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# Not only in the Caucasus: Ethno-linguistic Diversity on the Roof of the World

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**Abstract**

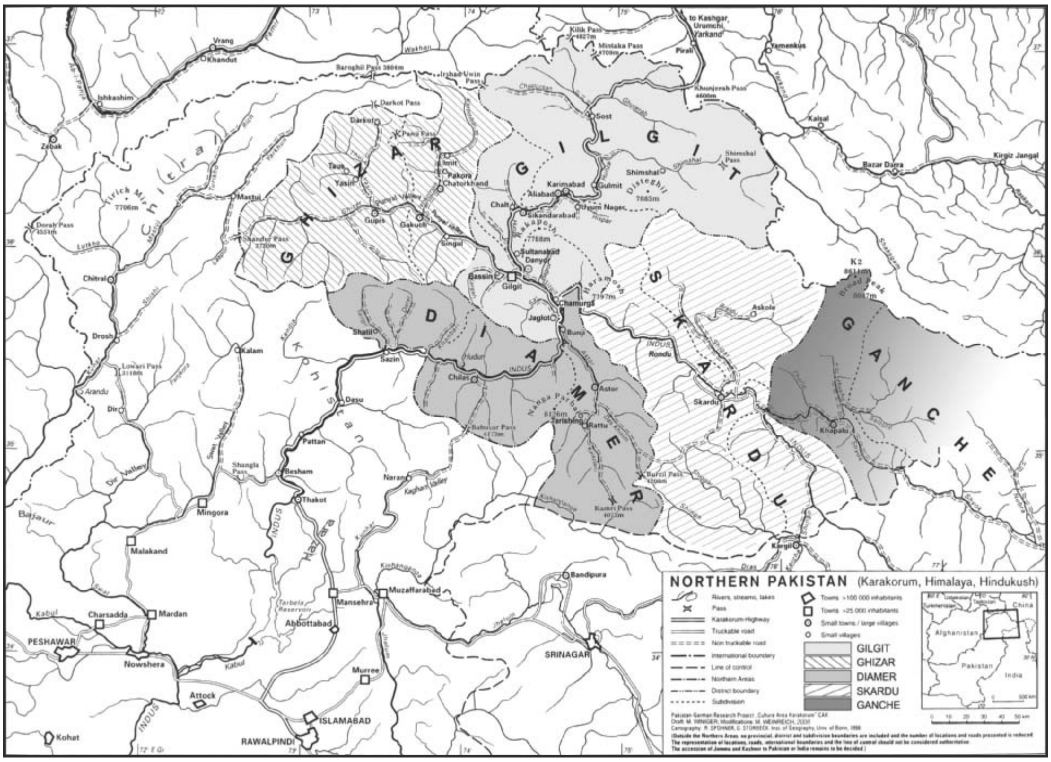
The current paper is an invitation to a virtual journey to Gilgit-Baltistan (former Northern Areas), a high mountain region in the north of Pakistan, endowed with an amazing variety of languages spoken on its territory. The travel itinerary includes stops at Skardu (Baltistan), Gojal (upper Hunza valley), Karimabad (central Hunza valley), Taus (Yasin valley) and Gilgit town. At each destination the traveller is introduced to the languages used by its inhabitants: Balti, Wakhi, Burushaski, Domaakí, Pashto and Shina. Local personalities, scholars and a foreign researcher share key information about their language's geographical distribution, speaker numbers and dialectal division. Special attention is given to expositions of the language attitude of the concerned speaker communities, as well as to the description of local efforts directed at creating language-specific alphabets and the promotion of mother tongue education. The interlocutors' narratives are complemented by black-and-white photographs and references to recent academic publications dedicated to the languages and peoples of Gilgit-Baltistan.

**Keywords**

Northern Pakistan, Gilgit-Baltistan, Northern Areas, Balti, Wakhi, Burushaski, Domaakí, Pashto, Shina, Dardic languages, language-specific alphabets, mother tongue education

*The Caucasus, this magnificent, blessed and in many respects extraordinary region to which Prof. Asatrian has devoted a major part of his scholarly interest, is often compared to a treasure trove of ethnic groups and languages. Another mountainous region similarly endowed with an amazing variety of ethno-linguistic groups is Northern Pakistan. Ever since our first encounter in January 2000, I have been trying to persuade Prof. Asatrian to pay a visit to this fascinating place, because I am convinced that once there he would fall in love with it as intensely and unconditionally as I did. Unfortunately, until now my efforts have not been crowned with success.*

*Dear Garnik, since I know that your hesitation to act on my suggestion is linked to your numerous academic commitments and because I fear that your formidable workload is not likely to become less in the foreseeable future, I am taking advantage of this Festschrift to* *present you with a virtual journey, hoping that one day we will be given the opportunity to re-enact it in real life.*[1]


