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At the Foot of the Fairy Mountain.
The Nagerkuts of the Karakoram/
Northern Pakistan

Myths – Traditions – Folklife

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Cover: Men of the clan of Ghushotkuts in front of their imām-bargah (Shi‘a assembly hall)
in Ghushoshal, one of the ancient villages of the Hopar oasis (Jürgen Wasim Frembgen)

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Transliteration and Dates

For terms in the local Burushaski language, the author uses the system of transcription introduced by Hermann Berger in his vocabulary (*Die Burushaski-Sprache von Hunza und Nager. Teil III Wörterbuch*, Wiesbaden 1998). Words in the Shina language were transcribed for him by Georg Buddruss. For Persian and Urdu words, he follows F. Steingass' *A Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary* (London 1892) as well as S.W. Fallon's *A New Hindustani English Dictionary* (London 1879) and John T. Platts' *A Dictionary of Urdū, Classical Hindī and English* (Oxford 1884).

Dates are given according to the Common Era calendar (henceforth CE), in some cases also providing the equivalents of the Muslim, Hijra (H), calendar.

The following abbreviations are used: sg. (for 'singular'), pl. (for 'plural').

Prologue

‘We, the Nagerkuts’ is the translation of the rhetorical formula *mii Nagérkuć* – ‘we, the people of Nager’ – used at times in Burushaski by my interlocutors in the course of ethnographic interviews to express their primary identity. The autonym *Nagérkuć* refers to *Nagér*, a term denoting a cultivated space inhabited by humans and delimited from the mountainous zone beyond inhabited by non-human beings.¹ Their region is situated at the foot of the ‘fairy mountain’ Rakaposhi (7,788 m) in the Karakoram, ‘one of the loftiest mountain tracts of the world’,² which is part of northernmost Pakistan (Fig. 1). The expression *mii Nagérkuć* first came up in conversation with male inhabitants of the hamlet of Hakuchar, all assembled in the home of Daulat Shah, who had been village headman under the last ruler of Nager.³ After we had spoken at length about the local process of settlement and the relations to their neighbours across the river with whom they had always been on bad terms, our host declared: ‘*Baré saap!* (“Look Sir!”) What we know about our *tariċhi* (history), *tariċân* (customs) and *šajirâ* (traditions), we shared with you. All what is important for us. But we, the Nagerkuts, are not treated fairly by the writers who visit our valley and our mountains. They have hurt our feelings as they do not respect us and side with our enemies. So do not forget to write down what we have told you. We are proud of our traditions!’ And my companion, Ghulam Nabi, headmaster of a school in a neighbouring village, added: ‘There are also “people of the pen” among us, writers who have studied the books and speak on the radio. Do not forget their works either!’ Those present nodded in agreement. That day, I realized how dear traditions were to them and how important it is to acknowledge their perspective.

Writing a book with the guiding idea ‘We, the Nagerkuts’ means recognizing what they want to tell others about themselves, in other words ‘we about ourselves’, how the indigenous population of the erstwhile kingdom of Nager describes and explains its own cultural universe as it existed ‘in the olden days’. Using their collective self-designation stands for the Nagerkuts’ sense of being themselves in relation to outsiders. In everyday talk this distinct ‘we-feeling’ or sense of ‘we-ness’ of an in-group comprises sympathy, solidarity, welfare, commitment, sharing, etiquette, honouring customs and observing established norms.⁴ We-ness is based on ‘nostrocentrism’ (derived from Latin *nostra* – ‘our’), a term coined by the eminent German ethnologist and cultural historian, Klaus E. Müller (1935–2021), for a people’s intact collective awareness of identity, its particular *Weltanschauung*, value orientations and the self-confidence that its own traditional order of life is the pride of creation.⁵ It is, for instance, reflected in the following proverb in the Shina language I heard in Nager: *jaċéi mištejo tòm kháćo mišto* – ‘One’s own bad is better than the stranger’s good’. This ideology (on a tribal level called ethnocentrism) is, in fact, a universal phenomenon and basic dimension of human experience shaping all aspects of culture. In a nutshell, culture can be understood as ‘the sum of all manifestations of people’s life’.⁶ The self-referentiality typical for nostrocentrism also contains pride, for instance clearly expressed by Nagerkuts when praising the excellence of their polo players, musicians and dancers as well as the exceptional beauty and faithfulness of their women.⁷

Admittedly, it is first of all my version how the Nagerkuts are represented to the outside world. Yet it seeks to convey their perspective, the ‘emic’ or insider’s/native’s point of view, which helps to

