

TAGHM : the sowing festival in Gojal

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Tsantsa : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Ethnologischen Gesellschaft = revue de la Société suisse d'ethnologie = rivista della Società svizzera d'etnologia**

Band (Jahr): **23 (2018)**

PDF erstellt am: **27.05.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1007223>

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TAGHM

The Sowing Festival in Gojal

Text and pictures: *Martin Sökefeld*

Introduction

This essay is a reflection on the sowing festival *taghm* which marks the beginning of the agricultural season in Gojal in the Karakorum Mountains of Pakistan. While doing research on the consequences of the Attabad landslide (Sökefeld 2012, 2014), I took the opportunity to observe *taghm* three times in Gulmit, the central place of Gojal. Gulmit is situated on the Karakorum Highway (KKH), the road linking Pakistan with China. I was always intrigued by the visual imagery of *taghm*, especially by the *druksh*, a man clad as a bull who carries the seed to a field and joyfully attacks people on the way; nonetheless, people told me that *taghm* in Gulmit was only a diluted version of what it used to be and that nowadays the original, «authentic» *taghm* takes place only in Shimshal, a cluster of villages three hours away on a precarious dirt road off the KKH. Shimshal is a place celebrated for its remoteness, roughness and «authenticity» (Butz 1993, Hussain 2015). In spring 2017, I had the chance to observe the festival in Shimshal, but contrary to what I had been told, I found the experience much less «original» than in Gulmit; instead, I perceived the festival as a focal point at the intersection of change and uncertainty.

Taghm is an invocation of fertility, meant to ensure a plentiful harvest; however, the previous year's harvest had been a complete failure in Shimshal after raging thunderstorms and locusts destroyed whatever lay in the fields. *Taghm* is the prerogative of the *shogan ptük*, i.e. those clans that are considered the descendants of original village settlers, who built the terraces and dug the irrigation channels required for cultivation. Normally, the ritual roles of *taghm*, including the *druksh*, can only be performed by a male *shogan ptük*. In Gulmit, I observed

how, in an old house of the *shogan ptük*, in an atmosphere of excitement and serenity, a man was transformed into the *druksh* (photo 1). Evergreen juniper, a symbol of fertility, is burnt in the house, and the direction into which the juniper smoke (*thumon*) is blown after escaping through an outlet in the roof is seen an omen: if *thumon* is blown towards *qibla*, the direction of Mecca, the harvest will be plentiful.

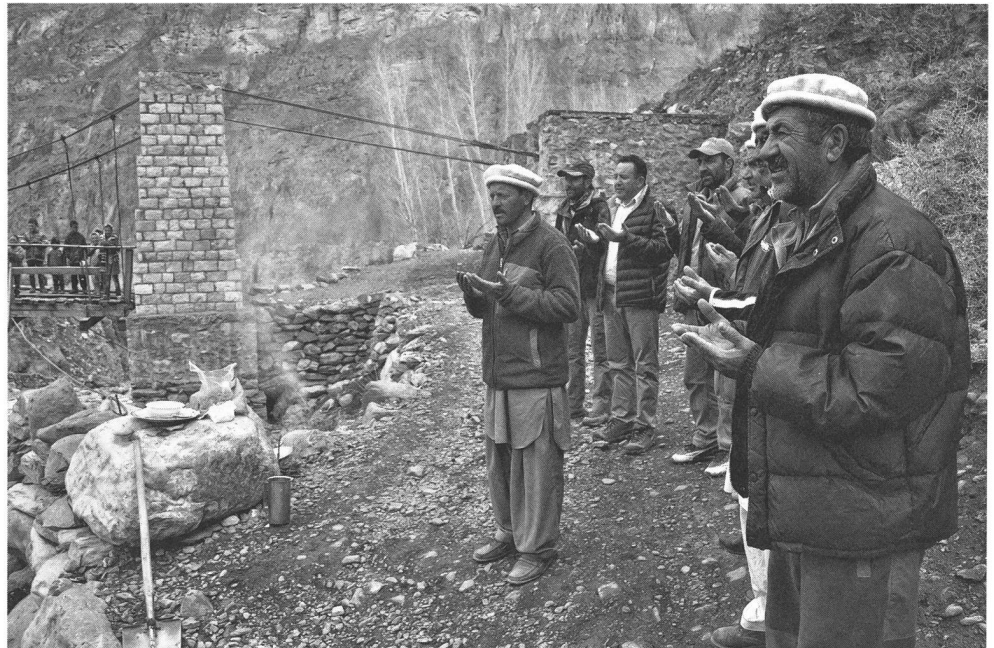
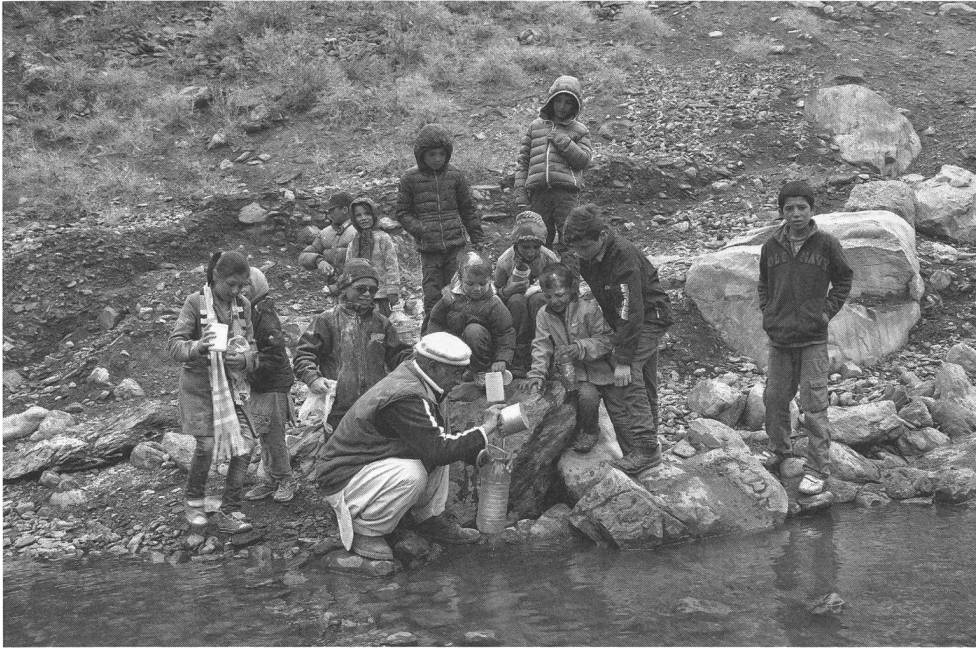
Taghm in Shimshal

