

SERIE ORIENTALE ROMA

n.s. 37

ROOTS OF PERISTAN
THE PRE-ISLAMIC CULTURES
OF THE HINDUKUSH/KARAKORUM

Proceedings of the International
Interdisciplinary Conference
ISMEO, Rome, Palazzo Baleani, 5-7 October, 2022

Part II

edited by Alberto M. Cacopardo & Augusto S. Cacopardo



ROMA
ISMEO
2023

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FOREWORD

It is with great satisfaction that we are able to present here, within the year immediately following the event, the Proceedings of the International Interdisciplinary Conference “Roots of Peristan: the Pre-Islamic Cultures of the Hindukush-Karakorum.” The Conference was held in Rome on 5-7 October 2022, under the aegis of ISMEO, who provided the venue of the meetings at its headquarters of Palazzo Baleani. The Conference had also the academic patronage of three Universities: Venice Ca’ Foscari, Napoli L’Orientale – the two main academic Italian Institutions for Oriental Studies – and the University of Florence. Over forty leading scholars in Peristani studies from 16 countries and three continents participated in presence or on line. A truly international and interdisciplinary event: anthropologists, archaeologists, historians, geographers and linguists converged in a coordinated effort to advance the understanding of the pre-Islamic world of the Hindukush/Karakorum.

The conference took place after the Covid pandemic had forced us to postpone it, giving up the original intent of holding it in 2020, on the 50th anniversary of the first Hindukush Cultural Conference held at Moesgård in 1970. We had the pleasure of hosting, even if just on line, the only still active scholar who participated in it, the renowned Nuristan specialist Richard Strand. Some of the founding fathers of Peristan studies organized that conference: Georg Buddruss, Lennart Edelberg, Karl Jettmar, Georg Morgenstierne, Peter Snoy. With most of them ISMEO has had long-standing relations of cooperation and exchange that continue to this day with their Institutions. Now they have all passed away, but Georg Buddruss, who died some months before the Rome Conference, had the time to kindly accept the role of Honorary President we had offered him. Unfortunately, he could not honour that commitment. To his memory, and to the memory of his ground-breaking work, we have chosen to dedicate the Conference and the Proceedings we are presenting. A dedication we wish to extend to the memory of Peter Parkes, the brilliant foundational ethnographer of the Kalasha, who left us only a few weeks after the Conference.

After Moesgård, a Second, a Third and a Fourth International Hindukush Cultural Conference were held in Chitral (Pakistan) in 1990, 1995, and, a few

weeks before the one in Rome, in 2022. In the Chitral conferences, which were very fruitful under many respects, the topic of the pre-Islamic cultures, though never completely abandoned, had however gradually slipped to the side to make space for issues perceived as more vital in the present-day Islamic context. The Rome Conference is in fact the first scientific meeting after Moesgård, totally and specifically focused on the pre-Islamic past of the area.

It was the stated intent of the Conference to revitalize Hindukush studies, for they had largely laid dormant since the 1990s, in spite of a few significant steps forward in some disciplines, linguistics maybe above all. The aim was therefore to connect and stimulate efforts in the various disciplines so that each could benefit from the work of all to achieve a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics of the ancient cultural world of Peristan. A world that thrived for centuries, and possibly millennia, in a fairly large area of Central Asia.

The results of the works of the “Roots of Peristan” Conference are presented in the two volumes of these Proceedings. The 41 contributions included are divided in five sections: Ethnography, Linguistics, History, Antiquity, Comparisons. Readers will see that a wealth of new data are made available and are connected in a complex tapestry from which a unifying fil rouge appears however to emerge. It will be appreciated how each discipline offers contributions to the others in an intense and fruitful interdisciplinary dialogue; while the comparisons of the last section aptly broaden the perspective of Peristani scholarship by looking beyond the geographical boundaries of the region, to the great civilizations with which the ancient dwellers of the mountains intermittently came in contact.

To conclude, I want to express our gratitude to the patron Universities, and I wish to congratulate all those who contributed to the success of this ambitious scientific endeavour: the scholars, their Institutions, the Scientific Committee and the ISMEO staff who did the less visible, but essential, job. Their concerted efforts allowed us also to hit the surely unusual target of publication of the Proceedings within a year or so of the Conference and even just before the 50th anniversary of the publication of the Moesgård Proceedings.

I am proud that ISMEO could be the frontline supporter of such an important work that will remain, I believe, as a milestone in Hindukush studies for years to come.

ADRIANO V. ROSSI

PREFACE

From the point of view of the great literate civilizations that surrounded it from all sides, the vast region we call Peristan was, until fairly recent times, an extreme periphery of the world. To their eyes, the heart of the world laid in their capital cities, with their great concentrations of business, of learning, of political power, while the mountains were just a hostile realm of ignorance and darkness, about which the only question was whether or not they could be crossed to reach the light on the other side.

From the point of view of the old cultures that once prevailed in those mountains, it was perhaps the very opposite. The heart of the world was the uncontaminated realm of purity of the lofty peaks and glaciers where humans could not reach and the fairies had their abode: moving further down, the world grew more and more contaminated by the life and death of humans, and reaching down beyond the borders to the plains, there laid a vast, remote periphery thick with the impurity of the cities and shunned by the shamans and the fairies. To the “Kafir” mind, the high civilizations were the low surroundings of their nobler world.

From the point of view of anthropology, and perhaps of human sciences in general, those cultures deserve at least as much attention as their far better known surroundings. This has been the purpose of the “Roots of Peristan” Conference.

As we wrote in the presentation of the initiative:

Recent historical research has established that in the late 1700s “Kafir” cultures still extended in large patches all the way from the Kashmir borders to present-day Nuristan, the remains of a continuous cultural area that only two centuries earlier was about twice the size of Switzerland: a fact that had not been quite realized until the very end of the last century.

We took this recent realization as the starting point of our research, at the same time proposing a basic hypothesis in the following terms:

This vast continuous area looks very much like a long-lasting phenomenon, that can perhaps be understood as a sort of “counter-civilization,” in which populations with different languages and different customs practiced disparate but cognate forms of life, possibly based on a common conception of the world and a common value system, alternative to the ones dominating in the cities

and the plains: perhaps something akin to Pierre Clastres' "societies against the state," versed in "the art of not being governed," recently depicted by James Scott. Societies, to be sure, that were far from static and devoid of history, but which seem to have preserved in time a distinctive flavour of their own, a set of basic traits that, in the face of many variations and mutations, were perpetuated and renewed in the course of the centuries and perhaps the millennia, with roots possibly harking back to the common Indoeuropean substratum of the Iranian and the Indian worlds, to which Morgenstierne's historical linguistics traced the origins of the Nuristani languages.

This hypotheses of a "counter-civilization" has three distinct implications, all of which need to be verified. Firstly, it implies that the cultures of Peristan were "disparate but cognate," being based on "a common conception of the world and a common value system." While this is something we can consider quite certain for such cultures of Western Peristan as those of Nuristan, the Pashai and the Kalasha, to what extent such a common basis of values, norms and conceptions was shared in pre-Islamic Eastern Peristan is more open to question.

A second implication is that those societies were indeed alternative and in opposition vis à vis the hierarchical, centralized structures of the State. Was there ever anything like Scott's "flight to the heights" to escape state control? And what about the "Kafir kingdoms" of the legends? Would they suggest that those cultures were after all compatible with social hierarchy and political domination?