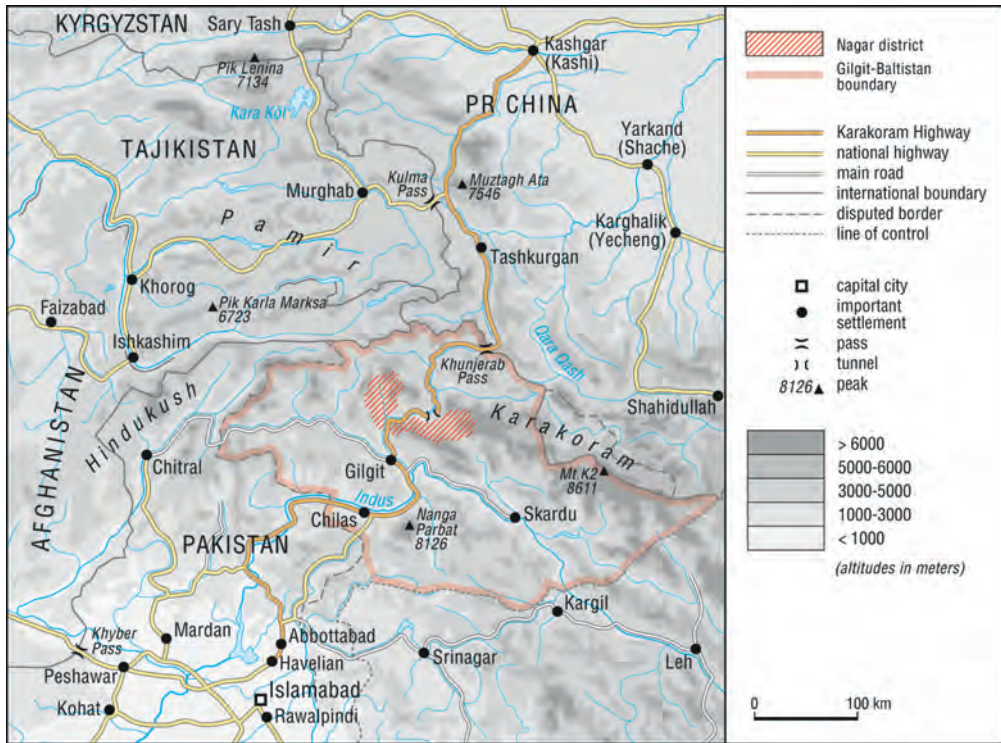


Fig 1 Location of the former kingdom (today district) of Nager situated in the heart of the Karakoram/ Northern Pakistan

understand the actors' motives. In contrast, the 'etic' perspective is taken by an outsider, who observes from a meta-level, beyond the native's point of view, and interprets the inside from his outside starting point using comparative and analytic approaches.⁸ Emic versions of cultural practices, on the other hand, reflect the participants' world of meaning and take note of their claims and convictions about beliefs and actions. The methodology of folk history, primarily applied to the second and third chapter of this book, is essentially 'emic'. Local micro-histories reflect emic views. Thus, the aim of this study is a self-portrait of Nager's history and cultural domain based on an approach which attempts 'to find what people in another society believe "really happened" as judged by *their* sense of credibility and relevance.'⁹ Emics is hence a methodological approach which treats local knowledge as having an inherent value. In the words of the American anthropologist James Lett: 'Emic constructs are accounts, descriptions, and analyses expressed in terms of the conceptual schemes and categories regarded as meaningful and appropriate by the native members of the culture whose beliefs and behaviors are being studied.'¹⁰ Although anthropologists need both emic and etic knowledge to understand human cultures, my domain of inquiry (particularly in Chapters II and III) is primarily emic in describing local thoughts and behaviour as this book revolves around the Nagerkuts and their particular cultural orientations, their history, customs and beliefs. It is



Fig 2 View of the remnants of the ancient fortified village of Shayar; in the background the deeply cut canyon of the Hunza/Nager River (August 1982)

not upon us to impose our Western notions and master narratives onto them, to claim that ‘we’ know better than ‘they’ and to subsume their world under our criteria of order and relevance.¹¹ Therefore, text collections in Burushaski and indigenous oral traditions in general, offering rich empirical material about the tradition of the ancestors,¹² constitute an indispensable source in preserving the original words and voices of local speakers.¹³ However, to achieve a complete picture of Nagerkuts’ history and cultural traditions, the emic perspective needs to be augmented by the etics of ethno-historical analysis and hermeneutic-ethnological interpretation. Although a number of anthropologists judge emic-etic as an awkward distinction, in my opinion it is a useful perspective for the present case. There should be a permanent dialectical relationship between emic and etic views to better understand both one’s own and the foreign culture.

The scholarly endeavour to write a sort of biography of the Nagerkuts focused on oral traditions has grown out of a deep-felt attachment to them, based on sequential field research conducted in their native area over a period of more than twenty years (between 1981 and 2004 as well as again in 2019). This monograph is also meant to be read by them – not only by colleagues in academia.

The present work is not concerned with contemporary history and recent economic, social and political change or processes of acculturation over the last four to five decades. This seems justified considering the fact that since about the 1980s academic research has largely focused on contempo-

rary societal and economic transformations in the Karakoram. Therefore, the purpose of this book is rather to look back into the past to study the ‘traditional’ culture of this peasant society. Traditional culture understood by the Nagerkuts as being self-evident, a familiar given reality, handed down from their forefathers, as the best of all possible ways of life. After the first turning point, the subjugation of the Nager state in 1891 by British and Kashmiri forces and the subsequent *Pax Britannica* which ended warfare and settling in fortified villages (Fig. 2), Nager remained until the 1960s and 1970s still relatively unaffected by exogenous influences, although social structures were already eroding since the 1930s and 1940s.¹⁴ Since then the culture of the Nagerkuts has been in transition.

