

Central Asian Cultural Intelligence for Military Operations

Nuristanis in Afghanistan

Summary of Key Issues

- There are several hundred thousand Nuristanis currently living in Afghanistan.
- The Nuristanis are located in high elevations along small river valleys in northeast Afghanistan along the border with Pakistan, north of Kabul and Jalalabad, and south of the Wakhan Corridor.
- The Nuristanis believe they are either related to the Greek occupying forces of Alexander the Great, which invaded the region in the 4th century B.C., or to the tribes of Mecca who rejected Islam.
- The Nuristanis are great lovers of freedom and independence. Nuristan was an independent group of approximately fifteen tribes for many centuries. In 1893 British India ceded control over the region to Afghanistan, which forcibly incorporated it into the modern state of Afghanistan.
- Although Nuristanis have come to share many aspects of Afghan culture over the last 100 years, the Pashtun code of behavior, the *Pushtunwali*, appears to be less important in Nuristan than among other non-Pashtun tribes. Nuristani behavior is less driven by the principles of defending honor, than by practical considerations of survival. Money plays a larger role in settling grievances in Nuristan than it does in the rest of Afghanistan.
- Wealth is an important discriminator in Nuristani society. More than in the rest of Afghanistan, wealth is a prerequisite for power and influence in Nuristan.
- The fifteen Nuristani tribes include numerous subgroups of people. There are five languages spoken among the Nuristani tribes, with numerous dialects between the different subgroups.
- The Nuristanis were also known as “Kafirs” for many centuries. Kafir means “infidel” and refers to the historical resistance of the Nuristanis to Islam. The ancient religion of the Nuristanis is *Kalash*, a faith related to Hinduism. The religion of *Kalash* involves the sacrifice of cows and goats. Over the past century, an increasing amount of Nuristanis have converted to Islam, although the practice of *Kalash* remains alive. Today, the name “Kafir” is considered to be a pejorative term for Nuristanis, especially by Nuristanis who are now Muslim.

- Nuristanis have very negative views of Arabs.
- Although the Nuristani tribes have worked together over centuries to resist domination by what Nuristanis consider to be foreign cultures, much of the conflict in Nuristan has been between Nuristani tribes. Conflict among the Nuristani tribes usually arises out of disputes over grazing rights or livestock theft.
- Despite centuries of conflict among themselves, as well as with Pashtun and Pakistani tribes, the Nuristani culture holds great value on the man who can step between two men about to fight and prevent the fight from occurring. In such a situation, it is dishonorable not to make an attempt to prevent conflict.

Ethnic Group

The Nuristanis are a small and ancient collection of approximately 15 tribes in northeast Afghanistan in the provinces of Lagman and Konar along the Afghan-Pakistan border. The Nuristanis were also known for centuries among other Muslim Afghans by the pejorative term “Kafirs” (infidels), due to their historical refusal to convert to Islam. Although the Nuristani tribes share similar customs and traditions, they speak five different languages. While there is some overlap between some of the Nuristani languages, many of the Nuristani tribes cannot communicate with one another. Some Nuristanis claim that they are descendants of the Greek occupying forces of Alexander the Great, who conquered the region in 327 B.C.



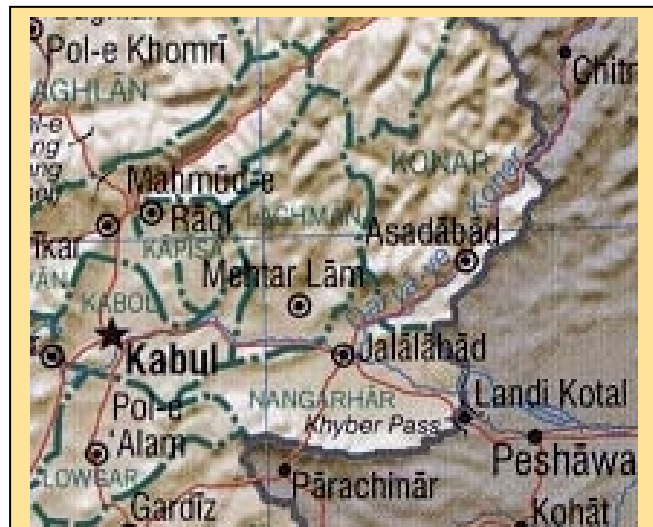
Ruins from Alexander the Great's Military Garrison at Balkh in northwestern Afghanistan

For centuries the Nuristanis lived in a quasi-independent state of Nuristan (also called Kafirstan). Nuristan is approximately 5,000 square miles in area.

Throughout the 19th century the Nuristani tribes fell between the Afghan and British Indian empires, but frequently fell under



High Mountains Between Chitral and Nuristan



Map of Nuristan, a region that spans the contemporary Lachman and Konar Provinces in eastern Afghanistan

nominal control of the kingdom of Chitral in modern-day northern Pakistan. Towards the end of the 19th century the Afghans and British established the “Durrand Line” between Afghan controlled territories and British India. The “Durrand Line” ceded most of Nuristan into the Afghan sphere of influence, with the exception of some of the Kalash tribes. Between 1893-96, King Abdul Rahman of Afghanistan formally incorporated Nuristan (Kafirstan) into Afghanistan, forcibly converting the Nuristanis to Islam and officially naming the region Nuristan, which means “Land of Light.”

Nuristanis generally feel no fondness for either the Afghans or Pakistanis. They reserve particularly strong negative feelings towards the Arabs.

