
**TRANSHUMANCE IN YASIN VALLEY,
GILGIT-BALTISTAN, PAKISTAN**

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ABSTRACT

In the Yasin River Valley of Hindu Kush Mountains region of Pakistan, transhumance is an old practice in which herders seasonally move to predetermined places without vacating or abandoning their original home. Only a few members of the family move in seasonal settlements and come back to their villages within a specified time.. In Yasin River Valley there is a village called Barkulti Bala. It is inhabited by the Shahbalis tribe. This tribe practices transhumance. Recently, a cultural change has begun in the village at a rapid pace. The age-old practice of transhumance is in disarray. It is time that this old practice be recorded before it completely disappears.

Keywords: Transhumance, Yasin Valley, Barkulti Bala, Koto

INTRODUCTION

Transhumance is a seasonal movement of herders to a predetermined place for grazing animals without vacating or abandoning their original home. Only a few members of the family move in seasonal houses and come back to their permanent homes within a specified time. It was first recognized in the Alpine regions of Europe (Fribourg, 1910; Onde, 1932). Although pastoral activities are one of the concerns of a transhumant community, agriculture always remains the dominant interest. In other words, pastoral movements are limited in scale, and usually take place in one valley system, and are undertaken by only a small proportion of the total population(Matley,1968). In Pakistan it is practiced in several areas of the Gilgit-Baltistan (Schomberg, 1936; Ehlers, 2000, Akhter, 2012).

This paper describes the transhumance in Yasin River Valley. The Yasin River is a tributary of the Ghizar River which in its turn is a tributary of the Gilgit (Figure-1). The Yasin Valley is located in the district Ghizar of Gilgit-Baltistan, the Federal

administrative region of Pakistan. It is located at the height of about 4300 meters in the Hindu Kush Mountains of Pakistan (Figure: 1). The climate of valley is arid with mild summer and cold winter. In Yasin River Valley there is a village called Barkulti Bala. The total population of the village is about 150 households. It is inhabited by the Shahbalis tribe. They speak Brushaski and belong to Ismaili sect. This tribe practices transhumance. The Shahblis are recognized as a transhumant community on following basis:

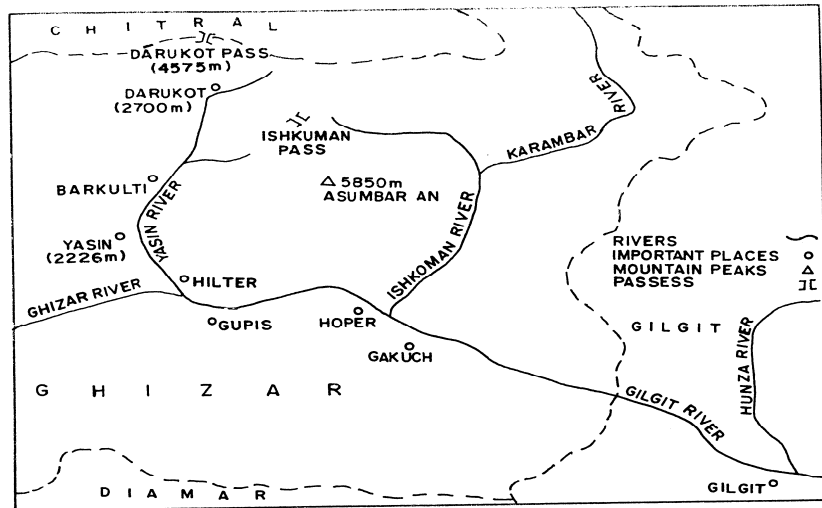
- They have dual settlements. The permanent settlement is at Barkutli Bala, located in the valley and the seasonal settlement is at Ghotoom Tawch located in the highland pasture.
- Pastoralism is one of their concerns but agriculture is their main interest.
- Their pastoral movements are limited in scale about 15 kms distance from their permanent village.
- A small proportion of population practice transhumance.