A third aspect in the idea of a (counter-)civilization is that it must have a measure of historical depth. While there is no doubt that Peristan has had a long, dynamic history of migrations, conflicts, negotiations and innovations, how far back in time can we trace the distinct cultural flavour of the pre-Islamic world we know from recent centuries? Does it really have roots in antiquity? Were "proto-Kafir" cultures present in Peristan during the first millennium CE, when Buddhism penetrated the mountains bringing with it literacy, high art, and monarchic polities? Did they pre-exist and succeed that phase?

These were some of the questions on the table when the "Roots of Peristan" Conference was convened. And that is why we emphasized that "many hypotheses need to be verified." Adding:

what is certain is that we are dealing with cultures of great richness as far as cosmological imagination, ritual architectures, socio-economic solutions and relations with the environment. Cultures with a far-reaching background that deserves to be understood in its own right and in its own terms, and not merely in relation to their transactions with the surrounding great civilizations.

But the state of research at the time was not particularly encouraging. As we further noted in the presentation:

After the great wave of studies and research in the second half of the last century, the investigation of the pre-Islamic cultures of the Hindukush/Ka-

rakorum has fallen in recent decades into a phase of comparative quiescence. This has been due both to the well-known security hazards in fieldwork, and to the widespread feeling that those cultures now belong largely to a past whose study must give way to the analysis of change in the Islamized present: a task that, since the days of the “Culture Area Karakorum Project,” has dominated recent research.

It was ironical, however, that this standstill should come about at such a time:

The study of those cultures has thus come to a kind of deadlock just at the time when the mass of data accumulated by research in anthropology, linguistics, archaeology and history was ready to provide a much sounder and documented picture of the vast complex of “Kafir” cultures.

Since the days of Jettmar’s milestone overview in *Die Religionen des Hindukusch* (1975) and his subsequent additions, there had been considerable progress in each of those fields, with new insights gained into many aspects of Peristani cultures, into their pre-colonial and earlier history, their traces in archaeological findings and their languages. It was time to lay the ground for a new approach:

Through the concurrence of these and other disciplines, we can now look at those cultures with a new long-term vision, to trace their historical vicissitudes over the course of some three millennia, as well as to analyze them in their fullness, including a comparative approach. The inquiries and the bold conjectures of Karl Jettmar and his associates opened in their days a path that can now be revisited with a critical and methodologically updated approach.

[...] Without discounting the importance of studying the present, this initiative intends to concentrate in a diachronic framework on the pre-Islamic past of the region, with the intent of mapping the state of research and pointing to further lines of inquiry.

To map the state of research and to point to further directions of inquiry: when we had conceived this program we could hardly have expected the great interest and authentic enthusiasm with which dozens of renowned scholars from three continents and sixteen different countries welcomed the challenge and took part in the endeavour.

When the Conference was held in Rome in October 2022, twenty-nine scholars participated in presence, six had their papers read by colleagues or co-authors, and seven more presented their papers online (see List of Speakers). In addition, five scholars who, for various reasons, could not present their paper in any form, kindly accepted to include it in the present Proceedings.

The results of all this are now in the hands of the reader, who can appreciate at a glance the wide-ranging scope of the various contributions.

We cannot review in detail here the various aspects of the progress that this fine collective endeavour has brought in the different fields. Let us just remark

that we have papers that add to our knowledge even in such fields as the ethnography of the Kalasha, the Nuristani, the Pashai, the pre-Islamic Kho, where new findings would hardly have been expected; we have papers on Eastern Peristan that bring new light on the cultures of that area and to the issue of their affinity with the Western cultures; we have contributions that touch on the key issue of Middle-Indian and Hindu influences on Peristani cultures; we have valuable inquiries into hardly explored historical sources, such as the chronicles of Kashmir and of Timur's Kafiristan inroad; we have new insights on the Buddhist phase and its possible relations with "proto-Kafir" peoples in the first millennium; we have new evidence on the history of the Chitral principality and its relations with the Bashgal "Kafirs," and findings on the Hunza state suggesting "Kafir" roots of key institutions; in linguistics, we have far-reaching investigations into the deep roots of "Dardic" and Nuristani languages or into their synchronic relations, as well as analyses of linguistic evidence about the early history of both Eastern and Western Peristan and, of course, research into little-known languages that add significantly to existing knowledge; and, last but not least, we have valuable comparative investigations on relations between Peristan and the early Iranian, the European and especially the Indian world.

With such a wide variety of approaches and concerns, it is inevitable that some of the arguments and conclusions put forward in some of the papers will be found disputable or objectionable by some: but since debate and controversy are the fuel of advancement in the sciences, we should only be happy if any such issue were to raise a discussion. Research on Peristan is a work in progress, and critical scrutiny is always precious.

At any rate, thanks to the dedication of all our authors, the wealth of new insights and new approaches, not to mention the new iconographic documentation enriching many papers, has indeed surpassed the most optimistic expectations. To be sure, not all the questions on the table have been exhausted. But we trust that this will be only the start of a new phase in Peristan studies that will hopefully be able to shed light on the many aspects that remain obscure in the intriguing past of this intriguing region.

There is enormous scope for further work. There is a large number of sites clearly ascribable to "Kafir" cultures scattered all across Peristan: not one of them has been excavated so far. There is by now a considerable stock of written documents in Persian and other languages, only in small part published, that can shed much light on the history of the region: yet to this day there is no scientifically reliable historical account of any part of Peristan, no reliable history of Chitral, of Hunza, of Gilgit. New sources are emerging on Nuristan and surroundings: the manuscripts of Hajji Allahdad and of Syed Shah will soon be published, and it is likely that more sources will come up.

There is a host of unpublished works by Western scholars. Peter Parkes, the greatest student of the Kalasha, who sadly departed only weeks after our conference, has left unpublished much of his most important writings: their publication would be not only a rightful homage to his memory, but a precious

disclosure of data recorded in the last days when the old way of life was still thriving. There are still unpublished works by Jettmar, Grjunberg, David Katz, Palwal, and the field notes of Alfred Friedrich from 1955-1956 are a precious 900-page manuscript that deserves to be published in a critical edition. There is a mass of unpublished photos by Herrlich, Schomberg, Schuyler Jones and other travellers and British officers, that could yield valuable information if critically examined.

And fifty years after Jettmar's opus magnum, we need a new comprehensive treatment of Peristani cultures based on the new evidence available: this would be the indispensable pathfinder for comparative analyses and for the work of indologists, iranists, Central Asia scholars, sinologists, who could bring new light on Peristan from the point of view of their fields of study. There is ground for hope that our conference will help to pave the way to this kind of developments.

One last word. The "Roots of Peristan" Conference has been a truly interdisciplinary endeavour. In fact, the cross-fertilization between disciplines has been so intense that we have often had a hard time classifying papers into the different sections of the Conference and of the volume. Where is the exact boundary between ethnography and ethnohistory, ethnohistory and history, history and historical linguistics, linguistics and ethnography, archaeology and history? We have the linguist who deals with ancient history, the archaeologist who trespasses into ethnohistorical fieldwork, the indologist drawing on ethnographies, the geographer writing history, the ethnographer digging into archives, the linguist digging into his texts to produce most significant ethnographic knowledge.

The reader should not be scandalized if we have given up disciplinary boundaries in the arrangement of the sections in these volumes. We have adopted a loose chronological classification, in which "Ethnography" includes studies mostly based on fieldwork and referring to recent times from the 20th century on; "History" deals largely with the second millennium CE until the 19th century; "Antiquity" refers to the first millennium CE and earlier times; and "Linguistics" includes the papers by linguists unless, due to their subject matter, they have been classified under "Antiquity" or "Comparisons," the last and most eclectic division that groups scholars from four or five different disciplines.