NORTHERN PAKISTAN (Karakorum, Himalaya, Hindukush)
Rivers, streams, lakes
Pass
Karakorum-Highway
Truckable road
Non truckable road
International boundary
Line of control
Northern Areas
District boundary
Subdivision
Towns >100 000 inhabitants
Towns >25 000 inhabitants
Small towns / large villages
Small villages
GILGIT
GHIZAR
DIAMER
SKARDU
GANCHE
Afghanistan
Pakistan
India
China
G I L G I T
G H I Z A R
D I A M E R
S K A R D U
G A N C H E
Gilgit
Skardu
Chilas
Astor
Karimabad
Aliabad
Sost
Khaplu
Kargil
Chitral
Drosh
Dir
Mingora
Malakand
Mardan
Charsadda
PESHAWAR
Nowshera
Attock
Kohat
ISLAMABAD
RAWALPINDI
Murree
Abbottabad
Mansehra
Muzaffarabad
SRINAGAR
Bandipura
Besham
Thakot
Pattan
Dasu
Sazin
Shatial
Naran
Kalam
K2
INDUS
Kabul
Tarbela Reservoir

Considering the fact that there are more than two dozen languages spoken as mother tongues by communities in Northern Pakistan, we would hardly be able to examine even half of them within a reasonable amount of time.[2] Therefore I would like to limit our journey in space, and to focus on Gilgit-Baltistan,[3] one of the region's administrative units and a place where I had the pleasure to work as a researcher in the 1990s.

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[1] My congratulations on your 60th birthday are joined by Silvia Delogu, my wife, who is (if not indicated otherwise) also the author of the accompanying photographs. The sources of the other illustrations are: 1) Map of Northern Pakistan: Weinreich (2009: 120); 2) Photograph on page 481: <http://www.concordiaexpeditions.com/pakistan/gilgit.html>.

[2] For a comprehensive list of the languages in use in Northern Pakistan see Baart (2003). Many of them are included in the "Sociolinguistic Survey of Northern Pakistan" (O'Leary 1992), which contains separate investigation into: Balti, Bashghali (Eastern Kativiri), Bateri, Burushaski, Chilisso, Dameli, Domaakí, Gawar-Bati, Gawri, Gowro, Gujari, Hindko, Indus Kohistani (Mayãn), Kalasha, Kamviri, Khowar, Ormuri, Pashto, Palula, Torwali, Ushojo, Wakhi, Waneci, and Yidgha (Munji). For additional literature see the bibliography compiled by Baart/Baart-Bremer (2001); as well as Buddruss (2006) and Kreutzmann (2005b), who give an excellent overview of the region's ethno-linguistic composition, including speaker numbers and language distribution.

[3] Until 2009, *Gilgit-Baltistan* was called the *Northern Areas of Pakistan*; the re-naming was effected on the basis of the "Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order", § 96, which also provides an outline of the territory's current political and administrative set-up.

Gilgit-Baltistan is situated in the far north of the country. It encompasses a territory of around 72.000 km², covering the greater part of the Karakoram mountain range, as well as the western fringes of the Himalayas and eastern fringes of the Hindu Kush. Because of its dramatic landscape, dotted with an impressive number of snow-capped mountain peaks, among them Nanga Parbat, Rakaposhi and K2, this part of Northern Pakistan is often associated with the legendary Roof of the World. Internally, Gilgit-Baltistan is divided into six administrative sub-units: Gilgit, Ghizar, Diamer, Astor (until 2004 part of Diamer), Skardu and Ganche. Together, these districts are inhabited by nearly 900.000 people, with approximately 200.000 of them residing in Gilgit, the region's largest town. The two other urban centres are Chilas and Skardu Town, headquarters of the Diamer and Skardu Districts respectively. Although urbanisation is, as in other regions of Pakistan, an ongoing process, the overwhelming majority of the population is still found in rural areas, in villages and larger settlements scattered oasis-like across the bottom of the bigger valleys and along the major roads.[4]

It is by taking the most important of these roads, the world-famous Karakoram Highway,[5] that I had thought to bring you up to Skardu, the capital of Baltistan. However, due to a landslide, the highway is once again closed to all traffic, and in order to reach our destination in time, we will have to change our plans and take a plane.

## 1. BALTI

After a flight of just under two hours, passing over parts of the snow-clad mountains of the western Himalayas, we reach Skardu Airport, situated at an altitude of about 2500 meters above sea level. On the way into the town we follow the mighty Indus, which in the Skardu valley meanders across a wide, sandy landscape. At the town's main bazaar Mr. Yusuf Hussainabadi is waiting for us. He is a highly regarded local scholar, who back in the 1990s translated the Koran into the Balti language[6] and is now engaged in promoting mother tongue education among the youth of Baltistan.

