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The Winter Solstice Festival of the Kalasha of Birir: Some Comparative Suggestions

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Abstract

The Chaumos Winter Solstice Festival is the fulcrum of the ritual system of the Kalasha, the last polytheists of the Hindu Kush. The Chaumos of the Birir valley was documented for the first time in 2006 by the author. The article investigates the structure and the meanings of this complex ritual event and sketches a comparison with a better-known, and rather different, version of the same festival celebrated in the other Kalasha communities, highlighting connections with the Vedic pantheon.

Key words: anthropology, Hindu Kush, India, Indo-European, Kafir, Kalasha, New Year festival, Pakistan, polytheism, religion, Vedas.

Cultural and historical setting

The Kalasha of Chitral have come to be considered a little cultural wonder. Settled in three small valleys right at the center of the Hindu Kush/Karakorum range, in the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan, and numbering no more than 4,000, they are the last example of an autochthonous pre-Islamic religion in the vast Muslim

ocean extending from Turkey to India. They are the last polytheists[1] of the Hindu Kush, disparagingly called Kafirs—Arabic for 'infidels'—by their neighbours.

Today their culture—at least in its most macroscopic aspects—appears to be so different from that of the people surrounding them that stories have developed assigning them foreign origins and, specifically, a Greek Alexandrian ancestry. In fact, their culture is just the last example of a religious and cultural complex that once prevailed throughout the whole chain, from the Panjshir valley in Afghanistan to the borders of Kashmir and Ladakh.

Though never a political unity, this vast mountain region—to which we have elsewhere referred as Peristan[2]—constituted in pre-Islamic times what may be regarded as an essentially homogeneous culture area; for the various peoples inhabiting it practiced a variety of polytheistic systems that, though certainly differing in many traits, had at the core of their symbolic systems a common ideology (cfr. Jettmar 1961: 83; Cacopardo & Cacopardo 2001: 25-26): A "pastoral ideology" based—in extreme synthesis—on a pure/impure[3] contraposition that associates positive values such as solidarity and harmony with the spirits of nature, with the male, wild and pastoral sphere of the mountains; as opposed to the domestic, agricultural, female, sphere of the valley where individual interests prevail and the natural environment is put exclusively at the service of humans (Jettmar

1 Though the term polytheism can no doubt be correctly applied to their traditional religious system, the Kalasha now reject such a notion. Due to a process of reinterpretation of their religion, which is not something recent, they have come to identify the Creator God of their pantheon—a typical *deus otiosus*—with the God of the Quran, and they regard their other gods as mere intermediaries or messengers (Saifullah Jan 1996: 240; Cacopardo A.S. 2006: 147–150).

2 In the absence of a single name designating the whole region, for the sake of convenience we resorted to a name that refers not to any human group of inhabitants but to a class of beings in which the people of the Hindu-Kush/Karakorum still largely believe: the *peri* or *pari*, i.e., the spirits of the mountains (cfr. Cacopardo & Cacopardo 2001: 13–16).

3 These English glosses, commonly used in the literature, do not render in fact the semantics of the polarity: the two poles, for example, do not have anything to do with cleanliness or sexual morals. We use them only for lack of a better alternative.

1975: 215–220; Cacopardo A.M. 1985; Parkes 1987; Sperber 1995; cfr. Maggi 2001: 43–72).

In spite of the fact that Islamic inroads from the north and south had started already in the sixteenth century (cfr. Holzwarth 1996), Peristan came fully under the sway of Islam only in the second half of the nineteenth century (Cacopardo & Cacopardo 2001: 25–54). The last polytheistic stronghold, in what is present-day Afghan Nuristan, was forcibly converted by the Amir of Kabul Abdur Rahman in 1895–96 (Jones 1974: 1–20; Kakar 1981; Cacopardo & Cacopardo 2001: 180–87), just after the demarcation of the border with British India following the Durand Agreement of 1893. The Kalasha, left by the treaty on the British side of the border, escaped the crusade and remain today the only living testimony of the pre-Islamic world of the Hindu Kush.

Such a centuries-long struggle was doubtless due to the resistance of the local populations, but also to the fact that the area we are dealing with has been historically one of the most remote and inaccessible in the whole Eurasian continent. Tucked away in its mountain fastness, for centuries, it was reached only by the ripples of the waves set in motion by the historical events of the literate civilizations of the plains surrounding it, where kingdoms and empires rose and fell and world religions competed for influence.

Indeed the wonder is not only that the autochthonous cultures of Peristan resisted Islam for so long, but also that before the Muslims appeared, they had only marginally been touched by the influence of the great religions of India: Buddhism and Hinduism. Only in the east of the region, along the Indus river, had some Buddhist principalities been established in the early centuries of the Christian era to protect and control what was then an important, though arduous, route leading from the Indian subcontinent across the mountains to Central Asia; and even there Buddhism did not spread to the bulk of the population. The rest of the region, fragmented in many different communities, retained for centuries its polytheisms and its political independence, free of the grip of the kingdoms and empires of the plains.[4] The central and western part of the area in particular—where the Kalasha

4 For references supporting this telegraphic historical sketch, see Cacopardo and Cacopardo 2001: 25–39.

valleys are located—thus remained almost completely beyond the reach of any substantial Brahminical or Buddhistic influence (Fussman 1977: 25; Cacopardo & Cacopardo 2001: 26–28).

Such influences could have easily produced syncretisms like those found for example among some communities of the Himalayas in Himachal and Uttar Pradesh, where ancient local beliefs and practices mix with Hinduistic or Lamaistic institutions and rituals (e.g. Berreman 1963; Chandra 1990). But this is not the case in the Hindu Kush, where we are faced with an archaic cultural universe that, although obviously not to be seen as in any way skirted by history, has followed its own peculiar lines of development.

This circumstance is of special interest if we consider that the people of the Hindu Kush are speakers of languages belonging to two especially archaic branches of the Eastern Indo-European family. With the exception in fact of the Burushaski language spoken in Hunza—a non-Indo-European tongue for which no plausible linguistic affiliation has yet been found[5]—the languages of the Hindu Kush belong to the so-called Dardic and Kafiri (or Nuristani) language groups (Edelman 1983; Fussman 1972; Morgenstierne 1974; Strand 2001; Bashir 2003). The Dardic languages are a group of very conservative (in comparison with those of the plains) Indo-Aryan tongues not traceable to a common origin, among which Kalasha (and especially its closely connected neighbour, Khowar) is considered by Morgenstierne to be one of the most "archaic" (Morgenstierne 1965: 184; 1974: 3). The Kafiri languages—a group of five non-mutually intelligible tongues spoken in Afghan Nuristan—display even more archaic features, to the point that there is general agreement among researchers that they may be considered either a separate branch of Indo-Iranian that issued forth from the undivided stem before the split between Indic and Iranian, or an early offshoot of the Indic branch.

We have here therefore a constellation of archaic cultures which have developed outside the sphere of influence of the great world religions, pertaining to people who are the speakers of the most

5 At the 14th Himalayan Languages Symposium—Gothenburg, 21–23 August 2008—however, Ilija Čašule from Macquarie University (Australia) has argued that Burushaski is probably an Indo-European language. His paper "Burushaski Numerals of Indo-European Origin" is due to appear in *Central Asiatic Journal*, 52, no. 2.

archaic[6] languages of the Eastern branch of the Indo-European languages. Furthermore, the (traditional) technology itself of these societies is archaic. Based on a dual agro-pastoral economy, with a prevalence of herding over agriculture, they display a level of technology which comes close to the conditions depicted for the reconstructed socio-cultural world of the ancient proto-Indo-Europeans (cfr. Mallory 1989: 110–26; Sergent 2005: 177–198).[7] The importance this area can have for Indo-European studies hardly needs, I believe, to be stressed. The knowledge we have of several of these now extinct cultures is limited to what could be gathered after their final (though recent) disappearance, but in the case of the Kalasha, we can still observe one of these systems in function. It is quite surprising, therefore, that the by now fairly consistent materials published on the Hindu Kush in general, and on the Kalasha in particular, have not raised among Indo-Europeanists the attention and the interest they deserve.

Further, it is equally surprising that after decades of quite intense ethnographic work among the Kalasha, this unique non-Islamic culture that can contribute so much to a better understanding of the pre-Islamic world of the whole area, is still, after all, not so well known. It is the aim of this article to contribute to a more extensive knowledge of Kalasha society by an investigation of its largely overlooked internal cultural diversity, conducted through a comparative analysis of a ritual sequence that can be considered the fulcrum of the whole ritual cycle: the Chaumos (*caum'os*) winter solstice festival.

Two varieties of Kalasha culture

The first point to stress is that although all published materials refer generally to Kalasha culture without any further specification, we have in fact two markedly different varieties of this cultural complex.

6 In the sense that they have retained features which have not been preserved in other modern Indo-Aryan languages.

7 The vertical loom, the most archaic weaving device (cfr. Sergent 2005: 190), still in use today among the Kalasha, is one of the most striking examples.

