

Viticulture in Kafiristan

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A thriving viticulture among the Kafirs of the Hindu Kush was already known to a certain degree in antiquity, but possibly only through inference. The Greek historians may have failed to report it in the context of their description of the advance of Alexander the Great's army through the southern flanks of the Hindu Kush, i.e. the southern region of "greater Kafiristan", in 327 B.C. Here, the Greeks came across densely wooded areas full of ivy and laurel which they had not seen for a long time, and this – most probably together with the locally encountered viticulture – made them relate the region to Dionysos and to Nysa, his mythical birth place. Accordingly, they suspected Nysa to be located somewhere here, and thought it opportune to raise Dionysos to the position of the Greek army's top guardian deity, replacing Heracles in this function for a certain period.¹

The next relevant reports cropped up nearly two millennia later, provided by Timur Lang and especially Babur, the first Moghul ruler, who even provided a reference to vine- and wine-rich southern Kafiristan by mentioning "strong yellowish wines ... all brought from up the Kafiristan-water and from Pich-i-kafiristani".² Some information on the Kafirs is included in the late eighteenth-century manuscript *Sair al-Bilād* by Moghul Beg,³ and soon afterwards, in the early nineteenth century, Mountstuart Elphinstone was able

¹ The apparent, related lack of any mention of wine may well have been considered superfluous, as wine cultures were encountered in all the countries the Greeks had passed through, for example in Kapisa to the north of Kabul, famous for its wine already in the Achaemenid times. See also Edelberg 1965, where he discussed briefly the questions of Dionysos in Kafiristan and of wine versus the Vedic soma, and Carter 1992.

² With the notion "Pich-i-kafiristani", i.e. the Kafirs of the Pech Valley, Babur indicated the centre of the Kafir wine production which was in and near the Pech Valley in southern Kafiristan. Another wine centre was in Dara-ye-Nur Valley, a side valley of the Kunar Valley (see note 12). Babur was also good for absurd statements such as that "wine is so commonly used there that every Kafir has his leathern wine-bag (*khig*) at his neck, and drinks wine instead of water" (1922 I:212). Naturally, wine was carried in goatskin bags for various reasons, such as for sale.

³ The manuscript was translated by Raverty and published in Raverty 1888.

to collect some substantial data when charged with research on the “Kingdom of Caubul”. As told by informants sent into Kafiristan, he reported that the Kafirs “drink wine, both pure and diluted, out of large silver cups, which are the most precious of their possessions. They drink during their meals, and are elevated, but not made quarrelsome, by this indulgence” (1839 II:384). The mention of silver cups must have caused much attention and even amazement, but they remained undocumented and thus of doubtful existence until 1953 (see below). Charles Masson, the British adventurer and explorer who roamed through Afghanistan and neighbouring areas in the 1830s, wrote that the “Kâfrs” or, rather, “Síáposh”,⁴ were “fond of ... singing and drinking wine” out of “drinking cups and bowls [which] are ornamented and embossed in a costly manner”, thereby referring certainly to silver cups. He reported that he has seen Kafirs “bringing wine in skins, and so sour as to be undrinkable. It is said, however, that they have good wine, and that the better classes, in default of jars, preserve it in cisterns, hewn in the rocks” (1842 III: 228, 232). Alexander Burnes, the British political agent in Kabul in the late 1830s, heard of Kafirs drinking “light and dark” wine from silver cups and thought them to be “trophy of their spoils in war” (1842: 211). “One would ... in that case have expected that the greatest numbers of cups would have been found among the strongest tribe in Kafiristan, the Kam people in lower Bashgal” (Edelberg 1965: 196).

However, this was not the case, when (Sir) George Scott Robertson, a British Indian government commissioner, in 1890–91 resided one year among the Kate-speaking Kafirs in the Bashgal Valley, in particular in Kamdesh in eastern Kafiristan. He saw mostly wooden cups and occasionally shallow tin bowls (ibid.: 501) used for wine drinking. On festive occasions the “dancers refreshed with wine ladled from a tub with wooden cups. The same not particularly generous fluid was also circulated among the spectators constantly ... The greybeards and seniors, all importance, sat round the dancing platform drinking wine and talking politics” (Robertson: 223 f.). Only at large gatherings “wine is sometimes handed around in shallow tin bowls, but these are rare.”⁵ Tellingly, as the consumption of mostly watered-

⁴ “Síáposh” is a name once given to the Kafirs living in the Bashgal Valley (with the village of Kamdesh) in easternmost Kafiristan.

⁵ These tin bowls were certainly different from the eye-catching chalice-like silver cups used in the Waigal Valley and in Wama and the “large silver cups” mentioned by Elphinstone and Burnes.

down wine was probably moderate for lack of sufficient supply and possibly also for reason of status-like behaviour, Robertson did not observe any drunkenness (1896: 559).

