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## Twin Peaks: the Two Shi'ite Factions of the Suru Valley<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

This article is about the yokma and goma-pa which are two Shi'ite factions in the upper part of the Suru valley between Kargil and Zaskar. The majority of the inhabitants of the valley are Shiah and belong to one or other of the factions. The research for the article was mainly conducted in the early 1990s in and around the villages of Panikhar and Taisuru in Suru block at the top of the valley. Both factions have their centres in the village of Taisuru.

Both the *yokma* and *goma-pa* have at their core a lineage of *sayyids* (people who claim descent from the family of the Prophet Mohammed's daughter Fatima and her husband Ali, the Prophet's cousin.<sup>2</sup> In Kargil tehsil, male Shi'ite *sayyids* have the title *archo*.<sup>3</sup> In each faction there is a leading *agha* who is the local guide, called *rehbar*<sup>4</sup> (Farsi) or *lamstan* (Ladakhi, literally 'one who shows the way'). The *agha* is the head of the faction and the rest of the members are his followers, called *murid* (Farsi) or *agha khirile yodkhan migun* (Ladakhi, literally 'those who follow the *agha*'). In Suru Block, all Shi'ite households are affiliated to one of the factions. They attend its major religious ceremonies, pay certain taxes to the leading *aghas*, and go to them for rulings on matters of inheritance and dispute settlement.

1. The research for this article was supported by the ESRC who funded my PhD and the Central Research Fund of the University of London which paid for an additional field trip in 1996.
2. Glassé 1991: 26.
3. This term was a title of honour or military distinction among the Turks (Glassé 1991: 26), and in Iran it is a title of respect both for an ordinary man and for someone of true authority (Fischer and Abedi 1990: 505). *Archo* seems to be a local term, as *cho* is a title of respect in this area.
4. Ayatollah Khomeini is called the *rehbar* of the Revolution (Momen 1985: 316).

The leading *aghās* have studied for many years in the Shi'ite centres of Iraq and Iran, and are literate in Farsi and Arabic, the languages of their religious books. As *sayyids*, the *aghās* trace descent in the male line from different Imams and have lineage names such as Rizvi, Husaini and Musavi. In Suru, there are a number of *sayyid* lineages, but only a few of the *aghās* are important leaders. Nevertheless, all *sayyids* are respected and they and *archos* are considered to be different from ordinary people (*am-pa*).

There were *sayyid* lineages in the Suru valley before the current century. However, some of the ancestors of the leading *aghās*' lineages and other clerics seem to have arrived in this century from Baltistan and Kashmir. Certainly the leading lineages of both the *yokma* and *goma-pas* both settled in Taisuru in the early part of this century. The *yokma aghās* have the name Rizvi and claim descent from Imam Rizvi Hazrat the 8th Imam whose *astana* is in Mashed in Iran.<sup>5</sup> The records (*daftar*) of the leading *yokma-pa aghās*' lineage relate that their ancestors came to the area from Iran nine generations (*khul-po*) ago. They initially settled in Langkartse, in Sankhoo Block, where there is still a large branch of their lineage; and they were established in Taisuru, in Suru Block, in 1916. Their *daftar* contains the agreement made in Taisuru at that time, between his family and the local people, in which the latter agree to perform certain duties for the *agha's* family in perpetuity. They also have at least 80 *kanals* of land in Taisuru that date from that time.

The *daftar* of the leading *goma-pa aghās* records that both their and the *yokma-pa* lineages in Taisuru are the descendants of two sisters from a lineage of *sayyids* who were religious leaders in Taisuru in the past. The two sisters had no brothers, so one was married to Sayyid Mushtaba who was the great-grandfather of the present leader of the *goma-pa*. Her sister married a man from the *aghās*' lineage in Langkartse, who then became the *rehbar* in Taisuru. His descendant, Agha Sayyid Mohammed, the current leader of the *yokma-pa*, is popularly known as Agha Miggi Ort ('with eyes like a lamp'). His father had been the *rehbar* in Taisuru in his lifetime, but he died in 1957 when Agha Miggi Ort was only a child and so was succeeded by Agha Hyder — who was from the same lineage in Langkartse and also his sister's son. Agha Hyder was an important figure in the history of the area until his death in 1988.

The internal organisation of the *yokma-pa* seems to have remained relatively unchanged in the last few decades. However, the faction apparently had become much larger and more united during Agha Hyder's time. I was told that Agha Miggi Ort inherited a following that was about sixteen thousand strong in Sankhoo and Suru Blocks. One factor in the increase in

the *yokma-pa* in Agha Hyder's day was his leadership of the millenarian movement.

### Millenarism and the *Yokma-pa*

I originally heard about the millenarian movement in 1981-82, when I first visited Suru, as it was still very active at that time. When I returned there in 1993 it was not spontaneously discussed in Suru. However, various people in Leh and Kargil mentioned Agha Hyder and his millenarian beliefs to me, often in order to make a joke about him and to ridicule the Suru people and Shi'ites more generally. I also suspect that this is one of the reasons why people like the *yokma-pa* leaders do not refer to the millenarian beliefs so openly now. Consequently I initially felt reticent about writing about the millenarian period in any detail, since I felt that I would be exposing people to further ridicule. However, I came to realise that the whole episode and the reaction to it, especially among people involved in the administration, is critical to an understanding of the current politics of the area.