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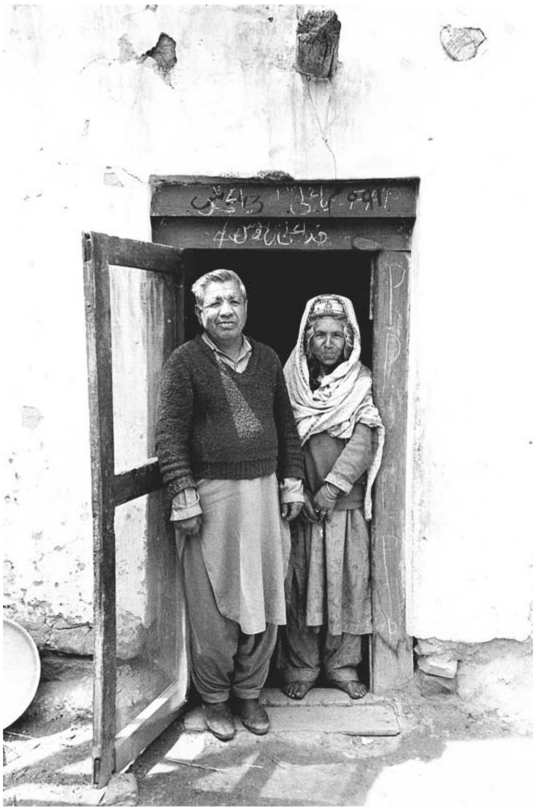
[4] For a comprehensive description of the area's geography and recent history see Kreutzmann (2005a).

[5] The importance of the Karakorum Highway for the entire region and its impact on the social and economic situation of Gilgit-Baltistan is discussed by Allan (1989) and Kreutzmann (1991).

Balti[7] is a Western Tibetan language, spoken throughout Skardu and Ganche districts, which is influenced by the neighbouring Dardic language Shina and, like all other vernaculars of Northern Pakistan to a certain extent also by Urdu, the country's *lingua franca* and main medium of school instruction. Notwithstanding considerable syntactic and lexical innovations, stimulated by contact with its linguistic surroundings, Balti has preserved a number of archaic features, reminiscent more of Classical Tibetan than of the modern variety now spoken in Central Tibet.



Mr. Hussainabadi informs us that although more than 300,000 people use Balti in their daily communications, it is not taught in any local school. On one hand, parents prefer their children to read and write in Urdu and English, because they perceive Balti as a language of low social value, and therefore of little importance for their offsprings' life. On the other hand, Mr. Hussainabadi is keen to stress that one can't seriously hope to raise the prestige of Balti in the eyes of its speakers unless they are provided with a unified alphabet, as clear and as easy to employ as those used for high-status languages like Urdu and English. However, while the creation of such an alphabet seems comparatively easy, agreeing on a standard version of it appears to be a rather challenging task. The problem is, that each of the handfull of language enthusiasts engaged in the encouragement of Balti literacy is promoting his very own variety of Balti orthography, one of them even arguing in favour of utilizing a modified Tibetan script. In order to finally move forward on this long-standing, highly controversial issue, Mr. Hussainabadi and friends have recently contacted the Forum for Language Initiatives (FLI),[8] a specialised, Islamabad-based NGO, which is not only expected to reconcile the differing opinions on the script, but also to design teaching material for Balti lessons at primary school level, following a methodology already successfully employed with other minority languages of Northern Pakistan. One can only hope that in this way Mr. Hussainabadi's educational efforts will finally bear fruit and Balti children will soon be able to read and write in their mother tongue.

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[6] Cf. Hussainabadi (1995).

[7] On Balti grammar see Read (1934), Lobsang (1995) and Bielmeier (1985); the latter also contains a long fairy tale as a specimen of the language. Balti's linguistic affiliation is analysed in Bielmeier (1998); on socio-linguistic issues see Backstrom (1992a). Balti oral literature is recorded and discussed in Sagaster (1981, 1984, 1985, 1993).

2. WAKHI

From Skardu we take the public bus in the direction of the Hunza Valley. Our final destination is Gulmit, a large settlement in Gojal, a high altitude region spread on both sides of the Hunza River's upper reaches. Although the view from the window does not allow for boredom, the journey seems never ending. First, we follow for about six hours the course of the Indus, until the latter joins the Gilgit River at Bunji. Changing the Indus Road for the Karakoram Highway and our bus for a minivan, we then head northwards for another eight hours, first, in the direction of Gilgit and then, shortly before reaching the town's outskirts, alongside the roaring Hunza River, up, up, up, into the night, almost until the Pakistani-Chinese international border.

One of our co-passengers happens to be a Wakhi speaker, a teacher named Didar Ali, who worked in the 1990s as a language consultant for the German-Pakistani Culture Area Karakorum Project. He informs us that the ancestors of the Wakhis now settled in Northern Pakistan arrived there during the 18th and early 19th centuries from Wakhan, a region in the south-eastern Pamirs, situated on both sides of the River Panj. On Pakistani territory the Wakhi language[9] is not only spoken in Gojal, but also in parts of the Ishkoman and Yarkhun valleys, the latter located in Chital, right across the western border of Gilgit-Baltistan. As the term Wakhi is of foreign origin, Didar Ali, who is sensitive to all issues connected with his language and culture, prefers to make use of the original self-appellations, referring to himself as *xik*,[10] and to his language as *xikwor*. He proudly quotes the well-known Norwegian linguist Georg Morgenstierne, who characterised Wakhi as "one of the most archaic, and at the same time most peculiar, of living Iranian languages".[11]