Undoubtedly, the Kafir viticulture was part of very old Indo-Iranian customs in a wider region which saw the crossing of Indo-Aryan peoples from Central Asia to India, which has rich vegetation including wild vines.⁶ Hidden in badly accessible high mountain valleys of the Hindu Kush and hardly disturbed by outsiders (fig. 1), the Kafirs or “heathens”, as they were called by their Muslim neighbours, had managed for millennia to keep to their animistic and polytheistic beliefs together with a large spectre of specific socio-cultural concepts and traditions in the midst of a hostile Islamized world, until they had to face the destruction of their civilisation. In the winter of 1895/95 they were subjugated by the Afghan army ordered to Islamize the population. Accordingly, the army and the mullahs in its train saw to a wholesale destruction of the Kafir temples and idol imagery as well as rooting out all the millennia-old beliefs and very rich, multifaceted “heathen” traditions, including their homicidal tendencies which had constantly threatened their lives outside their communities, and, of course, including their viticulture. Soon afterwards Kafiristan was renamed *Nūristān*, “Land of Light (or Enlightenment)”, and the formerly militant Kafirs had become comparatively peaceful *Nūristānī*. Only a small, distantly related side branch known as the Kalasha Kafirs survived in Chitral, which then was part of north-western British India, at present in north-western Pakistan. Among them, known under their tourism-stimulating name “Kafirs of Pakistan”, one still finds a thriving viticulture (see below).

Robertson was thus the first and last foreign eyewitness of the Kafir culture in the Bashgal Valley with its important role of wine drinking in the local Kafir lifestyle, wherever vines are growing, during the abundant feasting on a variety of secular and religious festive occasions. As status-seeking dominated every aspect of life, attained through elaborate honorific feasts, also called feasts of merit, and, on a minor scale, through homicidal acts affecting potential or real enemies (the victims being other Kafirs or Muslims both male and female), there was ample opportunity for celebrations and singing and dancing – and wine drinking as long as there was any available. Apparently there was a need for more of this in the distant past, as the

⁶ For some relevant opinions, see H. F. Neubauer, “Die Nuristanrebe, Herkunft der Edelrebe und Ursprung des Weinbaus”, *Afghanistan Journal*, 1974: 32–36; see also Carter 1992.

Waigal Kafirs allegedly paid for some time “a yearly tribute of four cows and four measures of wine” to the Kam Kafirs who had beaten the Waigal before settling down in Kamdesh and the lower Bashgal Valley (ibid: 158).

Unfortunately, Robertson tells us little about the local viticulture and nothing with respect to the growing of vines and the picking of grapes. He describes the wine-pressing in a hamlet near Kamdesh on a flat-topped boulder, with its side walls made by small boulder and stone walls about two and half feet high, with their interstices filled with clay. The somewhat semicircular “press” measured some five and a half feet in length and some four feet at its breadth. “The floor sloped naturally, and at the lower end, in front, an aperture had been left, partly closed by a little brushwood, from under which a deeply-grooved piece of wood ... protruded, and afforded an outlet for the expressed juice”. Then a big man was “persuaded” to tread the grapes, after his feet had been washed carefully. “He enjoyed himself thoroughly, treading with so much vigour that he had to be frequently checked to prevent the juice from overflowing the vessel” (fig. 2).⁷ Then the juice was collected in “large wooden cups, which, when full, had their contents ladled back into the press .. a necessary custom always observed”, as explained to Robertson. Finally it was poured into goatskin bags with the help of a wooden funnel. After 8 to 10 days it became wine, which was “most uninviting in appearance” as it was not strained, and therefore the Kafirs always blew into the cups or bowls in order to remove the scum from near their lips” (Robertson 1896: 556 ff.). Wine was kept in goatskins (ibid: 504) and then poured on festive occasions into “large plain wooden, tub-like vessels ... seen in most well-to-be houses. They are capable of several gallons of wine. At large gatherings they are placed in convenient positions for having their contents dipped into, and handed round in bowls and drinking cups” (ibid. 501).

Robertson observed wine drinking on several festive occasions and as a guest of an influential Kafir, who offered him wine which “was strong and good, and was declared to be three years old” (ibid: 234). Normally, however, the wine is “poor and thin, but even then is usually diluted with water” (ibid.: 559). Thus the risk of getting drunk was small, at least in Kamdesh, and Robertson did not notice there any drunken men and even less so women, who “never drink wine” (ibid. 656). That is in contrast to observations made among the Kalasha Kafirs in Pakistan (see below).

⁷ In contrast, the wine-pressing by the Kalasha is mostly done by young, ritually pure boys (see below).