Apparently Agha Hyder started his millenarian preaching in 1962, shortly after his return from studying in Iraq. He said that the Imam Mahdi, the Twelfth or 'Hidden' Imam was going to re-appear soon, an event which presages the Day of Judgement and the end of the world. His followers used to gather, particularly after Friday prayers, weep and repeatedly exhort the Imam Mahdi to come. I never attended one of these ceremonies, but apparently they used a *tazbi* which is like a rosary of beads made from earth from the battlefield of Karbala in Iraq. In 1981, I was told that they counted through the beads, repeatedly chanting: 'May the Imam Mahdi come'.

At one point, Agha Hyder set an actual date for the Imam Mahdi's coming and some of his supporters reputedly stopped tilling their fields. The authorities then intervened, and police were sent to quell the movement. I was told that a policeman from Leh said to the *yokma-pa* that one of the signs of the coming of the Imam Mahdi, was that if you fired a gun nothing would happen. He related that he fired his gun and people heard the sound and knew that the Imam Mahdi was not coming. This story is most interesting, firstly because it casts the people of Suru as being completely irrational in comparison to the rational man from the government administration (and Leh); secondly, despite being told as a joke, the reference to a gun indicates the power of the administration and the threat of force. In fact, force was used as Agha Hyder himself was apparently arrested and some of his supporters were beaten.

I do not know exactly when this incident occurred as most of the accounts that I received of this period were in the form of stories that are told about it by people from outside the area. However, I believe that it was in the

5. That of his sister Fatima is an important pilgrimage site in Qum in Iran.

1960s. I have also been told that people believed that Hajji Abdullah Far, the leader of the Sunnis in the Suru valley, was connected with the coming of the Imam Mahdi. He was from one of the leading Sunni families in Panikhar, but he had gone as a *mag-pa* to a Sunni family in Sankhoo that had large amounts of land. I have heard that in those days, people used to touch his clothes to obtain a blessing. On one occasion a cap that fell near him was believed to have fallen from the head of the Imam Mahdi. Again this last story was told as a joke. Agha Hyder continued his millenarian preaching through the 1970s when he was still saying that the Imam Mahdi would come soon. The following is an extract from a *matam* speech that he gave at a religious gathering in Taisuru in 1972:<sup>6</sup>

Oh poor ones, oh people who are waiting for the Imam. The best prayer is to wait for the Imam whether it is day or night. So wait for him. Who knows whether he will come out of hiding in the day or night, morning or evening. Everyone who is the well-wisher and follower of the Imam is waiting for him to come out of hiding.

In the early 1980s, when I visited Suru for a few weeks with another English woman, we were invited to both Agha Hyder's house in Sankhoo and that of one of his sons, Agha Baqir, in Taisuru. We were struck by their great interest in Christian mythology, especially in details of what happened to Jesus Christ when he was crucified. Subsequently, Hajji Abdullah Far's grandson, told us about the millenarian movement. He explained to us that part of the millenarian belief in Suru was that Jesus Christ was also about to appear.

In Shi'ite mythology Jesus Christ did not die on the cross, but was taken by the Angel Jibril (Gabriel) to Heaven, where he sits in the fourth level, whereas the Imam Mahdi is in the seventh. In Kashmir there is a widely held belief that Jesus Christ ended his days and is buried there.<sup>7</sup> After the coming of the Imam Mahdi and his period of rule on earth, Jesus Christ will descend to earth and will fight and kill the *dajjal* (Anti-Christ). These events will

6. During Muharram and on many other occasions throughout the year, each faction holds mourning ceremonies, called *matam* (Farsi) or *orche* (Purigi). An agha or another cleric gives an account of one of the members of the Prophet's family, and sometimes of their suffering, and urges the congregation to weep. The tears that people weep are considered to be of atonement, since they were not able to fight on Husain's behalf at Karbala. Shedding tears gains Husain's intercession for the Day of Judgement (Hegland 1983: 221).

7. Kashmiri 1973: 1; Robinson 1988: 13. Bray has reported that there is a belief that Jesus Christ visited Hemis monastery near Leh (John Bray, personal communication).

presage the Day of Judgement and the end of the world.<sup>8</sup> We were also told that it was commonly believed that foreign climbers who had been coming to Nun Kun — the twin peaks at the head of the Suru valley — were looking for Jesus Christ who was said to be at the top of one of the mountains. Those who died on the mountains, a not uncommon occurrence, were thought to have reached him because they were pure in heart.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, single foreign women like ourselves, who were far too old to be unmarried by local standards, were thought to be saving ourselves to be brides of Christ when he descended.

This information made sense of the fact that we had been repeatedly asked about Nun Kun by people in Suru and there seemed to be a general belief that we had come to visit the mountains. For example, one winter's day, we were walking along the road to Parkachik, in a light blizzard, when an old man we met on the road exhorted us not to go up Nun Kun. Beliefs in this area about mountain spirits and fairies provide a fuller background. For example, Munshi Khaled, the brother of Hajji Abdullah Far, vanished without trace one night more than thirty years ago, and some people believe that he was taken by mountain fairies (*pari*). Therefore there were pre-existing beliefs about deities in the mountains. When the Workmans came to the Suru valley to climb Nun Kun, just after the turn of this century, their porters prayed to the mountain spirits (*sic*) when they got near to one of the peaks. People in the villages below said they had seen lights on Nun Kun when they were on the mountains.<sup>10</sup> Even now people often told me that you can sometimes see lights on the top of Nun Kun and I am often asked why foreigners climbed them.