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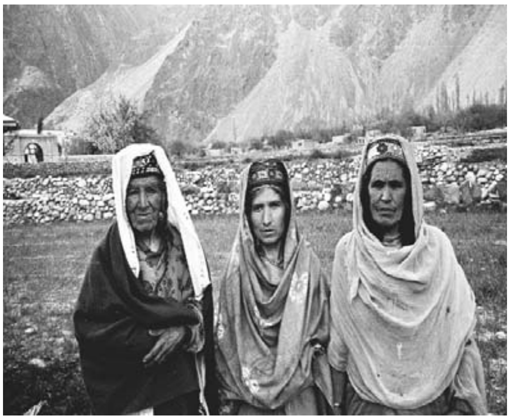
[8] The FLI is an educational organisation based in Islamabad which supports language communities in Northern Pakistan in their efforts to preserve and promote their mother tongue; cf. <http://fli-online.org>.

[9] On Gojal-Wakhi grammar and lexicon see Lorimer 1958, as well as Buddruss (1986b, 1998,



Most of the Wakhi studies conducted by Morgenstierne and other scholars are based on the Wakhan variety. In response to our question if the latter differs from the Wakhi spoken in Gojal, we are ensured by Didar Ali that he does not experience any difficulty in communicating with his Wakhan brethren, who he regularly encounters on business trips in neighbouring China. His observations are confirmed by the distinguished German scholar Georg Buddruss, who established that the dissimilarities between both Wakhi varieties are very slight, mostly pertaining to a few morphological and lexical variations.[12]

Didar Ali draws our attention to the fact that Wakhi oral literature, especially poetry and fairy tales, contains a significant number of Persian words and phrases, many more than can be found in the speakers' everyday language. Referring to Persian, the *lingua franca* of his ancestor's Pamir homeland, our traveller companion voices his appreciation by calling it "a sweet language". This affectionate attitude towards Farsi may also be linked to the fact that all Gojali Wakhis are adherents of the Ismailia creed, the most prominent texts of which are composed in this idiom.

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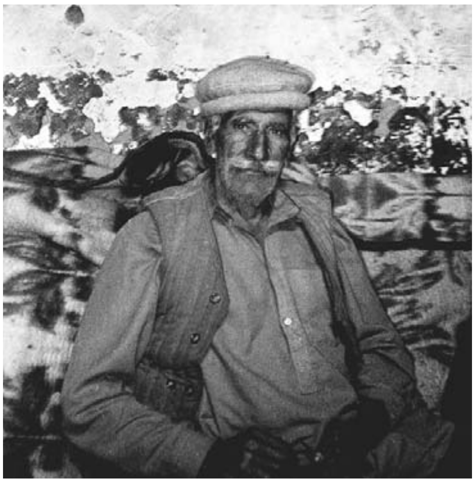
2001), who also offers specimens of oral literature; socio-linguistic issues are discussed in Backstrom (1992b), as well as in Reinhold (2006), which in addition contains a fine collection of texts.

[10] Wakhi [x] is a voiceless palatal-velar fricative, pronounced slightly posterior to the German *ich-Laut* [ç].

[11] Cf. Morgenstierne (1938: 431).

[12] Cf. Buddruss (2006: 240).



As a teacher, Didar Ali is very concerned that Wakhi children are not offered lessons in their mother tongue. Similar to Mr. Hussainabadi, he is in contact with the already mentioned Islamabad NGO, but differently from his Balti counterpart, Didar Ali does not entertain any hope of receiving governmental funding for the elaboration of educational material, because the number of Wakhi Speakers living in Northern Pakistan is comparatively small, estimated to be only 8000.

## 3. BURUSHASKI

From Gulmit we move towards Karimabad, Hunza's central settlement, set in breathtakingly beautiful surroundings. In a coffee shop below the famous Tibetian style Baltit Fort, we are received by Susumu, a Japanese linguist engaged in translating Burushaski legends and fairy tales. Susumu tells us that the Burushaski language[13] is spoken by more than 90.000 people, not only in Central Hunza, but also across the river in the Nager, as well as in remote Yasin, a valley close to the Chitral border.

