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BETWEEN RUINS, REBUILDING AND REMEMBRANCE: THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF PHUGUCH VILLAGE, DAREL VALLEY, GILGIT-BALTISTAN

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the cultural and religious heritage of Phuguch village in Darel Valley, Gilgit-Baltistan, drawing on my ethnographic fieldwork in 2000, 2001, 2009 and 2019. My research focused on the remains of the Buddhist monastery locally known as Naukot (also called Buddhist University), the eighteenth-century wooden mosque and the graves of Muslim mystics. I documented the mosque's carved architectural features and collected information from villagers about the mystics and the religious practices associated with their graves. The mosque was rebuilt in 2018, while the carved wooden tomb of Shah Khel Baba, photographed by Stein (1928), has disappeared. Local people said saint veneration had ceased after the spread of the Deobandi school of thought, although stories about the mystics continued to be told. Based on my observations, interviews, photographs and earlier historical accounts, I discuss the cultural and religious heritage of Phuguch and the changes I documented during successive visits.

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Introduction

Darel Valley is located on the right bank of the Indus River in Diamer District, Gilgit-Baltistan. The Darel River is a tributary of the Indus River. It lies about 80 km west of Chilas town and can be accessed from the Karakorum Highway near Shatial in Indus-Kohistan. Darel Valley is known for its archaeological remains, historic wooden mosques, and fortified settlements. It was once famous for the shrines of Muslim mystics. I became interested in the history and cultural heritage of Darel Valley during my early visits in 2000 and 2001. Over the years, I visited several villages, examined their historic buildings and collected information from local inhabitants.

I first visited Phuguch village in 2000 and returned in 2001, 2009 and 2019. On these visits, I studied and photographed the remains of Naukot, a Buddhist monastery situated on a hill overlooking the village. I also studied the eighteenth-century wooden mosque in the centre of Phuguch, paying heed to its carved pillars, doorways and floral and geometric designs. The Buddhist monastic remains of Naukot and the historic mosque belong to different periods of the village's religious history and occupy separate locations.

Phuguch was also known for the graves of Muslim mystics who, according to villagers, had come from Swat to preach Islam in Darel Valley. Shah Khel Baba was well known among them. His grave was once covered by an elaborately carved wooden tomb. During my conversations with local inhabitants, I heard accounts of these mystics and the devotional practices once performed at their graves.

The main objective of this paper is to discuss the cultural and religious heritage of Phuguch, focusing on the Buddhist remains at Naukot, the historic wooden mosque and its rebuilding, and the graves of Muslim mystics.

Review of Literature

Research on Darel Valley has covered its history, archaeology and cultural heritage. Stein (1928), Tusa (1985), Khan (1999), Tsuchiya (2002, 2005, 2006), and Hauptmann (2024) have contributed to the study of its archaeological past, while Jettmar (1961) examined the region's ethnological traditions. Scerrato (1983, 1984, 1985), Dani (1989) and Kalhoro (2008) discussed aspects of historic wooden architecture of Northern Pakistan in general and the Darel Valley in particular.

Their studies provide information about Buddhist remains, fortified settlements, historic wooden mosques and religious practices. My earlier research (Kalhoro, 2019, 2020, 2021) also discusses the religious heritage and social and cultural changes in Darel Valley. These studies are useful for studying the historic monuments of Phuguch village and the changes I observed during my visits.

The Chinese pilgrims Faxian (Fa-Hsien) and Xuanzang provide some of the earliest written information about Buddhism in Darel, which they referred to as Ta-li-lo/To-li and T'o-leih. Their accounts mention a Buddhist monastery and a large wooden image of Maitreya Bodhisattva. Stein (1928) discussed these accounts while investigating the archaeological remains of Darel. His work is relevant to Naukot (which he referred to as Lohilo Kot), the ruins of a Buddhist monastery on a hill above Phuguch village.

Stein (1928) recorded local accounts of Shah Khel Baba during his visit to Darel Valley and photographed the saint's intricately carved wooden tomb at Phuguch village. The shrine once attracted devotees, but the wooden structure has since disappeared.