We were frequently told about two unmarried foreign women who had visited previously and this is mentioned to this day. As far as I can ascertain, they came as missionaries to the area in the early 1960s and stayed in Sankhoo, where Agha Baqir says they knew his father well. My understanding is that Agha Hyder himself did hint at connections between many of these different elements rather than explicitly saying what they were. This ability to hint at hidden (*batin*) truths is seen as part of the *aghas'* power. For example, in one of his *matam* speeches Agha Hyder refers to the belief of the coming of the Imam Mahdi in the following way:

8. Glassé 1991: 246-47.

9. A few years ago a foreign climber who had been to the top of one of the mountains told me that there is a Christian cross on the summit.

10. Workman & Workman 1909: 68.

Remember, you should not forget what is in your hearts. [i.e. do not forget the Imam Mahdi and that he will come soon] Do not forget what you have seen and what you have in your hearts.

By the time that I returned to the Suru valley to do the fieldwork for my thesis in 1993, the millenarism was muted. However, people still believe that the Imam Mahdi will come soon, as do most Shi'ites in Kargil *tehsil* now. In one of the *matam* speeches that was made on the 13th Muharram in 1994, the speaker, an elderly *akhun* (cleric) referred to the millenarian beliefs and quoted Agha Hyder, saying that people should follow his example and pray for the Imam Mahdi to come. However, *yokma-pa* people did not mention the millenarian beliefs or the events of the past spontaneously, probably because they have been ridiculed over them.

The millenarian preaching may well be connected with Noorbakhshi beliefs which seem to have been widespread in the area until very recently. In the early 15th century, Noorbakhsh declared himself to be the Imam Mahdi (Twelfth or 'Hidden' Imam) and tried unsuccessfully to overthrow the Caliphate in Persia. His followers became Shi'ites in Safawid times and his disciple Shams Ud-din Iraqi propagated his teachings in Kashmir.<sup>11</sup> The Noorbakhshi Order was banned by the Dogras who deported some of its members from Baltistan to Kishtwar after their conquest of Ladakh in the 1830s.<sup>12</sup> Many people in Purig, including Suru-Kartse, were Noorbakhshi until recently,<sup>13</sup> but now there are only adherents in a few villages in Kargil *tehsil*<sup>14</sup> and some in the Nubra valley north of Leh.<sup>15</sup> However, there are still many in parts of Baltistan.<sup>16</sup> There are a number of reports of a previous Mahdist episode in Purig in 1884.<sup>17</sup> There appears to be some connection between Agha Miggi Ort's epithet containing the word 'lamp' and the fact that Noor means the same. However, no-one in Suru made that link to me.

The main elements in the millenarian preaching are found in mainstream Shi'ite *Hadiths* (books of the interpretation of Islam), from which the *aghas* prepare *matam* speeches.<sup>18</sup> As Richard says, millenarian beliefs are part of

11. Glassé 1991: 304, Rovillé 1990: 117ff.

12. Rovillé 1990: 118.

13. Francke 1914: 185.

14. Zutshi 1961.

15. Srinivas 1995.

16. Sagaster 1997: 414.

17. Francke 1926: 145, Shaw 1894: 17.

18. Glassé 1991: 26.

Shi'ite philosophy: 'The millenarist anticipation of the Imam's reappearance makes Shi'ism a doctrine turned, far more than Sunnism, towards meta-history, towards an idealistic anticipation of the End of Time'.<sup>19</sup> The connection with Jesus Christ has also been an element in similar beliefs in India in the past. For example, Cole describes a Shi'ite millenarian episode in Oudh (the Shi'ite kingdom in Northern India) in 1844, in which Jesus Christ figured prominently. He says that this was in response to a feeling that Christianity was taking over, as the British were conquering India at the time.<sup>20</sup>

The millenarian movement arose in a very difficult period for Suru and the rest of the region. Partition had been extremely traumatic in this area and left Shi'ites in Kargil *tehsil* cut off from Baltistan which had been the local centre for Shi'ism. In the last two decades the economy of Ladakh had been badly affected by the closing of the borders and the end of trade. In addition, Suru and other neighbouring areas, such as Zanskar, had experienced a serious famine in 1957, when snow fell in June and destroyed the entire year's crops. Older people frequently referred to this and said that no one had actually died, but they had only survived by eating all their livestock, and even the soles of their shoes. The lack of government help was a particular source of bitterness. Someone also said that at that time, the *yokma-pa aghas* used to lead prayers to try and change the weather.

I do not know what the motivation was for the millenarian episode; however, the people of Suru had clearly experienced quite extreme disjuncture in the last two decades, and had been left cut off from their main outside connections. The millenarian doctrine may have provided a means of creating an intense form of identity and thus making sense of, and taking control over, a world which was clearly out of their control. In the 1980s, the rise to power of Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran was seen by some people as being a possible sign that the end of the world might be near. People in Suru also said that it was possible that the Shah had been the *dajjal* (Anti-Christ). The *yokma-pa* became enthusiastic followers of Ayatollah Khomeini, as did many Shi'ites in Kargil *tehsil*, and to this day most *yokma-pa* have a picture of him in their houses.

At the height of the millenarian movement, a strong rivalry emerged between Agha Hyder and Agha Raza, who was the leader of the *goma-pa* at that time. This may have exacerbated a pre-existing competition between the two factions and resulted in a major rift between them.

