

Karakoram in Transition: Culture, development and ecology in the Hunza valley

edited by Hermann Kreutzmann

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This volume collects the research efforts and insights of several scholars on a very peculiar area of the Karakoram, the Hunza Valley. As stated by the editor in his preface, the Hunza Valley has been the focus of scholarly attention for many years now. The book is thus an attempt to bring together a wide range of contributions from different disciplines, schools of thought and backgrounds in order to 'present the state of knowledge as well as to provide an insight into the complexities of the cultural, ecological, and economic assets of the Hunza Valley' (p.4).

Divided into three parts, the volume addresses a range of issues, including the geology, history and anthropology of the area. Section One is devoted to the environment and its resources: a natural history of the region is depicted, starting with reports of geological features of the Hunza Valley since the Quaternary Glaciation, geomorphology and case studies on 'transglacial landforms', followed by detailed essays on forests, flora and fauna.

Section Two deals with history and memory: several chapters highlight the complex history of the area, a cultural cross-roads of strategic significance since ancient times, as testified by a report on rock inscriptions in several languages. The relationship between history and memories is also explained in the intertwined play of written and oral testimonies, and oral sources are called in to reconstruct the account of the battle of Nilt (1891) and the story of Zawaar Mayun Ali of the clan of Yabon (p.225). A couple of chapters are devoted to an analysis of the linguistic mosaic comprising several languages (Burushaski, Shina, Wakhi, Domaaki, etc.).

The last chapter of this section functions as an ideal bridge between Sections Two and Three, with its focus on the comparison of photographs taken by Lt. Col. David Lorimer during the 1930s with those taken by Julie Flowerday in the 1990s.

The third section, devoted to culture and development, explores several

on-going projects, including the restoration of historical buildings such as the Baltit Fort, NGO activities, and changes in the agricultural and economic landscape, education and tourism.

The volume thus presents the reader with several topics, each of them in a very detailed and specific manner. This could also prove to be its central flaw: despite appreciating the multidisciplinary approach (the only way to really describe such complex realities), readers may be unable to fully understand each contribution, given the high degree of specialisation required for each field.

The conceptual frame of the volume is reminiscent of the Gazetteer tradition of the late British Empire, and a geopolitical and strategic interest is highlighted in the preface. The starting point for transition and transformation (the main key words according to the editor, see p.1) is the end of the cold war and the collapse of the Soviet Union, while the last chapter, 'Story of Our Transformation' written by Nazir Sabir, ends with a reference to the local impact of the 9/11 terror strikes in New York.

Located at a vital cross-road between empires, the Hunza Valley's strategic value has been long recognised: it was one of the first places to be connected to the plains through a telegraph line and, later on, the mighty peaks of the Karakoram witnessed the building of one of the highest highways in the world. Now, as ever, Hunza is a threshold opening towards different directions (Afghanistan, China, India) in one of the world's most troubled regions.

It is certainly true that what may appear to be a remote corner of the world is, in fact, connected with events unfolding somewhere else (as the recent, and still unclear, showdown in Abbottabad demonstrates), but it is equally incorrect to assume that everything must be linked to 'western' interests. The story of transition and change in the Hunza Valley has a much longer history, as the chapter written by Jason Neelis clearly shows. In his essay entitled 'Hunza-Haldeikish revisited: epigraphical evidence for trans-regional history' (pp.159-170), Neelis analyses rock inscriptions from the area that provide valuable information on the history and culture of the Hunza Valley, establishing beyond doubt its role in 'trans-regional patterns of cross-cultural transmission between north-western frontiers of South Asia, the Iranian borderlands, Central Asia, Tibet, and China' (p.159). Inscriptions in several languages ranging from Sogdian to Tibetan and Chinese indicate that the region was a major

cultural crossroads and a strategic location from the first millennium CE onward.

The strategic role of the Hunza Valley during the 18th and 19th centuries is further analysed and carefully described by Irmtraud Stellrecht's 'Passage to Hunza: route nets and political processes in a mountain state' (pp.191-216), focusing on Afghan, Chinese, Moghul and British interest in this regional centre of power. Lying at the centre of an area of mountain passes, the valley was identified by British intelligence as a possible gateway for Russian armies in their march toward the south in the years of the 'Great Game', when the Mir of Hunza was the custodian of the routes leading up to the Pamir. This ultimately led to the British conquest of Hunza in 1891 (p.199).

The rich bio-cultural diversity of the Hunza Valley is a precious heritage to be preserved and this volume may well help to spread understanding of this while disseminating interesting materials collected by researchers over the course of the last three decades. The volume is a valuable contribution for all those interested in the region. It challenges narrow approaches based on single disciplines and instead promotes comprehensive knowledge that encompasses natural sciences and humanities, bridging a critical divide that still seems to dominate academia.