Ethnic Description

Cultural History

The Nuristanis have two primary myths about their origins. One version of their cultural history links the Nuristanis to the occupying Greek forces of Alexander the Great, who invaded the region in 327 B.C. Another version of their cultural history identifies the Nuristani tribes with the original Qureish, the tribe of Mohammed the Prophet. According to this legend, when Islam was established in Mecca, a group of the Qureish left present-day Saudi Arabia and traveled to Afghanistan to preserve their old religion. This group is believed by some Nuristanis to have led to the formation of the Nuristani tribes.

Western scholarship indicates that the Nuristani are probably an offshoot of the Indo-Iranian tribes that arrived in northern Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan before the main migration of Indo-Europeans from the Indus river valley, further to the south. Upon the arrival of the Indo-Europeans, the Nuristani were slowly forced from Kandahar and Kabul up into the Kama region near the confluence of the Kabul and Kunar rivers. Approximately 1,000 years ago, when Mahmud Ghazni imposed an Islamic Turkish empire throughout the Kabul river valley, the Nuristanis fled further up into the highlands, primarily into the upper Pech and Laghman valleys, where they remain to this day.



Ruins of the Capital of Mahmud Ghazni's Islamic Turkish Empire



Canyon Between Nuristan and Kabul

Throughout the centuries, Nuristanis were persecuted for continuing to reject Islam. A series of “Holy Wars” were launched against Nuristan by successive Islamic leaders, including the Mongol leader Tamerlane in 1398 A.D, Babur in the early 1500s, Akbar in the late 1500s, and Jahangir in the early 1600s.

The Nuristanis responded to this continuous persecution by launching raids down into the Afghan lowlands, where they would plunder the valley tribes and retreat to the safety of their inaccessible mountain homes.

Physical Appearance

Among the Nuristani, there is a high frequency of blond hair in the northern most regions of Nuristan. In the valleys towards Jalalabad there is a greater mixing of the Nuristani and other ethnic groups, resulting in a physical appearance that is largely similar to most of the rest Afghanistan: olive complexion and dark hair.

Nuristani men are generally of light build, of average height. They have great physical endurance and are well-suited to living in their high altitude environment.

Nuristani males have historically shaved their heads, with the exception of a circular patch about three inches in diameter on the crown. This lock is allowed to grow long and hangs over the back, sometimes all the way to the waist. This practice has diminished, but can still be observed in some locations.

Centers of Authority

Description

There never has been any real established authority among the Nuristani tribes. For centuries, the various Nuristani tribes would, when convenient, band together against other regional tribal groups. Just as quickly, these Nuristani tribes would also take up arms against one another. Before its incorporation into Afghanistan in 1893, there was never any effective central administrative government in Nuristan, although there was a deliberative parliament. Authority, to the extent it existed at all, was historically exercised, however, by autocratic tribal councils at the village level.

History

Nuristan had a deliberative parliament, but it was a forum for public discussion, rather than for decision making. The parliament had no discernible procedure, and positions were frequently issued and reversed. Nuristani tribal councils, known as the *Urir*, exercised true power. These *Urir* consist of local leaders, priests, local wisemen (*Mir*), and a tribal chief (*Jast*). The *Jast* is elected in a ethno-religious ceremony. Interestingly, the *Jast* cannot be elected without a female partner and most often this female was not his own wife.

Nuristan is and has always been an impoverished region. The role of wealth, however, plays an important role in establishing authority among the Nuristani tribes. "The possession of wealth gives enormous power to any one in Kafirstan. A man may be brave, devoted to his country, clear-headed, and sagacious, and yet have little or no weight in the tribal councils if he is poor...." To be elected a *Jast*, a man needs to put on many feasts for the village. Such feasts can financially ruin a man aspiring to this position. It is popular for the *Jast* to speak publicly and with pride of how he has spent his fortune on becoming a *Jast*. People present are expected to shower the *Jast* with flattery and gratefulness for his generosity.

Although the role of the *Jast* is important, he would rarely exercise bold leadership. Consensus is very important among the Nuristanis, both within the ruling *Urir* and within the larger tribe. This is at least partially due to the fact that the *Urir* never had any independent governmental power to enforce its decisions.

Rule of Law

There has never been the rule of law in a western sense in Nuristan. Until 1893, the Nuristani tribes administered their own self government, which consisted of a tribal code of justice. This code of justice was different from the *Pushtunwali* in that the payment of money or the sacrifice of an animal could easily exempt one from retaliation. Crimes against another tribe were treated less leniently than crimes committed within a tribe, as Nuristanis wished to avoid unnecessary war with neighboring tribes.

Under the Nuristani code of justice, all Nuristanis are theoretically equal. The *Urir's* consensus based decision-making procedures, however, usually result in the tyranny of the

majority. Minority opinions are forced to give way to the majority rapidly in order to avoid a physical confrontation. If the minority opinion holder feels that he could rally support for his point of view in a physical confrontation, he might resort to this, but will otherwise quickly move to the majority position.

The enforcement of *Urir* decisions rested with the population of the local tribe. Usually, the punishment for disobeying a *Urir* decision was the burning of a person's home and the destruction or seizure of his property, a task carried out by a local mob organized by the villagers with the blessing of the *Jast*.

The punishment for murder, justifiable homicide, or inadvertent killing was the same: the payment of a blood-ransom to the family of the aggrieved, the distribution of the offender's property to the family of the aggrieved, and the exile of the offender, now an outcast (*chile*) from the village. The outcast, however, is not forced to leave his tribe, but only the village in which he lived and committed the crime. If the outcast comes upon a member of the aggrieved family, the outcast is obligated to hide himself and not show his face to this person. The children of the outcast also become outcasts. The village of Mergrom has become known as a village where outcasts go to live.