The classification has no pretense of rigour or coherence, it is just an extemporary practical solution. It does however testify to an important point: that the present partitions of the social sciences, as Lévi-Strauss lamented many decades ago, are based much more on arbitrary academic traditions than on sound epistemological foundations. So many decades later, we are still in need of a new vision that may inspire a regeneration of the whole field of human sciences with a novel and more appropriate arrangement of their specializations. Or perhaps our muddy experiment in interdisciplinary cooperation might even turn out to be a tiny harbinger of the future kind of science that the French

scholar, at the end of a speech in 1952, envisaged in a sudden flash that sounds a bit like the prophecy of a Peristani shaman: “an anthropology conceived in a broader way—that is, a knowledge of man that incorporates all the different approaches which can be used and that will provide a clue to the way according to which our uninvited guest, the human mind, works.”

ALBERTO M. CACOPARDO



Georg Buddruss (1929-2021) with Abdur Rahim, malik of Pashki village. Parun valley, spring of 1956. Courtesy Dr. Karin Buddruss.

**International Interdisciplinary Conference
ISMEO, Rome, Palazzo Baleani, 5-7 October, 2022**

Scientific Committee

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Adriano V. Rossi, President

Elena Bashir
Michele Bernardini
Alberto M. Cacopardo
Augusto S. Cacopardo
Max Klimburg
Luca Maria Olivieri
Stefano Pellò
Irmtraud Stellrecht
Claus Peter Zoller

List of Speakers

5 October 2022

Adriano V. Rossi – President ISMEO

Morning – Chair Almuth Degener

Alberto M. Cacopardo

Max Klimburg

Tatch Sharakat Kalasha

Karl Wutt

Homayun Sidky

Augusto S. Cacopardo

Afternoon – Chair Anna Filigenzi

Michele Bernardini

Luca M. Olivieri & Matteo Sesana (paper read by Sesana)

Wolfgang Holzwarth

Stefano Pellò

Nile Green & Nurshin Arbabzada (on line)

Paul Bucherer-Dietschi (not present, paper read by A.M. Cacopardo)

6 October 2022

Morning – Chair Elena Bashir

Bernard Sergent

Claus Peter Zoller

Sergey A. Yatsenko & Sviatoslav I. Kaverin/ (on line)

Marcello De Martino

Jadwiga Pstrusińska (Bydgoszcz) (not present, paper read by A.S. Cacopardo)

Afternoon – Chair Claus Peter Zoller

Elena Bashir

Almuth Degener & Irén Hegedüs

Henrik Liljegen

Jakob Halfmann

Ian Heegård Petersen

Richard F. Strand (on line)



Some participants at the Conference.

7 October 2022

Morning – Chair Alberto M. Cacopardo

Ruth Young & Abdul Samad

Jason Neelis

John Mock, 1

Jürgen Wasim Frembgen

Anna Filigenzi & Cristiano Moscatelli (paper read by Moscatelli)

Hidayat ur Rahman

Afternoon – Chair Augusto S. Cacopardo

Jakob Halfmann

John Mock, 2

Birgitte Glavind Sperber (paper and film)

Wynne Maggi (not present only film)

Thomas Crowley (on line)

Sviatoslav I. Kaverin & Robert C. Tegethoff (on line)

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Karl Wutt – Independent researcher, Vienna. Austria
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Ruth Young – University of Leicester. UK
Claus Peter Zoller – University of Oslo. Norway

Bābā Siyar and the Soul of the Unbeliever Mapping the Persian Poetic Territories of Kāfiristān from Costantinople to Madaklasht

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SUMMARY. This paper explores the Persian poetic territories of Kāfiristān, showing how much literary conventions on Kāfiristān in the Persosphere may overlap with historical observations and “ethnographic” descriptions. More specifically, I discuss how the conventional poetic ethno-geographical tropes of *kāfir* and *kāfiristān* interact with “historical” Kāfir peoples and cultures in the Hindukush. This is done by analysing, in the first part of the contribution, a few cases from the Persian (and Ottoman) hypertext and focusing, in the second part, on the lyrical poetry of Chitral master poet Bābā Siyar (c. 1770-c. 1840). Some of these sources, including Bābā Siyar’s *bayts* from his *dīwān*, are studied here for the first time ever.

The characters of Mīr, a farmer from the Persian-speaking Ismaili village of Madaklasht¹ who passed away some forty years ago, and his father Dilbar are at the centre of several stories still alive among older local people, as I could ascertain during a recent, preliminary field survey on the history, status and uses of both literary and vernacular Persian in Chitral.² Among other things, Mīr is said to have tamed (and somehow “married”) a female *almastī*,³ who

¹ The relatively famous, but very little studied Persian-speaking Ismaili village (and community) of Madaklasht is situated at an altitude of c. 2600 m. (reaching almost 3000 m. in Biband, its highest settlement) in the uppermost part of Shishi Koh valley, Lower Chitral. A recent, very general survey, with sufficient bibliography, is Akhunzada 2018.

² The research was conducted during the months of November and December 2022. As far as the data provided here, the informants are two well-educated men born and living in the village, aged around 75, a retired school teacher and a retired public servant, who asked to remain anonymous. The language of interaction was exclusively Persian.

³ The well-known term *almastī* (one of the several Central Asian variants of the “wild man”) was explained by my informants as “a very big human-like creature (*ādam-i kalān*) with its feet turned backwards” (cf. Jettmar 2018: 457-458). The latter is a feature that is shared with other kinds of spirits and fairies, including the *parī*.

was kept in his house and willingly helped him in everyday heavy tasks; his father Dilbar, a strong and skillful hunter who once killed a snow leopard by grabbing it by its tail and beating it on a rock, was even gifted with a live markhor (*capra falconeri*) by a group of *parīs* that had once abducted him for a few days in the highest wilderness. According to my informants, the horns of Dilbar's domestic markhor (he had come back from the pure spaces of what the Kalasha would call the *onješta* world⁴ with the markhor tied to a rope) were buried with Dilbar himself in his tomb, a still surviving, unstudied wooden structure that shows possible connections to the pre-Islamic cultures of Hindukush (see Fig. 1).⁵ Mīr is also credited with the transmission of precious Persian manuscripts, including Persian poetry, from Badakhshan (he was in direct contact with the *pīrs* of Zebak, Kurān and Munjān in present day Afghanistan); and the name of his legendary father Dilbar resounds, significantly enough, with the classical literary canon, *dilbar* “heart-stealer” being one of the most common attributes of the cosmopolitan, codified “beloved” of Persianate textualities. We will focus on Madaklasht and the co-existing local and trans-regional dimensions of its unique Persian heritage in another study. However, the example of Mīr and Dilbar, perfectly at home in the rugged territories of folkloric Hindukush as well as in the far-reaching flow of Persian learned traditions, preliminarily suggest how the space of Kāfiristān (both real and imagined) can interact with the other layers of the cultural topography of even a supposedly “non-indigenous”⁶ community: a space where Nāṣir-i Khusraw's *bayts* are successfully cultivated in what used to be, until relatively recent times, the highest pastures of the *kāfir* Kalasha inhabiting the Shishi Koh valley (see Akhunzada 2018: 39-40).