Robertson also observed the pressing of the remaining semi-solid residue with the help of flat stones placed on small heaps of residue and “a long pliable pole used as a lever”: one end of it was anchored in the ground and its free end pulled down by a number of men, thereby pressing the underlying stones. “The dried residue is made up into cakes” tasting “most unpleasant”, but are “highly appreciated by Kafirs who believe that it possesses most sustaining qualities” (ibid. 559 f.).⁸

Since no proper field research took place during the half-century after the drama of 1896,⁹ this was our state of knowledge when the Danes started their field research in 1948,¹⁰ with Lennart Edelberg as their main explorer. Already during his first field trip in 1948, Edelberg made an important discovery when an informant led him into the mythical, community-owned orchard and “vineyard” Indrak’un, the garden of the deity Indr, located at 1.850 m high above the river in the Pech Valley, near the large village of Wama (figs. 3–4). Then, in 1953, in the Waigal village of Zhönchigal, he was the first explorer to see, to his great amazement, two of the “ominous” silver cups, surprisingly large and stemmed and thus resembling big chalices (fig. 11).¹¹ Clearly, these and the other silver cups which appeared afterwards (figs. 12–14)¹² document the importance wine once had as a status drink especially in central and especially southern Nuristan (see below), where wild vines enjoy favourable climatic conditions for growth and find large trees to climb, and which is the location of Babur’s “Pich-i-kafiristani” and of the Indrak’un “garden” or “vineyard”.

⁸ Among the Kalasha Kafirs in Birir a similar, but simpler method is employed (see below).

⁹ The Deutsche Hindukusch Expedition of 1935 produced a good survey, but only very few socio-cultural data of any significance except the information on the different calendar systems by W. Lentz. See Scheibe 1937

¹⁰ Unfortunately, Edelberg was not a cultural anthropologist, but a botanist by profession, who developed sympathies rather for the oppressed, the *bari* and *šiwala* (see below), than for their often very self-conscious, but more informative former masters, the heirs to the upholders of the Kafir civilisation.

¹¹ Fearing to cause a rush of antique dealers to Nuristan, Edelberg kept the great news secret for 12 years (the rush then promptly followed). See Edelberg 1965, written in Danish (with an English summary), in which he published – between travel narratives – his very important findings during his fieldwork in 1948 and 1953.

¹² The three cups owned by the present author were donated, together with his whole Nuristan collection, to the Kabul Museum, but they were stolen during the recent civil war. The total number of known vessels is about ten. Reportedly, there are still a few cups left in Nuristan.

This “garden” constitutes a genuine wine-growing centre, being essentially a small forest of large holly oak, walnut and other trees literally embraced by wild vines and therefore designated as an orchard. Its location on an inclined terrace high above the Pech River, above a high rock facade, is an extraordinary scenic feature in the otherwise very narrow valley. People could be thrown to their death from this rock wall when found guilty of a serious misdemeanour such as grape-picking before the time of its announcement.¹³

Indrak'un is also most noteworthy for its mythical origin owing to the god Indra/Indr, the most popular deity of Wama and of Ashkungal (the region of the Ashkun speakers), who was thought to visit Indrak'un each summer. Indr was credited for having founded the garden after he had tricked his brother Giwish/Gish into choosing a piece of land in the Kantiwo Valley at some distance to the north of Wama.¹⁴ When Giwish found out about the great beauty of the orchard created by Indr, he tried in vain to destroy it by rolling large boulders down from the mountain behind the garden. Indr made the best of it, as the story goes, by carving vats into several of these boulders to be used for wine making, as he was thought to be a great wine lover. There are four such vats, with one of them made to press the grapes (figs. 5–6).¹⁵ The other three, holding 840 l, 1,330 l and 3,780 l respectively (Edelberg 1965: 171), served to produce wine called *tin* (as also by the eastern Kati) by simply letting the juice ferment under a protective cover against twigs and leaves (fig. 7). According to Edelberg's fieldnotes, several days after the pressing and filling of the stone vats with the juice, men sat on the stone near the vats and drank some of the fermenting juice out of wooden cups. The Indrak'un wine, being community property, had to be distributed

¹³ The harvest of all the fruits and crops was strictly regulated in every Kafir community, as is mostly still the case in Nuristan.

¹⁴ According to a myth told to Robertson, „Inthr made Badáwan (Ahmad Diwáná) his resting-place, and there created vineyards”, but then was compelled, after several fights with “Imrá”, the Kafir top deity, to “fly for refuge to the Tsárogul” (1896: 388), referring to the Wama region. However, Ahmad Diwáná's altitude of 2,590 m is too high to allow for vines to grow, and thus Indr's new “resting-place” in Wama was much better located at an altitude of 1,850 m.