Because of its "polysynthetic" structure, Burushaski has the reputation for being an extremely complicated language. To illustrate this, Susumu lists some of its salient peculiar features: Burushaski has five primary cases and up to forty different plural morphemes; some nouns, especially kinship terms and names for body parts, take an obligatory pronominal prefix in three different grades, indexing the possessor: accordingly one can't say simply "heart", but has to say *as* "my heart", or *es* "his heart" or *mos* "her heart", etc. The verbal system is more complex still. It is possible to derive hundreds of verb forms from a single root by enlarging it with prefixes, infixes, and suffixes. Moreover, a single inflected verb form often translates as a complete English sentence, e.g. *eéumo* "she did not give it to him" (root *-u-*), *atúkushoa* "will she not bring you here?" (root *shu-*), *atúkomanuma* "you were not born" (root *-man-*).[14]

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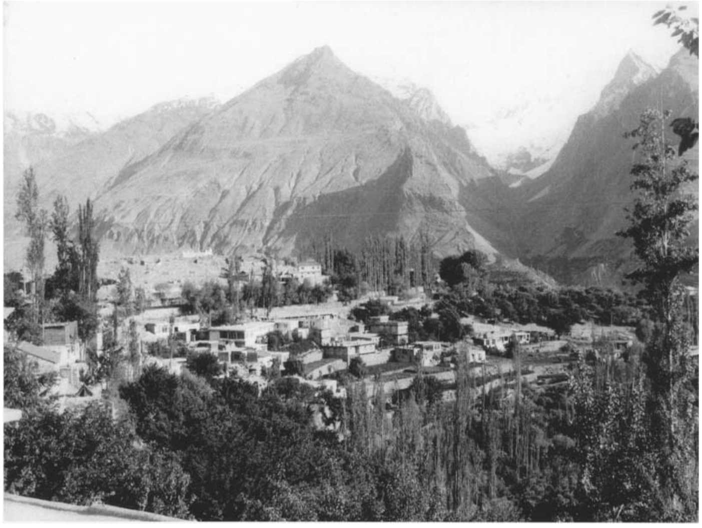
[13] The most authoritative researcher on Burushaski is Hermann Berger, who published extensively about both of its dialects, cf. e.g. Berger (1974, 1998), who offers a sublime introduction into Burushaski studies in Berger (1992); for other work on grammar, as well as texts related to Hunza and Yasin see Lorimer (1935-38); Tiffou/Pesot (1989) and Tikkanen (1991). Text specimens from Nager are also available in Skyhawk (1996, 2003); Burushaski's possible role as a regional substratum language is discussed in Tikkanen (1988).



All told, the most vexing problem concerning Burushaski seems to be its relationship with other tongues. Beyond any doubt Burushaski is an isolated language, quite unrelated in origin to its Indo-Aryan, Iranian, and Tibetan neighbours. Moreover, there is still no conclusive evidence relating it to any other known language family. Various theories have been put forward in this regard, but none of them have been generally accepted. Historical connections have been suggested with Yenisseian spoken in eastern Siberia, as well as with Munda, Nubian, Northern Caucasian languages and even Proto-Macedonian (Phrygian). Although some striking structural similarities with Basque exist, truly convincing etymological equations are still missing.[15]

Asked about local efforts to put Burushaski into writing, Susumu informs us that this issue has being discussed within the local communities since the 1980s. However, until two to three years ago, it seemed that only a few Burushaski speakers were interested in using their mother tongue in any domain other than oral communication. The situation was further complicated by the fact that the inhabitants of Hunza and Yasin, who are almost exclusively Ismailis, prefer a Latinised alphabet, while the people of Nager, who are mainstream Shiites, would only support an Urdu-based variety. But re-

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[14] The examples are taken from Tikkanen (2001: 186) and Berger (1992: 11).

[15] For references to publications speculating about possible genetic ties of Burushaski with other languages, see Buddruss (2006: 238).

cently, and here Susumu smiles, things have taken a new turn, and this is thanks to the Internet. Over the last few years a number of local sites have appeared, on which young, educated Burushaski speakers from Hunza, Nager and Yasin alike discus all kinds of topics in their mother tongue, using a simplified, non-standardized Latin transcription.[16] This, according to our Japanese friend, gives hope for the future. But teaching Burushaski at school? No, Susumu admits, with only a few parents interested in the education of their children in their mother tongue, this is still a very distant dream.

## 4. DOMAAKÍ

In the evening we are invited to a wedding party in the neighbourhood. At the height of the festivities, men in long woollen cloaks are leaping into the air and whirling around to the tunes of a traditional orchestra. During a break we are approached by one of these passionate dancers who introduces himself as Shaban Ali Nageri. Answering our question about his mother tongue, he promptly says “Burushaski”, but when he senses our genuine interest in the subject, he adds somehow shyly: “But I also speak Domaakí”. Like the musicians of the local orchestra, who had brought him along as their technical assistant, Shaban Ali belongs to the Hunza-Nager valleys’ tiny Dooma community. The Dooma people are scattered in extended family units among larger host communities in Gilgit-Baltistan and in Indus Kohistan (NWFP Province). Their comparatively low position within society is strongly reminiscent of the humble status occupied by the European and Asian Gypsies. Interestingly, the term Doom is connected to the same Indo-Aryan root as the Gypsy self-appellation “Rom” or “Lom”, although Domaakí itself does not show any special affinity with Romani or Lomavren. According to local oral history, the Dooma’s ancestors came through Baltistan from Kashmir, in separate groups and over an extended period of time; others claim their forefathers arrived from Darel or even from Kashghar. Traditionally, Dooma were only allowed to work as blacksmiths or as musicians, but nowadays they are also engaged in a variety of other professions. So Shaban Ali, who comes from a well-known blacksmith’s family, is now working as car electrician. In almost all the places of their present settlement, the Dooma have long since given up their original mother tongue in favour of the host languages.