FIGURE: 1
YASIN VALLEY, HINDU KUSH MOUNTAINS REGION OF PAKISTAN



Source: Photo by author

FIGURE: 1
LOCATION OF YASIN VALLEY



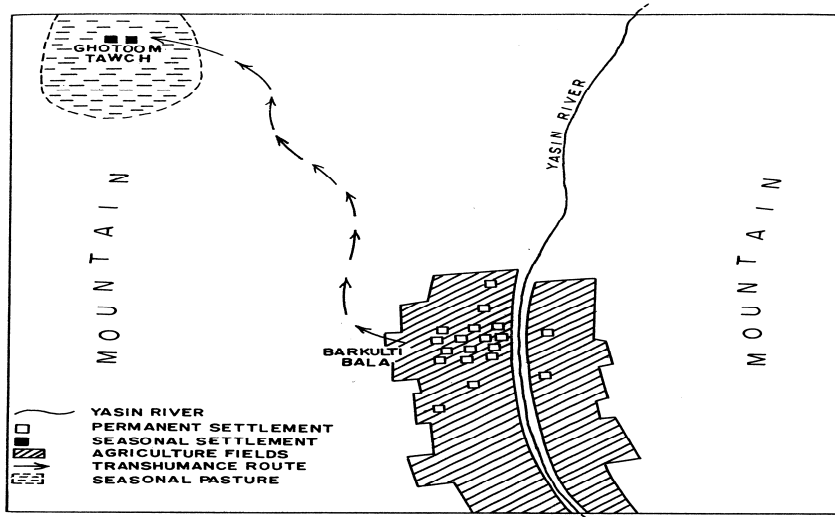
TRANSHUMANCE PRACTICE

The present study is based upon a field surveys which the authors conducted in summer 2012. It was primarily based upon the ways of practice of transhumance of the villagers of Barkulti Bala. It comes out from the study that the Shahablis practice transhumance mainly due to the following reasons:

- They keep animals which provide meat, milk, *ghee*, cheese, wool and skin.
- Animals herding provide an additional source of income.
- Pastures are not available at the lower level where their permanent settlement exist.
- Animals cannot be set free in the valley because crops are cultivated there.
- It is their family traditional practice.

In transhumance the Shahablis herders move to their seasonal place Ghotoom Tawch located at the height of about 2800 meters above sea level and 500 meters from Barkulti Bala. They utilize the extensive natural pastures of the higher elevation which provide fodder to their livestock during summer (Figure: 2).

FIGURE: 2
SEASONAL MOVEMENT OF HERDERS AND LOCATIONS OF SETTLEMENTS IN THE YASIN VALLEY



Each family of the Barkulti Bala keeps livestock which include cows, goats and sheep. In winter animals are kept in the shed and given dry fodder which includes wheat and maize crops. During this period their livestock become weak and give relatively small amount of milk (Figure: 2).

FIGURE: 2
THE LOWER YASIN VALLEY WHERE PERMANENT VILLAGES AND CROPS FIELDS ARE LOCATED



Source: Photo by author

In summer they take their livestock in the highland pasture which provide extensive green fodder for livestock. As a result their livestock gain weight and give large amount of milk from which butter and *ghee* are prepared. The amount of *ghee* which is required for their domestic use is kept and the remaining is sold.

In transhumance only a small number of the total population of Shahablis participate. About 20 to 25 members of the tribe practice transhumance. The remaining people are engaged in crop farming. These members are not permanent and may change each year depend upon their availability. The herders not only take animals of their families but also those of others. For this service each family pay in kind 70 kg wheat to herders. The herders in return give 'ghee'. A general principle that for each goat one kg 'ghee' and for one cow five kg 'ghee' is given to the owner of the animals by the herders. However they trust each other in case of low amount of production of 'ghee'.

The Shahablis have their own pasture (*ter*) located about 400 to 500 meters above their village. The *ter* is spread over a large area of about 2 sq.kms. The grazing right of *ter* is given only to old families of tribe who had settled first in this area. The new comers from other areas though they belong to same tribe cannot claim grazing right and ownership of *ter*. However they are allowed to take their cattle in the *ter*. This is now creating a conflict particularly on the issue of cutting of trees and collecting of fire wood in *ter*.

In Ghtoom Tawch a rill coming from glaciers is the source of water for Shahablis herders. Water is collected in a tank made by herders. It is sufficient for the herders and the their animals. In June the herders leave Barkulti Bala and shift to their seasonal settlement Ghtoom Tawch. The snow at the higher elevation melt and the *ter* is covered by grass and shrubs.

Each group of herders comprises 6 to 8 males and females. Children and aged are generally not included in this practice. But now many youth are busy in education and other activities therefore aged are now included in transhumance. If family of one brother goes to *ter* other families of brothers stay at village. That family which goes to *ter* brings animals of their brothers without any remuneration but outside the family

remuneration in form of wheat or money is paid for taking their livestock. The herders bring all things of domestic need like flour, tea and bed. Donkeys are used for carrying luggage while usually they travel by foot.