¹⁵ Karl Wutt photographed similar stone vats in Darra-ye Nūr, also an important wine producing valley in the past. It is inhabited by Pashai whose Indo-Aryan language is only distantly related to the tongues of the Kafirs/Nuristani, but who were certainly classified as Kafirs as well before they were Islamized gradually some time before “our” Kafirs. See Wutt 1981: pls. 152, 153, 159.

among the eligible adult men, numbering some 300 in 1948 (ibid.), according to social criteria, thus most probably not, as Edelberg was told, in equal shares of 10 litres. Clearly, families headed by men of high social standing through feast-giving and acts of heroism had more right to larger quantities of wine than the average households of “free”, eligible men. Naturally, socially dependent men and, even more so, those occupying a slave-like and untouchable-like status such as the craftsmen known as *bari* and the even lower classified servant-like *šüwala*, groups redlined as ethnic outsiders, had no access to wine – such as likewise women.

In addition to Indrak’un’s role in the viticulture and myths surrounding Indr, there was a major cultic site in Indr’s honour known as Indr-tā (fig. 8). Its centre consisted primarily of a small boulder which served as basis for Indr’s effigy, and a large juniper tree next to it, already dead in 1948. “On the trunk of this tree (or perhaps on a post nearby – or possibly on three posts, one for each of the main clans of Wama) the Kafirs used to hang ... rings of almond withes on wooden plugs hammered into the trunk or post(s) – presumably one ring (*däl*) for every Muslim killed” (ibid. 165).¹⁶ Normally the effigy of Indr, most probably represented standing, was kept in his temple, the *Indr-amā*, inside the village, but on the occasion of a large feast in his honour soon after the grape harvest, the figure was carried to the Indr-tā and placed on the said stone block. There it then served as the central cult image honoured by the sacrifice of numerous he-goats and one or two oxen, whose blood was thrown on the sacrificial fire,¹⁷ while men acting as priests and worshippers said thanksgiving prayers and sang hymns. Specific to Wama and possibly also to Zhönchigal (see below), new wine was thrown on the statue, as reported to Edelberg (p. 165). Silver cups were probably used during both blood and wine sacrifices, as was also the case at the other feast in honour of Indr in the winter month Zintseimas, with his effigy standing in his temple, the Indr-ama. This assumption that silver cups were used at these sacrifices is supported by a report of such a use by the Parun Kafirs,

¹⁶ The rings were called *shagere*, while *däl* or, rather, *dal*, denotes large poles mostly standing at pathways near the villages and signalling the number of homicides by the number of wooden plugs hammered into the trunk.

¹⁷ After the pouring of blood on the fire, the severed heads of the goats were placed briefly at the fire and their carcasses were held above it so that some of their hair would burn. All the deities were thought to cherish the smell of burned blood and hair.

wine-less inhabitants of the Parun Valley further upstream,¹⁸ when worshipping a certain deity.

The date of the Indr festival in Indrak'un could not be ascertained, but it must have taken place soon after of the picking of the grapes, lasting four days (followed by that of walnuts, pomegranates and jujubes), starting on the first of the September/October month Drashletr-mās. The most likely date is the end or the last day of this month, when all the flocks, mainly of goats, and their goatherds had returned to the village. The feast must have been particularly merry, with singing and dancing exceeding that of all other feasts, and with some excessive wine-related behaviour with regard to the sexual relations in particular between the unmarried young.¹⁹ A similar, but probably smaller feast, recorded by both Edelberg and this author, took place about the same time in Zhönchigal in honour of the local guardian deity Traskan (1965: 175). His name also appears in that of the local grape- and fruit-picking month called Traskando-mās which is mostly known in Waigal under the name Atau-mās. In default of stone vats, in Zhönchigal, as in all other wine-producing villages except in Wama, the vinification took place in large wooden pots or stone vessels. The wine was then stored in wooden pots or stone vessels or skin-bags,²⁰ until it was drunk out of wooden or silver cups.

On the occasion of feasts, in particular the often very elaborate feasts of honorification, better known as “feasts of merit”, which could include invitations not only to the eligible population of the host's community, but also to that of neighbouring villages, the respective hosts had to care especially for the wealthy and established guests who had to be served food and wine inside the privacy of houses. These celebrations may frequently have been

¹⁸ The Parun River is the eastern of the two main feeders of the Pech River. The culture of the local Kafirs, living surrounded by the Kati Kafirs to the east and west as well as the Wama and Waigal Kafirs to the south, forms the topic of the forthcoming study by this author complementing that on the Waigal and Ashkun Kafirs.

¹⁹ This feast must have been the equivalent to the Prun festival of the Kalasha Kafirs in the Birir Valley (see below).