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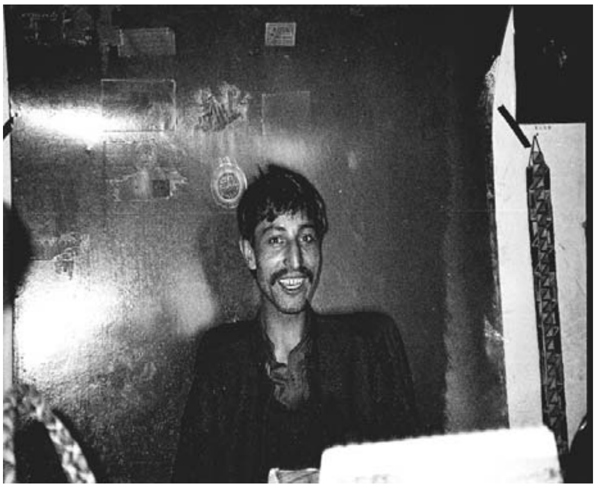
[16] See e.g. <http://hisamullahbeg.blogspot.com>; <http://gbtimes.wordpress.com>; <http://pamirtimes.net>.

Only in the Nager and Hunza valleys has Domaakí, in the form of two distinct dialects, survived to the present day.[17]



From a historical point of view, Domaakí is a language of the North Indian plains, and therefore affiliated to idioms like Urdu, Punjabi and Rajastani. However, due to its intense contacts with other languages Domaakí has lost or transformed many of its original features. This now places the language in a number of important aspects much closer to its Dardic neighbours than to its Central New Indo-Aryan cousins. Shaban Ali informs us that the Dooma people are typically bi- or multilingual. He himself, besides Domaakí and Burushaski, also speaks Shina, Urdu and a little English. Unfortunately, Domaakí, which is left with less than 350 speakers, suffers from having a rather low prestige and is perceived by almost all Dooma as an obstacle to their way out of a life of poverty and into greater social integration. In this context it is sad to hear, but at the same time absolutely understandable, that like many other Domaakí speakers, Shaban, too, does not teach his mother tongue to his children but instead communicates with them and his wife Nargis in Shina. The very limited size of the remaining Domaakí speakers' community and almost everybody's strongly negative attitude towards the utilization of Domaakí in both the public and private domains makes it rather likely that in one to two generations Shaban's mother tongue will cease to exist as a living language.

So, what about possible alphabetisation efforts? Well, when we ask Shaban about it, he gives us a surprised look, shrugs and replies somehow sarcastically: "None of our people really likes to speak this language, why should anybody be interested in writing it?!"

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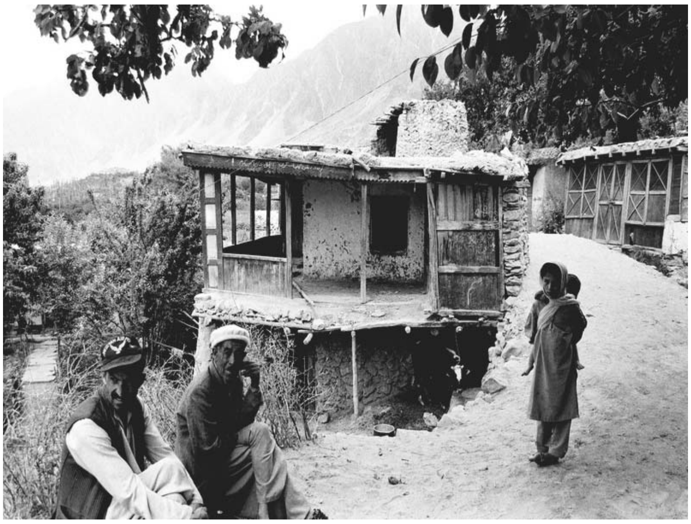
[17] On Hunza-Domaakí see Lorimer (1939); Buddruss (1983, 1984, 1986a); Tikkanen (2011, forthcoming); on Nager-Domaakí see Weinreich (1999, 2008, 2011). Domaakí language loss is discussed in Weinreich (2010); historical and ethnographic matters pertaining to the Dooma community in Hunza are taken up in Schmid (1997).