On my way to Shimshal, I learnt that the previous year a non-*shogan ptük* woman had performed part of the ritual, which some people linked to the harvest failure. While not all agreed with this point, and some in fact laughed at the idea that details of a ritual could affect «natural» phenomena like thunderstorms and locusts, the urge to do everything right this year was palpable; nonetheless, it turned out that not the *shogan ptük* but rather a group of twelve tourists from Japan, who arrived two days before *taghm*, dominated the festival in many respects. Such a group had already been in Shimshal the year before.

On the day the Japanese arrived, I met Afzal, who asked me why I had come to Shimshal. When I explained that I had come for *taghm* and wanted to see the transformation of the *druksh*, he exclaimed:

You will not be allowed to see it! This year, nobody will be allowed into the house, not any outsider! Last year, the Japanese entered the house; they took photos and disturbed the ritual. The smoke blew in the wrong direction and the harvest became a disaster – it was destroyed by billions of locusts! The

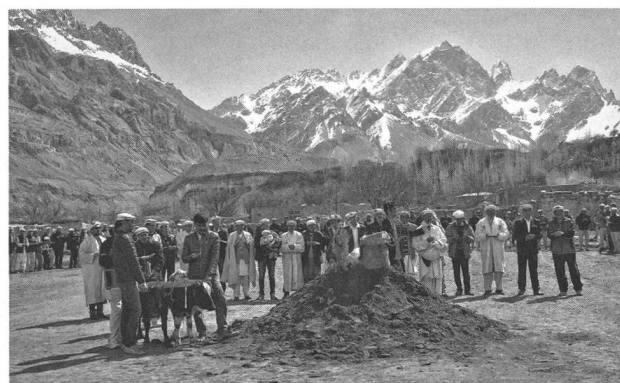
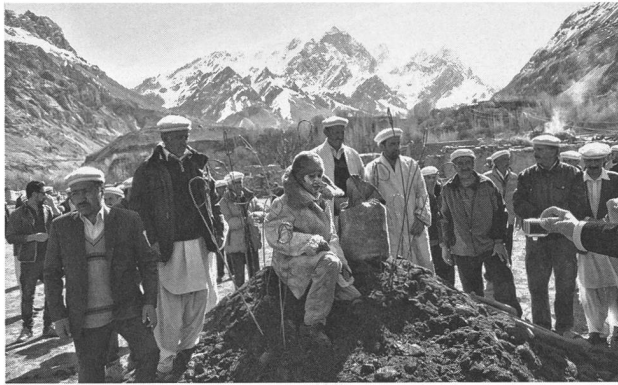