In some instances, the killer could avoid the life of an outcast by the payment of a fortune to the family of the aggrieved. In this way, the killer would "buy" his way back to respectability.

Role of State vs. Role of Ethnic Group

As Nuristan has been an independent fiefdom for centuries, the role of the state is small. Although Nuristan was incorporated into Afghanistan in 1893, the Nuristanis remain proud of their independence in the inaccessible highlands that they inhabit.

The Afghanistan state has sought to integrate Nuristanis into national life by deporting them to other regions of Afghanistan and by inducting them into the Afghan national army.

Cultural Attitudes

Self

The Nuristani cultural attitude of the self is more independent than the general Pashtun-dominated Afghan view of the self, which is entirely dependent upon a collective group.

Group/Tribe/Clan

The Nuristanis identify themselves as members of one of fifteen very small ethnic groups within the Nuristani tribe. Historically, Nuristani allegiance has been to one of these very small groups, which often fought against one another.

The Nuristani ethnic groups are formed around a common genealogy known as an “agnatic group.” These groups control mountain pasture land and each generation of the group is bound to defend this land. In pre-Islamic times, men and women could not marry within these extended families, unlike the Pashtuns, who seek out cousins as spouses.

In 1929 and again in 1998 the Kom and kSto Nuristani groups launched large intertribal wars. However, when threatened by an encroaching culture, as Nuristan has been for centuries, the Nuristani groups have banded together. The Nuristani groups continue to resist the movement of new ethnic groups into their territories. In the late 1960s the Nuristani tribes launched attacks against the Gujar and MiswaNi tribes, who were migrating into Nuristani grazing areas.

Modern Nation State

The Nuristani were only incorporated into Afghanistan in 1893 and have not been heavily integrated into the modern nation state. Nuristan was an independent collection of tribes for centuries. In some ways, they continue to operate somewhat autonomously in the highlands of the Laghman and Konar provinces, where the authority of the state rarely reaches. Generally, the Nuristani tribes view the Afghan state with suspicion. This Nuristani distrust of the Afghan state is not related to a particular ideology or government. The Nuristanis viewed the Taliban negatively, but do not have significantly better views of any other Afghan government. One potential exception is King Zahir Shah. Some Nuristani tribes view him as a positive political figure and leader, although it is not clear how much of these attitudes will cause the Nuristani to support the government of Karzai.

Nuristani tribes have, however, sided with the central government in conflicts that involve their own foes, such as was the case with the KalaSa Nuristanis, who allied themselves with Kabul government in 1949 against the Safi Pashtuns.

The Nuristanis played an early role in the Mujahideen resistance against the Soviet backed Afghan communist government. Five months after the communist coup in Kabul in April 1978, the Kom, Mumo, and kSto Nuristani tribes of the LanDai Sin valley launched the first major resistance against the new communist government. The Nuristani tribes overran the

Afghan government's outposts in Kamdesh and Bragimatal, and repulsed numerous government counter attacks. By 1980, the Nuristanis had formed the "Kunar Tribal Alliance for the Islamic Holy War," which forced the communist government out of Nuristan almost completely.

From 1980 to 1992 the fighting in Afghanistan would occasionally touch Nuristan, but there was little if any influence of the Afghan government in Nuristan. During this time period, the Nuristani tribes administered their own affairs in a quasi-state of Nuristan.

After the rise of the Taliban in 1992 some Nuristani tribes accepted a few Taliban administrators in the Kunar Province, while the Nuristanis in the Laghman Province joined the Northern Alliance and actively resisted the Taliban. The Taliban tried to fuel intertribal warfare inside of Nuristan to weaken it from within and succeeded, to some extent, in exacerbating the conflict between the Kom and kSto Nuristani tribes.

Nuristani views of Karzai's Interim Afghan government are colored by the role of Muhammad Zarin, a regional Miswani Pashtun warlord from the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan who is supporting Karzai's government and US forces in the region. Although the Nuristanis have great antipathy for Arabs and support the current war against the Taliban and Al Qaeda, they also have antipathy towards Zarin. Zarin is believed by some Nuristanis to have supported the Miswani Pashtuns efforts to take lands away from Nuristanis. The Miswani Pashtuns have fought with the Nuristani Kom tribes in the period leading up to the 1978 Nuristani revolt against the communist government in Kabul. Some Nuristanis also believe that Zarin orchestrated the 1991 assassination of Ghazi Khan of Tsunuk, the prominent Nuristani leader from the Kom tribe. According to one Nuristani analyst, Zarin is alleged to have reported to US forces that there are al Qaeda forces in Nuristan in an effort to weaken the Nuristanis.

Conflict Resolution

Although the Nuristani tribes have worked together over centuries to resist domination by what Nuristanis consider to be foreign cultures, much of the conflict in Nuristan has been between Nuristani tribes. Conflict among the Nuristani tribes usually arises out of disputes over grazing rights or livestock theft. There is a clan-based system of local village government in Nuristan that is supposed to adjudicate such issues, but these sort of disputes are frequently dealt with on an ad hoc basis through a neutral moderator.

Like much of Afghanistan, aggression must be met with retaliation among the Nuristani. Such a primitive form of conflict resolution can lead to protracted blood feuds between different families and clans. Unlike other tribes, however, the Nuristani have a simpler form of retaliation than the *Pushunwali* of the Pashtuns, and Nuristani culture encourages peace-making by third parties. Nuristani retaliation is done "in kind" and does not appear to vindicate lost honor or avenge a wrong; rather, it appears to simply impose a similar cost on the perpetrator. Although the aggrieved person is socially pressured to exact revenge, in the event of an imminent physical conflict, third parties are socially encouraged to intervene to prevent violence.