The herders travel about 15 kms in 8 to 9 hours to reach their seasonal settlement. They stay about three months in Ghotoom Tawach and live in *Kotoes* which are their houses. Shahablis have three *Kotoes* for three family groups which are not two meters away from each other (Figure: 4).

PHOTO: 3
THE TER (PASTURES) AT GHOTOOM TAWCH ,
THE UPPER PART OF YASIN RIVER VALLEY



Each group of herders make a mark of identification to their animals and count them before setting free in the meadow. One or two male members of each herder group have responsibility to watch their animals in the meadow. Before the sun sets the herders collect their animals and keep them collectively in one large animal shed locally called *terak*. One male member of the group has responsibility to collect fire wood for cooking and most important for heating of *Koto* because the night temperature in Ghotoom Tawach drops to freezing point.

The other male members milk the cattle. Milk is collected in *Tarang* made from animal skin. The female members are engaged in producing 'ghee' from milk of animals. 'Ghee' is kept in *hali* and *tarang*. *Hali* is made from the outer cover of trunks. The female have also the responsibility for preparing meal. It is very simple comprises bread of wheat or maize and milk, butter and *ghee*. After dinner when all members of the family are free from their work sit around the hearth in the *Koto* and engage in gossip with tea. The relatively old members tell folk tales to their young family members.

The herders stay in the Ghotoom Tawch about three months. During this period if any member of the herders become ill, he or she is shifted to the Barkulti Bala and replaced by a new member. In September when the day time temperature of Ghotoom Tawch starts to fall near freezing point the herders come back to Barkulti. Animals return to their respective families with their shares of *ghee*. Cattle are set free in the harvested fields.

SETTLEMENT AND HOUSE STRUCTURE

Transhumant communities develop dual settlements. One is permanent developed in valleys and other is seasonal built in high land pasture (Bose,1960; Matley, 1968; Ehlers and Kreutzmann, 2000). Barkulti Bala is the permanent settlement of Shahblis, located along the Yasin River. The old part of village is in an agglomerated form while the newly built houses are in dispersed form. For example in village Balkulti Bala old part comprises 15 houses are in agglomerated form. The new part of the village comprises 10 houses are in dispersed form. This is because as size of a family increases the married members are separated with their share of inherited land (Figure: 4).

FIGURE: 4
BARKUTLI BALA VILLAGE, YASIN VALLEY



Source: Photo by author

The seasonal settlement of Shahablis are located in Ghotoom Tawch, the highland pasture zone. It is in agglomerated form and very small in size. The houses of Shahablis are different in form and structure in the Barkulti Bala and Ghotoom Tawch. In Barkulti Bala a dwelling unit is called “*Ha*”. Houses are built by mud plastered walls with flat roof, made up of logs and plastered by mud (Figures 5 & 6).

FIGURE: 5
MODERN HOUSES OF SHAHABILIS



FIGURE: 6
SHAHABILIS IN THEIR *HA* (PERMANENT HOUSE)



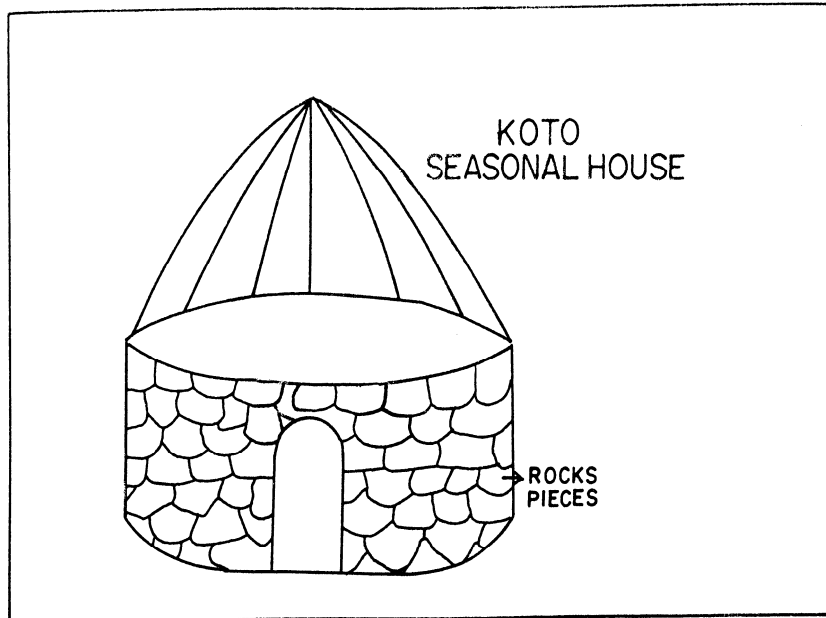
Source: Photos by author

The impact of modern development can be seen in house construction. Cement and bricks are now used. Some have tilted tin roof and other have R.C.C roof.