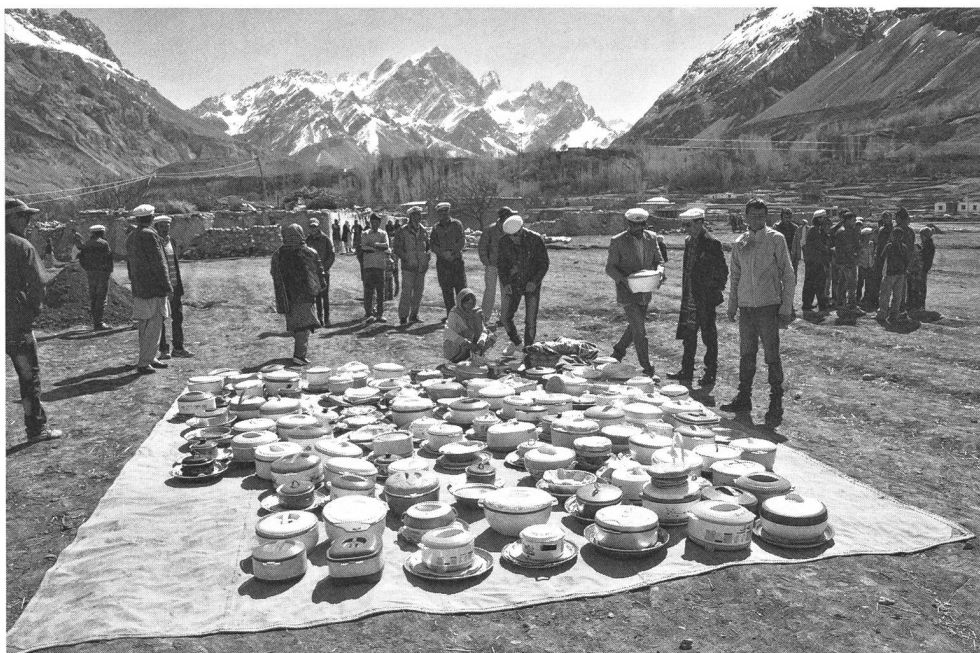












Japanese filmed everything. And they did not even donate a single rupee! Because of them we are not eating our own wheat now but have to buy flour from the shops. It's a disaster!

The next day, the day before *taghm*, was referred to as *pirkitn*, i.e. «stirring». The name is derived from the preparation of *semen*, a sweet dish traditionally prepared for the occasion and which requires many hours of stirring over a fire. On *pirkitn*, the *shogan ptük* release the water of a glacial stream into an irrigation channel, from where they also distribute water to children, who take it home for the preparation of *semen* and tea (**photo 2**). I met a group of *shogan ptük* at the beginning of the channel, who were preparing it and a heap of dry wood to burn auspicious herbs, though they did not actually start the ritual – they kept waiting for the Japanese to arrive. Only when the Japanese turned up did they release the water, burn the herbs and distribute the bread they had brought (**photos 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7**). Everything was carefully staged in a way that enabled the Japanese the best position for taking photos. This was not the only occasion that the tourist group dominated events. During the evening of that day, the *shogan ptük* brought branches of juniper and distributed them as tokens of fertility to local families. 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 (**photo 8**). The lanterns burned out quickly and the field was soon littered with parched paper. The next day was *taghm*. After a couple of cloudy days, the sun was shining. On the way toward the house in which the ritual of the *druksh* would take place, I met Afzal again. He reiterated that I had to ask permission to enter the house. We were joined by Bilal, a young man from Islamabad who had arrived the night before. When Afzal asked him why he had come, Bilal answered, «To see *thumon*!»

Afzal burst out angrily, «We won't let you in!»

Taken aback, Bilal asked, «Why?» to which Afzal exclaimed, «Many people have come from outside, from Japan, from Islamabad, to see *taghm*. Last year, the harvest was very bad, because of them, they destroyed our rituals!»

Afzal did not mention me, the German anthropologist, 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, «I have come to take photographs, and 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!»

While they kept on arguing I left them on their own because I saw the *buzurg*, the elders of the *shogan ptük*, approaching the house of the ritual. I joined them, we talked a bit and they gave me permission to enter the house. I sat down in the background. Slowly, more Shimshali men entered. After a while, the Japanese burst in, followed by two Koreans who had arrived just that morning. We were served tea and biscuits, not *semen*, following which an iron fireplace was prepared in the centre of the room, below the outlet in the roof. Two large juniper branches were burned (**photo 9**). Every moment was captured by more than a dozen of cameras (**photo 10**). The Shimshalis, with their smartphones, took pictures, too. When the house filled with thick smoke, the *buzurg* fled. 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. 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 dung). He rolled down from the heap and threw *khat* at the spectators. Finally, he settled on top of the *khat* (**photo 11**). The Japanese came closer to take pictures. Meanwhile, a Korean had started a drone, to shoot the event from air. Suddenly, two Japanese women sat on the *khat* together with the *druksh*. Quickly, two more women joined them. Finally, the *druksh* was surrounded by Japanese women (**photo 12**). Enthusiastically, more pictures were taken. Some Shimshali men stood in front of the *druksh* and the Japanese women and took selfies.