## 5. PASHTO

Our next destination is the Yasin valley, the home, as we already know, of one of the Burushaski dialects. On our way—following the course of the Hunza and the Gilgit rivers—we are informed that other idioms spoken by residents of the area include Shina, Kirghiz, Wakhi, Khowar and Gujri. However, our interest is focused not on these, but rather on Pashto, an Eastern Iranian language current in North Western Pakistan and in Afghanistan. Most of the Pashto speakers living in Gilgi-Baltistan[18] are temporary migrants, who come there for seasonal work, mainly trade and construction, keeping their families back home in the Pashtun heartland. Other Pathan migrants have settled on a permanent basis, sometimes in connection with marriage into a local family. One of these permanent settlers is Dilawar Khan, a shop-keeper from the village of Taus in Yasin. Dilawar Khan's ancestors arrived in the region at the beginning of the 20th century from Bajawur, a district situated on the Afghan border. Although almost a century has passed since then, our host, his Pashtun wife and his children still retain their original mother tongue, while also being able to speak Shina and Khowar. For most Pashtuns living in Gilgit-Baltistan speaking Pashto is a question of maintaining their social standing vis-à-vis their local neighbours, as their mother tongue associates them to the more than 20 million Pashtuns in the rest of Pakistan, who enjoy a reputation of being shrewd businessmen and uncompromising worriers.



The Pashto language is divided into a number of dialects and sub-varieties. Dilawar Khan tells us, that similarly to his family, which still speaks the idiom current in Bajawur, also other Pashtun migrants, permanent and temporary ones alike, tend to stick to the dialect of their place of origin. As some of these varie-

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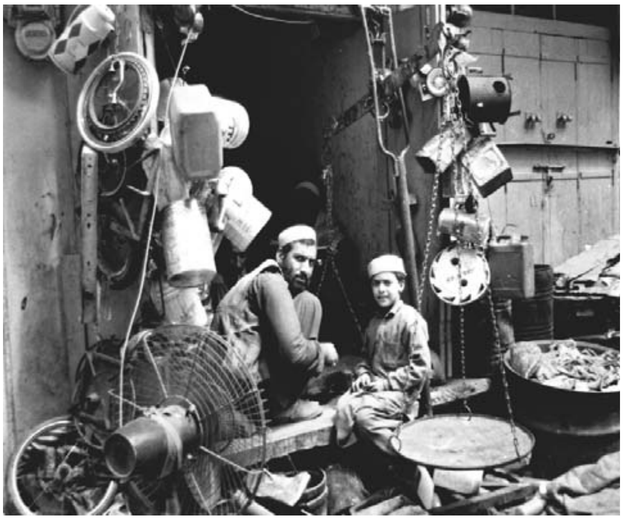
[18] In the mid 1990s there were around 5,000 to 5,500 Pashto speakers living in the Northern Areas (Gilgit-Baltistan), counting for about 0.8-0.9% of the territory's total population (Weinreich 2009: 19). On the Pashto spoken by these migrants see Bauer 1998; Weinreich 2005, 2009, 2010; on their migration history see Weinreich (2005).



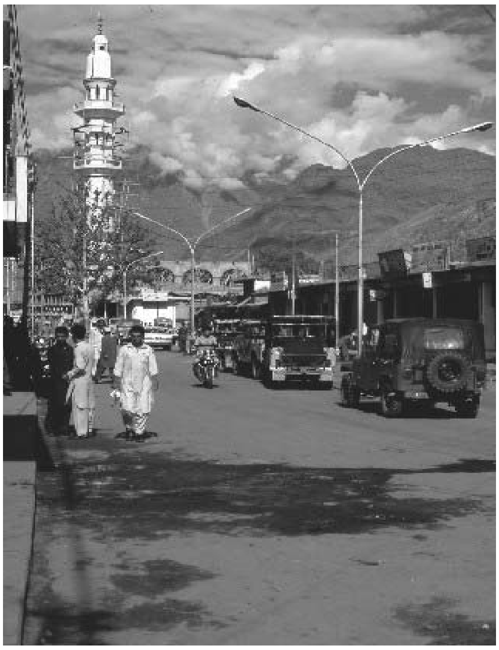
ties are mutually unintelligible, it can be quite a challenge for Pashto speakers to converse with each other in their common mother tongue, especially since they can't fall back on a widely diffused normative language, functioning like, for example, Modern Standard English in the contemporary English-speaking context. As a trader Dilawar Khan travels a great deal. Many of his business partners are Pashto speakers themselves, but by no means does everyone know the same dialect that he does. In order to make themselves understood, Dilawar Khan and his Pashtun conversation partners follow a simple pattern: Each participant in the dialogue uses his own dialect. If the person addressed indicates that he did not understand something the other had said, the speaker provides a synonym or a phrase, which is intended to illustrate the meaning of his words. In fact, very often the speaker adds his explanation not just on request, but immediately after a word or statement, identified by him as potentially creating difficulties in comprehension. The relevant synonym can be taken from the speaker's native dialect or from any other variety, preferably the one spoken by the conversation partner; the explanatory phrase is normally given in the speaker's dialect. To illustrate his words, Dilawar Khan provides us with a short example, in which a shopkeeper from Mardan addresses his newly engaged assistant from the Dir valley:

> *Za, bāzār-na mā-ta pey rāwra. pey. tāso če war-ta šode wāyey. se če čāy-kxe āčey.*
> Go, bring me *pey* from the bazaar. *pey*. What you call *šode*. What one adds to tea.

