

Remnants of the Kafir Music of Nuristan - a Historical Documentation

by Christer Irgens-Møller

ABSTRACT

In the present article Christer Irgens-Møller presents examples of the music of the Waigal valley, which is generally referred to as the essential Nuristani music. The primary topics are the polyphonic song and the instruments *wadzh* - harp and *saringi* - fiddle. The article is based on a comprehensive research in the music of Nuristan recorded by Lennart Edelberg and Klaus Ferdinand on three expeditions in 1953, 1964 and 1970 respectively. The article describes how this work came about.

As an introduction to the narrower subject made up by the music, Nuristan is introduced geographically and culturally. The isolated status of this mountainous region in Afghanistan is a precondition for the maintenance of a music culture rooted in the pagan religion that reigned before the conversion to Islam at the end of the 19th Century in what was then named *Kafiristan* (Land of the Infidels). The music and dances are about the only remnants of the pagan religion of the *Kafirs*. Today we are left with no other traces but the music.

Different types of musical concepts and repertoires are revealed in the huge collection of recordings, mainly from the two valleys, Waigal and Parun, and the village Kushtos in the Bashgal valley. Since the polyphonic singing and the instruments from Waigal are commonly referred to as the Nuristani music, these topics receive a more thorough elaboration.

The polyphonic choir singing is an unparalleled phenomenon in the music of Asia, as well as in the Turco-Arabic musical culture. Thus, this music is unique as well as (are) the two instruments, the harp *wadzh* and the fiddle *saringi* and their repertoire.

Examples of the described music from Waigal can be heard at the homepage at www.centralasien.dk, and to broaden the picture, a number of examples of music from the Parun valley and Kushtos are featured at this site.

Introduction

IN 1953-54, Lennart Edelberg and Klaus Ferdinand went to Afghanistan on The Henning Haslund Memorial Expedition. Ferdinand accompanied Edelberg to Nuristan, but focused mainly on the Hazara people of Hazarajat in Central Afghanistan. The Aimaqs, a segment of the Hazara people, was also subject for extensive studies, where Edelberg assisted.

The Nuristan expedition was for Edelberg a follow-up on his participation in the Third Danish Central Asian Expedition led by Henning Haslund-Christensen in 1947-48. These studies were published in 1979 in

cooperation with the English ethnographer Shuyler Jones in the comprehensive study "Nuristan" (Edelberg/Jones 1979).

Fortunately, on these expeditions Edelberg and Ferdinand were supplied with a transportable taperecorder which enabled a documentation of the music cultures of Hazarajat, the Aimaq people, and not least - the abundant musical traditions of Nuristan supplemented by many recordings of the music of Pashtun people as well. The study of Nuristan was continued by Edelberg and his wife, Margot, during two summer expeditions in 1964 and 1970, respectively, and on these tours a considerable number of recordings were made and thus supplied the

initial material of 1953-54. New equipment made longer recordings possible. The material consists of approximately 350 music recordings, all in all.

In 2001, the cobwebs were dusted off the music tapes when these were taken out of the archives to supply examples to be heard at the Afghanistan exhibition at Moesgård Museum, which was launched in 2001 after the terrorist attacks of 9-11. Klaus Ferdinand subsequently discovered that the tapes had a tendency to fall apart in the splices and in some cases the magnetic coating rubbed off. Therefore, it became all the more urgent to restore the collection by transferring the contents to digital media. Furthermore, priority was given to a thorough investigation by a musicologist, since the material had never been subjected to this kind of analysis. The choice of researcher fell upon me and the present investigation set out in November 2002 as a part-time work and focused initially on a selection of the music of the Hazaras. Applications by chief curator of Moesgård, Torben Vestergaard resulted in a grant from "Tipsmidlerne", the Danish State's Gaming Authority, which made a period of concentrated full-time research possible.

An additional grant from the Danish State's Humanities Research Foundation made it possible to continue the work with the comprehensive collection of music from Nuristan. Before this process was completed, in the beginning of this year, to everybody's grief Klaus Ferdinand died, thus making valuable personal experiences of the last survivor of these expeditions inaccessible for good.