Somewhat similar observations can apply, quite surprisingly, if we move to the completely different scenario of colonial literature and post-colonial criticism. In a brilliant paper published in 1999, literary critic Edward Marx deals with the craggy textual territories of Kāfiristān in 19th century English literature. The main objective of Marx's study is to show, in a sassy and articulated anti-New Criticism vein, how much Rudyard Kipling's well-known short novel *The Man Who Would Be King* (1888)—erroneously read by several critics as referring to an “invented” fantastic place called Kāfiristān—could indeed be understood also as an *interpretation* of the available knowledge on Kafir cultures at the moment of its composition. As Marx himself underlines from his historicist point of view, the story is indeed *hypothetical* and not purely imaginary or allegorical (as the overbearing post-colonial reading usually goes), and finds its

⁴ On the *pragata/onješta* dialectics and the relationship with the low/high spatial contrast see Cacopardo A.M. 1985: 720-723; Parkes 1987.

⁵ Madaklasht was never part of any survey in this perspective: no trace of this and other similar funerary structures present in the village can be found in the available surveys (e.g. Scerrato 1984; Noci 2006; Scerrato 2006).

⁶ This is the expression, in my opinion not completely satisfying, used by Akhunzada (2018: 35).



Fig. 1 - The tomb of Dilbar in Madaklasht, November 2022. Photo by the author.

own place—of course, with its distinct nature of historical *fiction*—in the panorama of the 19th century documents and reports produced by the diffused interest among the British imperial functionaries for the region and especially its still unconverted “pagans.”⁷ Long story short, Edward Marx very correctly warns about the significance, in both historical and representational terms, of an English literary source about Kāfiristān such as Kipling’s novel, especially in view of its interactions—meticulously retraced all along his article—with ethnographical, geographical, historical and so on reports, themselves obviously leaning on a certain “imaginary” about the region. What Marx’s article does not say, however, is that the literary dimensions of Kāfiristān, as an imagined territory interacting (but not at all necessarily coinciding) with the contours of the homonymous historical region, precede Kipling and the European colonial ethnographic investigations and phantasies by several centuries. The Persian poetic hypertext (as well as that of the other literatures in dialogue with the Persosphere, such as the Ottoman and the Urdu), is indeed rich of diverse glimpses of, and references to, a place (or space) called Kāfiristān, whose metaphorical reality matters often very much as far as the general Persian writings on the region are concerned.⁸

⁷ Marx is very clear on this point: “To say the story is hypothetical however, is not to say that it is purely imaginative or allegorical, and critical analysis has thus suffered from the loss of the story’s historical context” (1999: 47).

⁸ I have already touched on this theme in Pellò 2009: 100-104. Different perspectives on the same subject can be found in Holzwarth 1994, who insists more on the “Islamic” side of the cultural interpretation involved.

Bearing in mind Phillip Stambovsky's words on the mechanisms of metaphorical discourse in historical (and literary) writings,⁹ then, I introduce here a research on the Persian poetic territories of Kāfiristān, showing how much literary conventions on Kāfiristān may overlap with historical observations and "ethnographic" descriptions. More specifically, I discuss how the conventional poetic ethno-geographical tropes of *kāfir* and *kāfiristān* interact with "historical" Kafir peoples and cultures in the Hindukush. I will do this by analysing, in the first part of the contribution, a few cases from the Persian (and Ottoman) hypertext and focusing, in the second part, on the lyrical poetry of Chitral master poet Bābā Siyar (c. 1770-c. 1840). Some of these sources, including Bābā Siyar's *bayts* from his *dīwān*, are studied here for the first time ever.

Before going to the Persian verse, it is worth emphasizing the cosmopolitan dimensions of the phenomena discussed here by apprising that a quick description of Kāfiristān, in the form of a dictionary entry, can be found even in the *Qāmūs el-a'lām*, a monumental historical and geographical encyclopedia by the Albanian Sami Frashëri, published in six volumes in Constantinople between 1889 and 1899. Here, the hitherto unnoticed entry *Kāfiristān* describes the toponym as the name of a mountainous region in the North-East of Afghanistan, in a remote area protected by mountains and deep valleys, inhabited by some 200,000 people subdivided in several tribes (*qabā'il*); the text says that the region is "wild" (*vaḥṣī*) and, since its inhabitants (the traditional ethnonym *siyāhpūsh* is used in the text) have long lived in isolation without contact to the external world, they have not converted to Islam, although they are surrounded by Muslim states (*memālik-i islāmiye*); Frashëri also specifies that they are of "Arian" (*ārya*) stock, follow the Vedas but also believe in *jinns* and *parīs*, and have "strange rites" (*ḡarīb āyīnleri*); as far as their occupations are concerned, the Ottoman encyclopaedia says that men are mostly busy with "war" and "hunting", while all the other deeds are left to women; the text highlights their passion for dancing (*raqṣ*) (Frashëri 1889-1898: 3813). The author of the encyclopaedia was the brother of Naim Frashëri (1846-1900), one of the most representative Sufi authors (he was, just like the rest of his family, connected to the Bektashiyya order) whose multilingual poetical production, including Persian, is relatively well known. While the sources for Sami Frashëri's description are still to be reconstructed, it seems worthy to passingly mention here that more or less one century and a half before, in the imperial Constantinople of the *Lāle devri* (the "Tulip period"), the main poet of the century, Nedīm (d. 1730) could write lines such as the following, from a lyrical *ghazal*:

Hāl kāfir zūlf kāfir çeşm kāfir el-amān
ser-be-ser iqlīm-i hüsünüñ kāfiristān oldı hep

⁹ I think especially of his handy distinction among the complementary functions of heuristic, depictive, and cognitive imagery (Stambovsky 1988: 134). The meta-historical nature of the latter, as we will see, is particularly important for what we are concerned with here.

An unbeliever the mole, an unbeliever the curl and the infidel eye:
 the entire kingdom of your beauty has become a land of idolaters [or: a
 Kāfiristān].
 (Nedim 1972: 154)

We cannot of course exclude that, in the highly refined and learned courtly milieu in which Nedīm was writing, the metaphorical reality of Kāfiristān (here a territorialized description of the dark and cruel traits of beauty of the conventionally impervious beloved, i.e. the black mole, the black curl, the black eye) could have even been understood as a learned *talmīḥ* (allusion) to an equally impervious and very much unknown far geographical reality; for instance, through the textual memory of, and learned reference to, the Timurid *siyāhpūshān* (“those wearing black colour” mentioned as we have seen, also by Frashēri), Zāhīr al-Dīn Muḥammad Bābur’s well-known descriptions of Kāfiristān in the *Bāburnāma*, and so on.¹⁰ Given the growing, though heavily stylized “ethnographic” attitude of later authors such as Nedīm, it is quite possible that the specific geographical allusion is indeed there;¹¹ however, we can safely assume that the line would be absolutely and perfectly understandable even without any previous knowledge of the region.