²⁰ A story recorded by G. Buddruss in Nisheigram and then published by A. Degener deals with the grape picking from privately owned vines and the vinification in stone vessels which were then sealed off with clay for three months. In the past the wine, *cūkur'a*, was often left to age for three to four years. Old wine, *pra*, mixed with honey, *maci*, was the highly cherished drink *mači-pra*. See Degener 1998: 307 ff.

nothing less than drinking bouts²¹ with mainly whitebeards present, each of them sitting on his proper chair of honour known in Waigal, Wama and Ashkun as “horn chairs”, *şîṭ-nişä*, or *şîṭ-asta*, featuring two backrests set at an angle. At least some of them must have owned a silver cup, which they could have placed on a special stand next to their chairs – if they owned a stand called *urei-taò* (figs. 9–10). Any silver cup present was handed around to all the invited “VIPs”. These large, stemmed, chalice-like vessels, rarely cups without a stem, generally known as *urei* in the Waigali language and as *ro* (both terms meaning “silver”) and also *watak* in Wama and Ashkungal, held a particular status connotation not only for their very high value which in the 1970s was given as the equivalent of 30–60 goats,²² but also for the mythical origin of some of them. Stories were told of silver or even golden cups in treasures hidden in small lakes high up in the mountains, whose water would retreat on certain occasions and then expose the glittering objects.²³ Certain *urei* were said to have the capacity of ringing when touched by lower class, ritually impure people like the *bari* and *şüwala*. There was, in addition, the tale of a secret smith named Gauwarkawana somewhere on the southern border of Kafiristan towards the Pech Valley who would produce and magically deliver not only special Kafir daggers known as *kaṭera*, but also *urei*. If someone wished to order such an object, he had to request the local shaman (in Waigali: *dyäl*) to contact the smith, bring 30–60 goats or four to eight cows for an *urei* respectively six to seven goats or one cow for a *kaṭera* to a certain location and then leave. The animals, after having been checked and approved as payment, then disappeared, and several days afterwards the *dyäl* would have informed the purchaser that the paid-for *urei* or *kaṭera* would be seen placed at the same spot or even suspended in the air waiting to be fetched. – Such tales may have been created some time ago for socio-political purposes.

Evidently, the silver cups had important social and probably also religious functions which, unfortunately, are hard to envision with any degree of reliability. Their high value restricted their ownership to the wealthy, but

²¹ In contrast to the lack of drunken behaviour among the Kam Kafirs, as Robertson states, drunkenness may have been frequent in the southern parts of Kafiristan, where wine was produced in larger quantities.

²² A female goat aged 2–3 years was/is the basic unit of value at any transaction in southern Kafiristan/Nuristan.

²³ See Klimburg 1999: 214 ff. Jones’ statement that some of the *urei* could be worth “as much as 240 goats” or “the price of a man” (1974:170) cannot be taken seriously.

their possession was not part of the material-based culture of status merited through social achievements. Such “merited” objects were traditional weapons (especially daggers), chairs of honour, carved decorations on house facades and the standard four posts inside the house, certain insignia worn on caps and stitched into dresses and the like. Similarly, firearms had no particular status value in terms of “merit status”. One may argue therefore, that the introduction of *urei*, like that of firearms, may constitute a more recent, accretionary feature, their possession bequeathing more of a material than social value, seen more as an investment in a valuable object that could then be used for the payment of part of the high bride price once calculated in Waigal as up to 200 goats and often even more. As an object also used in bride-price negotiations, the *urei* clearly looks “transferable” and thus did not endow any particular social value on the original owner and his descendants, unless all this is a result of the breakdown of the Kafir social order after Islamization.

As to the origin of these large goblets, informants in Parun, once the religious centre of Kafiristan,²⁴ claimed that they were traded in from Badakhshan, together with the much coveted and gaudy-looking ikat clothes and coats, as well as much needed salt. Such an origin appears possible, and cups could also have been copied by the remarkably capable *bari* craftsmen of the Kafirs. However, the question remains whether they may have been made primarily in Badakhshan or somewhere else in northern Afghanistan, then sold in Kafiristan so as to stimulate specific demands or to satisfy already existing ones. In short, the origin of these cups remains a mystery, as is the reason for the close similarity in their appearance to drinking vessels depicted in ancient wall-paintings of the sixth to eighth century AD in Sogdian “Middle Asia”, such as in Balalyk Tepe (fig. 15). We have to content ourselves with the possibility of a very long – millennia long – survival in Kafiristan of not only ancient beliefs and traditions but also of some antique-looking objects such as the *urei* and, similarly astounding, three-legged stands of wrought iron, often made and decorated artistically, which served to hold flat wooden bowls or, designed differently, silver cups. Should we think again of Badakhshan as the likely origin at least of the more elaborate-

²⁴ The Parun Valley constitutes the “heart” of Kafiristan/Nuristan, once centred in the largest temple of Kafiristan, since some ten years housing the provincial capital. Through the valley leads an important path connecting central Nuristan with Badakhshan, the province and historical landscape to the north of the Hindukush. See also note 15.

ly made specimens? Whatever the answer, both objects betray a close relationship to the material culture of Classical Antiquity, which, of course, was present in that part of the world for a millennium after its conquest by Alexander the Great and the ensuing establishment of Hellenistic rule and cultural transfer as reflected later in the Graeco-Buddhist art of Gandhara with its numerous sculptural themes often related to the drinking of wine in cults and even to “Dionysiac” festivals.