In the present article, I have chosen to present examples of the music of the Waigal valley, which is generally referred to as the essential Nuristani music. This part of

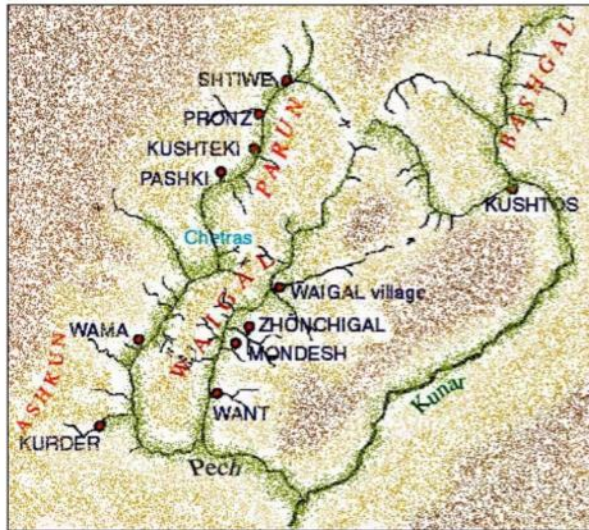
the Nuristani repertoire is summarily described in the main dictionary of music, *The New Grove Dictionary*, by Marc Slobin and John Baily respectively (1). Additionally, in the Edelberg/Jones book on Nuristan mentioned above, Thomas Alva has made a thorough description of the instruments, and exemplified the music supplied by music transcriptions. These transcriptions are, however, in some cases misleading. The following serves as an elaboration and a corrective of the accessible descriptions mentioned.

Finally, Nuristani music has been recorded on two LPs which have not been reissued (2). To get the immediate impression of the sound of the music, it is strongly recommended to listen to the mp3 files to be found on the homepage of the Danish Society for Central Asia, www.centralasien.dk. Additionally, there is music from Parun valley and Kushtos in Bashgal valley, as referred to at the end of the article. These examples widen the scope of musical styles of Nuristani music, but for editorial reasons this article does not allow for description of these examples.

Nuristan - geography

NURISTAN, today a part of Afghanistan, is situated on the southern slopes of the Hindu Kush mountain range, with Kabul to the southwest, and surrounded by the regions of Badakhshan to the northwest, Chitral to the northeast and Nangahar to the south. It is a land of high mountains and steep valleys, drained by four main river systems which all eventually empties into the Kabul river to the south by way of the Kunar river. The main valleys from west to east are Ramgal, Parun and Bashgal. Nuristan consists mainly of the northern regions of East- and West-Kati, and the central and southern regions Ashkun, Prasun and Waigali. The material

for the present study stems from the latter three, concentrated on the villages situated in the Waigal and Paruni valleys plus Kush-tos in Bashgal. Prasun is generally referred to as *Parun* (3).



Map of the central villages visited by the Edelberg-Ferdinand expeditions. Kushtos was the only village visited in the Bashgal valley, while Mondesh, Zhonchigal (Arrandz) and Waigal villages represent the Waigal valley, and Shtiwe, Pronz, Kushteki and Pashki the Parun valley. Chetras, south of Pashki in the Parun valley, is a mountainous area where the expedition made a night camp in 1953. To the far West the villages of Wama and Kurder represent the Ashkun re-

The mountain valleys of this region are among the most inaccessible in the world. This fact is presumably the main reason why these regions never became an integral part of the great empires of Asia, and also explain why no experienced conqueror ever had success in these parts. Only during the past hundred years has foreign control been established (4).

Nuristan had been known as Kafiristan - Land of the Infidels - until the end of the nineteenth century, when it was conquered by Abdur Rahman, Amir of Afghanistan; he forced the conversion to Islam and re-named the area Nuristan - the Land of Light (of

the Prophet). Most of the shrines, temples and a majority of the burial monuments of earlier Kafiristan were destroyed in connection with Islamisation, including the great temple at Kushteki, described in the 1890s as "the most sacred village in the whole of Kafiristan" (5).