In the form of a historical ethnography, I investigate local myths, traditions and folklife and examine related culture traits as unfolding in an ‘ethnographic horizon’, that is to say between the late nineteenth and the mid-twentieth century. For this period, I use in descriptions (as common in cultural and social anthropology) the ‘ethnographic present tense’ – if the period of time is not specified otherwise. 1972, the year when the then semi-autonomous kingdom of the Moghlotkuts dynasty was abolished, is the second turning point of transition with respect to cultural traditions, more decisive even than the accession to Pakistan in late 1947, the year of Independence, with its concomitant postcolonial transformations.¹⁵ In fact, 1972 meant the rupture with the past. Through the breakup of the Nager state, the rich agrarian festival calendar was given up completely. Cyclical time ended and people began to think in terms of linear time. My central theme is therefore indigenous traditional culture in the widest sense inasmuch it could be (often still vividly) memorized by interlocutors and reconstructed by me. Myths, traditions and folklife shared over generations, reflecting many pre-Islamic cultural traits, are brought into particular focus. Comprising values and norms handed down from ancient times, they formed a cultural pattern in the pre-modern period, creating an ordered world of stable relations. ‘Tradition’, which provides safety and stability, is valued, creates a sense of belonging and also includes the force of habit. There is even a melody played at the feast of harvest, the *čhire-hariip* (meaning ‘custom’), which specifically expresses the respect for the traditions inherited from the forefathers. In Nager as elsewhere, the senior generation tends to perceive history as inert or ‘stationary’; those were the days, elders told me, ‘when everything was better’, ‘when we had plenty of butter and meat’, ‘when there was respect for the aged’. Not without reason, this perspective is judged by their sons and grandsons as an expression of the ‘old mind’, of adhering to old-standing beliefs and customs, frequently using the stereotypical paired term backward/modern. For most of them the past is equated with backwardness. Thus, younger people view history as ‘cumulative’, shaped by events and nurtured by expectations of ‘becoming modern’.¹⁶

Holding on to the overall theme of ‘tradition’, the present ethnography covers the period when annual seasonal feasts were celebrated under the patronage of a king who ‘was believed to have divine roots’ and thus had sacral authority. The notion of regality, or ‘Königswürde’ in German, refers to consecration, power and grandeur. Therefore, I henceforth use the term ‘kingdom’ instead of ‘principality’, ‘princedom’ or ‘princely state’ (terms more appropriate for principalities in India and the Persian Gulf) – not as an indicator of autonomous power, but to emphasize local cultic kingship, that is to say the ruler’s essential sacred role in traditional agrarian communities. Nager ‘could thus be counted among the last sacral kingdoms of the world.’¹⁷ In fact, ‘the ruler’s presence was indispensable at feasts in order to carry out certain functions, without which blessing

for the entire land would become endangered.¹⁸ He is thought to have been chosen and guided by particular ‘pure’ fairies (*rāačikuyō*) residing on the Rakaposhi.¹⁹ His protective fairy, I was told, is a powerful *thámo rāači payáali* respectively a *barđaitiñ úmi*, which means an elderly fairy and ‘mother of fourteen daughters’ (fourteen being a number of symbolic value among Twelver-Shi‘as; hence, throughout this book, such numbers will be followed by an exclamation mark to indicate that they are drawn from Shi‘a symbolism).²⁰ The king’s role as provider of fertility was in any case essential for the whole fabric of society.

It was the time when Nagerkuts enjoyed music, both men and women danced and witnessed the shamans dancing in public, listened to mythical tales and songs in praise of heroic ancestors, legends about hunters and warriors, stories about fairies, demons, giants and witches²¹ as well as narrations of the Kisar epic.²² They kept horses and played polo in almost every village, held collective weddings at the same time in winter, kept falcons for hunting,²³ dressed in traditional woollen clothes,²⁴ decorated their caps with flowers, wore amulets made of gem-stones around their necks, walked long distances, lived in houses built in the vernacular style without glass windows, sat on the floor instead on chairs, and lead small caravans of donkeys carrying loads from village to village. It was the time when men still wore ibex-hide boots and shepherds a special archaic footwear made by winding pieces of cloth and cow leather around their feet and calves, when Nagerkuts still grew barley, millet and buckwheat (three particularly healthy crops), ground their grain in one of the many water mills, cooked meat in stone pots, ate their food from wooden bowls, discussed communal matters on village gathering places, when the young generation still mastered the enormous inherited vocabulary as well as complex morphology and syntax of their native language,²⁵ when artisans and craftsmen still passed their knowledge on to disciples, and when, in addition to Twelver-Shi‘a Islam, people still had a strong belief in fairies and spiritual beings before the millstones of modernity deprived these non-human entities of their souls. In short, when the Nagerkuts still practised their vernacular ‘folk’ religion ‘in which the young generation has no faith anymore’ as one of my partners in conversation put it.