19. Richard 1995: 48.

20. Cole 1988: 100-101.

### The *Goma-pa* and the dispute with the *Yokma-pa*

I found it very difficult to find out when the *yokma-goma* split had started. Agha Miggi Ort said that the height of the fighting between them had been forty years ago, in his father's time; but other people said that there had not been any antagonism before Agha Hyder's time. However, it would appear that some kind of divide seems to have existed between them for decades since they have not intermarried. The first *goma-pa astanas* (graves of members of important religious families) are in what is now the *yokma-pa* graveyard in Taisuru, but they have apparently had separate graveyards for at least fifty years.

Nevertheless, at least part of the current antagonism between the *yokma* and *goma-pa* dates from the 1960s, when the late Agha Raza, was the leader of the *goma-pa*. He strongly opposed Agha Hyder's millenarian preaching and, with some clerics from Kargil, he wrote to a *mujtahid* (senior Shi'ite guide) in Iraq asking him to say that it was not doctrinally correct. They also apparently asked the authorities to intervene to stop the movement, which occurred with some force, as I have mentioned. Hence there was animosity between the two factions, sometimes leading to fighting, and they would not even enter each other's houses. Although this mutual antagonism has greatly lessened recently, it was still an issue in 1993 in Suru.

The *goma* faction also has its main base in Taisuru. That is the site of their *imam-barah* (Shi'ite place of worship), as well as being the home of Agha Najibul the current leader of the faction, and his younger brother. They are from the core lineage of *sayyids* which consists of the descendants in the male line from an ancestor three generations ago. According to the *goma-pa daftar*, their great grandfather, Sayyid Mushtaba, came from Pakistan (where he is buried) and married the *sayyid* woman from Taisuru, whose sister married Agha Miggi Ort's male ancestor. His descendants inherited his wife's land and settled in Taisuru. He is said to have been the descendant of an Iranian monarch, who had Safwi as his family name, which indicates that he was a Safawid — who were the first Shi'ite dynasty in Iran.<sup>21</sup>

As I have mentioned, the rift that occurred over the millenarian episode was also the time when Agha Hyder's following was growing, presumably at the expense of Agha Raza's. As a result, the two factions established separate places of congregation in Taisuru, and stopped all unnecessary social interaction with each other. In particular, they stopped marrying each other

21. Momen 1985: 105.

and I only know of one marriage between the two factions in the recent past. In the 1960s, they did not even enter each other's houses as a general rule. In Agha Hyder's *matam* speech that I have already quoted, he seems to suggest such an action, when he says: 'Do not put your foot wherever you like. And do not greet everybody. You should not go to a place where there are enemies of God, or the Imam. Do not go to the door of an enemy of God or the Imam.'

Nevertheless, this antagonism does not seem to have extended to every aspect of people's lives, especially their farming activities. I was told that villagers still co-operated for collective work such as the *bares* and *rares* (collective pasturing of bovines, sheep and goats in the summer) and that between neighbours and relatives (called *laktsiks*). Also, the more hostile politics between the factions are only really present on a day to day basis in the upper part of the Suru valley and particularly in Suru Block, since the majority of people in Sankhoo Block are *yokma-pa*.

I was told by a prominent *yokma-pa* man that in the early 1970s, his father — an important *yokma-pa akhun* — encouraged mutual visiting again. By the early 1990s ordinary members of the two factions were interacting, but those from the leading lineages in Taisuru still did not usually speak to each other. At present, there is a good deal of antagonism between the factions over the allocation of government resources. For example, there are a number of schemes that involve the distribution of grants to villagers, which often lead to disputes. It was also quite common for people to make derogatory remarks about the members of the other faction, particularly about their piety.

This hostility between the two factions is linked to Shi'ite history and beliefs concerning the enemies of the Imam. The Umayyad Caliphs, who gained the leadership of the Muslim people shortly after the death of the Prophet Mohammed and killed Imam Husain at the battle of Karbala, were Sunnis. So Sunnis are usually regarded by Shi'ites as being the enemy in this respect rather than other Shi'ites.<sup>22</sup> In Suru, there does not appear to have been any hostility between Shi'ites and Sunnis in the past. On the contrary, the *yokma* faction and Sunnis were close during the millenarian period and many Sunnis seem to have believed in Agha Hyder's preaching. I understand that there were also good relations between the *goma-pa* and the Sunnis, as there are today.

The factions seem to have directed this hostility at each other. They sometimes speak of each other as being enemies of the true faith. For

22. Pinault 1992: 157.

instance, in one of Agha Hyder's *matam* speeches, he obliquely suggested that the *goma-pa* would be excluded from salvation on the day of judgement, because they opposed the supporters of Imam Husain. God will say to them:

I know you were not present on the battlefield when Imam Husain was murdered, but you have harmed his followers. [Then God orders these people to be taken to Hell, and addresses the others.] Oh well-wishers of Imam Husain, do not do such works that will hurt the followers of Imam Husain. Anybody who has done any harm to a well-wisher of Imam Husain, has done direct harm to the Imam himself.

As well as mutually avoiding each other, there have also been incidents of fighting between faction members, particularly during the processions (Farsi: *dasteh*, Urdu: *juloos*)<sup>23</sup> on the 10th and 13th days of Muharram. The 10th Muharram, known as Ashura, commemorates the actual day of the Battle of Karbala and is the climax of the Muharram observances for all Shi'ites. The 13th commemorates the day when Imam Husain was finally buried. These two days are the main focus of the ritual year for Shi'ites in Suru. Despite being extremely upsetting, they are also eagerly anticipated. For example, young boys used to play games of Muharram *juloos* for weeks before and after. Their games usually started with them all beating their breasts, then one of them would fall to the ground as if overcome and the others would come and pick them up and rush them to an imaginary medical aid post.