At the end of our conversation we ask Dilawar Khan about him and his compatriots' relationship with the written word. Smiling, he responds that although there exists a standardised alphabet and Pashto books and newspapers are freely available in towns like Peshawar and Quetta, few of his family and friends have ever bothered to learn it. The little written exchange that is necessary is normally carried out in Urdu, which seems a perfectly convenient medium for these communication purposes.

## 6. SHINA

Our last destination is Gilgit town, Gilgit-Baltistan's administrative capital and its financial centre. Once a sleepy provincial backwater, over the last three decades the town has experienced an unprecedented economic boom, mostly due to revenues generated by cross border trade with neighbouring China. Gilgit's population is divided into Sunnis, mainstream Shias, and Ismailites. This religious diversification, combined with a serious imbalance in the distribution of wealth, has created a high level of social tension, which tends to manifest itself in frequent inter-communal violence. The town's social complexity is mirrored by its linguistic situation. A survey conducted in the mid 1990s counted more than twenty-five languages spoken by Gilgit long-term residents. The town's main medium of communication is Shina, an Indo-Aryan language affiliated to the Dardic group.



Shina[19] is also the mother tongue of Mullah Shakil Ahmad Shakil, a local Sunni preacher associated with the Tablighi movement, whom we meet at the central mosque in Gilgit's main bazaar. Following his religious vocation Mullah Shakil travels all over Northern Pakistan, and, as he mainly preaches in his mother tongue, he is not only well informed about the geographic distribution of Shina speakers, but also acquainted with some of the language's many dialects. According to Mullah Shakil, Shina is by far the most important idiom of the area, spoken by at least 300.000 people. Besides Gilgit town and surroundings, it is also current in the lower Hunza valley, in Ghizar, Diamer, Astor and Skardu Districts, as well as in Indus Kohistan. As might be expected from such a wide distribution, the language is fragmented into a number of dialects, the main one being the idiom current in Gilgit, which in and around the town also serves as a *lingua franca* for a variety of other ethno-linguistic groups, including Wakhi, Domaakí and Burushaski speakers. Further Shina dialects include varieties spoken in Baltistan, Astor, Diamer, as well as in Indus Kohistan. From Mullah Shakil's subsequent description of his travels through Shina-country it appears that linguistic borders are roughly paralleled by sectarian religious boundaries. In the Hunza valley and to the west of Gilgit, the Ismailia sect predominates. In Gilgit town and Skardu District, Shias are more numerous. Astor District has a mixed Sunni-Shia population, and throughout the southern flank of the Shina area, including Diamer District and Indus Kohistan, the Sunnis are greatly in the majority.

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[19] Shina, as spoken in Gilgit-Baltistan is analysed in Bailey 1924, Schmidt 2008, Hook 1996 (Grammar); Radloff 1992 (Socio-linguistics), id. 1999 (Phonematics); Shina literature is presented in Buddruss 1987 (Proverbs), Degener 2008 (Proverbs; also contains an excellent grammatical outline of Gilgiti Shina) and Buddruss/Degener 2012 (Radio features). Kohistani/Schmidt (2006) give a general overview of Shina in Pakistan.

In the same way as sectarian differences between Sunni, Shia and Ismailia Shina speakers contribute to the survival of Shina's dialectal diversity, they also intensify the social and ideological separation between Gilgit and its southern neighbours. In this context Mullah Shakil observes that although Gilgit is the largest Shina-speaking town and the centre of Shina religious and intellectual life, efforts to develop a standard written form of the language are not only hindered by differences between the Gilgiti and other dialects, but also reinforced by the existing religious tensions. Nevertheless, Gilgit's Shina variety seems to be the only one that holds the potential for standardisation. It possesses a vast body of oral literature, and over the last few decades there have been many efforts at creating a written tradition as well. Moreover, Gilgiti is also used by Radio Pakistan for its daily Shina-language broadcasts, which are highly popular throughout the entire region.

And what about education in the mother tongue? At least in theory, our interlocutor strongly supports this idea. Recently, he remarks, some local volunteers have even undergone specialised teacher-training courses at the hands of an Islamabad-based NGO, which, according to his and our knowledge is also engaged in the Wakhi and Burushaski speaking areas. But as most of the Gilgit volunteers were Shiites and the NGO itself is rumoured to be supported by Western donors, Mullah Shakil remains rather sceptical regarding the chances of wider public support for this initiative.

The next morning we wave goodbye to energetic Gilgit and take the public bus going south. On our way, via the Karakoram Highway, we ride past the famous Nanga Parbat mountain, traverse Diamer District's high altitude wasteland, pass through the narrow gorges of Indus Kohistan and, sixteen hours later, awake to the hustle and bustle of Rawal Pindi. That's it. The mountains have changed to the plains, the northern languages have given way to Urdu and Punjabi, and I, dear Garnik, return you back to your favourite Iran and the Caucasus. I hope you enjoyed the trip...

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