The abolition of the kingdom not only meant a significant shift in power and the freedom from oppression, but marked the beginning of a phase of far-reaching social, economic and political transformations.²⁶ After 1972, Nagerkuts started to emigrate to the cities, in local parlance they went ‘down country’: in majority to Karachi, but also to Lahore and Rawalpindi, in search of education and work. Many found employment in the army. Before, rulers had strictly forbidden their subjects to leave the state’s territory, and only a few managed to escape their control. With the building of the 1,284 km long Karakoram Highway (completed in 1978), connecting Kashgar in Chinese Sinkiang with Islamabad and Rawalpindi in the Pakistani Punjab via the Hunza/Nager Valley, living conditions changed significantly: Nager and other regions of northern Pakistan were exposed to rapid socio-economic change introducing a noisy, triumphant, material modernity through commercialisation, the spread of mechanized farming, numerous technical innovations, the impact of government institutions and development organisations, as well as the transfer of new values and ideas.²⁷ In the words of the renowned German anthropologist Imtraud Stelrecht, ‘the wheels of change have affected every field of life.’²⁸ Consequently, people felt the pressure to adapt to modernization. In this process, traditional knowledge, including skills and ways of thinking, were either quickly lost or began to erode. The abolition of the kingdom not only led to an alienation

from indigenous cultural heritage, but also disrupted the previously stable relationship between people and their environment. Change of ownership had at times destructive effects as, for instance, exemplified by the severe depletion of the Chaprot forest in Nager and the indiscriminate hunting of wild animals.²⁹ Moreover, socio-economic change intensified the overpopulation caused gradually through the century-long remoteness of the region. As a well-educated young man from Nager commented: 'Today, half of our population lives in Karachi – in Malir, Abyssinia Lines, Chishti Nagar and elsewhere.' Even if this sounds exaggerated, there is some truth in it. Many of those who migrated in search of better-paid jobs and modern secular education from the mountains down to the sweltering plains must also have been overcome by the lure and restlessness of urban modernity, its lifestyle and sense of freedom. Particularly a metropolis like Karachi alters man. He is not only confronted with a luxury lifestyle seeking to mimic Dubai, but also faced with violence and insecurity. The Nagerkuts' change of lifestyle over the last decades, in the Age of Late Modernity, has moreover led to an increase of cardiovascular diseases.

As aforementioned and connotated by the nostalgic adverb 'still' in the temporal sense, Nagerkuts were rather forcibly detached and 'uncoupled' from their collective traditions in modern times. Tradition means a strong attachment to the past and having roots in customary behaviour. Admittedly, 'tradition' and 'modernity' is a politically loaded contrasting pair, often regarded a component of the colonial narrative as well as the Orientalizing discourse; however, they do not exclude each other and are often found in complex interweaving. Although change had been particularly abrupt in the Hunza/Nager Valley, the Nagerkuts, who practised strict traditionalism, showed more resistance to innovations than the Hunzukuts. At times, elders told me in conversations that to practice 'traditional customs' means not to make mistakes as they had followed these advantageously since ancient times. Yet, what once seemed unalterable, has changed. Even in societies living 'close to nature', confrontation with modernity is inevitable. In consequence, the Nagerkuts' cultural identity is gradually dissolving; individuals become disembedded from traditional forms of life and practices, the 'protective armour of tradition'³⁰ is eroding. Already in the 1990s, there were young men who were no longer aware of the origins of their families, could not recall the name of their clan, and had forgotten old customs and rituals. The past with which people used to identify lost its meaning, traditional culture began to crumble. Elders diagnosed the consequences of this overall change in telling me that since 1972 the weather had become worse than ever, people got sick and the fairies retreated to their lofty abodes in the mountains leaving them unprotected. In the words of the German indologist Hermann Berger (1926-2005), what is left is only 'a pile of cultural rubble'.³¹ Despite this rather sad (and all too harsh) diagnosis, I refrain from further discussing their world only in terms of loss and decay. Thus, I neither subscribe to the romanticised idea of Nager (and Hunza) being an 'arcadian lost world', nor do I deny the needs and amenities of modern progress. I believe, rather, in the words of the Pakistani poet Sarmad Sehbai that 'there can be no modernization without an awareness of your past and living traditions. It will be just like driving without a back mirror, which could be suicidal'.³²

Drawing on an empirical ethno-historical approach, I seek to interrogate aspects of the past behaviour of Nagerkuts – what I henceforth call 'Nageri culture' – as gathered from their own accounts, of behaviour in the 'olden days' when the world in general was easier to comprehend than today. In past and present, culture is in reality, in the words of the American anthropologist,