Jettmar (1961), in his ethnological research in Dardistan, studied the social organisation, kinship relations, village institutions and religious beliefs of mountain communities. His observations on

wooden platforms, carved architectural elements and village assemblies are relevant to the study of Darel's material culture and communal life. His research also offers comparative material for discussing the wooden architecture and village institutions of Phuguch.

Tusa (1985) surveyed archaeological remains in Darel, including sites associated with the valley's pre-Islamic history. His findings are relevant to the Buddhist remains at Phuguch. Khan (1999) reported the discovery of an Iron Age cemetery at Muzot in Darel. Although Muzot is a separate archaeological site, the findings add to our knowledge of the valley's early settlement history.

Dani (1989) discussed the historic wooden mosques of Darel, including Gayal, Phuguch, Sonigal Bala (Samigal Bala), Manikyala Bala (Manikyal Bala) and Manikyal (Manikyal) Pain. Scerrato (1983) discussed labyrinth motifs in the wooden mosques of northern Pakistan, including the Manikyal Bala mosque in Darel Valley.

Tsuchiya (2002, 2005, 2006) discussed the Buddhist history and other important sites of Darel Valley. Hauptmann (2024) reassessed the pre-Islamic archaeological heritage of the Upper Indus, describing earlier investigations and archaeological evidence. His work is relevant to the interpretation of Buddhist remains in Darel Valley.

Kalhoro (2021) described several religious monuments in Darel Valley, including Buddhist remains, a wooden mosque, and shrines of Phuguch. Earlier studies of Darel Valley have concentrated mainly on its archaeological remains, history and ethnological traditions. Less attention has been paid to the changes affecting the religious monuments of Phuguch. My earlier photographs of the wooden mosque, along with Stein's record of Shah Khel Baba's tomb and my subsequent visits to the village, were useful in studying buildings that have either disappeared or undergone substantial alteration.

Research Methods

I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Phuguch village, Darel Valley, during four visits in 2000, 2001, 2009 and 2019 (Fig. 1). My research concentrated on the Buddhist remains at Naukot, the historic wooden mosque and the graves of Muslim mystics. I studied these sites and photographed their architectural features, paying close attention to the woodcarvings of the mosque and the surviving walls of Naukot. I also spoke with local inhabitants about the history of these monuments and the religious practices associated with them.

I used key informant interviews, semi-structured interviews, observation and informal conversations with villagers. Much of my discussion with local inhabitants focused on the Muslim mystics; I asked about Shah Khel Baba, the graves associated with other mystics, and the devotional practices once performed at these sites. I also collected accounts of changes in religious practices and the disappearance of wooden tombs in Phuguch.

My visits at different times were useful to observe changes in the village's architectural heritage.



Fig. 1. A view of Phuguch village, Darel Valley (photo by the author, 2009).

Alongside my field observations, I consulted earlier archaeological, historical and ethnological studies of Darel, primarily Stein (1928), Jettmar (1961), Tusa (1985), Dani (1989, 2001) and Tsuchiya (2002, 2005, 2006). Their writings provided information about the Buddhist remains, religious monuments and earlier village life. I used these accounts to study the history of sites that had been altered or had disappeared before my later visits in 2009 and 2019. In analysing the material, I distinguished between monuments I personally visited, information collected from local respondents and historical descriptions recorded by earlier researchers.

Naukot: The Remains of a Buddhist Monastery

Naukot is one of the important archaeological sites of Phuguch and provides evidence of the Buddhist presence in Darel Valley before the spread of Islam. The remains of a Buddhist monastery, locally known as Naukot, are situated on a hill, 1.5 km east of Phuguch village in Darel Valley (Figs. 2–4). During my visits to the site, I observed that the remains of its walls were still visible. Local people call it Naukot. It is also known as Buddhist University.

Darel, called To-li or T'o-leih by Faxian and Ta-li-lo by Xuanzang, was home to a famous Buddhist monastery. The earliest source of information about the Buddhist monastery in Darel Valley comes from two Chinese pilgrims, Faxian (Fa-Hsien) and Hsuan-Tsang (Xuanzang).