As a matter of fact, the idea of *Kāfiristān* as a generic “place where unbelievers live” is literally as old as Persian literature, and we can indeed trace its use back to the 10th century so-called *Tārīkhnāma* by the Samanid minister Abū ‘Alī Muḥammad Bal‘amī (d. c. 996), based on the older Arabic chronicle by al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), one of the oldest examples of New Persian prose available. According to the *Lughatnāma-yi Dihkhudā*, Bal‘amī refers to *Kāfiristān* as the land of origin of the still unconverted Turks of the times of Abbasid caliph al-Mu‘taṣim (r. 833-842) (Dihkhudā 1993-1995: s.v. *Kāfiristān*); similar observations can be made for several other texts of historiographical nature, such as the Ghaznavid *Tārīkh-i Bayhaqī*, etc., especially as far as Central Asian contexts are concerned. More relevant for our purposes here is, however, to point out how references to an ambivalent place called *Kāfiristān* (dangerous and fascinating just like the face of the cruel beloved in Nedīm’s line) are easily traceable in the classical and post-classical Persian poetic canon, maybe more often than expected. I will limit myself to just a few examples among the tens of occurrences I have been able to trace so far, from ‘Unṣurī Balkhī (11th century) to Muḥammad Iqbāl (1877-1938) and beyond. For Farrukhī Sistānī (d. 1031), for instance, it is a place name that can alternate with Hindūstān, at his times the place of unbelief par excellence, as in these lines from a *qaṣīda* in praise of Sulṭān Maḥmūd of Ghazna (d. 1030):

¹⁰ For the Timurid representation of Kāfiristān, which I won’t touch in this paper, see the rich contribution by Michele Bernardini in this volume.

¹¹ Matthias Kappler has dealt with the subject of Ottoman literary ethnographies in a particularly dense paper, whose approach I often recast in my own analysis here (Kappler 2003).

*sipah burda andar dil-i kāfiristān
khaṭar karda dar rūzgār-i jawānī
zi hindūstān aṣl-i kufr u zālālat
burīda ba shamshūr-i hindūstānī*

He brought his army in the heart of Kāfiristān/the territory of the unbelievers
he risked a lot in the times of his youth.
He cut with an Indian sword
the root of error and miscredeacy from India.
(Farrukhī Sīstānī 1970: 362)

Elsewhere, the direct connection between the poetic idea of Kāfiristān and the problematic borderlands of Hindūstān is broken, and Kāfiristān can assume the features of a metaphorical geography, as in this line from a *ghazal* by the famous Sufi poet ‘Aṭṭār Nīshāpūrī (d. c. 1230):

*rūy dar zīr-e zulf pinhān kard
andar islām kāfiristān kard
bāz chūn zulf bar girift az rūy
hama kuḡfār-rā musalmān kard*

They hid their face under their curls:
and made a Kāfiristān within Islam.
Then they removed them from their face,
converting to Islam all the unbelievers.
(‘Aṭṭār Nīshāpūrī 1962: 161)

As it can be easily seen, however, one feature characterizing the prototypical Kāfiristān of India in Persian poetic imagination, i.e. the black color,¹² is retained, as it will be in innumerable other lyrical images built on the contrastive figure of the cruel and beautiful *kāfir* or idol-like beloved conventionally sought after by the lover poet (in ‘Aṭṭār’s line, notice the contrast between the white luminous face of the beloved representing Islam and her/his black curls representing *kufr*). Among the tens of possible other examples of allusive use, a particularly interesting case is made by the *ghazals* of Ṣā’ib-i Tabrīzī (d. 1676), one of the great masters of the later Safavid-Mughal style and, especially important for us, one of the most relevant influences for the Persian poets of Chitral.¹³ He refers to *Kāfiristān* with remarkable frequency, in order to build an unusually high amount of complex images, such as the following:

*sādalawḡhān zūd bargardand az āyīn-yi khwīsh
ān farangī kāfiristān mīkunad āyīna-rā*

¹² On the stereotypization of the “black” Hindu, as contrasted to the “white” Turk, in a model-text such as Ḥāfīz’s *dīwān* see Meneghini 1990.

¹³ Ṣā’ib is among the most often mentioned poets of the past in the lyrical collections of local authors such as Bābā Siyar and Tajammul Shāh Maḡwī (e.g. Bābā Siyar 2006: 431, 459; Maḡwī n.d.: 34, 40, 48).

Those with a simple heart quickly abandon their own customs:
 that European transforms the mirror in a Kāfiristān.
 (Ṣāʿib-i Tabrīzī 1985-1995: I, *ghazal* 237)

Again whiteness, blackness, beauty and miscreancy, in an interplay of paradoxical contrasts and geographical allusions: as in the case of Nedīm's Turkish line seen above, we cannot exclude here, as in the rest of Ṣāʿib's extremely learned ghazals, a deliberate hint (through the techniques of *ihām* "double-speaking" and *talmīh* "allusion") to the geographical "embodiment" of the evanescent *Kāfiristān* of Persian conventions. Very crucially for our discussion here, it should be highlighted how Ṣāʿib's *bayt* perfectly embodies, and clarifies, the paradoxical transformation of a (metaphorical) land of unbelievers in a land of beauties: the mirror, reflecting the beautiful face of the (white-skinned, non-Muslim) European paradoxically becomes a (dark and dangerous) land of unbelievers; the presence of the term *Farangī* (European) is indeed a hint to the presence of a specific geographical allusion in the name *Kāfiristān* as well. Moreover, the metaphorical procedure on which the verse is based, shows also how the phantastic toponym Peristan (land of fairies), sometimes employed today to indicate the region of Kāfiristān, but also—and perhaps more interestingly—the modern, contrastive Nūristān ("land of light," following the conversion), can be defined, from the point of view of Persianate canons and conventions, "antonymical synonyms" of *Kāfiristān*: after all, the conceptual procedure of semantic reversal into its opposite is analogous to that followed by the above mentioned 'Aṭṭār when transforming Iblīs (Satan) in the supreme lover of God.¹⁴ In such a multilayered context, it is lexicography itself—a discipline which retains, in the Persosphere, its original ancillary relationship with poetry well into the early modern period—that comes to our help here. The dictionary *Bahār-i 'Ajam* (the "Spring temple of Persian diction"), completed in 1766 by the Hindu *munshī* from Delhi Tīk Chand Bahār and devoted to the poetic tongue of the "modern diction" (*tāzagūyī*), notably includes *Kāfiristān* as a separate entry, just as the equally important South Indian *Farhang-i Ānandarāj* one century later, where the term is considered as "well known" (*ma'rūf*) (Bahār 2000: III, 1665; Shād 1956 n.d.: V, 3340). However, under the entry *Kāfir*, Tīk Chand Bahār shows how the semantic interactions of the two faces of the word (the metaphorical and the geographical) were already recorded and classified as part of the Persian education of a *munshī* in late Mughal India:

[...] and in most cases the word *Kāfir* is used [in Persian poetry] as a metaphor for cruel (*zālim*), ruthless (*bīrahm*) and saucy (*shūkh*), thus modifying the original use of the Arabs and its technical meaning of denier of the re-

¹⁴ For some clarifying insights of this classical Sufi-Islamic semiotic reversal, see Scarcia 1978 and Awn 1983: 122-183.

ligion of Muḥammad; and it is used to indicate a certain people [inhabiting] the region around Kābul, whose language is called *Kāfirī*. (Bahār 2000: III, 1664-1665)

Immediately after, a line of poetry including an “idol of *Kāfirī* stock” (*but-i kāfirīzāda*), by the poet of Badakhshānī origin Mīr Muḥammad Afzal Thābit (1st half 18th century), is quoted as an example of such allusive use:

*muṭrib-ī tīr u kamān az nay u chang-ash dar dast
kāfirīzāda but-ī rahzan-i īmān shuda-ī*

You are now a singer with a bow-like and an arrow-like flute,
an idol of *kāfirī* stock who assaults and robs the faith.
(*Ibid.*: III, 1665)