Melville Herskovits (1895–1963), always ‘both stable and everchanging’,³³ or, in the words of the French structuralist, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009), ‘cumulative in differences of degree’.³⁴ There were surely minor processes of transformation in the past too as history is always a process, although rustic worlds in general develop rather quietly and at a slow pace. While tradition(s) – the transfer of culture from one generation to the next – can be understood as ‘standard exercises of a culture’ and ‘incubators in which culture survives’,³⁵ there are constant re-evaluations, revisions and innovations. And all traditions were once innovations, although not all innovations become traditions. Though ideally, traditional cultures are inert ‘worlds without change’ which repeat traditions and customs in uniformity resisting innovations.³⁶ In the words of the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, they are basically ‘systems of repeating the tried and tested’.³⁷ ‘Cold’ societies, a term coined by Lévi-Strauss, are slow moving societies almost remaining in the state created by their ancestors, in contrast with present-day ‘hot’ modern societies which are dynamic.³⁸ Today, societies and cultures around the world are succumbing to a ‘maelstrom of self-destruction’ (Klaus Heinrich). They find themselves in the tentacles of an arrogant globalized civilization with hollow pretensions marked by individualisation and instability. With respect to Nager, whatever has survived in terms of tradition, has since 1947/48 been subjected to a form of ‘postcolonial colonialism’ (Martin Sökefeld) by the newly founded state of Pakistan.³⁹ And, as we know from history, colonialism as well as the secularizing West sooner or later lead to the deformation of cultures.

When I wrote my very first article on Nager in 1983, before starting fieldwork for my dissertation on forms of political organization in that high mountain region, I questioned the negative prejudices and stereotypes about its inhabitants found in the often romanticising popular travel literature, from early European visitors and ‘explorers’ to modern tourists, as well as in the expedition reports of mountaineers.⁴⁰ In it, the people of Hunza, the former rival kingdom situated opposite Nager just across the main river, are immensely idealized and their native country transfigured as a fairytale-land, while the Nagerkuts are constantly belittled, denigrated and even abused. Just to quote some of these biased views frequently found in narratives and reports: the British officer Colonel Reginald C.F. Schomberg (1880–1958), remembered as ‘Shamber’ in Nager and known among scholars of the region as notorious for his vicious remarks, called them ‘stupid, dirty, and but indifferent imitations of monkeys’;⁴¹ Emily Overend Lorimer, wife of the British amateur linguist David Lockhart Robertson Lorimer (1876–1962), described them as ‘far more slack and slovenly in their cultivation than “our” people’, meaning the Hunzukuts;⁴² and other travellers portrayed them as ‘unfriendly’, ‘unwilling to work’, ‘superstitious’ and even as ‘a people without a history’⁴³ living on the shady side of the main valley.⁴⁴ Such negative stereotypes not only reflect the eurocentrism of Western foreigners informed by an Orientalist world-view, but particularly the ethnocentrism respectively ‘nostrocentrism’ of the Hunzukuts who use to denigrate their neighbouring arch-enemies through sweeping judgements and prejudices. In the case of the Hunzukuts as well as Nagerkuts, this in-group bias strengthens their self-awareness while neither of them reflect upon their prejudices. A writer who like so many others one-sidedly praised the Hunza people, but never visited the area in person, remarked:⁴⁵

The Nagiris, though facing the people of Hunza, are not of their physical class. By all travellers who write of them this is noted. [...] in all the little wars that arose between these neighbours, the Hunza, though less numerous, have invariably won. Even in games it is the same. [...] The Hunza men won every event. [...] Nor have the Nagiris the brightness and good humour of the Hunza; they are more sedate and morose.

Not without reason, the more critical D.L.R. Lorimer kept a separate file with magazine articles and letters sent by enthusiastic admirers of Hunza's alleged health secrets and superiority typically marked as 'Hunza humbug'.⁴⁶

Analysing the grounds given to explain alleged cultural differences between the people of Hunza and Nager, it is obvious that they are based on the exoticistic and euphemistic image of the 'noble savage' on the one hand (the Hunzukuts portrayed as the 'Greeks of the Karakoram' living on the sunny side of the valley) and the 'barbarian, beastly savage' on the other (the Nagerkuts dressed predominantly in black and living on the shady side of the main valley), in this way also highlighting a form of geographic determinism rooted in antiquity. It is even more apt to argue that this dichotomy, presented in popular travel literature as the difference between an 'idealized' and a 'degenerated' people, helped to emphasize the exceptionalism attributed to Hunza. The negative image of the Nagerkuts was further intensified by claiming that they were 'black' and 'racially inferior'.⁴⁷ This claim is, of course, absolutely baseless. 'Races' do not exist, they are at best imagined. The term 'race' has been in past and present misused to create social and political typologies by projecting prejudices upon others, upon the 'out-group'. In our case, it just served the low instinct to stigmatize the Nagerkuts. Both societies, Nager and Hunza, developed a distinct antithetical relationship. Finally, it needs to be pointed out that within the wider regional setting Nagerkuts were in past and present not only disparaged by the Hunzukuts, but also by the inhabitants of Gilgit, the main town in northern Pakistan, who disapproved of the involvement of princes from the royal dynasty of Nager and their temporary rule in Gilgit since the eighteenth century.⁴⁸