The size of a house is generally about 100 sq meters. The house has a square and rectangle shape. The house is internally divided in four portions. These portions are not separated by walls. The back portion is a 3 meter wide platform which is used as a kitchen. The front portion is divided into three equal parts. Each is about 5 meters wide. The middle portion is about half meter lower than the other two. On one side of the upper portion grain storages are made. The upper portions are used for sleeping. The floor of the upper portions are covered with “*Sharma*” a hand woven carpet made up of goats’ hair. The *sharma* is made by the old members of families. The middle lower portion is used for sitting. A room is built outside the house for their animals.

The house of Shahablis in Ghotoom Tawch is different in shape and structure from their permanent houses in Barkulti Bala. They call it “Koto”. It has circular wall and conical roof. The circular wall is made up by rocks pieces. The roof is like an umbrella so that rain and snow slide easily. It is made up of wood, shurbs and grasses. In case of rain the roof is covered with plastic sheets which the herders keep for this purpose. The height of wall is about 1.5 meters while the umbrella increases its height up to 3 meters. The *Koto* has small door of not more than one meter in length. A hearth is made in the central part of the Koto. A few meters away from the *Koto* a big cattle shed is built. It is rectangular in shape (Figure 3).

FIGURE: 3
SEASONAL HOUSE OF SHAHABLIS



CROP FARMING

Crop cultivation in the Northern Areas depends largely on irrigation. Village lands are mainly located in the desert steppe zone where irrigation water is required. In general single cropping is practiced in the region. Kreutzmann (2000) pointed out the transition of single cropping to double cropping in low elevation areas of Hunza Valley.

FIGURE: 6
LIMITED AGRICULTURAL LANDS DEVELOPED CUTTING
MOUNTAINS' SLOPES IN TERRACES



Agricultural lands in the Yasin Valley are limited, mostly developed by villagers on the piedmonts in form of terraces. River boulders are used to make walls of farming terraces which protect crops fields from soil erosion which is very hazardous during flash flood and mountains torrents flood which occur in summer when snow melting season sets in (Photo 5). In Barkulti single cropping is practiced. It is mainly due to long harsh winter. Cropping season starts in April and end in August. Wheat, maize, Jawar, potatoes and vegetables are grown in the area. Farming is largely practiced by old traditional methods. However mechanization has been introduced in agriculture. Lands are also being irrigated by water channels coming from glaciers.

SOCIAL CEREMONIES

After harvesting of crops and return of herders from Ghotoom Tawch villagers are free from all work. They invite each other and arrange social gathering in their houses. Marriage ceremonies are also held during this period. In October they

practice a custom of *Nasalo* in which each family slaughter 5 to 10 animals. Their meat are dried and preserved. They eat it during winter.

The Shahabilis also celebrate spring festival called in *burushaski 'Bo'* and the month of spring festival is called "*Boyying Hesa*". People celebrate arrival of spring in the valley with cultural dance, wearing new dresses and cook meals.

IMPACTS OF MODERN DEVELOPMENT ON TRANSHUMANCE

The development works of Agha Khan Foundation and Government in form of schools, roads, electricity and clinics have brought about social change in Barkutli. All children go to schools. Some of them are now getting education in universities and colleges of Gilgit, Peshawar and Karachi. Many Shahablis are now employed in transport, business and services in Gilgit. As a result of the socio-economic change the folk practice of transhumance is diminishing. This is mainly due to the following factors:

- The shortage of labour force
- Availability of new sources of income
- The reluctance of young men to continue transhumance.

CONCLUSION

Transhumance is practiced in the Mountainous North of Pakistan for a long period. In the Yasin River Valley Shahablis tribe of Barkutli Bala practice transhumance. In summer a small proportion of the Shahablis move with their animals to their seasonal settlement Ghotoom Tawch utilize extensive natural pasture of higher elevation. They stay there for three months and come back to their permanent settlement Barkutli Bala. Recently there is a rapid change which has undermined the practice of transhumance.

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