That we should find two cultural varieties within this last minuscule shred of the pre-Islamic fabric of the Hindu Kush, gives us a little hint of the complexity and multifariousness of that ancient cultural world. The two varieties are represented by the culture of the two northern valleys of Bumburet and Rumbur, which is by far the best documented, and that of the southern valley of Birir, the main focus of this work, which is still to a large extent unknown.[8] The differences between these Kalasha communities are perceived by their Nuristani neighbours, who call the people of Birir "Weru" and those of Bumburet and Rumbur "Kasuo". To this cultural division corresponds a quite clear linguistic division: though the two dialects are perfectly mutually intelligible, remarkable differences between the two exist both at the lexical and phonological levels.[9]

Nothing better than the Chaumos[10] winter festival can provide the appropriate key to probe these differences and reflect on their meaning. The Chaumos winter solstice festival is the fulcrum of the whole symbolic system, for in its complex rituality are expressed the deepest and most comprehensive meanings on which the Kalasha world-view is based. To call the Chaumos a festival may seem like a reduction, because it is in fact the focus of a highly complex sequence of ritual events lasting, in both versions, several weeks. Though the analysis of the Chaumos can obviously be of great interest for Indo-European studies, we shall see that the cosmological themes emerging from the rituals go beyond this cultural horizon to join similar quests

8 The most extensive work on Birir is at present Di Carlo 2007, which is dedicated to the Prun autumn festival; on the same festival see Staley 1964, 1982: 71–76; Loude & Lièvre 1987: 206–219 and Lièvre & Loude 1991. Relevant data on Birir are contained also in Lièvre & Loude 1990.

9 Like anthropologists, linguists too have largely—though not exclusively—concentrated on the language of Bumburet and Rumbur, which is by now fairly well documented. See Morgenstierne 1973, Bashir 1988, Trail & Cooper 1999, Heegård 2006. For a discussion of the distribution of Kalasha dialects and their vitality see Morgenstierne 1965: 187–188; Cacopardo A.M. 2001: 281–85; Decker 1992: 104–105; Mørch 2000.

10 For Ralph Turner (1966), the name is connected to *caturmasya* (T-4742), seasonal sacrifices held in India every four months at the beginning of the three seasons (spring, rainy season, autumn) (Stutley & Stutley 1980: 89). References to Turner's dictionary will henceforth be indicated with a T- followed by the entry number.

ritually carried out in other, far away, contexts. As Lévi Strauss noted, in the winter solstice rituals we are confronted not only with traces of the historical past, but with "forms of thought and behaviour that depend on more general conditions of social life" (Lévi-Strauss 1995: 66).

The first ethnographers, and possibly the first Westerners, to participate in a Kalasha Chaumos were the German anthropologists Adolf Friedrich and Peter Snoy, who spent a whole winter in the Bumburet valley as members of the German Hindukush Expedition of 1955–56. The outcome was most unfortunate. The whole district of Chitral remains isolated in winter by the closure of the passes, and the Kalasha valleys were linked to the main valley, in those times, only by a rugged mountain trail. Seriously ill, Friedrich met his death in a Rawalpindi hospital after being carried by porters over the Lowri pass still covered in snow (Buddruss and Snoy 2006: 57–59). For the natives, his tragic death was due to a grave ritual offence: according to a local story still remembered today,[11] he surreptitiously approached—without having undergone the necessary purification rite—the main holy place of the valley when the most sacred ritual of the festival was taking place. The materials collected by Friedrich and Snoy are still largely unpublished, and only what is seemingly just a part of their data on the festival finally appeared after twenty years in Karl Jettmar's comprehensive work—in German—on the religions of the Hindu Kush (Jettmar 1975). Only in 1973 did another researcher, the Austrian Karl Wutt, participate in the Bumburet Chaumos (Wutt 1983).[12] That same year the present writer—together with Alberto Cacopardo and Manuela Borriello—was the first ethnographer to participate in the Rumbur Chaumos (Cacopardo, A.S. 1985, Cacopardo and Cacopardo 1989). The festival of that valley was subsequently documented in full by the French ethnographers Jean-Yves Loude and Viviane Lièvre (1984), while the Birir Chaumos incredibly remained totally undocumented until 2006, when the pre-

11 It was told to Alberto Cacopardo by Abdul Khaliq of Krakar village, Bumburet, who heard it from his father Sumal Beg, a renowned elder at the time of Friedrich's and Snoy's visit (Cacopardo A.M. 2006: 479). The same story, in a slightly different version, is reported by Snoy (Buddruss & Snoy 2006: 59).

12 U. Topper participated in the Bumburet Chaumos in 1962, but published only a very brief description (Topper 1977: 234–36).

sent writer chanced to be for the second time the first ethnographer to participate in a Kalasha winter solstice festival.

But it was not only the Birir winter festival which was left out by anthropologists; the whole culture of the southern valley was mostly overlooked by researchers, who invariably—myself included—set up their quarters in Rumbur, and generally tended to consider the Birir variety as a minor sprout of the main stem of Kalasha culture represented by the two northern valleys. Research conducted among some Islamized Kalasha communities in Southern Chitral (Cacopardo A.M. 1991, 1996; Cacopardo A.S. 1991; 1996; Cacopardo and Cacopardo 1992; 1996) showed instead that the Birir pattern was formerly the more widespread in the area, reversing what had until then been the prevailing perception. We have therefore a vast gap in our knowledge of Kalasha culture; a gap that our recent work in Birir has tried to reduce.[13] But let's enter now the intricacies, and the wonders, of Chaumos.

The Winter Solstice Festival of the Birir valley

To sum up in a few pages a ritual event as complex as Chaumos, and moreover in its two varieties, is a difficult task. The winter solstice festival, as mentioned, is in fact the focus of a whole winter sequence of rituals that should be considered in full. Furthermore, the system of meanings expressed in the festival's rites can only be properly understood within the frame of the whole yearly ritual cycle (Bell 1997: 173–77; Smith 1988: 141; Van Gennep 1981: 77). However, since I have taken this into account elsewhere (Cacopardo, A.S.

13 This article is based on fieldwork conducted by the author in Birir from November 2006 to February 2007 as part of a six-month Is.I.A.O. (Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente) research project devoted to the Kalasha and to Chitral at large, the third of a series inaugurated in 1990. Other members of the team were Alberto Cacopardo, like myself an anthropologist, and Pierpaolo Di Carlo, a linguist. Fieldwork was conducted separately by the three researchers. During my stay in Birir great hospitality was offered by many people, and especially by my host Erfan and his wife. For their precious assistance in my research, I owe special thanks to Baras Khan—who worked with me tirelessly on the transcription and translation of the songs—and to Danok, Erfan, Gulistan, Gulfurus, and Ala-ud-din.

forthcoming), and given the space at our disposal, I think we may be allowed to focus here on the mere structure of Chaumos and especially on its structural fulcrum, that is, on the focal event around which the whole ritual action is construed.

In both versions we can easily detect the classical structure of rites of passage outlined long ago by Van Gennep (1909). A New Year's feast is indeed a collective rite of passage that takes a community from one yearly cycle to the next. As is the case in many societies, the Kalasha system joins the cycle of individual life to the cycle of collective life, by setting initiation rites right at the centre of the festival; but we shall see that while in Birir, they are the focal event of Chaumos, this is not so in Bumburet and Rumbur. We shall start our comparison with the festival of Birir. Since no published record of this festival exists, we shall present here a brief synthesis of its major events.

The first, pre-liminal phase, lasting four days, is the time when adverse supernatural beings appear and must be contained. It is dedicated mainly to the purification—or, better, sacralization—of the whole territory. On the first day (14th December, in 2006) a kid is sacrificed in a place just up-valley of the uppermost village; its blood is collected in a vessel and subsequently sprinkled on juniper fires that are lit above each village by a restricted group of performers (four or five) who slowly descend the whole length of the valley. *desh suc'ein*, purifying the country, is the name of this ritual which marks the separation from ordinary space.[14] Every four years, a special ritual event takes place on this day, which is called *bhut ungush'ek* (= 'to anger'): the bhut spirits are believed to invade the villages at night with their typical 'backwards dance' to anger humans (who stay locked up in their houses) by playing all sorts of tricks—like hiding the ladders that lead to the houses—and turning everything upside down. On the second day (*ruzh'ias*), all houses are swept and cleaned and in the evening, at the goat sheds, the wine vats are ritually opened with a goat sacrifice. This is the day when the souls of the dead are believed to descend to earth and in which witches (*ruzh'i*) run loose in the valley (Loude & Lièvre 1984: 323). On the third day (*goST s'araz*) the goat sheds are purified with juniper smoke. In the evening,

14 I did not participate in this ritual.

tumultuous processions of men and women bearing torches (Fig. 1), coming from the hamlets spread along the valley, proceed to storm the temples located in the three main centers, shouting insults addressing the people of the villages where the temples are located: *g'uru h'Oi zh'awi!* 'People of Guru (village) fuck!' is one of the cries I recorded.

Fig. 1 — Birir valley 16th December, 2006: torch-light procession heading to Guru village for *goST s'araz*, the third day of Chaumos.

Assailants and assailed then gather inside the temples for a long night of songs and dances at the beat of the drums. In this first evening of rejoicing, the members of the lineages pertaining to each temple celebrate their unity.