In 1993, I witnessed the processions in Kargil, as we had just arrived on the 9th Muharram. I had avoided processions in Leh previously thinking that they would be frightening with all the blood. I was immediately disabused of that view and found the chanting beautiful and moving, despite the fairly violent beating and bloodletting that took place that year. In 1994, Ayatollah Khamenei, the appointed successor of Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran, issued an instruction (*fatwa*), saying that there should no longer be any bloodletting, because of the risk of infection. This was followed in both Kargil and Taisuru, but apparently not in Sankhoo, where people chose to continue as before, since they are not obliged to obey one particular guide.

In 1994 I attended the Muharram observances in Suru Block. During the earlier part of the month, there are a number of *matams* in the *masjid* at Taisuru and *majlis* (Farsi: gatherings) in individual villages, at which people recite *marsiyyas* (Farsi: mourning dirges), and chant *nohas* (Farsi). These are repeated refrains, usually in Urdu, that lament the deaths at Karbala and the

23. Momen says that the terms used for the elements in Muharram are different in India than in Iran (Momen 1985: 242-3).

sufferings of other members of the family such as Zenab, Imam Husain's wife. On the night of 9th Ashura, the *yokma-pa* of Taisuru, Panikhar and Prantee, held such a gathering at the village headman's house in the village of Panikhar near Taisuru in the late evening. This was attended by about a hundred people from the three villages, particularly young women and men. Agha Miggi Ort and his wife, Archo Nargis, were not there but all the younger members of their household were. We were in their large guest room, with the men sitting in the middle with a microphone and speakers, and the women crouched around the edges. The young *aghas* led the recitations and chanting, at which they are extremely skilled.

The atmosphere was subdued and there was little display of emotion, but some men gently beat their breasts. At the end of the ceremony, the women left the house, and we were given bread and meat as *tobarok*, while the men stayed inside and had tea. When they emerged, they unfurled banners, which have village names or curses against Yadz — the leader of the Umayyads at Karbala, and other enemies of Imam Husain written on them and, sometimes, drawings of Imam Husain's horse Zuljena.<sup>24</sup> Some of them have the hand called *Panja* (Farsi: *panj tan*) at the top, which represents the five pure souls of Islam, the Prophet Mohammed, his daughter Fatima (Zahra), and Imams Ali, Husain and Hassan (Fischer and Abedi 1990:519).

The whole group formed a procession that started to move down the road towards Taisuru. Each village formed its own section, with a banner and burning torches, as well as a microphone and loudspeaker, and chanted a different *noha* as they walked. The men and older boys formed the centre of the procession, and women and girls came mainly at the end. The men beat their breasts (*branga dungcha*) in time to the rhythmic *nohas* as they walked, and some women pat their chests, and occasionally cry out the name of Imam Husain. Every so often the procession halts for a period of more intensive chanting and beating. The men of each village usually form a circle and beat their chests much harder, reaching a crescendo, before they stop and start processing again. As we got nearer Taisuru, some of the men were overcome with emotion (*behoshi*) and had to be restrained and looked after by their companions. When the procession reached Taisuru, many people had come out to watch, both *yokma-pa* and *goma-pa*, and the men were gently beating their chests in sympathy. The *goma-pa* accompanied the procession up to the *yokma-pa masjid*, which was already full of old men who were

24. In Kargil I have also seen curses against Salman Rushdie, and people chanting anti-American slogans.

sitting on the floor with their heads in their hands, in gestures of despair. The *minbar* (preacher's seat) was covered in a black cloth and Agha Miggi Ort was present but not wearing his clerical garb or taking any particular part in the proceedings. Then there was a very short speech by an *akhun*, who stood at the bottom of the *minbar*, before everyone went home. Some people would stay up all night and women in particular often eat nothing until after the observances on Ashura day.

The benign way in which some *goma-pa* had greeted us in Taisuru, was apparently unusual and a sign of a short-lived truce which had started the previous year, when they had fought as usual on Ashura day. However, that day there was a bomb during a Muharram procession in Iran, which left many people dead and was extremely shocking to all Shi'ites. Unusually, on 13th Ashura the *yokma-pa* had a procession. Agha Miggi Ort related that when the processions met, he said to everyone, 'Look, we should not be divided in the light of this terrible tragedy that affects us all.' So the two parties processed together to Taisuru.

Ashura is the day that the battle of Karbala took place and the Imam Husain and most of his male relatives were killed. In Suru, in both factions, every village has its own section, banners and loudspeaker in the procession. Clerics do not seem to take part in the *juloos* itself,<sup>25</sup> nor do many elderly men; but all the younger men who are prominent in the faction played an important role in their village section. The three younger sons of Agha Miggi Ort formed the core of the Taisuru group. Most men go bareheaded and some of them were wearing a black headband and women wear black or dark coloured clothes as they do for the whole month. Women of all ages walk both behind and alongside the men.

All the workers from the Medical Department were on duty, including the doctor, who had the hospital jeep; and there were field hospitals at the roadside in Taisuru, as well as in the village itself. Two bus-loads of police had come from Kargil, as well as the five or six men from the Taisuru Police Post (*chowki*). The main part of the *yokma-pa* procession started in Panikhar bazaar; whereas the *goma-pa*'s came from below Taisuru. The procession halted on the way for a *matam* speech, which was given by a non-clerical young man, who gives a particularly vivid account of the battle of Karbala.