A further aspect to be addressed here are the reasons for using the spelling 'Nager'. I do so following first of all the Nagerkuts' own pronunciation and secondly the advice of the most renowned authority on Burushaski language, Hermann Berger, who set the example in his seminal three volume work 'Die Burushaski-Sprache von Hunza und Nager' (1998). Berger had been a member of the 'German Karakoram Expedition' of 1959; since then he basically devoted his entire academic life to the study of Burushaski. Consequently, I use Berger's system of transcription for local terms as closely as possible based on his vocabulary. Already Colonel John Biddulph (1840–1921), British explorer and colonial officer on special duty in Gilgit from 1877 to 1881, wrote 'Nager' in his book 'Tribes of the Hindoo Koosh' which became an early standard work on the region.⁴⁹ Thus, in all my books and articles about the Nagerkuts published since 1983 (see bibliography), I use this spelling based on local pronunciation. Also other anthropologists, historians and scholars of religion who did research in northern Pakistan, such as Irmtraud Stellrecht (formerly Müller-Stellrecht), Martin Sökefeld, Wolfgang Holzwarth, Anna Schmid and particularly Hugh van Skyhawk, who undertook extensive field research on oral texts in Hispar, write 'Nager'.⁵⁰ Although my teacher, Karl Jettmar (1918–2002), for decades the doyen of ethnological, historical and archaeological research

in northern Pakistan, still used the older spelling ‘Nagir’ in his *opus magnum* ‘Die Religionen des Hindukusch’ (1975), the spelling ‘Nager’ is also given in the index. The latter has since been taken over in the posthumously published English version ‘The Religions of the Hindukush’ (2018).⁵¹ Jettmar’s initial spelling ‘Nagir’ goes back to ‘The Hunza and Nagyr Handbook’ (1889), written by Gottlieb Wilhelm Leitner (1840–1899), the Hungarian/German orientalist, explorer and for years Principal of Lahore Government College. Disguised as a Mulla, he spent a few days in Gilgit and learned the basics of Burushaski under two sons of Tham Zafar Khan, ruler of Nager from 1839 to 1904.⁵² Leitner described the Nagerkuts in very positive terms.⁵³ However, his works are in many ways confused and labyrinthine. In a section of his ‘handbook’ entitled ‘Names of Race and Country’, he mentions a note he made in 1866 and specifies: ‘Nagyr ... called Nagèrr by Nagyris.’⁵⁴ In his comprehensive book on the northern areas of Pakistan, Ahmad Hasan Dani (1920–2009), the Nestor of Pakistan archaeology and history, titled a subchapter ‘Nagar (or Nager or Nagir)’ specifying ‘Nagar, or better spelt as Nagir’.⁵⁵

On the other hand, geographers, like Hermann Kreutzmann and Michael Spies, as well as most travellers, today follow official nomenclature in Latin script introduced/imposed by the administration of Pakistan in its northern areas by writing ‘Nagar’.⁵⁶ This spelling is, of course, also common for composite place names in Punjab, Sindh and many places in India. It is derived from Sanskrit *nagar* – a ‘settled area’ or ‘town’. Since about 1948, ‘Nagar’ is now locally used in official documents, on signposts, number plates, etc. As an ethnographer, however, who works with an unwritten language like Burushaski, I prefer to stick to the indigenous spelling used in spoken language since centuries. This also emphasizes that in comparison to so many South Asian ‘Nagars’, there is only one ‘Nager’ in the Karakoram.

At the end of this prologue, I want at least briefly to question theoretical concepts employed by two eminent German ethnologists. In line with older modes of anthropological praxis, their writings differ significantly from current debates in anthropology. Nevertheless, with regard to the valorization of history and tradition, they have been a source of intellectual sustenance for me enriching my thinking and understanding. Although in the days of my fieldwork traditional culture was already on the wane, it could still be grasped using an ethno-historical approach. In this respect, I followed the suggestions of my teacher, Prof. Dr. Karl Jettmar, an outstanding scholar as much as pioneer of systematic research in the Hindu Kush and Karakoram, a dedicated fieldworker with a stimulating verve and wide academic horizon.⁵⁷ Enthusiastic in hypothesizing, he tried to construct the culture history of what is now called Gilgit-Baltistan. As an anthropologist – or rather ethnologist and cultural historian, Jettmar had strong leanings not only towards history and archaeology, but also towards culture morphology (amongst others promulgated by Adolf Friedrich) which tries to understand the emic world-view and ‘Gestalt’ (configuration, form) of a culture from a holistic as well as comparative perspective.