The community appears here to function according to that dual rhythm of "increased solidarity and exacerbated antagonism" that Lévi Strauss (1995: 68) sees as a polarity typical of the European "December feasts" from the Roman Saturnalia to Medieval Christmas celebrations. The antagonism is basically between youngsters and adults, because it is the former who set the processions in march by giving the departure signal by lighting their torches and leading the chorus of insults, which are directed especially toward the most respected elders of the villages. We have here a reversal of ordinary social relations, which is again a well-known typical feature of New Year celebrations. At the eve of a new beginning, the society sym-

bolically reverts to the formless disorder that preceded creation, to the chaos that preceded the emergence of the cosmos (Eliade 1968: 94).

The group of youngsters is composed of the *'onjiSTa s'uda*, the 'pure boys', i.e. the initiated virgin boys who are considered among the Kalasha the more *'onjiSTa*, the purest, of all human beings. In the approaching central days of the festival these boys become the *prabal'on g'Uak*, the boys of the god Praba, and segregate themselves with the new initiates in the space of the goat-sheds, which are invariably located above the villages, well separated from the houses, at the lower end of the oak forest covering the flanks of the valley. The pastoral ideology pervading the Kalasha system is based on a fundamental *'onjiSTa / r'ela*[15]—rather imprecisely translatable, as mentioned (see fn. 3), with pure/impure—polarity, that is reflected symmetrically in the opposition between herding and agriculture. Hence the *prabal'on g'Uak* confine themselves in the *'onjiSTa* sphere of the goat sheds in the most sacred days of the festival to avoid all contact with the opposite sphere.

On the following day (*nong rat*)—the last of the pre-liminal phase—the *prabal'on g'Uak* get ready for their segregation. They make the round of the villages, collecting grain to make bread in the period of their seclusion, in an extorsive rather than begging manner. In the homes, all kitchen implements are cleaned by the women. In the goat-sheds belonging to the families of the novices, he-goats are sacrificed for the feast to be offered on the following day, when the initiations will take place. Three animals must be sacrificed for each novice. We are here at the very eve of the liminal period. The arrival of the most sacred days is underscored by a brief fast, ending in the early morning with a ritual offering of juniper smoke and rice (*pakt'i s'araz*) on the roofs of the houses. In the name that designates this day—the night of the serpent-monster—we may see a remembrance of Vṛtra, the monster snake of the Rig Veda, the personification of chaos, defeated by Indra at the beginning of Time (Eliade 1979: 226–229; Stutley & Stutley 1980: 496–497). The most archaic of the Aryan gods is a divinity that looms over two of the main deities of Birir, whose names—Praba and Warin—are etymologically connected to

15 In Bumburet and Rumbur the term *pr'agata* is used instead of *r'ela*. Since this article is focused mostly on Birir, *r'ela* is used throughout the text.

Indra.[16] Moreover, Indra can be considered specifically the divinity of Chaumos. To him is dedicated a sacred bread-offering (called *indr harik* = 'to take to Indr') in the holiest rite, and his name—again in the Vedic form, Indr—is invoked, we shall see, in a secret prayer murmured by the holder of the secret formula on the central day of the festival. Furthermore a holy place—marked only by a greenish boulder—specifically dedicated to Indr exists in Birir near the upper village of Biyu, where offerings are made at the time of Chaumos.

A chant announcing the descent of a god is sung in the morning of the next day, the day of the initiations (*ist'ongas rat*),[17] that opens the liminal period. The children are dressed in ceremonial clothes by their maternal uncles: the girls wear for the first time the *kup'as*, the heavy cowry-shell-covered Kalasha headdress, and the boys the traditional woolen trousers (Fig. 2). They are then brought to the temple where the boys have to perform a ritual dance in front of the community gathered around them. Before and after their performance the women sing the chant of the descending god, which announces the divine visitor and recalls the main ritual events of the festival. For reasons of space, only the first part of the recorded text is reproduced here below:[18]

\tx	k'ari		khayrio		o	bidrakal'en	ta	uchund'ao			
\mb	kar	-i	khayr	-i	-o	o	bidrakal'en	ta	uchund	-a	-o
\ge	do	-IMPV.2S	peace	-ADJ	-RTM	oh	Bidrakalen	PCL	descend	-PST.A.2S	-RTM
\ft	be benevolent oh Bidrakalen you have come down (on earth)										

\tx	roZHo		th'ara	roZHo		o	bidrakal'en	ta	uchund'ao		
\mb	roZH	-o	th'ara	roZH	-o	o	bidrakal'en	ta	uchund	-a	-o
\ge	blessing	-RTM	on	blessing	-RTM	oh	Bidrakalen	PCL	descend	-PST.A.2S	-RTM
\ft	blessings upon blessings oh Bidrakalen you have come down										

\tx	L'ui	th'um zhe	s'aras	th'um	o	bidrakal'en	ta	uchund'ao		
\mb	L'ui	thum zhe	s'aras	thum	o	bidrakal'en	ta	uchund	-a	-o
\ge	blood	smoke and	juniper	smoke	oh	Bidrakalen	PCL	descend	-PST.A.2S	-RTM
\ft	scent of blood and juniper oh Bidrakalen you have come down									

16 For Praba see T-8782 *pravabhra*, 'a name of Indra'; for Warin T-444 *aparendra* 'unrivalled Indra' (Trail & Cooper 1999).

17 *ist'ongas* is the name of the male purification ritual; *rat* = night.

18 See "Note on transcriptions and Abbreviations", p. 119.

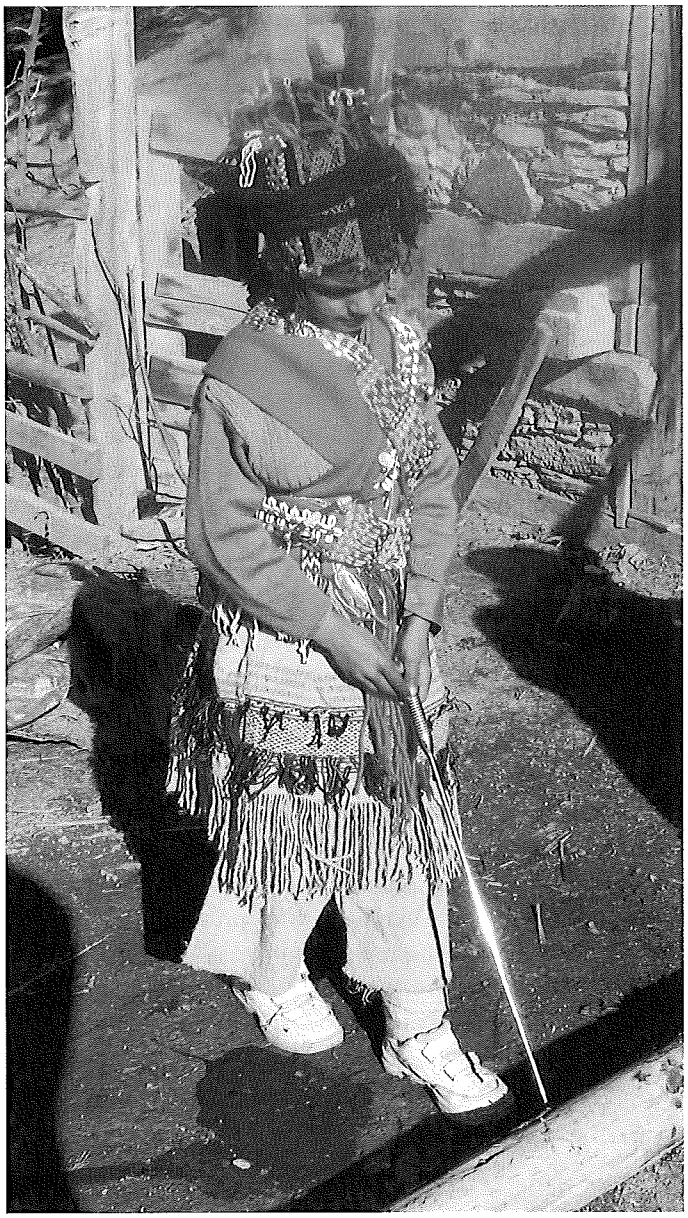

Fig. 2 — Birir valley 18th December 2006: an initiate in ceremonial dress on the eve of *ist'ongas rat*, the fifth day of Chaumos.

\tx b'iram'ari doo o bidrakal'en ta uchund'ao
\mb b'ira -mar -i -do -o o bidrakal'en ta uchund -a -o
\ge he.goat -kill PRF.P -RTM -RTM oh Bidrakalen PCL descend -PST.A.2S -RTM
\ft initiation sacrifices oh Bidrakalen you have come down

\tx k'ari khayrio o bidrakal'en ta uchund'ao
\mb kar -i khayr -i -o o bidrakal'en ta uchund -a -o
\ge do -IMPV.2S peace-ADJ -RTM oh Bidrakalen PCL descend -PST.A.2S -RTM
\ft be benevolent oh Bidrakalen you have come down (on earth)

The name 'Bidrakalen' occurs only in this chant; it was explained as the name of the divinity who descends on earth for Chaumos.[19]

The initiation rites of the boys are held in the afternoon at the goat sheds, while the initiation of the girls takes place in the homes. Since the pastoral ideology connects men with herding and women with agriculture, in this rite the girls hold bread-cakes in their hands while a burning juniper branch is circled around their heads by an officiating woman; symmetrically, the substance of the male rite is the blood of a sacrificed he-goat. The male ritual may be seen as a blood baptism, because the novice bends down in front of the sacrificial victim, whose blood gushing from the split throat is sprinkled on his shaven skull. With the rite the novices—who are well below the age of puberty—attain the highest *'onjiSTa* state and must avoid all contact with adults. They hence soon disappear into seclusion to reappear only two days later at the end of the festival.