The two processions met on the road near Taisuru at the *Qatl Gah* (*qatl* means 'slaughter', *gah* means 'place'), and represents the battlefield at

25. In Iran it is unusual for clerics to join in the processions, as they are said to disapprove of them (Richard 1995:101).

Karbala where the Shi'ite martyrs died. Emotions were running very high at this point, and there was a good deal of tension, when the two processions surged together, but nothing happened. At this point, a *yokma-pa* woman, Sakina, described how they had fought in the past. She said that the women would gather up rocks and hide them under their *dahons* (head scarves), to conceal them from the police. She made it sound exciting and enjoyable, and my understanding was that she was half looking forward to a good rumpus!

At the *Qatl Gah*, both processions stopped for some time, and sat in separate groups, that formed around the *tazias*, which are representations of the tomb of Imam Husain at Karbala.<sup>26</sup> Each of the groups had a horse with red dye on it that represented Zuljena, Imam Husain's horse at Karbala. The son of Agha Najibul, the *goma-pa* leader, who was visiting from his studies in Iran, made a speech but it was not the occasion for an outpouring of grief. When the two groups rose to continue into Taisuru, Agha Miggi Ort, who was dressed in his ordinary, rather than full clerical garb, managed — with the agreement of the *goma-pa aghas* — to get the two processions to combine for the last part of the walk into Panikhar. The *nohas* and beating became more frenzied and a number of men were completely overcome and had to be taken to one of the field hospitals. At Taisuru, the two processions divided again and went towards their respective places of worship. When they reached the *masjid* each group paused for a final session of intense breast beating. At one point, a group of young women formed a circle in front of the *masjid* and chanted *nohas* and beat their breasts very hard. In the *yokma-pa masjid*, the *minbar* was covered with a black cloth, but Agha Miggi Ort sat at the top of it. The horse was brought into the *masjid*, and tethered at the bottom of the *minbar*. On the walls there were a number of hangings with pictures of Imam Husain on them. There were a few brief prayers and then the crowd dispersed.

The 13th of Muharram is the day when the burials of Imam Husain and the other martyrs are commemorated. For the second year, the *yokma-pa* broke tradition and had a procession; the *goma-pa* always organise one on this day. Again the *yokma-pa* procession set off from Panikhar, but there was a halt on the way in the meadows next to the river between the two villages. There an *akhun* from Kanoor village in Sankhoo Block gave a *matam* speech that was particularly touching. He described what happened to Hazrat Zenab, Imam Husain's sister, after the battle of Karbala:

26. Momen 1985: 242.

After the martyrdom of Imam Husain, his sister, Hazrat Zenab went to look for his body. She picked up lots of bits of earth but she could not smell Imam Husain on them, but on her way back she saw some earth and she smelt it and recognised his smell, then she saw his body. [She was in the Qatl Gah between the tents where the dead bodies were.] When Hazrat Zenab saw the body of Imam Husain she wept there and stayed for some time. Then she said goodbye to his body and returned to the campsite where she saw the enemies had tied up all the womenfolk in a single rope, and were ready to take them as prisoners of war. [All the men had been killed.]

Then Umr Sadr, the leader of the Yazdi forces, ordered all the prisoners to be taken. The womenfolk were riding camels, and he told his men to take the prisoners through the Qatl Gah just to show them what they had done and to harass them. [After killing the martyrs they had beheaded all the dead bodies] He wanted them to see with their own eyes the result of not obeying Yazdi's orders. All the prisoners had their hands tied behind their backs so they could not come down from the camels. Hazrat Zenab said to Imam Husain, 'I cannot come down and embrace your body, so I am saying goodbye to you from far away.'

[Then the speaker addresses Hazrat Zenab.] I am sorry you cannot dismount, as you are tied to the camel and your hands and legs are bound.

[Then the speaker addresses the Last Imam.] When will you come to take revenge on the enemies of Imam Husain, who have martyred your grandfather? [Imam Husain was the grandfather of the 12th Imam.] Hazrat Zenab has been parted from her beloved brother and she is plucking her hair out. [This is customary when your closest relatives have died.]

This fragment is very typical of *matam* speeches, insofar as it allows us to view the tragedies of the Prophet's family through the sufferings of one of the women. Hazrat Zahra, the Prophet's daughter and the wife of Imam Ali, and Hazrat Zenab, her daughter are both extremely important in the rituals of the *yokma-pa*, and other Shi'ites in this area.<sup>27</sup>

When we reached the *Qatl Gah*, the *goma-pa* had a blood-spattered bier, which bore the shrouded body of Imam Husain. Women in particular went up to it weeping and touched it, and some of them put earth on their heads, a sign of mourning. When the *yokma-pa* procession reached the *masjid*, Agha Miggi Ort was sitting on the *minbar* which was no longer covered by the

27. People said that the other two important women for them are Hazrat Maryam (Mary mother of Jesus), and Hazrat Hawwa (Eve).

black cloth. The men from the procession entered the floor of the *masjid*, village by village, and for some time they continued to loudly chant *nohas* and beat their breasts very intensely. Agha Miggi Ort started to recite some prayers, but for quite a while the crowd of men stayed on their feet and refused to stop chanting *nohas*; eventually they quietened down and he gave a brief *matam* before everyone dispersed.