Such an astounding survival over the millennia as is assumed here may well have had specific reasons also associated with cultic values. The cups might have played the role also of sacrificial chalices used in religious cults, as has already been noted above. In addition, the red wine, which was/is the general kind of wine in Kafiristan/Nuristan, may have been seen as reflecting the blood of sacrificial animals. Its cultic value appears strongly indicated in the information gathered by Karl Jettmar in Punyal.²⁵ Accordingly, wine may have been drunk in Wama not only for pleasure, but also in honour of that guardian deity, Indr, who cherished wine himself, whose effigy was allegedly spattered with wine, and whose temple in Wama reportedly also served as a community wine storage. Likewise, wine was drunk in other places in the Waigal and Ashkun area, though probably less “conspicuously”, during feasts honouring local tutelary deities such as Traskan, the protector of both Waigal Village and Zhöñchigal, of Gröshter-panao, the guardian deity of Nisheigram, and of Indr, the tutelary deity of Nakara (Titin Valley).

One may thus surmise that the worship of village tutelary deities, such as of Indr in particular, in comparatively wine-rich southern and southwestern Kafir communities, bordering the densely Muslim-populated lower Pech Valley, had particular wine-related features including the use of silver cups to express special reverence to the deities. Accordingly, there may well have

²⁵ Jettmar observed the pressing of wine by Ismailis in a village in Punyal in the northern flanks of the Hindu Kush, north-western Pakistan. A young man had to wash his feet and then, before the treading of the grapes, he and the others present were purified with the smoke of burning juniper. At another place in Punyal Jettmar was told that the treading of the grapes was done by boys (of untold age) after they had taken a bath, put on new clothes and had been purified by the smoke of burning juniper, as were the attendants and the press, and after finally a certain dish was ritually eaten to please the wine-loving *peri* (fairies), who were believed to be present at the pressing. Very probably, but not stated by Jettmar, any boy or young man chosen to tread the grapes had to be ritually “pure” by not having had sexual relations. Women of child-bearing age were not allowed to attend. An animal (goat?) was sacrificed after the pressing. See Jettmar 1973: 192 f. and 198 f.

been much emphasis on the cultic role of wine in southern Kafiristan while in northern Kafiristan wine may have been consumed primarily in the context of private and public feasting. However, during invocations of deities not only sacrificial blood, but also some wine may have been thrown on their shrines or effigies. This was the case at least at a sacrifice of 15 male goats to the “war god” Gish/Giwish at Kamdesh, a rite attended by Robertson (1896: 429)²⁶

An additional, specifically honorific role of the silver cups was reported in southern Waigal and in Wama/Ashkungal. On the occasion of the funeral feast of an important man, a wooden cruciform structure was celebrated in dance; it was dressed with a woman’s shirt and capped by a reversed *urei* or *ro*, in so far as the deceased had owned a silver cup (see Klimburg 1999: 98). Such an object, known in Waigal as *dal-sanka*, represented the dead, and recalls the dancing with wooden ancestor figures in Kamdesh observed by Robertson (see above). All this expressed great respect for the dead person’s social merits, especially those honoured for the killing of genuine or imagined enemies, strongly indicated by the use of an *urei* as a shining – otherwise often blood-filled? – helmet. Ancestor figures did not exist among the Waigal and Ashkun Kafirs, and hence such dressed and helmeted cruciform structures might be understood as a local and specifically also blood- and achievement-related object reflecting the ancestor cult of the Kati Kafirs, with its greater emphasis on the preservation of higher social standing than that on particular achievements.