In 1997, Jettmar (as well as other scholars inspired by him) was accused by Johannes H. Löhrr of being an ‘essentialist’, as relying in his works on ‘the assumption of static cultural concepts’.⁵⁸ However, the charge of essentialism raised from a postmodern perspective, and today considered an academic sin also renders ‘all claims to standard objectivity as invalid’, as critically marked by Klaus-Peter Köpping (1940–2017).⁵⁹ This is not the place to enter into a proper debate on this ideologically

loaded topic and buzzword,⁶⁰ but at least some arguments have to be touched on: drawing on Marshall Sahlins (1930–2021), Dieter Haller recently contradicted the dogma of today's 'fluidologic' anthropology, mainly promulgated by younger postmodernist colleagues (the 'new power holders' in Köpping's words),⁶¹ in which the reproach of 'essentialism' and 'generalization' has become a virtual 'death blow argument' (or, in my own wording, a 'cannot fail weapon') to discredit 'old-school' anthropologists who examine the structure of cultures, above all condemning anything 'essential, structural and intrinsic'.⁶² Not seldom, even the concept of culture as such is denied as in postmodernist thinking 'culture' is considered a questionable essentialism. Obviously, culture also includes customs and institutions, the 'givens' of peoples (to use an expression by Clifford Geertz). In this regard, Haller makes a critical comment (which could well have been addressed to the then undergraduate Löhrl): 'The hegemony of fluidology and the condemnation of everything essential, structural and intrinsic is also an expression of the academic world as lifeworld, which is about the struggle against or for authority: positioning is not only privileged, but becomes the sole point of departure for observation. In this way existing structures are reinforced because these are no longer scrutinized, but instead diverted to the field of identity politics.'⁶³

Likewise, there is a general phobia of methodological controlled reductionism in today's 'dominant trend' of socio-cultural anthropology. Hence, studies of cultural systems and approaches based on cross-cultural evidences leading to statements of general validity about peoples and cultures, for instance related to rules and principles of collective behaviour, culture history and the common ground between cultures (such as, for example, investigated by Klaus E. Müller in his numerous works) are openly discredited and considered outmoded. In his magisterial study 'Die Siedlungsgemeinschaft' (2010; 633 pages; a foundational text developed by the author over more than forty years), subtitled 'Grundriß der essentialistischen Ethnologie' [outline of essentialist ethnology], Klaus E. Müller formulates the central framework of a general theory of society and culture. In it, he uses the particular in such a way that it can be meaningfully built into his analytical scheme to formulate verifiable generalizations. He thoroughly defends essentialist criteria (Latin *essentia* means 'fundamentals') in the analysis of cultures belonging to the type of 'early agrarian village communities' or 'horticultural societies', before their exposure to major influences from outside (also the traditional lifeways of the Nagerkuts have a lot in common with this type of society). Referring to peoples' beliefs about how things happened 'in reality' in order to understand a particular society, he notes: 'The mutually corroborative rules and assumptions of constancy (the "Konstanten"), which are the foundation of this kind of traditionalist philosophy of life and weltanschauung, form the basis of a solid line of argumentation and genuine explanations – of an ethnology rightfully titled "essentialist" as it is based on data of experiences and ideas *understood as essentialist*.'⁶⁴ If the 'discourse on "culture" is and should always be open to "negotiation"', as emphasized by Köpping,⁶⁵ then also Klaus E. Müller's approach of formulating a general explanatory basis for defining cultures focusing on 'essentials' is not to be excluded even if it runs against today's hyperrelativistic postmodernist theory with its emphasis on subjectivity. This is not said to critique postmodernist thought in total as it offers new impulses with regard to its spirit of pluralism and tolerance, concern with ambiguity, multi-voiced representations of cultures and societies as well as critically reflecting the process of fieldwork. The purpose of the present study is, however, different: It is neither based on large-scale comparativism (although anthropology has to be comparative!),

nor attempts to make statements of general validity with regard to cultural history (although I consider this approach meaningful) or rules out postmodern perspectives. It rather uses ethno-historical inquiries and examines folk-historical views. Focused on a particular local context and grounded in extensive fieldwork, it hence represents the in-depth study of a single regional culture and its specific profile. As such, it is a piece of ‘traditional ethnography’, an ethnographic report – no more and no less.

To return to Karl Jettmar: his forte and main research interest, however, had been culture-historical reconstruction thereby also taking the liberty to present assumptions about the diffusion of cultural traits as well as cultural processes not all based on solid facts.⁶⁶ Working in northern Pakistan since he became member of the ‘German Hindukush Expedition’ of 1955/56 (led by Friedrich, with the indologist Georg Buddruss [1929–2021] and the ethnologist Peter Snoy [1928–2012] as further team members) on a continuous basis, he studied with passion particularly the indigenous religious traditions, convinced that the specific cultural traits found in that region had been subject to historical processes. In addition, he studied rock-carvings and rock-inscriptions in the Indus Valley.⁶⁷ Those days were the beginning of a veritable school of German scholars who focused their research on the peoples of the Hindu Kush and Karakoram.⁶⁸ Not without reason, the French indologist Gérard Fussman wrote: ‘[...] our German colleagues, especially the team of Heidelberg/Mainz (the professors Berger, Buddruss, Jettmar and Snoy), have contributed to our knowledge of this region in such a way that it is impossible to study it without understanding German.’⁶⁹ In 1955/56, Friedrich and Jettmar pursued their keen interest in the history of migration and settlement⁷⁰ – a theme taken up in the present work.