Historical records of the Kafirs are scarce. The main sources that can illuminate the history and roots of this people are based on archaeological and linguistic evidence together with the oral traditions of the old Kafirs. The latter includes the musical traditions in particular. Linguistic studies show that the Kafir society bears similarities with the stratum of early Hindu society, and it is possible that it constituted a marginal area within the Indian world (6). This theory was reinforced by the discovery of the ruins of a Hindu temple at the confluence of the Pech and Kunar rivers (7).

One of the most persistent beliefs of the origin of the Kafirs is that the people are descendants of a left contingent of Alexander the Great's troops. In 327 B.C. he traveled along the Kabul valley and sent a force up the Kunar valley, there passing the south-east border of present day Nuristan. Generally, this theory has been rejected, based on the lack of linguistic evidence; even though certain items like the iron tripod in Nuristan have a Greek counterpart, even sharing similar names, such as *pini* in Nuristani and *pinochion* in Greek (8).

The last European visitor to Nuristan who actually experienced the Kafir culture at full blossom was Sir Walter Scott Robinson, the private surgeon of the British agent Algernon Durand in Gilgit, whose post Scott took over in 1894. His book "The Kafirs of the Hindukush" about his time in Kamdesh of the Bashgal valley in 1890-91, which was published 1896, is an indispensable source

in the study of the culture and the religion of Kafirs.

The ethnic groups of Nuristan are speakers of the Kafir and Dardic languages, belonging to the Indo-Iranian stock and sharing religious traditions from Vedic and Avestan texts. Up until the 1950s there were still people alive who remembered the old religious traditions.

In the religious context, even though the textual content is often inadequately conveyed in translation, resulting in a number of ambiguous texts, it is obvious that the music itself is still the well-preserved remains of the performance of traditional Kafir rituals. In spite of over half a century of Islamization (8), these musical traditions were not at all eradicated in the times of Edelberg's and Ferdinand's expeditions. Also, strong traditions had preserved traditional choral singing, and the playing of the characteristic instruments, *wadzh* (harp), *saringi* (fiddle) and *urba* (lute). Furthermore, rhythms played on drums, percussion instruments and clapped, integrated in the musical structures as such, had been preserved as a vital part of the dancing and as a part of music in general. The remaining traces of the traditional religion had a strong attraction, not only to Edelberg and Ferdinand, but also for preceding researchers such as the Norwegian linguist, Georg Morgenstierne, beginning in the 1920s and the German linguist, Wolfgang Lentz, in the 1930s. Professor Georg Budruss has also contributed to the collection of oral traditions. The studies made by these scholars and the cooperation between Morgenstierne and Edelberg have unraveled several layers of the religion.

Music

WHEN juxtaposed to the music of the surrounding regions of Central Asia and the

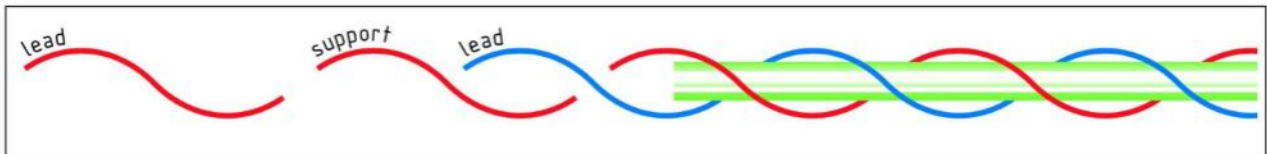
Indian subcontinent, several features of the music of Nuristan are unique. Above all, the dominant position of dance music has resulted in a broad repertoire of songs, plus various flute and drum settings. This aspect of the general music repertoire has conspicuous counterparts in African traditional music, although these common characteristics have no cultural relation whatsoever (10).



Dance performance, Waigal village 1953. Photo: Peter Rasmussen. Ethnographic department, Moesgaard Museum).

Generally, songs are performed in a social setting. In the Waigal valley, one kind of a choral song in particular is recorded in such numbers that it can be designated as the quintessential song, referred to as the Waigali polyphonic song. Alongside the unique polyphony of this particular song type, other principles of polyphony appear in a number of songs. Basically, these forms of polyphony are structured as call-response songs; the parts of these have local names for first voice, second voice and choir. In the present article, these roles are designated *lead* and *support*, two terms borrowed from descriptions of African drum music (11).