The basic differences assumed here in the viticultures of the Kati versus the Waigal/Ashkun Kafirs indicate more emphasis on private and public enjoyment in the east versus accretional cultic values in the south and south-east of Kafiristan and would complement the numerous other socio-cultural features which distinguish two distinct cultures. Differences in achievement orientation may be credited for many of these variations, thus it is plausible that the wine culture in the highly competitive Waigal/Wama/Ashkun culture had preserved at least some of its former cultic value shared by the entire (eligible) male population. In contrast, among the Kati speakers in the east and primarily in Kamdesh, a more firmly stratified society had made wine

²⁶ Out of four wooden vessels filled with millet flour, ghee, wine and water, the priest Utah took “a small quantity of the contents of each vessel [and] threw it against the small closed door of the shrine, all the time repeating a certain invocation ... The goats were then rapidly seized” and killed. There is no other mention of the wine present in the vessel.

drinking a privilege of the wealthy, who appear to have contented themselves with the less ceremonious use of every-day wooden cups as drinking vessels. The two different types of wine-drinking vessels may thus reflect two diverging cultural backgrounds, as do numerous other features. These vessels have certainly changed much in the course of time, yet, in addition to many other peculiarities, both sorts attest to the millennia-long survival of Indo-Iranian wine-related traditions in isolated mountain societies in the Hindu Kush until their virtual destruction, or, rather, near destruction, as they have survived among the Kalasha Kafirs in Pakistan.

It is in Birir, the southernmost of the three valleys inhabited by these Kafirs, located to the southwest of the town Chitral, that a lively, but little known Kafir viticulture still enjoys the great traditional values attached to wine as a highly esteemed, nearly cultic beverage.²⁷ It is praised for its “inherent purity revealed by the gods for prayer and rejoicing” (Loude/Lièvre 1988: 68), with ritual “pure”, called *onjesta*, in contrast to “impure”, called *pragata* (the basic Kafir classification of everybody and everything). The valley is particularly rich in wild growing vines (both red and white), climbing high up on large walnut and other trees, while the other two valleys have few vines or lack them altogether. The picking of grapes (and other fruits), strictly forbidden before²⁸, starts in late September (on 20 September in 2006) after an evening sacrifice of a goat kid (one for each of the valley’s moieties) at each of the two adjoining cult places of the deity Praba, a god closely associated (identical) to the important Indian deity Indra/Indr. Both these gods are seen as protectors of the vines and the health of the Kafirs, and in southwestern former Kafiristan (present Nuristan) Indr even played a much hailed role as the founder of the large “vineyard” Indrak’un (see above). The first of the two sacrifices is at the smaller cult place consisting only of a “roundish whitish stone” (Di Carlo: 54), the second at the god’s shrine which features an altar topped by two wooden horse heads. In both

²⁷ Good descriptions are only by Loude/Lièvre (1987, based on a visit in 1985) and Di Carlo (based on a visit in 2006), while Staley’s report is very short and the information given in the recent book by Fentz is partially doubtful.

I am very grateful to Augusto S. Cacopardo for informing me about that wine culture, which I did not know until recently, and for commenting critically my pertinent discourse.

²⁸ As already noted above (fn. 13), in the Kafir – and still in the Nuristani – social economy, all the starts of harvesting crops and collecting fruits are strictly regulated by each village, which therefore chooses annually a certain number of men empowered to control and fine trespassers.

cases an *onjesta* virgin boy kills the animal next to a sacrificial fire and sprinkles the kid's blood on the fire – a standard sacrificial procedure. Then, at the first offer, he also throws blood on the faces of the participants, thereby initiating them to the second, more important sacrifice (*ibid.*),²⁹ at which the boy also sprinkles blood on the altar and – according to Loude/Lièvre (*ibid.*) – on bunches of freshly picked grapes. Then the first animal's meat is cooked and eaten while the second kid's "meat is roasted and eaten by the *onjesta suda* 'pure boys', and its bones are then thrown into the fire " (Di Carlo:55) This last act cannot but mean that the whole animal is offered to the deity, as a similar observation was made 21 years earlier by Loude/Lièvre (1987:209): The two French researchers observed a virgin boy killing the first of two goat kids at the Praba shrine (the smaller cult place is not mentioned), then grilling and eating pieces of the kid's meat and then throwing the whole carcass into the fire as a special offer to Praba. This gift of the goat's whole body to the deity was explained as necessary "to reestablish the threatened purity" endangered by the conversion to Islam of members of the Kafir community some time before. The French researchers noticed further that the meat of the second sacrificed kid was then boiled and eaten at the shrine, and that the participants at the sacrifice were also offered, as the valley's privileged first persons, fruits (grapes, walnuts, pears) picked before the general fruit harvesting was allowed to start in the following morning.³⁰

After this sacrifice the general picking of fruits starts, undertaken by men and boys climbing the trees and collecting them in small baskets which are then emptied by women below the trees into large carrying baskets. Men carry these baskets to the (still empty) winter stables. The pressing of the grapes not eaten fresh or separated for making raisins then takes place next

²⁹ According to Fentz (p. 393), the boy dips his head into the blood. This feature has been documented by others only in the context of the Chaumos feast (see below),