The observances on the 10th and 13th of Muharram often involves some kind of re-enactment of the events at Karbala. Among many Shi'ites, this takes the form of an actual drama, which in Iran is called a *tazia*.<sup>28</sup> There is no explicit drama in Suru, but I think that there is a dramatic element to the whole occasion. For example, an important part of the observances is that people in the procession are meant to experience thirst, in order to recreate the conditions that Imam Husain and his followers suffered. The attendants who provide cold drinks which they press on the processors, are also able to gain religious merit by being able to help. In 1994, Muharram fell in June, but when it falls in the winter it is apparently the custom in Ladakh to commemorate the events at Karbala a second time in the summer when it is suitably hot.<sup>29</sup>

The fighting was like a ritual battle, albeit one that was started spontaneously. As far as I could gather, it was not very violent and never caused any serious injury or death. It seems that it was an opportunity for the members of both factions to act as if they were the true supporters of Imam Husain and his family at Karbala. As their enemies, the other faction were the enemies of Imam Husain. So, both factions felt that they had performed a righteous act by fighting with his enemies.

The processions were watched closely by the police, both the four or five men from the Police Post (*chowki*) at Taisuru, and the reinforcements from Kargil. As far as I know, the fighting in Taisuru is unusual in Kargil *tehsil* and the level of Police presence is correspondingly high. Their presence adds to the drama of the processions, as does that of the Medical Department. However, Suru people's religious expression is being pathologised, in a way that has been common practice in India since colonial times (Pandey 1990). Outside the valley, the Shi'ites of Suru are frequently regarded as being both riotous and a bit of a joke, both because of the millenarism and the *yokma-goma* dispute. These attitudes are particularly prevalent among people in the administration, both in Kargil and in the state as a whole. For example, one

28. Thaiss 1972, Momen 1985: 242.

29. David Pinault — personal communication.



story is told about Agha Hyder visiting the Governor and not being able to drink tea because he ran the risk of being polluted by taking anything wet from a non-Muslim.<sup>30</sup>

The *yokma-goma* split is regarded as if it was unique and used as the stereotype for negative images of Shi'ites. On one level, the fact that there are factions in Suru is just normal politics both in Ladakh and anywhere else. For example, underlying the overtly communal politics of the Ladakh Buddhist Association in Leh *tehsil* in recent years, there is a major divide between two factions in Buddhism.<sup>31</sup> Similarly in Kargil there are two major Shi'ite political factions and this is a feature of Shi'ism in the Middle East at the moment as well (see below).

The *yokma-goma* split also has resonances of the type of rivalry that is found all over the region between structurally equivalent groups. For example, relations between brothers who have divided their land, are often quite fraught because they form part of the same *pha-spun*, whose members must co-operate and support each other, but at the same time they are to some extent in competition. A large proportion of serious disputes are between closely related people over land and inheritance, and nearly all come to a head at the time of ploughing when land ownership becomes *de facto*. A Suru man once remarked to me that he could not understand why another was jealous of him, since he had neither stolen his beloved, nor was he his relative who had become richer than him. People also particularly feared the evil eye (*mi-kha*) from the houses of their immediate *pha-spun*, (which in Suru is a patrilineal clan) especially those from whom they have recently divided the house and land.

Therefore, the rivalry between the factions is typical of that found between groups of equal status in the area, a slightly more playful form of which is the inter-village rivalry enacted at weddings and in archery contests all over the region. External connections of the two factions reveal a similar form of competition between equals and reflect ideological splits that are found in Shi'ism in Kargil and the Middle East, and in party political divisions in Ladakh.

30. The majority of Muslims in Kargil tehsil regard the wet touch or receiving drink or wet food from a non-Muslim as being polluting.

31. van Beek and Bertelsen 1995.

### Outside connections of the two Shi'ite factions Suru

The Shi'ite congregation has its most important spiritual centres in Iran and Iraq (and to a lesser extent Syria), but there is no single central organisation or leader for all Shi'ites. This is partly a result of the doctrine of the line of Imams and the occultation of the Twelfth Imam, which means that most Shi'ahs believe that in the absence of the Hidden Imam there is no absolute religious authority present on earth. Hence, at any given time, there are several religious authorities in Shi'ism who are considered to be *mujtahids*, that is, people who are sufficiently learned to pronounce on matters of jurisprudence, a handful of the most respected of whom are known by the title *Ayatollah*.<sup>32</sup> They are spiritual guides, whom ordinary believers are enjoined to follow.<sup>33</sup>

Currently, all the leading *mujtahids* are normally resident in the Middle East, mainly in Iraq, Iran and Syria. Each *mujtahid* may pronounce judgments (Farsi: *ijtihad*) on matters of religious practice, and Shi'ahs are free to follow the guidance of whoever they want. When this was discussed in Suru, people said: 'If we don't like one Ayatollah's advice, then we can follow another's.' This was what had happened in 1994 in respect of the blood-letting at Muharram. Ayatollah Khamenei, who is the successor of Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran, had issued a ruling (*fatwa*) that there was to be no bloodshed during the memorial processions in Muharram. Nevertheless, the people of Sankhoo were under no obligation to follow this advice, and chose not to; whereas those of Suru Block and Kargil did.

Some *mujtahids* also run religious colleges, called *madrasas*, in the important Shi'ite towns, such as Qum in Iran, Najaf (near Karbala) in Iraq and Damascus in Syria. These *madrasas* are funded mainly from the *khums* tax, and, to a lesser extent, through income from land ownership.<sup>34</sup> The students are from all over the Shi'ite world, and may receive a small stipend from the *madrasa* towards the cost of their upkeep.<sup>35</sup> The main religious

32. Glassé 1991: 259.

33. Zubaida 1987: 43.

34. Fischer 1980: 42. Ayatollah Khomeini challenged this in his political philosophy, and claimed temporal authority (Zubaida 1993:16).

