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Yak Grazing in the Shimshal Valley, Pakistan

An Interview With Farmer/Herdsman Laili Shah, Conducted for the Panos Oral Testimony Programme



FIGURE 1 Laili Shah with a yak, Shuijerav (Shimshal Pamir), summer 1989. (Photo by David Butz)

Introduction

Shimshal is a farming and herding community of some 1400 inhabitants in northern Pakistan, close to the Chinese border where the Pamir and Karakorum Mountains meet. The community is sole steward of vast areas of high-altitude pasture and depends greatly on transhumant livestock herding and agriculture. Shimshal pastures are scattered across 2700 km² of the central Karakoram. Since 1974, there have been plans to include most of these pastures in the Khunjerab National Park, yet Shimshalis themselves were never adequately consulted. The Shimshal Nature Trust (SNT), a community-based organization, has responded by developing their own management plan, which formalizes the knowledge, beliefs and practices with which the community manages its environment sustainably, without the intervention of the National Park.

Hajat Shah: Thank you for agreeing to share your opinions and giving us your precious time. Could you please tell us your age and something about your earlier life?

Laili Shah: I am 32 years old. Our early life was difficult; you could say we had a very bitter experience without any facilities available to us here in Shimshal. Life has been very hard since childhood.

Would you share some of your experiences and personal opinions about grazing of yaks as a *shpun* (herder)?

I started grazing yaks when I was only 15. It is a very difficult task for someone who is weak. During grazing we have to face many, many difficulties. Every year is not the same: one year is hot, another might be cold. When I first started doing this job, it was not as difficult as it is today because people had less *chat kala* (cows, goats, and sheep) and yaks. Now people have more livestock, and we face many problems while grazing them.

Why did you choose this occupation?

We had not been recruited into the army, and we had no other means of making a

living. I took up grazing because it is our tradition and a source of livelihood for us. We obtain basic needs such as milk, *rogan* (butter), *qurut* (cheese), *gosht* (meat), and *pulos* (rugs) from these animals; otherwise it would be very difficult for us to get these things from outside Shimshal.

Please tell us more about pastures and grazing yaks in Pamir!

We have many different pastures, and we graze our yaks in one pasture for a specific period. In Pamir, we first take our yaks to Ganjdoor pasture, where we keep them for 2 months and then we go to Shuraghel, another pasture, and spend 2 months there. In Ganjdoor, we divide the yaks into 2 groups (male and female); we take the larger male yaks to another pasture called Sheralik, and the very young yaks are kept in the same pasture along with their mothers. During that period, 5 of us live in the main Pamir pasture, whereas 3 of us live in Sheralik. When snowfall starts in Arab-a-Door, we move to another valley called Rost-a-Door, then to Ghorsuw, and then back to the main pasture when the *youzeen* (breeding season) comes. At that time, we separate the male yaks and take them to Ghor Zerav, where they spend a month and a half. Female yaks ready to give birth must remain in the main pasture.

How long are yak-grazing places suitable?

Our valleys are not suitable for grazing large numbers of yaks at a particular time. If the weather is not good in Sheralik, then it is not suitable for more than 200 yaks. Arab-a-Door is good for only 15 days, Rost-a-Door for only a month, and Chap-a-Door for only 15 days. If we made these [barren] lands cultivable to overcome the shortage of grass, then fewer of our yaks would die every year.

Could you please tell us about the exact number of yaks that our villagers have, and the number that could be accommodated in the future?

Presently, we have 800 yaks. Usually when the number of yaks reaches a maximum of

900, they start dying and the number never reaches 1000. The reason is lack of grass and heavy snowfall in winter. Our grazing valleys are very far from the main pasture. We have enough grass in the valleys located in Shireen Iloq to graze our yaks, but we usually spend most of our time in the main Pamir pasture.

Two years ago, people who had more yaks used to graze their animals, but since then all the villagers are supposed to graze their animals in rotation. Could you comment on this system?

There is a difference between these 2 types of grazing. We applied this method some 4 years ago, but it failed. The reason was that people who are sincere or honest enough did their duty honestly, but those who were lazy did not. Last year we started the same [rotation] system again, and I noticed that it is difficult for people who have never been to the pasture before for grazing yaks. They face difficulties finding places or going from pasture to pasture. A new person who is not familiar with the area always needs an experienced companion when moving from one place to another.

In the rotation system, everyone should get an equal chance to fulfill their responsibility. But I feel that this system has not been established fairly by our representatives. It must start in Khizrabad and finish in Aminabad. I noticed that when it started, they left out 3 houses in the beginning before starting the rotation from the fourth house. I think this is not fair; people sometimes quarrel with one another about these things.

What else are the people doing for our village in Pamir, other than grazing goats, sheep and yaks?