³⁰ In Fentz' description (pp. 393 ff.) special wine made of grapes picked before in "a sacred protected area in the lower part of the valley" was drunk "during the sacrificing at the Praba shrine". Then, in a nearby winter stable, when the participants ate the (roasted or boiled?) meat of the sacrificed kid, clusters of grapes were brought in, "one for each man ... Finally, each man receives a large cup of wine". However, no other researcher has reported anything like that, and thus the very interesting information of an early sacred wine and the wine drinking at the Praba shrine may be just a story told by Kafir informants with a bent to extemporize. Furthermore, no non-Kafir man, and even less so a woman, is allowed to witness that particularly *onjesta* ritual.

to sheds near the stables. A deity by the name of Warin, also associated to the god Indra/Indr, is invoked to provide for a good wine quality, and virgin boys, occasionally also men, ritually purified for the occasion, squeeze with their feet the grapes heaped in large boxes (up to 3 m long, nearly 1 m wide and up to 1 m high), which are dismantled after use (figs. 16–17). The juice is led through a hole and a conduit into big plastic bins or – hardly seen any longer – into stone vessels kept in the ground or pits in the ground carefully lined and tightened with stone slabs.³¹ Protected by lids, the juice will become wine already after some ten days.³²

Drinking of the new wine is considered at least in theory "illegal" before the beginning of the winter feast Chaumos (see below), when animals are sacrificed to honour a more martial deity by the name of Grimun. However, some wine is drunk already during the Prun festival (Di Carlo: 58), which starts – together with the harvesting of cereals – 10 to 14 days after the picking of fruits and the pressing of grapes.

The Prun feast is a Birir specialty which is variously called an autumn wine or harvesting or fertility festival celebrated with much singing and dancing – actually a feature common to all Kalasha feasts. It has no particular wine connotation except in a wider sense insofar that wine stimulates and reduces inhibitions with regard to sexuality. This used to play an important role until Muslims – virtually all of them Islamized Kalasha – living nearby made the Kafirs reduce markedly all sexually relevant behaviour.³³

During Chaumos, the long-lasting winter solstice festival of all the Kalasha with the focus on the ritual initiation of boys and girls, purification of men and women and the enhancement of communal solidarity, which in

³¹ Cacopardo was told that such a pit's size "is as deep as a man is tall and as wide as his outstretched arms" (personal communication).

³² According to Fentz (p. 385), Birir households "cultivate" (i.e. have rights to?) "an average of 20 to 30 vines producing several hundred litres of wine", and some families are "able to harvest more than 1000 bottles per year" (!). Naturally, much of it is sold to mostly Muslim visitors.

³³ Until recent times a goatherd or even several of them, just having descended from the pastures in the high mountains after a long isolation from women, appeared at the Prun festival dressed as he-goats with horns on their heads. Loaded with sexual energy, these *budalak*, as these men were called, were allowed to attack women and girls who were expected to take full advantage of the situation - for the good of progeny.

Birir is in essence a wine festival,³⁴ much wine is consumed after its drinking has been "authorised" by the deity Grimun. As told to Cacopardo in 2006 (2010:150 ff.), who was not allowed to attend the rite, a sheep and a male goat have to be sacrificed to that deity in the evening of the second day of the feast (in 2006 on 15 December) at a goat's shed located at a distance from the deity's holy place³⁵ and housing plastic bins or a pit filled with wine.

The wine consumption by both sexes and also children especially during the extensive singing and dancing can be so high that drunken behaviour, even that of women, is common, as noticed by Schomberg in the 1930s,³⁶ by Topper in the 1960s and again by A.S. Cacopardo in 2006 while participating in the Chaumos (but not allowed to attend all the rituals). This wine drinking by women appears in sharp contrast to basic attitudes among the Kafirs in former Kafiristan, present Nuristan – a difference simply existing or explicable partially by culture change and by the fact that hardly anywhere there the conditions for the growing of wild vines are as favourable as in Birir, resulting in a much smaller production of wine.

Accordingly, in a small Hindu Kush valley in the northwest of Pakistan the Kafir viticulture with its ritually relevant features is still alive, but its survival is certainly in danger in view of the mounting Islamist threat. Its death would mean the end of its last remains in a region where the wine culture as such may have originated many thousand years ago as a culture with "Dionysian" features based on wild growing vines of a special kind whose various descendants then may well have become our vines.

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³⁴ Personal communication by Cacopardo, who states "che l'ebbrezza da vino è un tema che percorre tutta la festa" (drunkenness of wine is a theme which is present during the whole feast" (2010:151).

³⁵ According to Schomberg, it is a place of peril and power, and nobody dreams of approaching it (1938:198).

³⁶ Schomberg observed that in spite of strict local regulations of gender dichotomy „the women will drink the wine as well as the men, and some of them are even famous toppers" (1938:192).

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