Notes on Ethnographic Fieldwork and Acknowledgements

When I entered ‘the field’, for the first phase of my stationary work in Nager (several months annually from 1981 to 1986), I was affiliated with the ‘Pak-German-Study-Group for Anthropological Research in Northern Areas’. For my dissertation, I first studied the traditional political system of the erstwhile kingdom, focusing on its power structures and local kinship networks, as well as on ethnographic contextualised practices in general.⁷¹ To reconstruct the past, I took every opportunity to be instructed by the last witnesses of tradition – keeping in mind the urgency of this work as noted by my colleague Irmtraud Stellrecht with respect to Hunza: ‘Time is running out for research on the traditional life patterns [...]’.⁷² In order to meet knowledgeable male elders (as history and tradition is considered by Nagerkuts to belong to the male domain), I visited nearly all the villages (with the exception of Hispar and Guachi), taking to heart the French historian Marc Bloch’s advice that ‘the walk over the fields should always remain part of the work of the social historian, even the historian of the distant past.’⁷³ I augmented this systematic research through focused conversations on topics of history in Hunza, especially in the old village of Ganish whose inhabitants are Twelver-Shi‘as and thus kept since long relations with Nager.

Prof. Jettmar suggested that I meet Raja Ali Ahmad Jan (d. 1992), a scion from the royal family of Nager and son of the famous Subedar-Major Raja Babar Khan (the head of the liber-

ation movement of 1947), who then served as Superintendent Police (SP) in Gilgit. Through his kind support, I was cordially received in Uyum Nager, the former ‘capital’ of the small state, and provided with a room in a small building adjacent to the police station. In Askurdas, situated in the main valley opposite Hunza, the second field-site of my stationary research, I inhabited an almost dilapidated room in a small building (without running water and toilet facility) adjacent to the dispensary situated outside the village close to the border of Sumayar. This room, furnished with a string-cot and a single broken chair, was intended to be the residence of the dispenser who, however, actually used to live in Hunza. I appreciated the simplicity of this accommodation, only the door could not be locked from inside, so it was open to visitors also in the middle of the night. In those days in the early 1980s, tourism had not yet descended upon Nager and there were consequently no guest-houses. Food supply was not sufficiently secured, although at times I was invited for meals or a policeman helped with cooking. Feelings of loneliness were intensified by my lack of speaking Burushaski, an inadequacy I became painfully aware of. As I did not fulfil a standard requirement of ethnographic fieldwork by mastering the local language, I relied on an interpreter and made progress only insofar as I was able to follow conversation and control ethnographic interviews. In my work, I experienced the usual ups and downs, times of boredom and loneliness, of waiting in frustration, at times indignant about people when they were arriving late when I wanted to talk to them and worried about the growth of my field-notes intended to become the basis of my dissertation. However, I also enjoyed many moments of satisfaction and serendipity, of encounters with extremely friendly people, of their sense of curiosity in my work, of finding long-awaited answers to research questions. Every day (and there was, of course, no day without research work), I was propelled by my intense interest in the Nagerkuts and their lifeways. My only tools were pencil and notebook as well as a camera. Coping with an unfamiliar culture on a daily basis, I had – to a certain extent – to learn and think as if being an insider. Admittedly, this ‘insiderness’ was severely hampered by my inability of speaking Burushaski and to comprehend the Nagerkuts without the help of an interpreter (consequently not being able to talk and act as if an insider). Thus, I had serious doubts about meeting the well-known requirement set out by Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942), the proponent of functionalist anthropological theory, namely that the fieldworker needs to turn from an outsider to an insider.⁷⁴ In fact, I did not immerse in people’s ‘lived life’, did not learn certain skills or participate in their daily tasks, remaining a stranger on the edge of their social life. At least, in the course of fieldwork, I felt that gradually I was no longer perceived as an outsider. Thus, I began to share that ‘intimate and cosy “feel” about Nagar’ mentioned by an early traveller.⁷⁵ Although being painfully aware that I had come too late to observe the ancient seasonal and agrarian feasts in person and to experience how the traditional Nager state functioned, I was grateful to meet so many Nagerkuts who had witnessed all that in their lifetime.

In those initial periods of ethnographic fieldwork, I was supported by forty-five prime interlocutors (‘informants’) who provided me with particularly valuable information. A list of their names is found in the appendices of my dissertation as well as in the present work.⁷⁶ To my regret, as far as I know, all of them have passed away since then. I owe much to them and to all other Nagerkuts who took time off from their work to patiently answer my questions. Many invited me into their homes and gardens. I remember these encounters with deep gratitude. Although the personal names of



Fig 3 Raja Karim Khan, the youngest son of Mir Sikandar Khan, with falcon; Gilgit (April 1984)



Fig 4 Ghulam Nabi (left) with villagers in Shayar (August 1983)