In the choral music of the Parun valley,



Above: Fig. 1: Sample Waigal Polyphonic.

Below: "Kamale kimile", Mondesh, Waigal valley 1953. At the bottom all voices and the drum have joined in and the piece continues with the full ensemble.

The text follows: "1. Kamalek (the king Kamalek - came to see the Nuristanis) spoke quietly with me and father. 2. Kolum Sunera (name of a valley) with you, myself, my father - spoke Persian. 3. All the world earthquake - father - fight. 4. Kalash (possibly translates 'king') came to see mija (son of the family) [Music example on www.centralasien.dk: 470-o8.mp3].

EAL470-08

Kamale kimile

Mondesh 1953

poetry by Sune'ra (d. 1952)

♩. = ca. 65

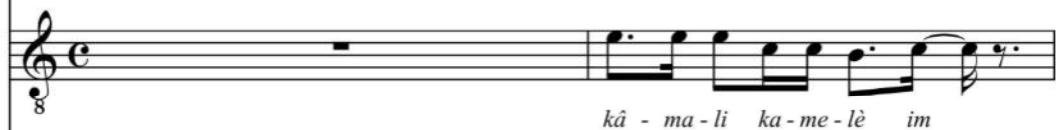
transposed up a small second

leadvocal, supportvocal, choir and drum

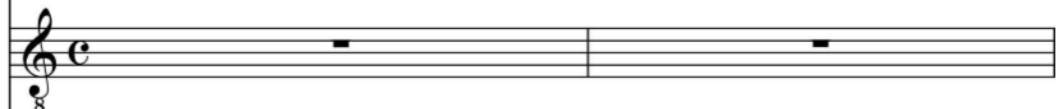
lead vocal
mil-alôl



support vocal
ât-alôl



choir
âsamchilog



drum
dab



again a basic principle of call and response is employed, organised as a solo call and the choir responding with a longer melodic line. Polyphony is also encountered in Parun, mainly as a combination of independent flute parts, stanzaic choir singing and rhythmic chanting.

In the choral music of Kushtos, songs in unison prevail. These songs have unique melodic features that separate them from the style of Waigal and Parun.

Solo singing is particularly connected to the music of the Waigali *wadzh* and the Paruni *urba* (lute); the singing is characterised by an introvert style with the voice seeming to be a prolongation of the sound of the instrument.

Melodic structures and the practice of embellishments relate the music of the *urba* of Parun to corresponding lutes in the rest of Afghanistan and Transoxania. Perhaps this relationship is based to some extent on the idiomatic itself, i.e. the left-hand playing and the tuning of the instruments.

Polyphony in Waigal

THE polyphonic song of the Waigal valley appears on 63 recordings out of 106 from this valley. Out of these, about two thirds of the songs is musically the same song, while the texts are individual. The remaining songs are musically based on the same formal pattern, but have melodic variations of the two main melodies that differ from the 'standard' song.

The song is performed by two soloists (a lead and a support singer) and a choir. The examples below are recorded in the village of Mondesh. The choir supports the support singer with a rhythmic chant melody supplemented with clapping and a drum, while

the lead singer sings his own rhythmically displaced melody.

The song always starts out following this scheme: the lead singer "shows" the phrase to the support singer, who repeats it immediately. (see figure, pg. 52).

Then the lead singer starts his melody setting off from a tone above the last tone of the support singer's phrase, thus filling out the supportsinger's pause. The assembly generally joins in on the fourth or fifth repetition of the two lead singer's phrases, and at the same time a drummer adds his pattern. After some time the choir claps in the pause of their phrase, thus making these two elements complementary. The clap falls on the first beat of the drum pattern. The rhythm is a 9/8, subdivided in three times three. The drum plays the first and the last beat of each subdivision.

What is remarkable is the harmonic concept. The harmonic intervals between voices are dense, resulting in constant clashes between the lead and the support voice and additionally between the support voice and the choir's chanting tone (s). This harmonic concept has in the Western partiture music of 20th century been given the designation 'cluster'. Likewise, the relation between the lead voice and the support may be described by another term from this realm, namely 'bitonal'. On the other hand, these two basic musical principles are unparalleled in traditional music in the rest of the world.