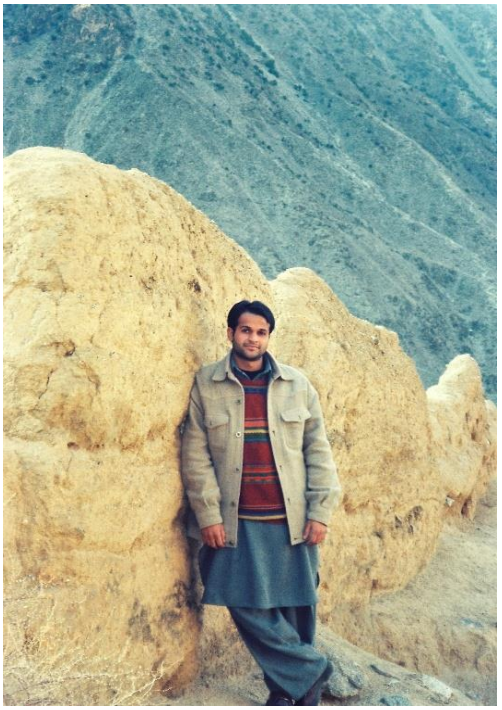


Fig. 2. The author at the remains of the Buddhist monastery at Naukot, Phuguch (photo taken in 2000).



Fig. 3. Remains of the Buddhist monastery at Naukot, Phuguch (photo by the author, 2000).



Fig. 4. Another view of the Buddhist monastery remains at Naukot, Phuguch (photo by the author, 2001).

According to Hauptmann (2024, p.43), Chinese pilgrims, including Faxian (travel 398–412), Song Yun (travel 518–522), Xuanzang (travel 629–645), Huichao, and Wukong (travel 751–790), who travelled through the Karakorum region to India, referred to the gorges of the Indus as the most difficult part of their pilgrimage. The Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Fa-Hsien reached Darel Valley in 401 AD while travelling to India (Tsuchiya, 2012, p. 3115). He visited the Buddhist monastery of To-li/T'o-leih or Darel Valley and mentioned a carved wooden image of Maitreya Bodhisattva. The Buddhist place of pilgrimage in To-li/T'o-leih or Darel Valley was famous for its eight *zhangh,* or twenty-four metre-high statue of the messianic Bodhisattva Maitreya, the Buddha of the future, made of carved and gilded sandal wood (Hauptmann, 2024, p. 44). Later it was also visited by another Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang (travel 629-645 AD), who also mentioned a Buddhist monastery in Ta-li-lo or Darel Valley, which was an old and important seat of the government of the Udayana Kingdom (Stein, 1928; Tsuchiya, 2002, 2005, 2006; Hauptmann, 2024). Later, the scholars investigated the Buddhist remains in Darel and discussed their possible connection with early accounts (Stein, 1928; Tsuchiya, 2002, 2005, 2006). I think Naukot, or Navakot as mentioned by Dani (1995) and referred to as Lohilo Kot (Red Fort) by Stein (1928), is a probable site of the Buddhist monastery which was mentioned by Chinese pilgrims in their accounts. One can still see the remains of the walls constructed of red clay; hence, it was also called Lohilo Kot (Leloo Kot). The word Leloo in local Shina means red. Another Leloo Kot is in Gayal Valley in Darel. People later migrated from Leloo Kot in Gayal and established the present village of Gayal.

Stein (1928, pp. 30–31) visited the shrine of Shah Khel Baba at Phuguch (he spelt it Poguch) and suggested that the village might have been the location of the colossal wooden image of Maitreya Bodhisattva mentioned by the Chinese pilgrims.

The Historic Wooden Mosque of Phuguch: Architecture and Ornamentation

The historic wooden mosque of Phuguch was one of the finest examples of traditional wooden architecture in Darel Valley (Figs.5&6). Dating to the eighteenth century, the mosque was noted for its floral and geometric carvings on its doorways, pillars and other wooden elements.