Also unlike the dominant Afghan culture of the Pashtuns, retaliation in the Nuristani culture can be staved off with the payment of proper financial compensation to the aggrieved party. The sum of such a payment is usually negotiated by a neutral mediator. Even in the instance of murder, the payment of a fortune to the family of the aggrieved could restore the murderer to “honor” in society, thus avoiding the life of an outcast.

In the instance of a double murder, where two people are killed in a quarrel, the families of the two dead sacrifice a cow and each member of each family step in the cow’s blood. This is meant to constitute a peace between the families, and is designed to avoid the eruption of an on-going family feud.

Cultural Views of Pashtuns

Nuristanis view the Pashtuns as the dominant tribe of Afghanistan. For centuries, Nuristani perspectives of the Pashtuns were colored by the repeated attempts of the Afghan Pashtun-dominated government in Kabul to convert Nuristanis to Islam and to incorporate them into Afghanistan. Nuristanis would respond to Pashtun-led attacks on Nuristan with guerilla raids into the Pashtun population centers in the valleys along the Kabul river. After the successful incorporation of Nuristan into Afghanistan in the late 19th century, the Nuristani tribes no longer openly resist Pashtun influence, although they maintain their own identity and have not been heavily assimilated into Pashtun culture.

Cultural Views of Pakistan

Nuristanis have historically had ties with the tribes of Pakistan in the area of Chitral, a remote city in northern Pakistan. Frequently, these ties consisted of the Nuristanis paying tribute to the leader in Chitral for protection.

Language

Nuristani forms a linguistic group as well as an ethnic group. Within the Indo-European linguistic family, the Nuristani language group forms a third sub-group of the Indo-Iranian group. This Nuristani language group is now believed not to be a part of a larger “Dardic” group of Indo-Iranian languages, including Khowar and Dardi (Kashmiri).

Although the Nuristani are a small group of people and form a single language group, they are linguistically very diverse within this group. This linguistic diversity is sustained by the inaccessible nature of many of the geographical enclaves in which many of these subtribes live. There are five languages spoken among the approximately fifteen Nuristani subtribes: Vasi, Kamkata viri, aSkNu viri, Kalasa, and Tregami. Vasi and Kamkata viri form a Northern Nuristani language cluster, which has been more influenced by subsequent Iranian languages that have spread through the Hindu Kush. aSkNu viri, Kalasa, and Tregami form a Southern Nuristani language cluster, which retains a purer connection to the original Indo-Iranian subgroup. Among these languages, there are many dialects, some of which vary village to village. Some of these dialects overlap between the languages.

Vasi

Vasi is spoken in Upper, Middle, and Lower dialects by the Vasi people of the Parun valley.

Kamakata viri

Kamakata viri is spoken by the Kata, Kom, Mumo, kSto, bini, Jamco, and Jasi peoples.

The Kata speak two dialects of Kamakata viri, known as Western and Eastern Katavari. Western Katavari is spoken in Ramgal, which is the upper Alingar river basin, in the Ktivi valley, off the upper Pech river, and in the PeRuk valley, off the upper LanDai Sin. Eastern Katavari is spoken in the upper LanDai Sin, and along the Pakistani border. The Kom, kSto, Jasi, Binio, and Jamco speak another dialect, Kamviri or kStaviri.

The Mumo speak a transitional dialect, Mumviri, which is between Kamviri and Eastern Katavari.

aSkNu viri

AskNu viri is spoken by the aSku people. Among the aSku, there are different dialects among the peoples of the Bazaigal, Kolata, and Titin valleys off the middle Alingar, and among the Sama and gRamsaNa peoples of the middle Pech river valley.

Kalasa

The Kalasa people speak Kalasa, as well as the three other ethnic groups, the Vata, the kSto and the kStorm. A major dialect separates the Varjan Kalasa of the upper Vaigal river valley

from the Cima-Nisei Kalasa of the lower Vaigal valley. Among the Varjan, there are minor dialects within each village.

Kalasha is also spoken by Nuristanis living in the valleys of Bumboret, Birir, and Rumbur in the Pakistani district of Chitral in the Northwest Frontier Province.

Tregami

Tregami is spoken by the Tregami people in three villages of the Tregam valley of the lower Pech river.

Religion

Today, Nuristan is predominantly Muslim, at least in a nominal sense.

The Nuristani resisted Islam for centuries until their forcible conversion to that religion in 1893, when they were incorporated into the modern state of Afghanistan. The dominant religion among the Nuristani before Islam was Kalash or Kalasa. Kalasa is also used to refer to a Nuristani linguistic group, as well as an ethnic group. Generally, the religion, language, and “ethnicity” of Kalash are linked. For example, if someone stops practicing the religion, they also stop using the language and stop identifying themselves as of the Kalasa ethnic group. Today it is estimated that there are still several thousand Nuristani who continue to practice the Kalash religion. The exact number of Nuristanis practicing Kalash is unknown, although some suggest it is growing.

Kalash is an ancient form of Hinduism that revered a Creator god, the ancient Hindu god Yama Raja (*Imra* in Kamviri). Kalash was influenced by local additions over the centuries and in different areas of Nuristan, different tribes revere different deities. In addition to *Imra*, many tribes also historically recognized the Kalash war-god *Gish*. Kalash teaches that the deities guide people’s destinies, and that it is possible to influence these deities through sacrifice, prayer, and dance.