The song texts document that although the melody is the same, the texts are different. Two texts are praise songs, one is a lament and one is a farewell song from a mother to her daughter.

Song text:

[Music example on www.centralasien.dk: 470-02.mp3]

“Ina datina” - I am sad. (EAL470-02/03)

1.0:00

A: [èna da ti nâ si] *I am sad*

B: [meimana ma â na da] *a beautiful house*

2. 0:07

A: [è nâ yè â ta tina] *my own horse*

B: [sè tō grō:sh-atala / ma yâ nan-da] *my cattle with horns my house*

3. 0:13

A: [sè nâ jiéma nurjani] *my only daughter*

B: [Nur-â gal i ava-a böta] *Nurgal ruined*

C: [Nur-â gal i ava-a böta to] *Nurgal ruined*

4. 0:21

A: [o yi bi yâ lâ drâ hâ sa pè zhè]

B: [e ba-nam na-shâ-â-na-bè dar]

C: [â-hâ nâ-me-nâm shâ ma-né-ma gro]
the pasture in the mountain pass is ruined

5. 0:29

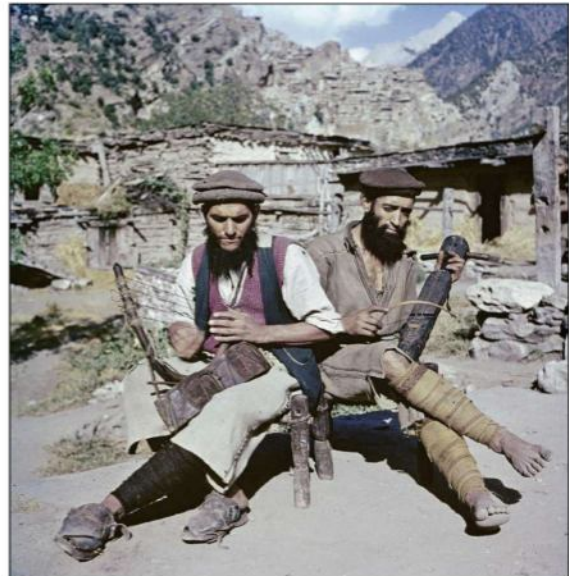
A: [â yi bi â ma tawè]

B: [â bajar-va kudarwalum-è]

C: [â ya di grō na-a wa-no-o-mè o]
my richness - welcome - ask himself

[Note to the text example: The text of verse 5 was ambiguous for the translator, Georg Morgenstierne, and only translatable words have been written down. Formally, verse 1-2 have two textlines (A-B), while 3-5 have three (A-B-C); in verse 3-4 the line 2 is repeated, and in verse 5 a new line is added. After finishing verse 5, the singer starts all over].

Wadzh and saringi



Wadzh and saringi players in Berimdes, (lower) Waigal village, Oct. 1953. Amir Shah (right) plays saringi and a fellow villager the wadzh on a roof-top. Amir Shah was a craftsman and made musical instruments himself (Ref. from Edelberg/Jones 1979: ill.text 79). The wadzh is held on the lap, the saringi between the knees. Apparently, the saringi player uses his thumb for the high string and one of the other fingers for the low string. Both performers are seated on stools (Photo: Peter Rasmussen. Ethnographic department, Moesgård Museum).

IN a few recordings of the polyphonic song, two instruments accompany the song almost as a prolongation of the interwoven voices and harmonic clustres. These are the *wadzh* (harp) and the *saringi* (fiddle). These two instruments form an obbligate pair, but while the *saringi* is never played solo, the *wadzh* appear as accompaniment for a solo song, sung by the *wadzh* player. This song is called a *proki wadzh alol* - a solo harp song, which is usually sung in a soft falsetto voice [music example on www.centralasien.dk: 471-11.mp3, recorded in Zhönchigal 1953].

Robertson refers to the *wadzh* as an instrument used in connection with dance as “the boat-like stand of which is held between the musician’s knees” (13) - a description that fits the physical appearance of the *wadzh* perfectly.



Wadzh from the Mosegård Collection.