After that, the sowing went almost unnoticed by the crowd: a *buzurg* took wheat out of the *druksh*'s bag and distributed it to the bystanders, who held it for a few minutes before handing it back (**photo 13**). After a prayer (**photo 14**), a ploughman, using a wooden plough dragged by two small oxen, drew a rather symbolic furrow and the seed was sown. Meanwhile, people from all over Shimshal brought bread and pots with *semen* and other dishes, each collected beside the field where men and women sat separately on tarpaulins (**photos 15, 16**). The food was distributed, and then another *buzurg* said a prayer and the people started eating (**photo 17**). With this meal the «traditional» part of *taghm* ended.

Uncertainty, remoteness and authenticity

The experience of *taghm* in Shimshal contrasted starkly with the discourse of «authenticity». In fact, many elements of the festival had changed. For convenience, the first sowing was shifted from a field on the periphery to the centre of the village, and recently also the preparation of the *druksh* moved to

another house. Furthermore, the year before, a woman had played a part she was not supposed to play, and parts of the festival were staged for Japanese tourists and served as a backdrop for their photographs. Particularly significant was *semen*, the sweet dish, because while people in Gulmit regarded it as a *sine qua non* for *taghm*, very few households prepared it in Shimshal. Its preparation is very labour-intensive. Quite a number of households lack the required (wo)man power, due to outmigration. Many Shimshalis, both men and women, have moved out for education or employment. Being Ismailis, Shimshalis enjoy many opportunities provided by the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) and are generally highly educated. However, it is not only the lack of a workforce that impedes the preparation of *semen* – the sweet dish is exchanged among kin and neighbours as a token of reciprocity. One man, Shafqat, told me that he was not on good terms with his neighbours because of disputes over water for irrigation. He partly blamed the out-migrants for strained social relations in Shimshal. According to him, the emigrants still meddled too much with the affairs of the village, without being practically involved. He noted, «When I am not on good terms with my neighbours, how can I send them *semen*? The community is torn apart. I have not prepared *semen*.»

Many households depend on agriculture, and so after the previous year's devastation, they were highly worried. Some considered the «correct» performance of *taghm* as a precondition for a plentiful harvest, and, like Afzal, explicitly tried to prevent disturbances to the festival, albeit without success. Most people, however, were much more relaxed.

Given all of these changes and uncertainties, why did the discourse of authenticity prevail around Shimshal? I suppose that in this regard the idea of remoteness plays an important role. Being considered as «remote» – not long ago, before the construction of the tenuous road, the village was accessible only after an arduous three-day march – Shimshal is perceived as being largely untainted by «modernity», as an abode of «tradition». While in the past, remoteness was usually equated with backwardness that needed to be eradicated by modernisation and education – e.g. by the programmes of AKDN – remoteness has acquired today a partially positive meaning of strong communal life, of respect for traditions, of «authenticity». In a kind of nostalgia, those who have left Shimshal contribute especially to this discourse.

Remoteness and authenticity became a resource 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), it has never lost its enchantment for

a certain strand of tourism. For the Japanese, «authentic» *taghm* in «remote» Shimshal was the highlight of their tour. Yet, this «authenticity» bears the seeds of its own destruction, as it is difficult to regard a ritual as «authentic» when it is staged partly for tourists. However, the Japanese did not know and they did not bother; they got the pictures they wanted. While taking photographs in the way the Japanese group did betrayed an appropriation and consumption of culture that bore little respect for the concerns of the people whose culture was consumed, taking pictures together was also a means of communication and of establishing bonds. In spite of some dissenting voices like that of Afzal, who felt excluded from potential benefits, it seemed that most people in Shimshal actually enjoyed becoming the object of a kind of «global» attention. Moreover, taking photos has become a global practice and idiom that Shimshalis actually have in common with the Japanese, as posing for pictures with the Japanese women and the *druksh* was clearly considered a highlight of the festival. While Shimshalis did not use the heavy cameras that the Japanese carried, they nevertheless joined in taking photos with their smartphones, 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 other people treated them with great courtesy – and that included enabling them to take the pictures for which they had come. At *taghm*, «authentic» Shimshalis met with «authentic» Japanese tourists. In spite of the uncertainty voiced before the festival, the Shimshalis celebrated *taghm* with joy and fervour. Moreover, as *thumon* blew in the right direction, there is now hope for a plentiful harvest this year.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft for generously funding research in Gojal, Sabine Strasser for her very helpful comments on this essay, and Mark Jones for proofreading.

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