People communicated with deities through shamans, who would enter a trance state after purifying the air with juniper smoke to invite the deities’ presence. Frequently, the supplicant would be asked to sacrifice an animal to appease the deities for some transgression committed against them. For *Gish*, the Nuristani would sacrifice a bull.

The sacrifice of an animal usually involves a fire of cedar branches. Butter is thrown on the fire. The throat of the animal is cut and the blood is gathered by a priest and sprinkled on the fire, sometimes followed by the head of the animal.

Dancing played an important ceremonial role in Nuristani religion in pre-Islamic times. It was believed that dancing could also help appease deities. This dancing often includes the twirling of war axes.

Every Wednesday night, the local village magistrate, or *Jast*, would light a fire at the *gromma* for the weekly Kalash holy day of *Agar*.

When a new *Jast* was elected, Nuristanis would make a sacrifice and bring the new *Jast* offerings of flour left over from the sacrifice. Sometimes sacrifices would be conducted at the *Jast’s* home. Some of the flour left over from the sacrifice would also be brought home, where it was burned with cedar branches and bread.

According to pre-Islamic Nuristani religious traditions, dogs defile religious purity and must be kept away from religious events and religious clothing. Other religiously unclean things include domestic fowl and their eggs. Cedar, on the other hand, is often used as a symbol of religious purity.

The pre-Islamic traditions of the Nuristani are important in distinguishing Nuristanis from the rest of Afghanistan, as well as from Pakistan. Although Nuristanis, in most cases, do not attempt to reconvert Muslim Nuristanis to Kalasa, the Kalasa identity of the Nuristanis is a source of general cultural and historical pride among the Nuristani tribes. This Kalasa identity continues to contribute to Nuristani views of the modern Afghan state, making them feel somewhat “outside” this institution. The Kalasa identity of the Nuristanis may also contribute to their severe dislike of the Arabs.

Customs

Cultural Issues

Although Nuristanis are still sometimes referred to as “Kafirs,” the name “Kafir” means “infidel” and refers to the fact that Nuristanis resisted Islam for centuries. In 1893 Nuristanis were forcibly converted to Islam by Afghanistan. Although not all Nuristanis actually practice Islam today, to refer to a Nuristani as a “Kafir” is deeply insulting to the devout Muslim population among the Nuristani tribes. Generally, because of this the words “Kafir” and “Kafirstan” should not be used to refer to these people or region.

Other pejorative names for the Nuristani include “šex” (from Arabic “šaix,” meaning elder or sheik), a common designation used by neighboring Afghans and Chitralis to imply the recent-convert status of Nuristanis to Islam.

Negotiations

Negotiations are usually carried out through a “neutral” moderator. The exchange of flashy, colorful items often assist in the negotiation process.

Greetings

Greetings are frequently formal and kind. They often inquire on where a person is coming from. A man traveling up the hill into Nuristan would be greeted with “Have you come from below?”

If a Nuristani meets someone he knows on the road, he will greet him with an upraised hand and the hand will remain in the air throughout the greeting.

Social Visits

Nuristanis are very hospitable and will entertain guests in their homes. Part of entertainment includes conversation, which takes place while sitting on stools around a fire. In exchange for “generous” hospitality, guests are expected to give the host something of equal value. The guest should not openly link the gift with the hospitality, as this would be considered rude.

Gestures

Vows can be demonstrated by making a sacrifice of a goat. The most solemn vow can be made by first shaving one’s head, stripping naked, going to the shrine of Imra to make an oath, and then dressing and returning home to sacrifice the goat.

Food

When traveling, Nuristanis will eat along the road. When a passerby comes along the road, Nuristanis will offer to share the food with the passerby, even a complete stranger. After politely declining, the passerby will have the food forced on him by the dining party.

Cultural Do's and Don'ts

The Islamic and Pashtun Taliban influence on the Nuristani have made adultery a serious crime punishable by death. However, in pre-Islamic traditions adultery was merely punishable by the payment of a fine of six cows. Sometimes men would have their wives seduce other men in order to receive the payment of the six cows.

Lifestyle

Role of Family

The family is central to the Nuristani tribes. In a society where there is little solidarity above the village, the role of the family can be important in maintaining social cohesion. Nuristanis, despite being a fierce group of tribes, are known for the expression of great tenderness and affection within their families.

Role of Men

Nuristani men hold property, hunt, and defend the family. Oddly, Nuristani men also are known to sew garments in their spare time. The man is head of the house and he runs the house in a generally autocratic fashion. The first born son becomes the new head of the household. Although this can cause disputes in families with more than one son, the brothers will generally attempt to work together to support the older son as head of the household in order to keep the families wealth, property, and livestock together. Breaking up the family's assets means weakening the family.

In the Kafir's opinion, a really fine manly character, what he emphatically calls a 'good' man, must possess the following attributes... a good hill-man, ever ready to quarrel, and of an amorous disposition. If he is also a good dancer, a good shot with bow and arrow or matchlock, and a good...stone-quoit player, so much the better. These qualities constitute a fine man; but to be really influential in the tribe, an individual must be also rich.

-Robertson 1896, p. 94.

Role of Women

Unlike the Pashtuns, Nuristani women have more involvement in everyday life and generally tend the gardens for the family. Nuristani women have never been able to hold property, however, and cannot inherit money or property.

Nuristanis have always been polygamists, so some households may include more than one wife.

Dating and Marriage

Dating does not exist among the Nuristani tribes, although, at least in pre-Islamic times, affairs were relatively common, both between married people and unmarried people. The Islamic influences over the past century and the leadership of the Taliban have most likely changed this, however, and it is improbable that such affairs would currently go unpunished in Nuristan.