Saringi (see photo below) is a two-stringed fiddle. In physical appearance and as well as in playing technique, it differs from Central Asian and Hindu fiddles. Only the name associates it with the Hindu *sarangi*, and the employment of two strings is the only feature it shares with the Afghan/Uzbek spike fiddle, the *ghichak*.

The *wadzh* is often referred to as a 'bowed harp' because of the arched stick that holds the strings. This feature resembles the antique Greek lyre; this type of harp was very common about 2000 years ago according to pottery motifs and carvings from these times. Today, harp types are found to the east in the traditional music of Burma and to the northwest, Svanetia in Georgia (and in Africa as well). A harp with a similar name, *yadzh* existed in India, but a huge number of strings made it a notably different instrument than the *wadzh*.



Saringi from the Mosegård Collection.

The *wadzh* normally has four strings. The tuning varies, and occurs most frequently as a diatonic scale, where small seconds can appear as neuters (12), thus being somewhere between the minor and major second. Although the strings are tuned in a scale, the *wadzh* is played as a chord instrument, with both up- and down-strokes on several strings (see note example below, EAL472-01). This results in a constant flow of clashes or "clusters" of neighbouring tones; in general, it sounds like the clusters frequently consists of more than two tones. As a consequence, generally, up- and down-strokes usually include all the strings.

Muting techniques of varying degrees of sophistication are employed, resulting in a melodic contour of the clusters. Damping implies that the tones that should not sound, are muted with the fingertips of the left hand (see photo).



Wadzh played by a plectrum by the right hand and strings damped by the left hand. One end of the resonator is held between the feet, while leaning against the left leg. Thus, the strings are almost in horizontal position. Photo: Peter Rasmussen. Ethnographic Department, Moesgaard Museum.

In the accompaniment to the *wadzh* tune below (471-07), there is a rhythmic pattern underlined by a contour of the top-note of the clusters. The top-note G3 is damped

wadzh pattern

Arrandz 1953

EAL471-07  =ca. 48



Above; Proki wadzh alol, Zhönchigal 1953, wadzh pattern in 7/8 metre [music example on www.centralasien.dk: 471-07.mp3].

Below: Tuning of the *saringi* and the *wadzh*.

EAL472-01


Waigal village

wadzh-saringi
tuning

wadz playing mode



saringi playing mode



muted on the fourth eighth beat in this almost symmetrical seven-eighth rhythm. Whether the bottom note D is damped muted on the remaining beats is an open question. The rather sophisticated way of subdividing a seven-meter is 2+1, 1+3.

The *saringi* is tuned to the strings of the *wadz*. The playing technique is determined by a constant sound of the two strings together. The *saringi* is played constantly on both strings without pauses, and the harmonics is defined by the three main intervals. This is a characteristic, which sets this

instrument apart from its counterparts; these are generally played monophonically (one note at a time).

The patterns are defined by the stepwise up- and down-motions, on either the high string or low string. When an accompanying *wadz* is difficult to hear on the recordings, it is often hard to define the rhythms and the periods of this instrument because of the floating character of the bow strokes.

To convey an impression of the diversity of music styles not accounted for in the pres-

EAL472-05
EAL482-08

♩. = ca. 90

saringi, wadzh

"astañnard"

Waigal 1953

Waramdech, Waigal 1970

period pattern

"Astañnard", Waigal village 1953 and Waramdech 1970. Fortunately, the recording from 1970 is long enough to stipulate the period that makes up the transcribed pattern.

The saringi's two strings are tuned to the second lowest string and the highest string of the wadzh, respectively. According to tonal range, the saringi adds a tone on top of the uppermost tone of the wadzh. The play mode of the wadzh exhibits the tone-clusters when all strings are played simultaneously.

[Music example on www.centralasien.dk: 482-08.mp3].

ent article, the following examples can be downloaded from the webpage www.centralasien.dk:

- a) Choir song with wadzh accompaniment, Waigal village 1964. (music file: 485-31.mp3).
- b) Dance song, Kushtos, Bashgal valley 1953. (music file: 473-07.mp3).
- c) Dance song, Chetras, Parun valley 1953. (music file: 476-20.mp3).
- d) *Urba* song, Pashki, Parun valley 1953. (music file: 476-01.mp3).