In the evening the male population of the valley is feasted in the goat sheds by the relatives of the novices, who provide meat, bread and wine for whoever turns up. The men therefore make the round of the goat sheds in a body, spending the whole evening in an itinerant banquet in which orgiastic excesses of food and drink are the norm, which results in a generalized state of alcoholic exhilaration, when not outright drunkenness. But the treat does not only consist in com-

19 The etymology is uncertain. Rather than with Indra the connection may be with Vr̥tra. Di Carlo (pers. com.) proposes: b'idra-kal-en = vr̥tra-time-LOC, 'in the time of Vr̥tra'. He sees *kal* as possibly having to do with time, the year (*k'au/k'aluna*), and *en* as possibly a locative suffix.

mensality and consumption, for meat and bread are also handed over to the guests for them to take home. More than a banquet, we have here a true distribution of foodstuffs. The pole of 'increased solidarity' emerges again: through commensality and sharing of goods, the lineages connected to each temple celebrate their unity. The women do not participate, because they are not allowed in the goat sheds and are generally excluded from the *'onjiSTa* pastoral sphere.

Once the round of the goat sheds of the novices is completed, men and women gather in the temple for a full night of celebrations. The community at this point is divided into two sections: the small group of the *prabal'on g'Uak*, including the novices and a few accompanying closely related male adults, in the upper belt of the goat sheds; and the rest of the population, male and female, in the valley bottom where the villages are located. We may infer that the two sections can be identified with the two poles of the fundamental *'onjiSTa-r'ela* polarity, even if many males are left with the women in the lower *r'ela* section. This is quite understandable if we consider that the polarity has a relative character. If, in general terms, men are *'onjiSTa* and women are *r'ela*, married men who habitually have sexual intercourse are *r'ela* as opposed to the *'onjiSTa s'uda*, the virgin boys. Hence they are not admitted in the seclusion area of the goat sheds and remain with the women in the area of the villages.

In 2006, after several hours of dancing and singing in the temple, in the dead of the night between December 17th and 18th, a procession of torches left the temple of the lower village of Guru to reach the up-valley village of Aspar, at less than an hour's walk. The people of Aspar are divided into two lineages which trace descent from the same ancestor as those of Guru. In this crucial night of Chaumos, the unity of the two lines of descent was being celebrated. This brief passage from my field journal may give a faint idea of the atmosphere of the event:

> *I walked out of the temple and I saw a group of women at the beginning of the Aspar trail holding their torches in their hands, ready to light them at a small bonfire burning beside them. All of a sudden the procession started out. In that same moment we saw the flames of the torches, and we heard the cries, of the prabal'on g'Uak who were leaving the goat shed above us heading, like us,*

up-valley, but following a higher path. I found myself in the midst of a forest of crackling torches winding up the frozen path while the women were chanting Bidrakalen. At a spot where the trail crossed a small gorge, an enchanted scene was displayed before my eyes: the whole hillside in front of me was alight with torches shedding their red light on the polychromous ornaments of the women holding them, who had stopped to light up the treacherous crossing. I reached for my camera but it was only a short moment, the women were again on the move and the spell was dissolved.

When the procession approached the village and we could hear the drums and the singing in the temple, the cry *zh'awi!*—fuck!—directed to the people of the village, again resounded in the night. After an hour of dancing in the Aspar temple, at a signal given by the women, the procession turned back and reached Guru in the early hours of the morning. But the celebration was still not finished. A circle of women formed around a bonfire on one of the terraced roofs and a singing game was played: one girl holding a stick was left in the middle; she was pursuing and threatening another young woman who was outside the circle protected by the women holding hands. The song accompanying the game was of an explicit sexual nature:

\tx	Law'ak	Law'ak	manD'aw	k'ocaw		Law'ak
\mb	Law'ak	Law'ak	manD'aw	koc	-aw	Law'ak
\ge	fox	fox	vagina	dig	-AGENT	fox
\ft	fox, fox, vagina digger fox					

\tx	manD'olaka			khan'ashu	t'ai	ph'istako			LO'ai	parau
\mb	manD'ol	-ak	-a	khan'ashu	t'ai	ph'ista	-ko	LO	-ai	par-au
\ge	vagina	ENDM	GEN	penis	2S.GEN	penis	-ENDM	mix	-PRF.P	go-PAST/A.3S
\ft	vagina's penis, your penis got mixed[20]									

The game was explained as representing a fight between an angry

20 The words *manD'olaka*, *manD'aw* and *khan'ashu* were said to be used only in this song. They are not the standard terms for vagina and penis; while *ph'ista* is glossed as 'genital organs' in Trail & Cooper (1999). *Lo'ai par'au* is seemingly a composite form where the second term only conveys information about the aspect of the verb.

husband (the girl in the middle of the circle holding a stick) and his wife (the girl outside the circle) who was protected by her friends.[21] The obscene words of the song can be seen as intended to stimulate the reproductive energy necessary to ensure fertility, one of the main themes of the festival. The women had taken up the initiative in the ritual events of the night, and were now celebrating what can be seen as a ritual of female solidarity against male dominance. If the segregated group of the *prabal'on g'Uak* was exclusively male, the procession in the valley bottom was primarily female. The male-female polarity parallels here the division of the community in two sections, and from here the theme of fertility emerges, expressed by the ritual obscenities.

The *prabalon g'Uak*, in the meantime, were proceeding up-valley towards the sacred side-valley of Jagar, where the altar of the god Praba is located. Their nocturnal ascent along the treacherous mountain trail is probably to be seen as part of the initiatic ordeal. Their path is called the 'white trail' (*gh'ora r'eZHa*), because they reach the holy place with the 'white' light of dawn. There they sacrifice a small kid and smear its blood, mixed with flour, on the stones of the shrine, an act symbolizing that "the victim is entirely dedicated to the god" (Hubert & Mauss 1964: 35–36). It is a holocaust sacrifice that requires the burning of all the remains of the victim, bones included. After the rite, the boys rest for a few hours in some neighbouring goat sheds. In a way, we may say that the whole community participates in their trial, for they are accompanied in their itinerary by the torchlight procession to Aspar and they will be accompanied back on the approaching last day of the festival.

In the following day (*kot shat'ek* = 'to set the towers on fire') the festival reaches its climax. Up to this point the two moieties into which the valley is divided have conducted identical rites separately. In this crucial day, in contrast, the whole population of the valley reunites in the central dancing place at the mouth of the sacred Jagar valley. The ritual activities of this long day are so numerous and intense that there is no way to do them justice here. After the sleepless night, the people gather in the late morning and singing and dancing

21 We have notice of a similar game being played in pre-Islamic Nuristan, in the Waigal valley (Klimburg 1999: 179).

goes on the whole day. The novices again dance under the eyes of the community, but this time in the area of the goat sheds and in front of an exclusively male crowd. A game follows—called *nog'or* ('fortress') *grik* ('to take')—always in the area of the goat sheds, which is a sham fight between the *prabal'on g'Uak* and a couple of married men who boldly trespass a line separating the *r'ela* from the *'onjiSTa* space: among much joking and laughter they are expelled by force and sent rolling down the hill. The same contrast between *'onjiSTa* and *r'ela* is enacted in a ritual that follows which is called *law'ak* ('fox') *bih'ik* ('to be afraid') and consists of a chase in which the *prabal'on g'Uak* pretend to scare a fox—an animal symbolically connected to the sexual sphere—out of their territory. Eventually the *prabal'on g'Uak* move on to the holy place of the god Praba, to witness the result of a race that is the focal event of the day and maybe of the whole festival.

Fig. 3 — Birir valley, 19 December 2006: *kot shat'ek*, the sixth day of Chaumos. The two sets of poles represent the two moieties. They stand near the shrine of the god Praba. The burning one belongs to the down-valley moiety. The brushwood in the other one has already been burnt.

Runners of the two moieties—up-valley and down-valley—compete torch in hand to be the first to reach two tall stacks of brushwood set

between two groups of high wooden poles (*kot*) that stand by the altar, and set them on fire. The two stacks stand for the two moieties. Good fortune accrues to the winning group. In 2006 the race was won in a rather unfair way by the up-valley half, whose men set their stack on fire before the beginning of the race was officially signalled (Fig. 3, above). What seemed like a true village brawl—and not a sham fight—ensued, involving nearly all the men, either as aggressors or would-be pacifiers. I was assured it was a traditional outcome, taking place every year.

Again we see solidarity and antagonism going hand in hand. On the day when the whole valley community is finally reunited, a fight erupts. But, as remarked by Lanternari (1983: 56), author of a major study on New Year celebrations, "social cohesion...is celebrated and reconfirmed just through a dialectical process that enacts antagonisms, divisions, ritualized competition" (cfr. Caillois 2001: 126). Through the dramatic representation of conflict, a superior unity is reaffirmed. Following Mircea Eliade (1968: 78 ff., 93; 1976: 324), who considers ritual fights between opposing groups as a typical trait of New Year festivals in general and of those of the Indo-Europeans in particular (Eliade 1979: 211), the race and its violent outcome could be seen in the light of the chaos/cosmos dichotomy: on one side the competition generating the fight representing chaos, and on the other the return of an ordered cosmos when the communal dancing and singing are resumed. At the root of the ritual race, however, the dichotomy light/darkness is quite manifest. The winner of the race, on the eve of the winter solstice, lights the fire that symbolizes and propels the return of the sun at the end of the darkest part of the year. The race hence represents the victory of light over darkness. On one side we have darkness, chaos and conflict; on the other sunlight, ordered cosmos and social solidarity. The race has therefore also the traits of a fertility rite (cfr. Frazer 1987: 316–17). Something due, for Eliade (1976: 214) "...to the archaic concept that blows, competitions, rough games between groups of opposite sexes etc. increase and stimulate the energy of the universe."