Marriage is not a complicated affair and is basically a purchase of a bride from a bride's family. A suitor would send a friend to negotiate a price with the bride's father. Once the price is set and paid, the suitor arrives at the bride's house, kills a goat, and the family holds a feast. With this, the marriage is complete. Polygamy was common, and up to 4-5 wives was normal for a household. The number of wives increased the social status of the husband.

A divorce is accomplished when the husband simply sends his wife away. Divorce, however, is uncommon.

Role of Children

Male children are valued more than female children. Daughters do not begin the hard work of the female Nuristani until approximately age eight. Male children are frequently married very young, often to older women who can cultivate land he has inherited. When he grows older, the male will then take a younger wife as well.

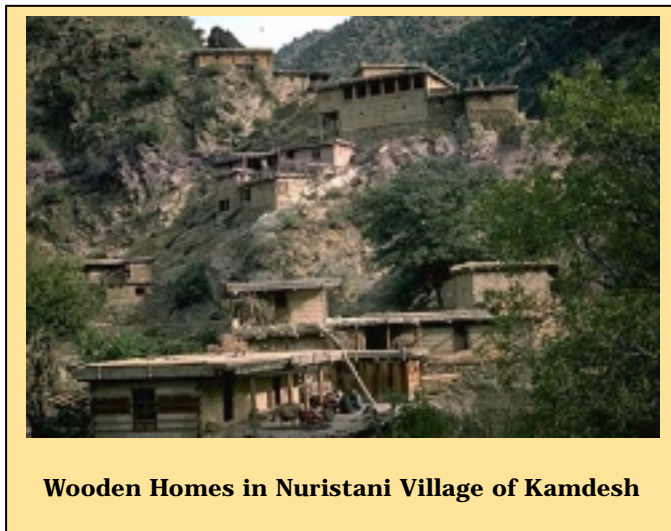
Elders

Elders are generally respected and kept within the family and cared for by the family.



Housing

The houses in the highest northern regions are built of stone or brick. The houses in the steep forested regions are mainly of wood, often in several stories, stepwise above each other. The lower level of a house usually contains a stable and storage area. The upper



floor is generally a large single room in which the family cooks, sleeps, and receives guests. One house's roof serves as a patio to the house above. These patios are used for drying fruit. This configuration is chosen in order to save what little arable land there is for cultivation purposes. The patios are connected to each other with ladders, which facilitate movement around the village.

Among some tribes, the Nuristani live within fortified villages, where the houses ring a common courtyard, with the rear walls forming a common

defensive perimeter. Watch towers are built on the corners of this perimeter wall. Tunnels connect these fortified villages with water sources. All villages have a common *gromma*, or dancing floor. Dancing is an integral part of Nuristani culture and pre-Islamic religious life. At least up until the end of the 19th century, every village also had a stone altar near the *gromma*.

Where villages are not fortified, the villagers usually have a designated cave or mountain location to which they can retreat in case of attack.

Nuristani houses often have wooden verandas along the front, wooden facades, and a hearth in the middle of the main room. The hearth is surrounded by four wooden pillars, sometimes carved to resemble deities, and there is a smoke hole in the roof over the hearth. Having carved wooden pillars and carved wood facades along the exterior verandas are symbols of social importance within the Nuristani tribes. Lower classes of workers are not permitted to carve wood within their houses. In addition to *Kalash* deities, Nuristani wood carvings include goats and criss-cross basket patterns.

These wooden houses are built of posts and beams, hewn by hand. The spaces between the timbers are filled with stones and clay.

Sanitation

The sanitation practices of the Nuristani tribes are very different compared with Western standards. Nuristanis do not wash regularly. Odors indoors and around the houses can be very strong. Food is not prepared by sanitary means.

Brotherhood

Nuristani men will sometimes join themselves together as “brothers” through a religious ceremony that involves the deity Imra. A sheep’s kidneys are cooked and the two men feed each other the kidneys, while placing their arms around each other’s shoulders.

Death

Kalash funerals involve the erection of a wooden figure in honor of the deceased. The men will chant and dance around the figure as part of the ceremony.

Clothing

Headwear

Nuristani men traditionally wear the soft roll-up Chitrali hat.

A *Jast* will wear a cotton turban, sometimes with a sprig of cedar in it.

Before Nuristan was incorporated into Afghanistan, a Nuristani man who has killed no less than four Muslims in combat was permitted to wear a blue shawl, supposedly taken from the turban of the dead men.

Before puberty, girls would wear only a double string bound around the head at the level of the eyebrows. After puberty, at least in pre-Islamic times, Nuristani women would wear a small four-corner cotton cap. On the occasions of special Nuristani ceremonies, such as the election of a new tribal chief (*Jast*), Nuristani women would wear horned caps.



Nuristani Villagers Wearing Chitrali Hat

Common Garments

The *budzun* is a dark brown woolen cloak that buttons down the front. It is worn by both men and women. Among wealthier Nuristani, some garments are made of silk, which historically came from the northern province of Badakhshan.

The common garment worn by poor workers or shepherds, as well as most young boys, is the goatskin vest. Other garments include a woven goatshair tunic that reaches nearly to the knees.

Nuristanis wear colorful clothes for festivals and dancing. Nuristani men historically wore ear ornaments as indicators of social rank.

Footwear

Soft, red leather boots are commonly used for footwear in Nuristan.

Diet

The Nuristani's main crops are wheat, barley, corn, millet (*tchina*), sorghum, squash, and peas. Wheat, however, is a luxury crop and kept for special occasions, as well as sacrifices or religious events.