The mosque had a covered verandah and a rectangular prayer hall. An ornately carved doorway provided access to the verandah. Its wooden doorjambs were decorated with floral and geometric designs, with a prominent sun motif. Similar sun motifs can also be seen on the pillars and doors of wooden mosques elsewhere in Diamer District. The covered verandah had seven arched windows fitted with wooden grilled panels. Its roof rested on five pillars, while three square pillars supported the roof of the main prayer hall (Dani, 1989).

A *hujra* was attached to the covered verandah, with its entrance opening from the verandah. Another doorway led into the main prayer hall. The carved doorway, decorated pillars and wooden panels were all noteworthy. I also saw similar floral and geometric carvings in other historic wooden mosques of Darel Valley.

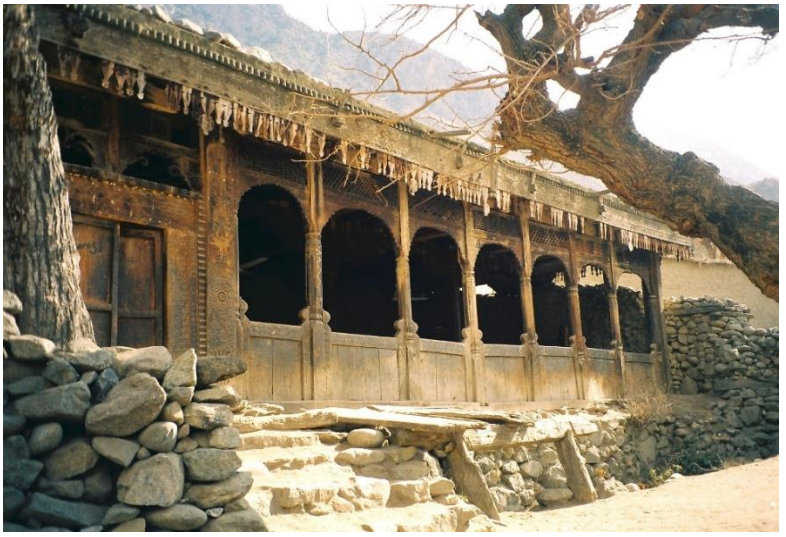


Fig. 5. A view of the historic mosque of Phuguch (photo by the author, 2000).

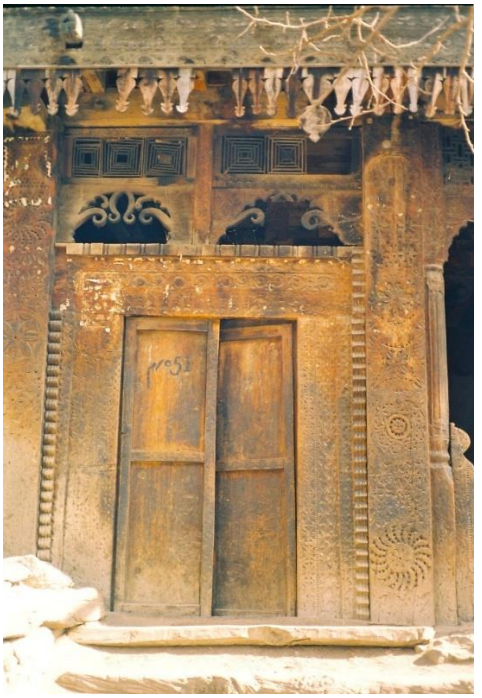


Fig. 6. Main doorway with intricate woodcarvings at the historic mosque of Phuguch (photo by the author, 2000).

Jamia Mosque of Phuguch or Jamat of Phuguch was noted for its ornamentation. One of its prominent decorative features, as discussed above, was the sun motif on the architrave of the main doorway of the mosque. The wooden mosques of Darel and Tangir Valleys were decorated with floral and geometric motifs. Scerrato (1983, p. 25) discussed a labyrinth motif carved on the architrave of the wooden doorway of Manikyal Bala mosque. He interpreted it as a Cretan-type labyrinth. He also discussed labyrinth motifs in many other wooden mosques in Northern Pakistan. Apart from wooden mosques, labyrinth motifs also appear in the rock art of the Upper Indus. Hauptmann (2024, p. 262) discussed the labyrinth at the Shatial rock art site. It was earlier documented by other German scholars (Fussman & König, 1997).