After the brawlers were pacified, the singing and dancing resumed. At a certain moment I was summoned to the nearby goat-sheds where a very *'onjishta* rite was taking place. I was asked to remain at a distance: a group of men led by an officiant holding a

leafy branch was murmuring a secret prayer (*gac*) near a small fire while the drum was beating a slow and solemn rhythm. The rite lasted some minutes and ended with the cry *zh'awi!* A connection with fertility and reproduction seems apparent. The secret prayer, I was later told, was addressed to Indr. We returned to the dancing ground but the feast was approaching its end. The man who had led the secret prayer—a religious expert belonging to the Aliksherdari lineage who is the holder of the secret text—irrupted at a certain point among the dancers and took the lead of a chain of men and women which grew longer and longer finally involving all the dancers in a wiggling serpentine that was stamping the ground at a fast pace, knocking down whoever stood in its way. Gradually everyone joined the long chain that seemed a concrete enactment of the unification finally achieved between the different components of the society. It was the dance of the markhors. While dancing, everybody sang the *sharacath'aki* song which announced the arrival of the markhors, the wild caprids (*Capra Falconeri*) deemed to be the domestic goats of the fairies of the mountains, which are therefore connected to the high *'onjiSTa* sphere:

\tx	wa~	k'arae			sh'ara	'ilo			
\mb	wa~	kar	-a	-e	sh'ara	'i	-u	-o	
\ge	place	make	-IMPV.2P	-RTM	markhor	come	P/F.3S	-RTM	
\ft	make room! the markhor is coming!								

\tx	sharacath'aki	zh'aLo			
\mb	sharacat'aki	zhal	-au		
\ge	markhor/dance	arrive	-PST.A.3S		
\ft	the time of the markhor dance has come!				

\tx	sh'ara	'ile			mish'ari	h'iu		
\mb	sh'ara	'iu		-e	mish'ari	hi		-u
\ge	markhor	come.P/F.3S		-RTM	mixed	become		-P/F.3S
\ft	the markhor is coming, there will be mixing							

\tx	s'onay		k'irik	th'arae		'ile	
\mb	son	-ay	k'irik	thara	-e	'iu	-e
\ge	high.pastures	-LOC	snow	on	-RTM	come. P/F.3S	- RTM
\ft	in the high pastures he comes walking on the snow						

\tx	m'ai	muzh'ik
\mb	m'ai	muZH'ik
\ge	1S.GEN	markhor.kid
\ft	my markhor kid	

The dance enacted the irruption of the wild, *'onjiSTa* sphere of the high mountains into the symbolic centre of the village, the dancing ground, the heart of the domestic sphere. Another basic polarity was being integrated. In the pastoral ideology of the Kalasha the wilderness of the mountains is the spatial locus of the *'onjiSTa* sphere. The untouched nature of the high mountain pastures, where men are only visitors, is opposed to the low, domestic, sphere of agriculture where nature is reshaped by the hands of men. The polarity appears to imply an ethical statement about the relations between humans and nature. With agriculture, man sets himself as the master of nature and submits all other beings to his needs; while in herding man is a guest, and only one among many other beings, for the resources of nature are not his, but belong to the spirits. We have here an example of that "ideology of sacrilege"—largely attested in traditional cultures (Lanternari 1976: 429–442)—that considers the appropriation by man of the life of other beings—animals and plants—as a sacreligous act that needs to be ritually atoned.

At the climax of the great celebration, all oppositions—human/divine, male/female, up-valley/down valley, wild/domestic—are brought to unity. In the course of this central day, the communion of man with the divine is first represented with the holocaust sacrifice held at dawn at Praba's shrine; then the communion between men with the overcoming of the contraposition between the two moieties; and finally the communion of man and nature is celebrated with the symbolic descent of the markhors who, as sung in the song, "mix with men". Condensed in the rites of just a single day, the essential concerns are expressed which are at the core of the festival and which, as remarked by Izard & Smith (1988: 14) are "at the core of all cultures: to account for the relation of man with nature, of man with

society and, in the last instance, of humans with their individual destinies." We have witnessed, in the course of the festival, a gradual descent of the *'onjiSTa* sphere into the *r'ela* one: a gradual penetration of the male into the female principle, from which life arises. With the integration of all polarities, the beginning of a new cycle is celebrated together with the regeneration of all that lives.

The carrier of the leafy branch finally danced through the fire around which the serpentine had been whirling, stepping resolutely on the flames to extinguish them, and leading the whole chain of dancers through it. Thus the fire was put out and the long day of celebration was over. The leafy branch the officiant was holding, surprisingly was not juniper, the most *'onjiSTa* tree. It was the mistletoe, Frazer's Golden Bough.

The following day, the seventh consecutive one, is the last of Chaumos. It is called *da'U tat'u*, the day of the collection of the beans. The *prabal'on g'Uak* retrace their steps along the "white trail" to the goat sheds where they spent the first night of seclusion. The community accompanies them by gathering for a last morning dance in Aspar while the boys make a stop in the goat sheds above the village. Before dusk the dance ends and the boys proceed to where they started from for the *zar'ori s'araz*, the ritual of reintegration—the last phase of the rites of passage in Van Gennep's model—that ends their seclusion; from now on they can be the officiants in rites and can go with the men to the high pastures. The rite is the standard one, only that the usual juniper branches are replaced by boughs of mistletoe.[22]

In European folklore, great virtues are attributed to this evergreen parasite plant that only grows on other trees. It is deemed to stimulate the fertility of plants, animals and humans (Frazer 1987: 658–663; Van Gennep 1988: 3476–80, 3492). I did not hear of such properties from the Kalasha; but what better symbol of fertility and regeneration than an evergreen plant that produces its fruit, the little whitish and translucent berries, in the coldest and darkest time of the year when a new cycle is about to begin?

22 The standard rite is called *s'araz dek*, to give juniper. In the name of the closing rite of Chaumos, the word for juniper (*s'araz*) is retained and the term for mistletoe (*zar'ori*) is added, though only the latter is burnt. Like all adult married men, I could not participate in this ritual.

Meanwhile, since the morning, the little girls have been making the round of the villages collecting beans, another symbol of abundance and fertility, well known in Europe as well. Beans are seeds, as well as fruits, and thus they contain the principle of life (cf. Propp 1978: 47). After all polarities have been reintegrated in the great feast, and the *'onjiSTa* principle has penetrated its opposite, fertility becomes the dominant theme. The treat is for the women only. The beans are cooked by the girls in the temple where at night the youths gather, and they are then distributed to the families in proportion to their members. Men do not eat any; they still have the meat of the sacrifices. Once again social ties are reaffirmed, but this time chiefly between women.

After Chaumos is over, the winter ritual sequence of Birir continues with two events—*lag'aur* and *jan'i*—set at intervals of one or two weeks (each lasting several days, but the second one concerning only little girls) which focus largely on fertility and reproduction and are also explicitly aimed at training children in the correct performance of ritual activities. The rite that properly initiates the New Year—*salgher'ek*[23]—follows at the beginning of February and it includes an animal sacrifice at the shrine of the god Mahandeo. It may seem surprising that the actual beginning of the New Year should not coincide with the winter solstice, but the logic of the system may be that the end of a cycle, which Chaumos celebrates, must be kept distinct from the beginning of the new one; end and beginning that is, though indissolubly connected, are not one and the same. Between them we have therefore a "period of margin" (Van Gennep 1981: 157), a "crepuscular phase" which, it may be interesting to note, seems to correspond to the one highlighted by Cardini (1995: 191) in the winter cycle of Italian folklore, where we have a similar temporal structure from the Epiphany to the two following festivities of Sant'Antonio Abate (January 17th) and Candelora (February 2nd).

The long winter cycle of Birir finally ends a couple of weeks later with a ritual event (*ra'istam*) conceived as the completion of the initiations and as a blessing for the approaching sowing season through a rite in which some grains of millet are dipped in the blood

23 The Persian word *sal* is used here for 'year' instead of the Kalasha *k'au. gh'erek* means 'to turn over, rotate'.

of a sacrificed animal and are subsequently scattered on the ground still covered in snow.

The comparative focus of this article does not allow us to go into the details of these rituals because we must now turn our attention to the Chaumos of Bumburet and Rumbur to highlight the differences, and similarities, with the festival of Birir.

The Chaumos of Birir and the Chaumos of Bumburet/Rumbur: a comparative sketch

As may be expected, of course, the differences between Birir and Bumburet/Rumbur do not concern only the Chaumos, but the whole yearly cycle of calendrical festivals. For the scope of this article, however, we must concentrate on the winter sequence centered on the solstice festival which, on the other hand, is the focal point of the whole cycle. Since quite detailed accounts of the Chaumos of Rumbur as well as of that of Bumburet are published (Wutt 1983; Loude & Lièvre 1984; Cacopardo A.S. 1985; Cacopardo & Cacopardo 1989), we shall concentrate here only on the structural differences with that of Birir.