There are many barren places where they used to bring drinking water from far-flung areas. Every year they clean the water channels. From the main pasture where 5 people usually stay with the yaks, 2 of them are supposed to fetch water for daily use. The rest stay behind to look after the yaks. Therefore, it is important



FIGURE 2 Yaks and pasture settlement at Shuwert (Shimshal Pamir), June 1989. (Photo by David Butz)

to supply water to these barren areas through water channels. We can develop these lands and grow grasses there that will help us feed the yaks in the winter. There are many channels, such as the channels of Shevkhoon and Goz Khoon. The *shpuns* usually clean these channels to get irrigation water. Last year there were many people in Pamir, and they constructed a channel in a place called Chikorben, in the name of Khiyal Baig *sahib* [following the tradition of *nomus*, according to which households or individuals sponsor a community development project that is named for them]. This channel proved very beneficial. This year we built houses in the name of Iqbal Hussein *sahib* in Suraghel and Sher Lakhsh. So every year people do some construction work for our village as well as grazing in Pamir.

What do you think about the production of yaks and other livestock; which do you prefer?

We must prefer yaks rather than goats and sheep because goats and sheep harm

FIGURE 3 Laili Shah (left) being interviewed about his herding experience by Hajat Shah in June 2001. (Photo by Mirza Aman)



Hajat Shah interviewed Laili Shah in June 2001, as part of the Panos Institute's Oral Testimony Programme in collaboration with the SNT, Pakistan. For the last 14 years, Hajat Shah has served as a teacher, and more recently headmaster, in the village school for girls (the Aga Khan Diamond Jubilee School) in Shimshal. He is a member of the SNT's Board of Directors and also secretary of the Shimshal Volunteer corps. The interview with Laili Shah is one of 60 interviews collected by local interviewers as part of the Shimshal Oral Testimony Project—a partnership project between the Panos Institute's Oral Testimony Programme and the Shimshal Nature Trust. This project is part of the Panos international oral testimony mountains project through which interviews have been gathered in and by communities in the following ten countries: India; Nepal; Pakistan; China; Kenya; Lesotho; Ethiopia; Peru; Mexico; and Poland. An on-line archive of over 300 testimonies gathered under the international project is available at www.mountainvoices.org. The *Voices from the Mountain* booklet series contains edited versions of the interviews from each of the ten country projects. To order any of these booklets or to find out more about the Panos Oral Testimony Programme please visit www.panos.org.uk (SNT will also be producing their own information outputs based on the Shimshal testimonies for local and national audiences.) MRD is grateful to the Panos Institute, London, for making this interview available, and to David Butz, Canada, for providing photographs. Ed.

trees, etc, whereas yaks are mountain animals that require no extra care for their growth. Yak hair is also useful. It is valuable for producing local carpets called *pulos*, which last for some 200 years.

We have to save (not graze) some of our pastures in Pamir for better growth of our yaks. If we do not do this in summer, many yaks, especially the females, can become weak and give birth to weaker calves, which may not survive the harsh winter season. We should also leave enough grass for their survival; that will benefit the villagers. I suggest to our villagers that they should care for the male yaks by taking them to the *doors* (adjacent valleys) where there is enough grass. The plain areas should be kept as grazing areas for female yaks.

What problems can an inexperienced *shpun* face during his *shpunig* (herding)?

An inexperienced *shpun* faces many problems while grazing yaks, especially in the first year. But we usually manage to show him all the places in the beginning of the season by sending an experienced herder with him everywhere.

What factor do you keep in mind, age or experience, when sending the *shpuns* to the *door* for grazing?

We keep in mind both of these factors while dividing them into groups of 2 or 3. When sending them to the *door*, we usually send 2 experienced and 1 inexperienced *shpun* together. These 2 experienced *shpuns* make him familiar with all the places or pastures within Pamir or with the yaks. One experienced herder is sent with an inexperienced one to check the female yaks ready to give birth, and they bring them to the main pasture.

What do you think about the future of *shpunig*?

In Shimshal everyone is interested in producing more yaks. There are many types of yaks—healthy, weak, small, and large. The *shpuns* must be very careful in caring for *all* these types during their turn.

You said that we will produce more yaks instead of goats and sheep in the future. What will we use these yaks for?

They have many advantages. We can sell them, and the income can be saved for the education of our children. On the other hand, production should continue in accordance with limitations, such as the limits of grass in our pastures. The birth rate per year is 200 yaks. So, we should sell at least 100 yaks per year to get the benefit; otherwise this productivity will be useless for all of us.

Is there any difference in the grazing of yaks between present and past?

Obviously there is a difference. In the past there were only 100 or 150 yaks in Shimshal, and the grazing was very easy, enjoyable, and comfortable for the herders. But now the number of yaks is increasing every year, and it is very difficult for only 8 people to graze 800 or 900 yaks at a time.

We have to walk for a long time. Shirilik is about 10 days walking time from Shuraghel for a strong person like you, and for a weaker person it might take more than 10 days. Before the border demarcation, there were no more *doors* or pastures in our land, but since the friendship (between China and Pakistan) we can use *door* Shirilik. *Shpuns* in the past had never seen Sheralik and other *doors* at all.

What is your opinion about the SNT?

I am really very happy with SNT, and with the ideas of SNT. We should work for our village in accordance with our own ideas, with the collective participation of all our villagers, and never let outsiders interfere in running our lives or let them influence us.

Thank you for all your cooperation, your time and your comments. We will, *Inshallallah* (by the grace of God), give you a copy of this interview, if translated into English.

Forgive me for the mistakes if there are any, and thank you also.