I have also documented labyrinth motifs in the rock art of Karachi, particularly at Lahut Tar in Mol Valley (Kalhoro, 2024).

Apart from the wooden mosque of Phuguch, a wooden sitting platform, locally called *byak* or *karri*, stands near the mosque. It still exists and serves as a sitting place for worshippers and members of the village *jirga*. Dani (1989) refers to it as a *jirga* platform. I have also seen *byak* (also spelt *biyak*) in other villages of Darel. However, two prominent *byak*s, or *jirga* platforms, are located in Biro Kot in Samigal and Manikyal Bala villages. One can also find a wooden *jirga* platform in Harbin-kot in

Harban Valley. These wooden sitting platforms are an important part of social life in the communities of Darel Valley in Diamer District and the valleys of Indus-Kohistan.

Apart from the *byak*, Phuguch village is also noted for its defensive towers, locally called *ghari* or *shikari*. These towers break the village skyline. The tradition of building defensive towers continues in Phuguch village. I will discuss this tradition in another paper.

Mystics, Martyrs and Shrines in Phuguch Village

Phuguch village was once known for its shrines associated with Muslim mystics who, according to local accounts, came from Swat to preach Islam in Darel Valley. Villagers spoke of their arrival, preaching activities and deaths. According to these accounts, some of the mystics were killed by the inhabitants of Darel, who later regretted their actions and erected wooden tombs over their graves. Locally, these mystics came to be known as *shaheeds* (martyrs). Dani (1989, p. 107) mentions that, apart from the mosque, there was a newly built square enclosure in Phuguch containing the graves of *Shaheeds* (martyrs). According to Dani, one grave belonged to Shah Khel. He states that one of the graves was originally surrounded by a wooden enclosure with carved screens and panels which had been demolished by the time of his study in Phuguch.



Fig. 7. Six graves of the *shaheeds* (martyrs), including that of Shah Khel Baba, in Phuguch village, where carved wooden tombs once stood (photo by the author, 2019).

There are seven graves associated with these mystics in Phuguch. Six graves, including that of Shah Khel Baba, are located in the village graveyard (Fig. 7), locally called *jarat*, while the seventh lies across the river, west of the village, at the foot of a hill.

Shah Khel Baba was among the most prominent mystics of Phuguch, and his shrine once attracted devotees from various villages in Darel Valley. An intricately carved wooden structure covered his grave. When Stein (1928) visited Darel Valley during the rule of Raja Pakhtun Wali, he recorded local accounts of Shah Khel Baba and photographed the wooden tomb. The structure has since disappeared, but Stein's photograph preserves a record of its elaborate woodcarvings. Moreover, Stein (1928) also recorded local legends about Shah Khel Baba. One important detail comes from his discussion of Shah Khel Baba that he was a Chishti.

The shrine of Shah Khel Baba and other shrines in Darel Valley, including those at Gayal and Dodokot, were frequently visited by local people who sought the blessings of the mystics and solutions to their everyday problems. For more serious problems, they travelled to Saidu Sharif in Swat to seek the blessings of Akhund Baba. This shows that the people of Darel also venerated Abdul Ghaffur Akhund (d. 1877), popularly known as Akhund Baba or Saidu Baba. He was an influential Sufi saint and religious leader whose spiritual authority extended beyond Swat. He also played an important role in the religious and political life of Swat, while his descendants later became rulers of the State of Swat (Sultan-i-Rome, 1992).

Although people no longer observed these practices during my visits, they still recounted stories about Shah Khel Baba and his place in the religious history of Darel.

The disappearance of Shah Khel Baba's wooden tomb has left a gap in the architectural history of Phuguch. Its carved wooden structure can now be studied only through earlier records, particularly Stein's (1928) photograph. However, I examined the surviving graves and spoke with villagers about the wooden shrines that had once stood in the village. Their memories, alongside Stein's account, helped me trace aspects of Phuguch's religious past that were no longer visible.