Although fish are plentiful in the mountain streams of Nuristan, the Nuristanis have historically not eaten fish, as they believe them to be "unclean."

Grapes and mulberries are grown in the lower areas. The pre-Islamic culture in Nuristan supported wine-making in this region, a practice that may still continue in the highlands.

Nuristanis also keep goats, sheep, and cattle. Although much meat is used for sacrifice, once the sacrifice is complete, the owner of the animal uses the meat for a feast, unlike other religions, where the owner parts with the animal.

Cheese is a popular local food.

Cultural Economy

The Nuristani live in the highlands of the Hindu Kush mountains, where farming is very difficult or impossible. In some areas at the floor of the steep narrow mountain valleys, the Nuristani women will cultivate vegetable gardens in small enclosed areas around the house. Some families have small vineyards and walnut groves. The picking of grapes and walnuts was historically regulated by the tribal council (*Urii*).

These vegetable gardens are irrigated with water from common irrigation channels that collect run-off from melting snowfields above the valley villages. If the snowfall is light, significant disputes can erupt over the division of this water.

The Nuristani primarily survive by raising cattle on the valley floors, while shepherding



Snowmelt from Mountains is used for Irrigation



Irrigation Channels

sheep on the sides of the mountains. Men also hunt wildgame to supplement the Nuristani's diet.

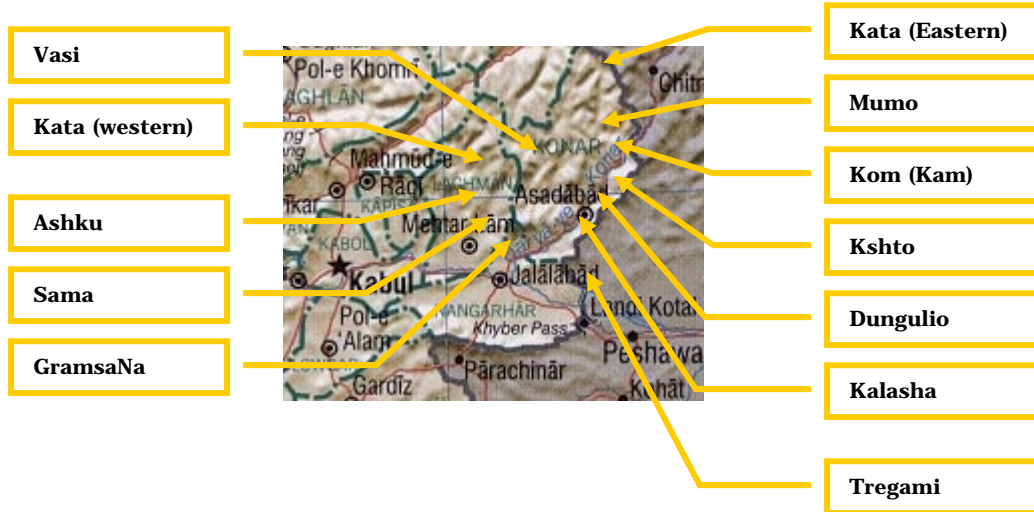
Each village has at least one family of *bari*, craftsmen who performed the labor of building houses and making tools, furnishings and household utensils. The *bari* are skilled in wood carving, but are generally not permitted to carve wooden decorations for their own homes, only for the homes of landowners.

The closeness of Nuristan to the Pakistani cities of Chitral and Peshawar have brought traders from Pakistan to Nuristan over the past several hundred years. These traders are known for passing off trinkets and other cheaply constructed items to the Nuristanis.

The closeness of Nuristan to Pakistan has also given rise to a "timber mafia" from Pakistan, where the felling of trees is more regulated. Pakistani loggers illegally cut in Nuristan's large forests of deodar cedar, pine, and fir trees. It is reported that some Nuristanis believe that the deodar cedar trees are shipped to Arab Gulf states and used in the palaces of rich Arabs, a fact that is recited by Nuristanis as further reason for their hatred of the Arabs.

Cultural Geography

The Nuristanis (Kafirs) live on the southern slopes of the Hindu-Kush mountains in a small region of northeastern Afghanistan that spans the Laghman and Konar provinces. This region of Afghanistan lies along the Afghan-Pakistan border, between Kabul and Jalalabad to the south and the Badakhshan region and Wakhan Corridor to the north. Along the eastern border with Pakistan the climate tends to be wetter, with some moisture coming from the monsoons of South Asia. In the northern regions of Nuristan, the climate is arid and cold.

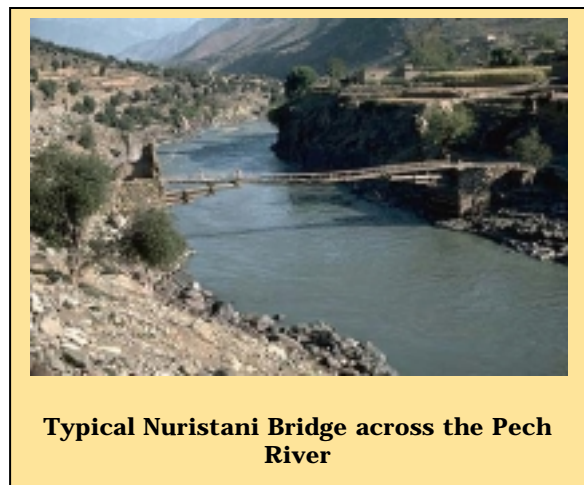


The Nuristani tribes are located in small river valleys and highlands along the Alingar (Laghman) and Pech (also known as Presungul or Kamah or Komar) rivers in the Laghman province, and along the LanDai Sin, Bashgul, and Kunar rivers in the Konar province.