Moreover, the dictionary includes as well the entry *Katwar*,¹⁵ directly related to Timur’s expedition and described as “the name of a place between Tūrān and Hindūstān, as attested in the *Tīmūrnāma*” (*ibid.*: III, 1676). Again, the definition is corroborated by a line of another Badakhshānī poet, Abū Naṣr Naṣrīrā, built on a stereotyped ethnographic image:

*hinduw-i zulf-i tu ay shūkh chi gūyam ki chi kard
ānchi ū kard ba man kāfir-i katwar¹⁶ nakard*

How can I describe what your Hindu curl has done, o you charming impudent!
Not even the *Kāfir* of *Katwar* has done what it has done to me!
(*Ibid.*: III, 1676)

This is not an isolated case at all: a verse of a similar tone can be found, just to provide an example, in a later Safavid poet from Yazd, Sa’īdā Naqshbandī (d. c. 1700), showing the widespread diffusion of the ethnographical notion (formulaic as it may be) in the learned, ubiquitous textual practice of Persian poetry:

*kas-ī ba kāfir-i katwar namīkunad hargiz
zi ‘ishq ānchi Sa’īdā ba khwīshtan kard*

Nobody will never do even to the *Kāfir* of *Katwar*
what I, Sa’īdā, have done to myself for love.
(Sa’īdā Naqshbandī Yazdī 2009: 44)

Significantly enough from our “paganologic” perspective, it is worth remembering here that, in Bayhaqī, the term *katwar* appears in association with

¹⁵ I follow here Gianroberto Scarcia’s preferred reading of the term (instead of *katūr*), supported both by Persian lexicography (see Dihkhudā 1993-1995: s.v. *Katwar*) and Persian poetic sources, where the reading is always *katwar*.

¹⁶ For prosodical reasons, the reading *katwar* is here indisputable; the same applies to the following *bayt* in the text.

the generic *hindū* (Indian) in the expression *hinduwān-i katwar*, comfortably locating it within the geopoetics of idolatry (in the Persianate conventions *Hindū* is of course the ethnic “Indian” but also, through a synechdochical process, the non-Muslim *par excellence*, in opposition to the *Turk*).¹⁷ More than the actual connection between the term *Katwar* and the ethnonym *Kāfir*, which Scarcia ultimately saw, with very good arguments, as a deformation of the first (Scarcia 1965: CXIV ff.; see also the resumé in Tucci 1977: 18), what is relevant to us here—and observable from the examples provided so far—is that the articulate semantic background of *Kāfir* and *Kāfiristān* clearly builds on a high degree of interaction between the “historical” and the “metaphorical” dimensions. In this perspective, perhaps, even the “philological” side of the problem can be more easily integrated: Scarcia’s observations on the derivation of ethn. *Kāfir* from *Katwar* acquire a more nuanced character if we insert them within the complex literary history of the trio *Katwar/Kāfir/Kāfiristān*.

In summary, *Kāfiristān* locates itself at the crossroads of geopoetics, idolography, Sufi metaphorical practices and more or less imaginary ethnography, in a context where poetry is the main medium for acquiring solid literacy, valuable worldviews and social distinction; this is, after all, what happens as late as c. 1840 when the *munshī* from Peshawar Ḥājī Allāhdād reads the ethnographic data provided to him by two notables from Kamdesh through the lenses of Persian literary practices.¹⁸ In this perspective, it is essential not to overlook that, especially for the Mughal-Safavid period, literary genres such as the *shahrāshūb*, imperial taxonomies, spatial reorganizations and regional boun-darisation play a primary role in the textualisation of “local” realities in the “transregional” language of Persian literature (Sharma 2004 and 2012): as, for instance, in the case of real Hindu characters, deities, practices, rituals and beliefs transferred, by a plethora of Hindu writers of Persian, into the rich conventional set of images and metaphors on the innumerable dimensions of “unbelief” provided by tradition.¹⁹

Along such lines of investigation, it seems quite promising to explore and reconstruct the trajectories of Persian poetic literacy across Peristan while mak-

¹⁷ Text in Bayhaqī 1992: 633. As far as *hindū* used as an ethno-religious definition in the earliest examples of Persian poetry see Pellò 2015: 44. For our purposes here, notwithstanding the fundamentally geographical references of the term (= from India), *hindū* crystalized in Persian literary culture, as early as the 10th century (cf. the use of the term in the *Hudūd al-alam*, a geography dated 981), as an image of the “unbeliever of the Indian frontier” (Sutūda 1983: 66; Minorsky 1970: 88).

¹⁸ I discussed the issue in Pellò 2009. The text by Allāhdād has recently been the object of a preliminary study by Alberto Cacopardo and the present writer (Cacopardo A.M., Pellò 2021). The manuscript and its translation will soon be published by the same authors in Cacopardo A.M., Pellò (forthcoming), along with the *Notice sur le Kaffèristan* that Claude August Court wrote on its basis and left unpublished (Court n.d.).

¹⁹ A relevant discussion, focusing on an exemplary text from the late 18th century, can be found in Pellò 2021, where further bibliography is provided.

ing sense of the interaction of observed realities (what would be called, in the Islamic intellectual tradition, the *'aqlī* epistemic dimension, or *taḥqīq*) and inherited metaphors (the so-called *naqlī* dimension, or *taqlīd*),²⁰ about the surrounding unconverted environment. This is, to be sure, a research which is in its infancy at best, and what I am doing here is nothing more than pointing to some scattered data and very tentative interpretations, as a sort of announcement for a wider project of deeper philological excavations. Bearing in mind what we have discussed about Kāfiristān and Kāfir imagination in Persian poetry so far, the question here can, then, be resumed as follows: what does the Persian poetic hypertext produced in the region tell us about the pre-Islamic and non-Islamic dimensions of the Hindukush? How can we make use of such textual references? How should we decodify them *in context* and what is their relationship with the background conventions? While working on the collection and stabilization of a wider corpus, a good starting point for some preliminary observations is represented by the Persian poetic works of the most revered Persian (and Khowar) author of Chitral, Mīrzā Muḥammad Siyar ibn Dūst Muḥammad (the *dīwān* and the *jangnāma* known as *Shāhnāma-yi Chitrāl*, respectively dating, according to Holzwarth [1999: 203], 1812 and *c.* 1810).²¹ I will focus here almost exclusively on the *dīwān*, given its specific dialogue with the hypertext discussed so far; for its peculiarities, the *Shāhnāma* will be the object of a separate study. Before going to the text, however, it is important to underline that Bābā Siyar's Persian poetical work as a whole—produced in a context where, as Elena Bashir underlines, “Persian was the only language of written communication and government [...] until 1953” (Bashir 2006)—shows a remarkable, and declared, amount of connection and interplay both with the region and with the Persian cosmopolis. Not only, quite obviously, the *Shāhnāma-yi Chitrāl* locates and superimposes the transregional characters, lexicon and protocols of almost one thousand years of Persian *shāhnāmaniwīsī* (*Shāhnāma*-writing) and *shāhnāmakhwānī* (*Shāhnāma*-reciting) over the late 18th and early 19th century history of the Kator dynasty, but also his *Dīwān*, while openly conversing, in stylistic terms, with the greatest authors of the Sa'favid-Mughal *koiné* (from Šā'ib-i Tabrīzī to Nāšīr 'Alī Sirhindī),²² contains a

²⁰ The “modernity” represented by the use of Persian textual practices and tools in Chitral from the 18th century onwards can be framed within the intellectual methods and attitudes recently described by Giancarlo Casale in his survey on the epistemic concept of *taḥqīq* (2023).