During the conversation with local inhabitants, I learned that, in addition to the shrine of Shah Khel Baba, the second most popular shrine was located in Samigal Bala, which was also demolished after the introduction of the Deobandi faith in Darel Valley. There was also a shrine of mystics in Manikyal village. A shrine also stood in Gayal village. All these shrines have now disappeared. Apart from Darel Valley, there was also a popular shrine of a mystic in Tangir's Lorak village which was also called Lorak Baba. It is believed that the shrines of *Babas* (saints) of Phuguch and Lorak were the most popular sacred spaces in both Darel and Tangir Valleys (Kalhoro, 2021).

The Disappearance of Saint Veneration

Villagers recalled a time when devotees from different parts of Darel Valley visited the shrine of Shah Khel Baba to pay their respects. They also spoke about the devotional practices once performed at his grave.

With the spread of the Deobandi school of thought in Phuguch, such practices were increasingly discouraged. By the time of my fieldwork, saint veneration had ceased in the village, although elderly villagers still remembered the shrine and the religious activities associated with it. The inhabitants no longer visited the graves of mystics for devotional purposes or performed rituals associated with saint veneration.

Rebuilding of the Historic Mosque

When I returned to Phuguch village in 2019, I was surprised to find that the eighteenth-century wooden mosque I had documented in my earlier visits had been rebuilt in 2018. I remembered its carved pillars, doorways and covered verandah, which had attracted my attention during my visits in 2000, 2001 and 2009. The mosque continued to serve the villagers, but much of the woodwork that distinguished the older building was no longer present in the rebuilt mosque. Fortunately, I had photographed its architectural details before the rebuilding.

Discussion

During my visits to Phuguch, I was mostly interested in the village's Buddhist remains, wooden mosque and graves of Muslim mystics. I had documented the old mosque in 2000, 2001 and 2009. When I returned in 2019, I noticed that much had changed in Phuguch village, including the rebuilding of the historic wooden mosque the previous year. The carved pillars, doorways and other wooden features that were noted for their intricate wood carvings were no longer visible in the new building of the mosque. The rebuilding of the Phuguch mosque has made it difficult to study its earlier architecture, except through photographs and descriptions.

I also learned much about the religious past of Phuguch from my conversations with villagers. They spoke of the Muslim mystics who reportedly came from Swat to preach Islam in Darel. Some of these mystics, according to local accounts, were killed by villagers and later remembered as *shaheeds*. Elderly villagers recalled that devotees once visited their shrines, particularly that of Shah Khel Baba. By the time of my visits, these devotional practices had ceased. However, villagers continued to tell stories about the mystics and their deaths. I found these interpretations useful for understanding local beliefs about the arrival of Islam.

At Naukot, I studied the surviving walls of the Buddhist monastery on the hill overlooking Phuguch. Earlier researchers, particularly Stein (1928), related it to the Buddhist monastery. My visits focused mainly on observing the visible remains rather than undertaking archaeological excavation.

I used both primary and secondary sources to study the monuments of Phuguch village. My photographs preserve details of the old wooden mosque, while Stein's photograph records the wooden tomb of Shah Khel Baba. The accounts I collected from villagers concern the mystics and religious practices associated with their graves. I consider these sources separately, as they provide different kinds of information about the village's past.

Conclusion

The cultural heritage of Phuguch reflects different periods of its religious history, from the Buddhist remains at Naukot to the historic wooden mosque and the graves of Muslim mystics. My visits between 2000 and 2019 revealed considerable changes in this heritage. The rebuilding of the old mosque resulted in the loss of much of its original woodcarving, while the practice of saint veneration had ceased. However, memories of the mystics and their association with the village have survived in the accounts of elderly villagers.

The changes I observed in Phuguch also show the importance of earlier field documentation. Photographs I took of the mosque before its rebuilding now preserve details of its former architecture. The Buddhist remains at Naukot require further archaeological investigation, while the surviving wooden mosques and other historic buildings of Darel Valley deserve greater attention. My study of Phuguch highlights the need to document these buildings and local religious traditions before more evidence of the valley's past disappears.

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