The Nuristani tribes include the Vasi, the eastern and western Kata tribes, the Ashku, the Sama, the GramsaNa, the Mumo, the Kom, the kSto, the Dungulio, the Kalasha, and the Tregami.

The Vasi live along the Parun valley. The Kata live along the upper Alingar river and along the Ktivi valley off of the upper Pech river, and in the PeRuk valley off of the upper LanDai Sin.

The Kom live along the lower LanDai Sin and upper Kunar river basins and have a population of approximately 5,000-10,000. Some Kom live



across the Pakistani border in Chitral. Several smaller non-Nuristani groups, including the Jasi, the Binio, and Jamco, live among the Kom tribes. These groups predate the arrival of the Nuristani in this region. The Kom tribes have historically fought with the kSto Nuristani tribe over grazing rights.

The Asku live along the middle Alingar river valley. The Sama and GramsaNa live along the middle Pech river valley.



Arid Areas of Northern Nuristan

The Kalasa live along the lower Pech river valley and along the middle Kunar river valley.

The Tregam live along the lower Pech river valley.



Vegetation in Northern Nuristan

Culture's Effect on Warfare

According to British military historians, the Nuristani tribes were known for their fierceness and military prowess. Of all the subgroups within the Nuristani tribes, the Kom (or Kam) tribe was the most dreaded by British military forces.

The Nuristanis are not known for traditional forms of combat. According to one British military historian “[i]n their mode of warfare, no spark of chivalry is possible.” Images that observers have had of Nuristani warriors include “the silent watcher, his face protruding from a thicket, his wild eyes glancing swiftly and fearfully around, or...wriggling like a snake along the ground to stab his sleeping enemy, man, woman, or child.”

The decentralized political and administrative systems of the Nuristani tribes and the cultural and linguistic diversity of these tribes influence the manner in which Nuristani tribes fight. Nuristani tribes will launch individual attacks, with little or no coordination among themselves.

This decentralized method of warfare does not mean, however, that the tribes cannot quickly and successfully unite in purpose, especially when facing a common external enemy. There are many examples of the ability of the Nuristani tribes to fight effectively against an enemy. The 1978 revolt against the communist government in Kabul was fought successfully by the Nuristani tribes in a highly decentralized fashion. Each village had its own military leader. Men from each village fought in the village's militia, rotating in and out of service in order to continue to tend crops.

To the Nuristani, any force that originates beyond its very narrow boundaries and attempts to influence life in Nuristan is an enemy. Nuristani tribes tend to look at much of the outside world as a potential enemy.

The tactics historically employed by the Nuristanis include raids down upon forces in the river valleys, launched from the tribes' secure and isolated mountain villages. Sometimes the Nuristani warrior will go into enemy territory covertly and then launch a raid. Once a raid has been conducted, Nuristanis will quickly withdraw back into the mountains.

Sometimes when the Nuristanis are facing a large force, they may evacuate women and children into the Chitral Province of Pakistan. This occurred during the 1978 uprising of the Nuristani tribes against the communist government in Kabul. By doing this, the Nuristanis made themselves less vulnerable to counter attacks by the Kabul government's fighter bombers and helicopters, as these could strike Nuristani mountain villages, but could not cross over into Pakistan.

Urban vs. Rural Culture

There is no urban/rural divide in the Nuristani cultures. There are no urban centers in Nuristan and there is no significant presence of Nuristanis in the urban center of Kabul. The nearest city to the Nuristanis is Jalalabad.

Influence of Diaspora

Although Nuristanis have moved into Pakistan and spread from there throughout the world, the diaspora does not wield a large influence, and has not affected internal affairs in Afghanistan.

Holidays

The Nuristani village magistrates, or *Jast*, are responsible for organizing local festivals and dances and will serve as the official host for guests to the village. One reason that wealth is a prerequisite for leadership in Nuristan appears to be related to the fact that the *Jast* is frequently required to pay for local feasts and celebrations.

Secular Holidays

The Victory of the Muslim Nation is April 28, Remembrance Day is May 4, and Independence Day is August 18.

Kalash Holidays

Agar is the weekly Kalash holy day.

Kalash holidays honor the deities Imra and Gish.

The election of a new *Jast* is a holiday that mixes religious and political symbolism, often including the sacrifice of animals and a large feast.

Islamic Holidays

The ninth month of the Muslim calendar is Ramadan (in Arabic) a period of obligatory fasting that commemorates the Prophet Mohammad's receipt of God's revelation, the Quran. Because the lunar calendar is eleven days shorter than the solar calendar, Ramadan revolves through the seasons over the years. Fasting is an act of self-discipline that leads to piety, and expresses submission and commitment to God. During this period, Muslims cannot eat from sunrise until sundown.

Id al Fitr, a three-day feast and holiday, ends the month of Ramadan, and is the occasion for new clothes and much visiting between family members.

Ramadan is followed by the beginning of the *haj* pilgrimage season during the twelfth month of the lunar calendar. At least once in their lifetime both men and women should, if economically able, make the *haj* to the holy city of Mecca. The beginning of the *haj* is marked by the holiday of *sawab*. The *sawab* is a day for seeing off pilgrims who are leaving on the *haj*. On the *sawab*, hostilities are frequently suspended to allow people to cross factional lines to see off friends and relatives. As pilgrims embark on the *haj*, they are usually driven to their points of departure in highly decorated vehicles.

Id al Adha, the feast of sacrifice, marks the end of the *haj* month.