A comparison between the two complexes shows indeed noteworthy differences that concern the structure itself of the event. In fact there are differences also between the festivals of Bumburet and Rumbur, but within the frame of an essentially homogeneous pattern. In the case of Birir, instead, the whole structure is different, even though many elements are the same.

The structure is different in the first place because the Bumburet/Rumbur festival includes some rites that in Birir are celebrated in the festivity of Lagaur mentioned above, which comes after Chaumos and is considered separate from the winter festival. The Chaumos of the two northern valleys therefore is longer, lasting twelve days interspersed with some empty days (*mic 'adua*) used for preparations, for a total of more than two weeks.

A further macroscopic difference is that in Bumburet/Rumbur, drums are forbidden for the whole duration of the festival; the music for the dancing is provided only by singing and the clapping of hands. This means that the songs and dances that characterize all the other

calendrical festivals, as well as social celebrations such as funerals or feasts of merit,[24] are banned. Such prohibition bestows on the Bumburet/Rumbur Chaumos a character of absolute uniqueness that sets it clearly above other festivals as the focal point of the whole ritual year. We shall see shortly how this prohibition is explained.

Another major structural difference concerns the morphology of the isolation of the liminal phase. While in Birir only the novices and the other *prabal'on g'Uak*, with the few adults accompanying them, isolate themselves in the goat sheds, in Bumburet and Rumbur the whole male community sleeps in the stables for the central days of the festival,[25] where men make their own bread, baking it on stone slabs to avoid use of any implement that has come in contact with women. Sexual relations are forbidden and men must avoid even sitting on a bed when they go down to the villages during the day for the celebrations. The *'onjiSTa* and the *r'ela* must be kept separate. These however, as mentioned, are relative concepts: though Kalasha women are *r'ela* in relation to Kalasha men, the whole Kalasha people are *'onjiSTa* in relation to the Muslims. Hence the whole community isolates itself from the external world through a series of additional prohibitions: Kalasha converts must leave the villages; tea and cigarettes are banned, as well as soap, radios and any other item coming from outside. Such ritual isolation termed "village cloistering" by Macdonald (in Nicoletti 2006: 137), is a quite common practice in the Himalayas.

If in Birir the community identifies symbolically with the novices and the other *prabal'on g'Uak* in their isolation, in Bumburet and Rumbur the identification is ritually enacted. Not only the novices, but all males undergo the purification ritual of *ist'ongas* in the goat sheds, whether or not there are novices among them; and all women are purified with the *sh'ish au* ritual.

This period of separation of the sexes and isolation from the external world—called *dic*—covers in Bumburet and Rumbur the whole liminal phase of the festival.[26] The community as a body

24 For detailed analyses of Kalasha oral art, see Parkes 1993, 1996, and Di Carlo 2007: 65–76, 89–97.

25 Already in 1973 this prescription was not strictly adhered to in Rumbur.

26 Until very recently the period of seclusion lasted seven days in Rumbur, but only three in Bumburet (Loude & Lièvre 1984: 256; cfr. Wutt 1983: 144). In

undergoes, as it were, the initiatic ordeal that marks the passage from one stage to the next. In other words, the crucial moment in the individual life of the novices is made explicitly to coincide with the crucial moment in the life of the community represented by the end of the yearly cycle.

At the climax of this liminal period we have what may be considered the fundamental structural difference between the Birir Chaumos and that of the two northern valleys. In the time when the community is all turned towards the *'onjiSTa* sphere, the human and the divine are brought together: the god Balimain descends to earth. It is to this central event that all the other structural differences are due: the drums cannot be played because such is the will of the visiting god, expressed through a shaman; and the period of "village cloistering" and separation of the sexes is conceived as preparation for his arrival. We have seen that in Birir as well, the descent of a divinity is announced in the chants, but he is not called Balimain, the set of sacralizing prescriptions is lacking and the ritualization of his arrival is reduced, possibly, to the nocturnal sacrifice at Praba's shrine, a most *'onjiSTa* ritual in which I could not participate.

Balimain, the visiting god of Bumburet/Rumbur arrives on a winged horse with hooves of burning embers in the most sacred days of the festival, during the period of seclusion. Behind his name emerges the figure of Indra, the ancient tutelary deity of the Indo-Aryans, to whom many hymns of the Rig Veda are addressed. The most likely etymology of the god's name is in my opinion *bal'ima-in*, where *bal'ima* would be an epithet borrowed from Kati, the geographically closest Nuristani language, meaning 'most-powerful' and used in hymns as an attribute of divinities (Morgenstierne 1951: 180, 184; cfr. Jettmar 1975: 358), while *in* stands for Indra.[27] Just as Indra

2006, I heard that since many infringements of the rules had taken place in Rumbur, Qazi Koshnawaz (one of the leading ritual elders of that valley), following instructions received in a dream, had ordered a number of atoning goat-sacrifices and had declared that the period of seclusion was going to be reduced to three days the following year; but the prescriptions were to be respected in full.

27 In Rumbur we have another instance of the use of this adjective for a deity: *bal'ima JaC*. Morgenstierne (1973: 154) hypothetically suggests a derivation from **Bala-mahendra*. Di Carlo (pers. com.) remarks that his proposal would

is depicted as the founder of the New Year festival in Indian epic literature (Dumezil 1929: 111, 122–24), so is Balimain considered the re-founder of Chaumos in this version of Kalasha mythology (Jettmar 1975: 354–55). It is believed that it was he who established the prohibitions mentioned above and instructed the Kalasha in the rituals to be performed for his arrival. In fact we may say that the identification of Balimain with Indra is quite explicit: he is called often In or Indr in songs and prayers (e.g. Jettmar 1975: 384); the holy place dedicated to him, in Bumburet, is called *indr'eyn*; the place where the sacred fire is lit for the ritual performed to receive him is called *'indras kot* (cfr. Jettmar 1975: 356), the fortress of Indra; and the name of his horse, we were told, is *'indras*, which is a genitive. We have already seen, on the other hand, that in Birir as well Indra is the god of Chaumos.

Though Indra is a complex deity, to whom many activities are attributed in the texts, some of his main aspects can indeed be found in Balimain. In a hymn of the Rig Veda, Indra sets the sun alight (Eliade 1979: 228), in another text he is described as "the one who inflames", and the original meaning of his name is possibly the one stated in the Rig Veda where generative power and vigour are indicated as his main characteristics (Stutley & Stutley 1980: 170). Balimain is explicitly connected to fire as shown by the burning embers of his steed and the bonfires and torch processions with which he is welcomed; while his connection with the power of generation is stated clearly in the prayers with which he is addressed: "*gum bi zhe putr bi de*", 'give us seed of wheat and seed of children'. If we further consider that the reproductive power of Indra is identified with the energy of the stallion and is associated with his bay horses, we find in Balimain's representation as a rider another strong indication of the basic identity of the two figures.

Most interestingly, another Vedic divinity is associated with Balimain. The attendant of the god, we were told in Rumbur, is called

again lead to Indra: *bala-maha-indra*; for *bal'a*, 'huge' in Kal., see T-9161 *b'ala-*, 'power, strength' (Trail & Cooper 1999: 26). A different etymology is proposed by Loude & Lièvre (1984: 262). For a still different proposal formulated in the past by the present author see Cacopardo A.S. 1985: 740–741.

Pushaw (*p'ushaw*), a name which leads quite directly to Pushan (*p'ushan*) "a divinity whose name derives from the root *puS* 'to nourish', with reference to his role of divine dispenser of fertility" (Stutley & Stutley 1980: 350). Pushan is a deity associated with the sun and the partition of the solar year, and he is the guide of wayfarers (ibid; cfr. Sergent 1997: 318–19). The etymology of his name is connected with the term *puSya*, which in the Rig Veda indicates vigour (T-8306) as well as the month of December-January (T-8307). There could have been no more appropriate companion for a god like Balimain who arrives for the winter solstice to bring reproductive energy to animals, plants and humans; and it is interesting to note that the two deities are found associated in a Vedic hymn (RV, VII. 35, 1) where Indra and Pushan are reunited in a dual divine being, called Indra-Pushan (Stutley & Stutley 1980: 174).

Though the Balimain complex is present both in the Bumburet and in the Rumbur Chaumos, the real centre of the cult is however in Bumburet, because it is in a precise place in that valley that the god is believed to descend to earth; while in Rumbur the visiting deity does not have its own shrine and is welcomed at the altar of the god Sajjigor, of whom he is said to be a guest.

The place of the god's descent in the Bumburet valley is called, as we have just seen, *indr'eyn*. By the express will of Balimain, oral traditions state, no altar was to be built there, for the god wished its worship to be different from that made to the other divinities (Jettmar 1975: 355, 362). The holy place is therefore only a stony clearing surrounded by a thicket of evergreen oak trees, at the foot of a steep rocky cliff. On the west side of it, by a holly oak tree, a level grassy space has been created through some terracing where the god's 'nest' is prepared—a small structure of willow reeds—while on the east side a stone set upright marks the place where a lamb is sacrificed on the night of his arrival (Fig. 4). The holy place is located in the side valley of Batrik which parallels the sacred Jagar valley of Birir, and can be considered the main ceremonial area of Bumburet.

