshal but still wanted to bury their dead in the village. That is, they left, but at the same time they did not leave, at least not for good. They expect their relatives who remain in Shimshal to take care of their fields and yaks, and they show up now and then, especially during summer vacations and on occasions like *taghm*, and expect to

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<sup>7</sup> See Steinberg 2013 on AKDN in Gilgit-Baltistan.

find everything as they left it. They do not fulfil their obligations, Nazir Hussain added, but they do place a lot of pressure on those who have stayed behind. According to him, the emigrants still meddled too much with the affairs of the village, without being practically involved and actually taking responsibility. This had created tension within the village. He noted: “When I am not on good terms with my neighbours because of all kinds of friction, how can I send them *semen*? The community is torn apart. I have not prepared *semen*.”

Quite often, I heard nostalgic invocations of a much more harmonious past. Mirza Shah, for instance, told me: “In former times, we used to take care of one another. We helped each other not only while working in the fields, but also on the way to the Pamir [the high pastures of Shimshal, where the yak herds are kept]. The trek was very dangerous, and at some places some people were really fearful. Younger, stronger people helped them to get across. One did not only think of oneself. But today everything needs to be done very quickly and everybody thinks first of all of himself.” Such a sense of nostalgia and loss intersects with discourses of how to celebrate *taghm*. And even though Mirza Shah did not believe in *taghm* having an impact on agriculture, he strongly emphasised that the old beliefs had to be respected and honoured.

While most people in Shimshal were much more relaxed about *taghm*, the local experience of the festival contrasted starkly with its outside image of authenticity. *Taghm* in Gulmit was as ‘authentic’ – or as ‘inauthentic’ – as it was in Shimshal, and yet why did the discourse of authenticity prevail about Shimshal? The idea of remoteness is significant here. Since Shimshal is considered as ‘remote’ – not long ago accessible only after an arduous march of three days – it is perceived from the outside as being largely untainted by ‘modernity’, as an abode of ‘tradition’. In those areas of Gilgit-Baltistan through which the KKH passes, narratives of change are linked inextricably to the road: literally, the KKH ‘brought changes’ and ‘opened’ the area ‘to the world’ when the road was officially handed over to traffic in 1978, and again when a few years later foreign tourists were allowed to travel on the KKH

(Kreutzmann 1991).<sup>8</sup> While now the road is taken for granted and people can hardly imagine life before the KKH,<sup>9</sup> there was a strong narrative of *before* and *after* the KKH when I first visited Gilgit-Baltistan in 1991. Those areas that were not linked with the KKH were perceived as being *cut off* and *remote*, and this was considered synonymous with being ‘backward’, a place where modernity was yet to reach. However, this discursive equation of remoteness with backwardness has meanwhile given way partially to a more positive evaluation of remoteness as signifying strong communal life, respect for traditions and authenticity<sup>11</sup><sup>10</sup>. In a kind of nostalgic longing for hard and yet ‘authentic’ village life, those who have left Shimshal contribute especially to this discourse.

Remoteness and authenticity became collective resources, particularly for tourism (Saxer 2016: 108). While anthropologists have only recently rediscovered remoteness as an “enhancement, if not enchantment, to the anthropological vision” (Ardener 2012: 520, cf. Harms et al. 2014),<sup>11</sup> it has never

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<sup>8</sup>For the (international) political context of the construction of the KKH, see Ispahani (1989: 185ff).

<sup>9</sup>This does not mean that the KKH is a reliable connection. Very often, the road remains closed for days or even weeks due to rock falls and political or sectarian events (e.g. Grieser and Sökefeld 2015), and this creates great hardships after some days, when supplies from Pakistan do not reach the area and people cannot travel.

<sup>10</sup>According to Hussain (2015: 135), the older generation of Shimshali men had an ambivalent perspective towards the road at the time of its completion. While they appreciated the ease of accessibility for themselves, they simultaneously lamented the loss of remoteness, fearing the intrusion of disturbances from outside.

<sup>11</sup>For many decades, anthropology has struggled somewhat *against* the image of being a discipline that is concerned largely with ‘remote’ (add: ‘isolated’ and ‘primitive’) peoples and cultures only. The focus on subject matters like globalisation and migration, i.e. on interconnections, that emerged since the 1980s can be seen as an antidote to the ‘traditional’ orientation of anthropology and the essentialisation of the culture it implied (see e.g. Gupta and Ferguson



lost its enchantment for a certain strand of tourism. For the Japanese tourists, ‘authentic’ *taghm* in Shimshal was the highlight of their tour in Gilgit-Baltistan. However, this ‘authenticity’ bears the seed of its own destruction, not only because it is perhaps difficult to regard a ritual as ‘authentic’ when it is partly staged for tourists, but also because an increasing influx of tourists that look for authenticity will increase disparities within Shimshal between those who take advantage of this tourism and those who do not do so.

Nonetheless, the Japanese did not know that, and they did not bother, either; they got the pictures they wanted. While taking photographs the way the Japanese group did betrays an appropriation and consumption of culture that bears little respect for the concerns of those people whose culture is consumed, taking photos was also a means of communication and of establishing bonds. In spite of some dissenting voices like that of Afzal, it seemed that most people in Shimshal actually enjoyed becoming the object of a kind of ‘global’ attention. Moreover, taking photos has become a universal practice and a shared idiom that many Shimshalis actually have in common with the Japanese. Taking photos with the Japanese women and the *druksh* was clearly a highlight of the festival. While Shimshalis did not use the heavy digital cameras that the Japanese carried, they joined in taking photos with their smart phones, and like the Japanese, they took selfies with the *druksh* – and with the Japanese. In fact, only a few people complained about the Japanese group; rather, the *shogan ptük* and others treated the Japanese with great courtesy and respect – and that included enabling them to take the pictures for which they had come.

Recently, tourism to Shimshal has increased greatly and dramatically changed its character. Until a few years ago, Shimshal was mostly a destination for a limited number of foreign, non-Pakistani trekking tourists and high-altitude climbers, and many Shimshali men were engaged as guides and porters by these visitors (Butz 1995). Yet, several factors, most

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1997).

importantly the upgrading of the KKH and of the connection to Gilgit-Baltistan via the Babusar Pass by Chinese companies, produced a huge surge in Pakistani tourism to Gilgit-Baltistan, including, albeit on a lesser scale, to Shimshal. The road works had the purpose of enhancing the export of Chinese goods via Pakistan,<sup>12</sup> but the facilitation of tourism was an important side effect. Furthermore, Attabad Lake, formed as a consequence of a huge 2010 landslide, became a very popular touristic sight in Gojal and attracted many Pakistanis to the north. With the opening of a series of tunnels in September 2015, built also by Chinese companies, that realigned the sections of the KKH severed by the lake, Gojal became easily accessible for Pakistanis. And finally, the trade in photos on digital platforms like Facebook or Instagram contributed greatly to the popularity of Gilgit-Baltistan as a destination for Pakistani tourists – beforehand, only a very few people in ‘down-country Pakistan’ knew about the scenic beauty of the high-mountain area. Bilal’s assessment that more people will come to Shimshal when he, like so many others, shares his photos on his blog is most probably right. Now, the ‘remoteness’ of Shimshal attracts more and more visitors – making it much less remote at the same time.

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<sup>12</sup>The KKH has now become part of the China Pakistan Economic Project (CPEC), a huge programme of Chinese investments in Pakistan.

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