These examples show that the music of the neighbouring valleys have different concepts for the musical organisation, as mentioned above.

The present article has focused on the Waigali polyphonic song and the two characteristic instruments, wadzh and saringi that had survived in Waigal valley up until 1970. The limited length of this article has determined this priority. The repertoire of Wai-

gal embraces several other choral genres and flute and drum music as well.

The music of Parun and Bashgal valleys consists likewise of a broader repertoire and somewhat different musical concepts. But the basic approach is the same, i.e. the social performance of the music in general and the frequent connection to dance.

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NOTES

1. Marc Slobin in New Grove Dictionary 1980: 143, and John Baily in New Grove Dictionary 2001: 189.

2. Musik aus Afghanistan. Nuristan. Adevap-hon 1976 and Musique de la zone interdite du Nuristan. Barclay 1968.

3. Prasun is the local dialect for the name; Parun is the Pashto name for the valley.

4. Jettmar: Introduction pix in Cultures of the Hindukush

5. Robertson 1896: 389

6. Edelberg/Jones 1979:14. Comprehensive linguistic studies have been carried out by Prof. Georg Morgenstierne of Oslo, Prof. Georg Buidruss of Mainz, and Dr. Gérard Fussman of Strassbourg.

7. Ibid: 14

8. Ibid: 16

9. As Robertson points out "It would seem that in Káfiristán the form of religion remain, while the philosophy which those forms were originally intended to symbolise is altogether forgotten. This is not, perhaps, surprising in a country in which there are no records of any kind, and everything depends on oral tradition." (Robertson 1896:379)

10. The allusion to African music is given by Yves Somavilla in the covernotes to the LP record from 1968 as a comment to one rather furious and exuberantly fresh six-eight drum and dance rhythm. ("Musique de la zone interdit du Nouristan", Barclay 1968)

11. Chernoff 1979: 46. Local Waigali terms are accounted for in the chapter on Waigali songs.

12. The region west of the Caspian Sea. Corresponding lutes are the Uzbek *dambura* and *dotar*, the Kazakh *dombra*, the Kyrgyz *komuz*, Kyrgyz and the Afghan *rubâb*.

13. Robertson 1896:628

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RESUMÉ

Indeværende artikel af Christer Irgens-Møller præsenterer eksempler på Waigal dalens musik, som leksikalsk refereres til som den Nuristanske musik. De primære emner er den polyfone sang og instrumenterne *wadzh* (harpe) og *saringi* (fele/strygeinstrument). Artiklen er baseret på en omfattende undersøgelse af den musik fra Nuristan, som er indsamlet af Lennart Edelberg og Klaus Ferdinand på tre ekspeditioner i henholdsvis 1953, 1964 og 1970. Der gøres i artiklen rede for hvordan dette arbejde kom i stand.

Som en introduktion til det afgrænsede felt musikken udgør, introduceres Nuristan geografisk og kulturelt. Denne bjergrige regions isolerede status i Afghanistan er en forudsætning for opretholdelsen af en musik kultur med rødder i den hedenske religion som herskede i de daværende Kafiristan (Hedningernes Land) – før omvendelsen til Islam i slutningen af det 19. århundrede. Musikken og dansene er de eneste reminiscenser af den hedenske (animistiske) religion som kafirerne dyrkede. På indeværende tidspunkt har vi blot musikoptagelserne tilbage.

Forskellige typer af musikalsk opfattelse og repertoire er åbenbaret i den kæmpestore samling af optagelser, mest fra de to dale, Waigal og Parun, samt landsbyen Kushtos i Bashgal dalen. Da det er den polyfone sang og instrumenterne fra Waigal som almindeligvis bliver beskrevet som den nuristanske musik, er det disse emner der bliver uddybet.

Den polyfone korsang er uden sidestykke i Asien, såvel som i de tyrko-arabiske traditioner. Således er denne musik ganske unik, ligesom de to instrumenter, *wadzh* - harpe – og *saringi* - fidel (fele/strygeinstrument), og deres repertoire.

Eksempler på den beskrevne musik fra Waigal findes på hjemmesiden www.centralasien.dk og for at komplettere billedet af musikken, er der suppleret med eksempler fra Parun dalen og Kushtos.