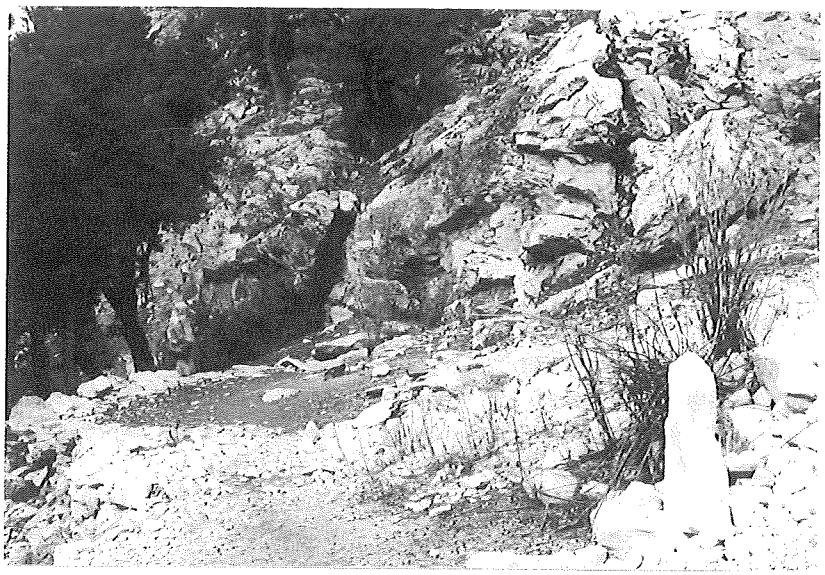

Fig. 4 – Bumburet, November 2006: *indr'eyn*, the holy place where Balima-In is received on the Nangairo night.

The rites performed at *indr'eyn* on the Nangairo night are complex. Only a very brief synthesis of them is possible here. The only eye-witness account of the event is that provided by Snoy who in 1955, after undergoing the purification ritual, was allowed to remain at the shrine for the nocturnal ritual. In the evening, torchlight processions proceeded from the whole valley to Batrik. While the women stayed behind at the village, the men went on to the holy place where a sowing rite was performed by seven pure boys—the *inw'aw g'Uak* (In's boys)[28]—by dipping some wheat grains into the blood of a lamb sacrificed for the purpose. At this point, the *deh'ar*, the shaman, fell into a trance and made divinations for the coming year. Contextually a functionary was nominated (*r'oy*) who is charged with a number of ritual duties for the year to come. All men then withdrew to the village where obscene songs and dances were staged, while the seven pure boys, chaperoned by some adult custodians, stayed at the holy place

28 The suffix *aw* is an adjectivizer (Trail & Cooper 1999: 351).

where, having lit seven fires representing the seven gods of the valley gathering there to greet Balimain, they remained in vigil to welcome the god. The climax of the event was reached in the early hours of the morning. The impure adults (*m'Aka moc*) left the dancing ground of Batrik village and headed back to *indr'eyn* as a menacing throng, bragged of having raped the women, and launched an assault on the virgin boys, threatening to rape them as well; a ritual that enacts on a grander scale the same theme of the pure/impure contrast that is played out in Birir's *nog'or grik*. The *inw'aw g'Uak* then struck up the Nangairo song welcoming the return of Balimain, while their custodians defended them with sticks and stones. At this very moment Balimain discharges his blessings on the boys and leaves the valley. The resistance of the custodians then relented, and the *m'Aka moc* finally succeeded in symbolically touching the boys thus participating in the benediction; a conclusion that seems to differ from that of the Birir rite. The merging of the two basic opposites—*'onjiSTa* and *r'ela*—had now taken place and a long line was formed by the men, each holding from the back the hips of the person in front. With a wordless chant the long line slowly proceeded with explicit copulating movements down to the village where the women were waiting (Jettmar 1975: 384–386).[29]

The theme of fecundity and reproduction is quite obviously in the foreground. In one of his main aspects Balimain is no doubt a god of fertility. His cult is connected specifically to the cultivation of wheat, as shown by the rite just briefly described and by the circumstance that, in the myth, he presents the first Kalasha who welcomed him with two ears of wheat (Jettmar 1975: 354). This aspect of Balimain is further underscored by the obscene songs that are typical of Chaumos and of his cult in particular (Loude & Lièvre 1984: 272, 282–285). As is well known, indeed, obscene language contributes to that orgiastic dimension which is largely attested in fertility rites (Eliade 1976: 371–375). The specific connection of this dimension with the Balimain cult

29 According to Wutt (1983: 135–136), who could not witness the nocturnal part of the rite at *indr'eyn*, but gathered information about it, ritual events followed a rather different course when he participated in the festival in 1981: instead of by the menacing throng of *m'Aka moc*, the assault on the pure boys was enacted by two shepherds, notoriously uninterested in women, who had blackened their faces and were wearing goat horns on their heads.

is indicated by the fact that the role of the obscene is not as prominent in Birir.

But the most intriguing aspect of Balimain is that he is represented as a bisexual deity, appearing as male when turning to the right and female when turning to the left (Jettmar 1975: 354, 412), which probably means that his right side is male and his left side is female; a representation with which may have something to do the association (made in ancient India) of the pupil of the right eye with Indra, and of the left eye with his wife Indrani (Stutley & Stutley 1980: 174). In the account of one of our informants his female part was played by his horse who was described as woman-faced.

The male-female contraposition is portrayed as relative in the mythical symbol; this fundamental polarity has been termed 'a root metaphor' because, by being inscribed in the very bodies of the human beings who classify, it is the most obvious conceptual tool to indicate opposed classes (Rappaport 1999: 247–48; Bell 1997:101).[30] In the divine representation this 'mother of all distinctions' is dissolved, revealing itself as ephemeral, tied to the world of forms. It is the supreme unification: the *'onjiSTa* principle manifests itself and it includes its opposite.

Structure and History in the Kalasha Chaumos

It is now time to wrap up our synthetic comparison of the two versions of the Kalasha Chaumos. As suggested by Lévi Strauss (1995: 69), it is important to distinguish here between the historical and the structural point of view. We shall now take up the latter, leaving aside the former for the moment, keeping in mind that to highlight a structural transformation does not amount to a statement about its historicity.

We may be tempted to see in the Bumburet Chaumos a structural transformation of the Birir feast, because in Birir, as we have seen, a visiting god is hailed, but his arrival is strangely not the focal ritual event of the festival. A logical development of the implications of

30 Possibly the most archaic of all metaphors of distinction, if it is true that it can be traced back to the paleolithic (Eliade 1979: 32–33).

such a system would be the full ritualization of the coming of the god; which is exactly what we have in Bumburet. To understand the relation between the two systems we must probe here into the deepest level of meanings in the Kalasha system, the one most removed from the conscious appreciation of the actors.

The fear that the world may not re-emerge from the depths of darkness and coldness into which it is plunged at the heart of winter has been highlighted as characteristic of archaic thought (Brelich 2007: 57; Buttitta 1996: 280; Eliade 1976: 359–360). The affirmation of life can only be ensured by a renewed contact with its source, which lies in the supernatural. For the Kalasha this means an immersion into the *'onjiSTa* sphere, where gods and pure spirits dwell.

In Birir the task of re-establishing the contact with the source of life is entrusted to the children, the novices, and the other *'onjiSTa* boys, the *prabal'on g'Uak*. The society, as we noted, identifies with its children. The novices face the trial that will give them a new individual status, just as they perform a ritual duty for the whole community. Their rebirth is one with the regeneration of the society.

In Bumburet the virgin boys—though not the initiates themselves—play a similar focal role. Like the *prabal'on g'Uak* in Birir, the *inw'aw g'Uak* bear the responsibility of performing the most sacred rituals on behalf of the community in the course of the Nangairo night, when they are confined in the holy place dedicated to Balimain. In Bumburet too the virgin boys are mediators between the world of life and death and that of immortal life. But there the success of their task is more fully ensured by the descent of the god to the very place of their confinement.

In both cases the virgin boys have to go through a symbolic ordeal when they are attacked by the *r'ela* forces. An attack enacted in Birir in the ritual games of *nog'or grik* and *law'ak bih'ik*, and in Bumburet in the assault of the *m'Aka* men trying to touch them and symbolically rape them. The outcome however does not seem to be quite the same. In Birir the *r'ela* forces, impersonated by the attackers, are repulsed, while in Bumburet the assailants eventually manage, once Balimain has showered his blessings over the boys, to catch hold of them. In one case, it appears, the *'onjiSTa* principle simply overcomes the *r'ela*, while in the other there is a final merging of the two; which is further symbolized by the line of men, including the boys, that descend to the

village with copulating movements, and by the obscene singing that follows once the village is reached where the women were waiting. Moreover, the merging of opposites is manifestly symbolized by the bisexuality of Balimain.

The idea of bringing together the opposites, we have seen, is present in Birir as well. There too the festival is pervaded by the theme of unification through the integration of all polarities. But the system appears to lack the idea of their essential coincidence in the divinity, which in the festival of the northern valleys is expressed by the bisexuality of Balimain. Could the full assertion of the *coincidentia oppositorum* be the focus of Balimain's cosmological message?