²¹ Besides the data provided by Holzwarth, some information (not always completely reliable) on Siyar can be found in Isrār al-Dīn 1971: 119; Ghulam Umar 1982; Malik 1998; Bābā Siyar 2006: 9-17.

²² The Indo-Persian poet Nāšīr 'Alī Sirhindī (d. 1697) is by far the most revered authority in Siyar's *ghazals* (cf., for instance, Bābā Siyar 2006: 91, 238, 431, 565). In one case, the Chitrali writer expresses his (impossible) desire to go to Sirhind to meet him, i.e. to visit the homeland of the master (*ibid.*: 91): such kind of references prompted some critics to imagine a personal dialogue, and even physical meetings, among the two, quite an unlikely event considering that almost one century had passed between the death of the Panjabi and the birth of the Chitrali.

noteworthy amount of direct, autobiographical information about the *Kūhistān*, i.e. Chitral itself. For instance, it is Siyar himself to tell us—although with a certain amount of recognizable conventionality—about the not particularly high consideration of Persian poetry in the Chitral of his own times:

*ba kūhistān sukhan qadr-ī nadārad ay siyar warna
nagufta hīch jā kas īnchunīn shi 'r-ī ba maẓmūntar*

In Kuhestan (i.e. Chitral) poetry has no value, o Siyar, otherwise nobody has ever composed such a meaningful poem, in any other place (Bābā Siyar 2006: 390)

Through such procedures *Kūhistān* is transferred, so to say, in the written realm of the later Safavid and Mughal canon of Persian poetry:²³ our research, in order to make sense of such texts, should aim as well at reconstructing the trajectories of Persian poetic literacy (and textual mobility) in the region. In two other lines from the *dīwān*, Bābā Siyar connects his poetical work, respectively, to Badakhshān and Hindūstān, by far the two regions of the Persosphere most often represented in his work.²⁴ In the first case, as in the above mentioned *bayt*, Chitral is described as a place where Siyar's value is not recognized:

*hawā-yi dīdan-i mulk-i badakhshān mīkashad dil-rā
ba kūhistān waṭan dāram nadāram i 'tibār īnjā*

The desire to see the country of Badakhshan is capturing my heart:
I have my homeland here in Kuhistān, but I have no recognition.
(*Ibid.*: 36)

In the case of Hindūstān, what rhetorically attracts the poet in the exemplary verse is the possibility of earning more money, but the spiritual exhortation is not to go there:

*ān khudāwand-ī ki dar hind-ast īnjā nīz hast
az barāy-i māl-i dunyā sūy-i hindūstān ma-raw*

The same God that resides in India resides here as well:
don't go to India looking for worldly goods and riches.
(*Ibid.*: 666)

The verse, of course, finds its place in a long tradition of Persian poetic references to the “economic” migration of writers, artists and intellectuals to

²³ A “local cosmopolitanism” of Persian literary culture in the Hindukush is suggested as well by the fact that a younger poet of Chitrāl, Tajammul Shāh Maḥwī (c. 1790-1850), has even a whole *ghazal* where the *radīf* (the refrain at the end of each *bayt*), is represented by the word “Chitrāl” (*Chitrār*), which is the sole theme of the whole composition (Maḥwī n.d.: 50)

²⁴ Interestingly enough, in one case Siyar builds a complex ethnographic image alluding to both regions and, at the same time, to economic history, by describing the “Hindu merchant” (a metaphor for the black mole) “buying rubies” (a metaphor for the lips and paradigmatically conjuring the region of Badakhshan as the place of origin of those precious gems) (Bābā Siyar 2006: 712).

South Asia, already exemplified by the famous line by Ḥāfiẓ of Shīrāz (and especially its interpretations in commentaries) about an alleged invitation of the 14th century poet to Bengal (Ḥāfiẓ 1983: *ghazal* 218). However, the classical motif is inextricably mixed here with local reality, and metaphor becomes a way to textualize the latter, grafting it onto the powerful tree of tradition. As a matter of fact, in the *maqṭāʿ* (closing line) of the same *ghazal* Siyar brings to the stage the rugged environment of rocky Chitral, by using a trope (the spark lying in the rock) very dear to his model Ṣāʿib-i Tabrīzī (e.g. 1985-1995: I, *ghazal* 20; III, *ghazal* 962, 1025, 1074, 1176; IV, *ghazal* 2442 etc.):

shuhra chūn nām-i nigīn dar shahrhā bāshī siyar
chūn sharar dar sang pinhān shaw az kūhistān ma-raw

You are famous in the cities, like a name on a precious seal:
 hide yourself in the rocks, like a spark, and don't leave Kuhistān
 (Bābā Siyar 2006: 667)

The scanty examples briefly analyzed are, nevertheless, enough to show how the “local” reality of Chitral is a syntagmatic presence in Siyar’s lyrical production, well integrated within the classical, paradigmatic protocols of the genre. Against this still evanescent background, I suggest that, to get back to the expression used before, Kūhistān is integrated within the geography of early modern Persian poetry along with its unconverted Kāfirs as objects of allusion, textualised through the conventions discussed in the first part of this paper.

As far as historical metaphors are concerned, it should be preliminarily highlighted that in some interesting lines the dimension of *kufr*/unbelief is directly connected to the realm of the *Farang*, i.e. the (beautiful and treacherous) Europeans (e.g. Bābā Siyar 2006: 424, and 525). While the dangerous beauty of the *Farang*/European is of course a conventional ethnographic trope in the Safavid-Mughal poets chosen by Siyar as his models (see for instance Rouhbakhshan 1995-1996), it would be difficult not to see in these lines a hint to the early colonial penetration in the wider region. In other cases, on the contrary, the reference to the realm of *kufr* and the figure of the *kāfir* seem to generically refer, as predictable in a Sufi author such as Bābā Siyar, to the unending and ubiquitous conflict between real/interior and hypocritical/exterior religion, as in the following *bayt*:

bāʿīn u zāhir-i khalāʾiq-rā pur-ast az kufr u dīn
harki dārad subḥa dar kaf dar baghal dārad šanam

The interiority and exteriority of creatures are full of unbelief and faith:
 whoever has a rosary in his hand holds an idol in his embrace.
 (*Ibid.*: 601)

Somewhere else, however, the text builds a more articulate metaphor where the traditional trope of the “black” Hindu—connected, as we have seen, to the Katwar unbelievers at least since Bayhaqī—is conjured as an ethnographic substitute for the *Kāfir*:

*raqīb-i rūsiyah-rā kay rawā dāram dar āghūsh-ash
ki lāzim nī-st jā dādan darūn-i ka'ba hindū-rā*

I will never accept a black-faced rival to be embraced by him:
it is not necessary to let a Hindu come inside the Ka'ba.
(*Ibid.*: 64)

The “Hindu” rival is marked by the color black, a persistent sign of unbelief especially as far as the early Persian textualization of the Indo-Iranian frontier is concerned, through the adjective *rūsiyāh*, literally “black-faced” but normally used to define the “damned” (an inherent feature of the *kāfir*) in the afterworld. The black colour reappears in the following line, here as a paradoxically positive peculiarity of the *kiswa*, the black cloth covering the sacred temple in Mecca:

*chi parwā ka'ba-rā az tīragīhā-yi libās-i khwad
şafā-yi bātin az ālāyish-i zāhir chi gham dārad*