It may be. But let us see now if this structurally conceivable transformation can in any way be traced at the historical level. In other words, is it possible that the Bumburet/Rumbur Chaumos is a historical development of the Birir morphology?

In the lack of any documentation, we can unfortunately only grope in the hazy realm of conjecture. Karl Jettmar, apparently somewhat startled by the presence in the Kalasha system of such a deep insight—the *coincidentia oppositorum*—in which he even saw a reflection of a system of thought reminiscent of the Greek philosophy of the late classical period, ventured to explain it by suggesting possible external influences of distant Greek/Dionysian and Iranian/Zurvanist origin which could have been transmitted through contacts with the Ismaili Muslims, who have long been present in North Chitral (Jettmar 1975: 357–58).

Though we cannot of course rule out some external influence coming from the surrounding world, it does not seem necessary, however, to resort to what appear as rather farfetched speculations to explain the presence in the Kalasha religion of this profound vision: as Jettmar (1975: 473) himself remarks in the conclusions of his work, religious thought is not the monopoly of literate civilizations. Divine bisexuality is a well-known phenomenon in the history of religions. For Eliade it articulates in biological terms the coincidence of opposites and is "one of the most archaic ways in which the paradox of divinity was expressed" (Eliade 1976: 434).

In this light we must equally reject Jettmar's further suggestion—formulated indeed in quite contradictory terms—that the Balimain

complex may be a very recent development: a suggestion based on the circumstance that at the time of Friedrich's and Snoy's first visit in 1955–56, the cult of the visiting god appeared to be clad in secrecy and limited to a section only of the Kalasha population, while, at the time of Snoy's second visit in 1970, it turned out to be widely acknowledged (Jettmar 1975: 358–59). Such difference can in fact be easily explained with an understandable wish of the people not to disclose to those early western visitors the details of a cult that, for being in sharp contrast with Islamic tenets, they probably preferred to keep to themselves. As Jettmar (1975: 396), again, himself recognizes, the Kalasha must have known Balimain for a long time.

In more reasonable terms, Snoy suggests that the cult may pertain to a more recent layer of Kalasha culture, associated with the cultivation of wheat, as opposed to an older layer, represented by the other rites of the Chaumos festival, associated instead with the cultivation of millet and beans (in Jettmar 1975: 394). That millet preceded wheat in the agricultural world of the Kalasha is indeed quite likely: the fact that the sowing ceremony of Birir is done, as we have seen, with millet instead of wheat would seem to confirm this point. But, on the other hand, the Balimain cult has itself very archaic traits. It is indeed an example of what has been termed "the cultual complex of the visitor" which for Eliade (1968: 96) is rooted in prehistory.

If we do not need to resort to influences from literate civilizations to explain the presence of this complex among the Kalasha, we cannnot however rule out external influences deriving from the other polytheistic religions of the Hindu Kush, before they were submerged by Islam. In pre-Islamic times the cult of a visiting god descending once a year indeed existed in other parts of the region, namely in Gilgit (Biddulph 1880: 107; Müller-Stellrecht 1973) and in southern Nuristan. An influence on the Kalasha is more likely from the latter area, where a similar complex existed in Wama (Klimburg 1999: 146, 177) and in Kattar (Masson 1842,1: 234), both located in the basin of the Pech river. If the name given in Kattar to the divine visitor is not mentioned in our source, we know that in Wama he was Indra himself who, just like Balimain, was expected to arrive on horseback at the end of the year. Like Balimain, who according to the myth was barred from settling in Bumburet after losing a competition with another god, Indra was expelled from Wama after a fight with his son. In pre-

Islamic Nuristan, Wama was the recognized centre of the cult of Indra, for it was the seat of the famous Indrakun vineyard garden, in the midst of which the *indr-ta~* was located, an open air shrine comprising a large effigy of the god next to a sacred tree, a juniper (Klimburg 1999: 148).[31]

Wama, however, is far south of Bumburet and the closest neighbours of the Kalasha, the Kati of the adjoining Bashgal valley, in pre-Islamic times did not have—as far as we know—a visiting god (cfr. Cacopardo & Schmidt 2006: 38–42) and only knew Inthr as a minor deity and not quite as one of their own (Palwal 1969: 66), not to speak of the fact that an influence from Wama should have reached the southern Kalasha first. Kati oral tradition however relates that Inthr originally dwelt in the upper Bashgal valley, from where he was expelled by Imra, their own chief god (Robertson 1896: 388). The myth seems to convey the memory of a time when the cult of Indra was practiced in that area. This could refer to the times preceding the arrival of the Kati from western Nuristan, a migration related by Kati oral traditions, which can be considered a quite certain fact, that should not have taken place much earlier than the middle of the second millennium C.E.

If it is actually the case that the cult of Indra was formerly widespread in upper Bashgal—and the place name Indr-Zyul (Jettmar 1986: 64) lends some support to the myth—where accessible passes lead to both Bumburet and Rumbur, we can surmise that from there it may have spread into the two northern Kalasha valleys. Indeed in some accounts Balimain is said to come every year from Bashgal.[32] The circumstance that the myth explicitly refers to upper Bashgal and not to the lower part of the valley which adjoins the southern Kalasha area, could mean that his cult was not prominent there; which would

31 Four large wine vats carved out of massive boulders were another outstanding feature of this unique holy place, which must have been dedicated to the cult of wine.

32 On the other hand, in other accounts he is said to come from Waigal (see Loude & Lièvre 1984: 264, 268), i.e. from South Nuristan; or from Tsiam (Jettmar 1975: 386; Loude & Lièvre 1984: 286), the mysterious original homeland of the Kalasha, the whereabouts of which are not known. Tsiam, it is worth noting, is the place name mentioned in our earliest source on Chaumos (Friedrich and Snoy, in Jettmar 1975).

explain the absence of the Balimain complex in Birir.

On the other hand it is also possible that the complex of the visiting god was a development internal to the Kalasha world, of which, we have seen, the premises certainly existed in the Birir model.

Another possibility still is that the Bumburet/Rumbur model is just the form that the Chaumos of the Northern Kalasha, centered in pre-Muslim times around Chitral, always had; as opposed to the model of the Southern Kalasha, formerly centered around the area of Drosh, represented by the Chaumos of Birir.

Conclusions

From the historical point of view we are therefore confined, as noted earlier, to the realm of conjecture. Some conclusions can however be drawn from the structural comparison we attempted of the two varieties of the Kalasha Chaumos.

In the first place it is quite certain that Balima-In (or Indr) is to be identified with Indra.[33] Indr is without any doubt the god of Chaumos, both in the Bumburet/ Rumbur and in the Birir versions of the festival, and he is conceived as a visiting god of fertility[34]. Secondly, though it is confirmed that the Balima-In complex does not exist in Birir, we may say that the cultual complex of the visiting god is latent in the Chaumos of that valley, because there are several references to Indr in the course of the festival and his descent is clearly announced, if apparently not fully ritualized. Yet the focalizing element of the two versions is different: in Birir the celebration is focused on the initiation rituals, while in Bumburet and Rumbur the focus is the descent of the visiting god.

Apart from the Balima-In complex, which entails, as we have

33 The close connection between the figures of Balimain and Indra has been highlighted already by Loude & Lièvre (1984: 261, 326). Their suggestions fall just short of an outright identification of the two figures, probably due to the etymology they propose for the name "Balumain" (see fn. 25).

34 As remarked by Fussman (1977: 32) with regard to the pre-Islamic pantheon of the Nuristani, the identity of origin of Indr and Indra is also assured by the presence in the Kalasha language of terms like *idr'O~*, rainbow (T-1577), and *ind'ocik*, lightning (T-1576) (cfr. Trail & Cooper 1999: 127, 128).

seen, some major structural differences, we find in the winter sequence of Birir just about all the elements of the winter solstice festival of the two northern valleys, though differently arranged. The descent of the dead, however, is more simply ritualized, while the emphasis on dangerous and 'chaotic' forces—spirits (*bhut*), witches (*rhuzh'i*) and monsters (*nong*) that loom over the first pre-liminal phase of the festival—appears to be a peculiar trait of Birir.

As for the semantics determined by this differential structural morphology, it seems that the Balima-In complex brings with it a deeper appreciation of the quintessential identity of opposites, expressed by their coexistence in the representation of the divinity. In other words, it appears that the deep insight of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, remains somewhat implicit in the Birir Chaumos, while it reaches in the Bumburet/Rumbur model full expression and articulation.

We have here a fundamental theme that may be seen as a further link with the religious world of India. Although the idea of the coincidence of opposites is widely spread, as noted, in world religions, its role in Indian thought is particularly prominent to the point that it is deemed to have been "one of its characteristic themes long before it became the object of systematic philosophical reflection" (Eliade 1979: 224; cfr. Dumont & Pollock 1959: 34). Eliade highlights indeed "a mighty effort of the Hindu spirit to reach a single principle of explanation of the world, and from a spiritual perspective in which contraries may be united and oppositions cancelled" (Eliade 1971: 84), an effort already present in the Vedas with the idea of the consanguinity of Devas and Asuras, and later developed in the classical metaphysics of Hindu philosophy (ibid: 84–85). Could the bisexuality of Balima-In be an early seed of that profound reflection?

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