The Ka'ba doesn't care about the blackness of its own clothes:
inner purity does not care about outer imperfections.
(*Ibid.*: 335)

What is more striking here, in our perspective, is that, in a line whose meaning is clearly that of not presuming impurity from the external features of people, the *kiswa* is referred to with the common expression *libās-i [Ka'ba]*, the “dress of the Ka'ba.” If read in its own geographical context, the verse clearly contains a technical *talmīh* (allusion) to the dark clothes attributed by the Persian textual tradition to the *siyahpūshān*, the “black-robed” Kāfir of the Hindukush. The following verse, where the term *siyahpūsh* is directly connected to the character of the *kāfir* (as a personification of the black eye of the beloved), comes as a proof to this discourse:

*namībāyad ma-rā ghūsl u kafan ba'd az fanā gashtan
shahīd-i khanjar-i ān kāfir-i chashm-i siyahpūsh-am*

After my annihilation I won't need ablution or shroud:
I am the martyr of the dagger of that black-robed kafir eye.
(*Ibid.*: 580)

Moreover, the image of the “killing beauty” of the beloved's eye, “martyrizing” the lover-poet, is openly built on the paradigm of the *mujāhid* who dies fighting against the infidels and doesn't need, thus, the usual purification rites: an historical *talmīh* to the wars against the Kāfirs witnessed by Siyar himself, interacting with the already mentioned ethnographic one. One can't but connect these contents to the atmosphere of the following *bayt*, where the *kāfir dawr*, i.e. the pre-Islamic times of Meccan paganism, but also those (still surviving) of pre-Islamic Hindukush are conjured:

*ba kāfir dawr bar mu'min ajal nazdik binumāyad
dirāz īn rāh-i kūtah dar shab-i tārik binumāyad*

In the times of the *kāfirs*, the believer feels that death is near:
 this short route seems so long, in the darkness of the night.
 (*Ibid.*: 370)

If read in the same perspective described so far, the following three lines of poetry, apparently focusing on the usual lover-beloved and purity-impurity dynamics, acquire obvious historical referents as allusive descriptions of the various patterns of real and pretended conversion to Islam (and maybe rejection of it, in the third line) at work in late 18th- early 19th century Chitral:

bunad talqīn-i īmān zulf bā khāl-i lab-ash bingar
musalmān mīkunad īn nāmusalmān nāmusalmān-rā

Look: the curl is touting faith to the mole on her lips:
 this non-Muslim is converting a non-Muslim to Islam.
 (*Ibid.*: 26)

but-i man az tarahḥum sūy-i man āmad sitamgar shud
musalmān gashṭa īn kāfir pashīmān gashṭa kāfir shud

My idol came mercifully towards me, and then turned cruel:
 this *kāfir* became a Muslim, and then, repentant, turned *kāfir* again.
 (*Ibid.*: 313)

az shḥbat-i badān dil-i pākīza-rā chi gham
dar dast-i kāfirān nashawad kāfir āyīna

A pure heart doesn't fear the company of vicious people:
 in the hands of the *kāfirs*, a mirror doesn't become an unbeliever.
 (*Ibid.*: 682)

Very similar observations can be made as regards the last two lines by Bābā Siyar that I am quoting in this brief survey, where the description of different kinds of resistance to conversion (and different attitudes towards it) is hidden in the veils of conventional images of unbelief, referred, at the Sufi-lyrical level, respectively to the untamed “animal” of the desiring soul and the “ruthless, cruel and saucy” (as for Bahār’s dictionary) attitude of the beloved:²⁵

nīst āsān naḥs-i kāfir-rā musalmān sākhtan
īn sag-i dīwāna dar zanjīr natwān sākhtan

It is not easy to render Muslim the soul of the *Kāfir* (also “this miscreant soul”)
 you can't reduce in chain this mad dog
 (*Ibid.*: 646)

²⁵ A line by Tajammul Shāh Maḥwī shows, at the same time, a direct continuity with Siyar’s poetic attitude towards the non-Islamic realities of the Hindukush and an evident reception of cosmopolitan models such as Ṣā’ib, immediately recalling, moreover, the above quoted Ottoman line by Nedīm: *maḥwiyyā imkān-i taqwā nīst dar dawr-i rukh-ash/ ‘ālam-ī-rā az nigāh-ash kāfiristān sākhtand* “O Maḥwī, there is no possibility of piety, around her face:/the world was turned into a *Kāfiristān* by her gaze” (Maḥwī n.d.: 58).

but-ī dāram ki būy-i kāfirī mīyāyad az dīn-ash
ba juz-i āshiq kas-ī munkir nabāshad rasm-i āyīn-ash

I have a beloved/idol (*but*) whose religion smells like unbelief (*kāfirī*)
 none but the lover would deny that these are indeed his traditions.
 (*Ibid.*: 434)

Both lines look, and no doubt indeed are, perfectly readable within the mainstream symbolic/metaphorical Sufi tradition of Persian poetry, as we have seen, without any necessity for a previous knowledge of Hindukush ethnography: in the second case, for instance, one can even find an allusion to the story of Shaykh San‘ān falling in love with the beautiful Christian, narrated in ‘Aṭṭār’s authoritative *Manṭiq al-ṭayr* and directly mentioned by Siyar in his *dīwān* (*ibid.*: 321). However, a contextualised reading (in the specific case, for instance, the local courtly reception of Siyar’s poetry) requires a syntagmatic association with the surrounding observed realities (the proud resistance of the Kāfirs, the locally celebrated beauty of Kāfir women). Similar examples can be multiplied, from the heart of the lover-poet “dancing in the temple” (*ibid.*: 255), alluding to the well-documented passion for dancing of pre-Islamic Hindukush to the “silent image on the mountain” (*taṣwīr-i kūh*) clearly referring, through the canonical filter of Bisotun, to the *buts* scattered in the wider region of the Hindukush-Karakoram (*ibid.*: 278).

All these allusions need to be studied thoroughly, of course. I will limit myself to observe, in conclusion, that in his other Persian masterwork, the *Shāhnāma-yi Chitrāl*, Siyar consistently transfers a whole set of historical realities and events related to the Kāfir/pre-Islamic space into exactly the same textual protocols, images and conventions described so far: as a matter of fact they are conventionally transformed into brahmans (*barhāman*), fire-worshippers (*ātaṣparast*), demons (*ahrimanān*), etc., without losing anything of their historical referentiality. A fitting example is made by the reference to the rock carving of the Kargah Buddha of Gilgit (Stein 1907, I: 17-19) which is found in the 20th *dāstān* of the *Shāhnāma-yi Chitrāl* (see Holzwarth 1999: 220): here, the poet connects the image to classical references such as “the times of Sulaymān,” the “monk” (*rāhib*), the “Buddha of Bamyān” (*but-i bāmyān*, the same idol that was the protagonist of a lost *mathnawī* attributed to ‘Unṣurī Balkhī already in the XI century), and so on, using centuries-old conventions on idolography to convey the reality of an object which is observable even today (Bābā Siyar MS: 240-242); this description of the *but* of Gilgit, which clearly interacts primarily with the “demonology” of Firdawsī’s *Shāhnāma*, may help to clarify, moreover, even the just mentioned references to “silent images on the mountain” which are found in Siyar’s *dīwān* as well.²⁶

²⁶ I am thankful to Alberto Cacopardo for his comments on a previous draft of this article.

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