35. For example in the madrasa where Agha Miggi Ort's eldest son was studying in Qum, most students received a stipend of about 1,000 Rials a month, which is very little. In 1994, he had come first in the examinations so he would receive 7,000 Rials a month for the following year, but even that was not enough to live on. The rest of the cost of his upkeep was covered by the *khums* money and other ad hoc donations from the *yokma-pa*.

leaders in Suru have all spent some years studying in Iraq before the expulsion of foreign clerics in 1974,<sup>36</sup> and more recently in Iran. At the moment, a number of men from Suru are studying in Iran, including three of the scions of the *yokma* faction's lineage, and an important *shaikh* from the *goma* faction.<sup>37</sup> Until 1947, some of the local religious leaders used to study at *madradas* in Skardu in Baltistan; but I have not heard of anyone studying at Shi'ite *madradas* in other parts of India, not even in Kashmir. Local leaders may have a certain doctrinal loyalty to the preaching of the guides associated with their *madrada*; however, they can choose subsequently to take the guidance of one or more other *mujtahids*. Hence, as Zubaida points out, despite Shi'ism having a large institutional base, it does not have a centralised organisation or single authority.<sup>38</sup>

The absence of a single indivisible sovereignty or territory was a feature of the politics of religion and the state in the Himalayan region for centuries, as Burghart has shown in respect of Nepal.<sup>39</sup> Miller describes the overall structure of Tibetan Buddhist monasticism as a 'web', since it consisted of different sects, which overlap geographically, and are not completely exclusive, or often antagonistic to each other. Similarly, within each sect, the sub-monasteries and *rinpoches* (lines of religious leaders) are often relatively autonomous, and not subject to any centralised spiritual authority.<sup>40</sup>

A similar factional split to that found between the *yokma* and *goma-pa* exists in Kargil, where the two important Shi'ite factions in the last few years have centred around the Islamiya School and the Ayatollah Khomeini Memorial Trust (AKMT). The former, has been in existence since the 1950s as a school of religious instruction for younger men, most of whom subsequently study at one of the Shi'ite centres in the Middle East. Nowadays it has an imposing building in Kargil's main bazaar. The latter was started after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini as a social welfare organisation, and runs a chain of schools in and around Kargil town. The *yokma* and *goma-pa* are linked to the AKMT and Islamiya School factions respectively. The AKMT does not seem to have any presence in Suru itself; but a few years ago, the *goma-pa aghas* opened a branch of the Islamiya

36. Richard 1995: 114.

37. In 1994, there were said to be about 100 students from Kargil tehsil in Iran, and a few had their families with them.

38. Zubaida 1987: 42.

39. Burghart 1984.

40. Miller 1961, Cassinelli & Ekvall 1969.

School in Taisuru. However, it is relatively inactive and Agha Sakawat, one of the *goma-pa* leaders, said that it only had two pupils in 1994.

This division among the Shi'ites of Kargil *tehsil* reflects one in the Middle East between Ayatollah Khomeini and the Ayatollah Khoi, who were two of the leading *mujtahids* in Shi'ism, until their deaths in 1989 and 1992 respectively.<sup>41</sup> Broadly speaking, the *yokma-pa* faction has taken its leadership for the last few decades from a politically more radical section in the Shi'ite leadership, whose main exponent was the Ayatollah Khomeini, and hence it is seen in Kargil as the Iranian faction. The *goma-pa* favoured the Ayatollah Khoi who lived and taught in Najaf in Iraq and died at a great age in 1992, not long after he was briefly imprisoned by Saddam Hussein during the Gulf War. He was considered by many Shi'ites to be the most important *mujtahid* prior to the rise to popularity of Ayatollah Khomeini. He remained extremely popular, and was followed by the majority of Shi'ites in India, Pakistan and East Africa as well as many in the Middle East.<sup>42</sup> Ayatollah Khoi preached a quietist doctrine and he: 'considered politics a pitfall to be avoided by men of goodwill'.<sup>43</sup> His view was in keeping with the widespread interpretation of the doctrine of the Hidden Imam, which can be used as a justification for accepting existing regimes.<sup>44</sup> Hence, the fierce opposition between the two factions on matters of doctrine is congruent with wider Shi'ite divisions.

The factions are also split along party lines in the democratic politics of the area. It has been customary for the *yokma-pa* to support the National Conference and for the *goma-pa* to follow the Congress Party, as do the AKMT and the Islamiya School factions respectively. The National Conference party is only found in Jammu and Kashmir state, and has been the party of several recent administrations. The Congress Party is national and has been in power at the centre most of the time since Independence. From the 1950s to the 1980s, these two parties were politically opposed to each other, except for a brief period in the late 1980s when they had a disastrous accord.<sup>45</sup> In broad ideological terms, there is some degree of homology between the *yokma-goma* split, that between the more radical doctrine of Ayatollah Khomeini and the more quiescent of Ayatollah Khoi in Shi'ism and the National Conference

41. Richard 1995: 84.

42. Momen 1985: 315. According to Richard, by 1988, he had become the most popular Ayatollah in Iran, presumably as people became disenchanted with Ayatollah Khomeini, who the majority had followed since the Revolution (Richard 1995: 85).

43. Taheri 1985: 136.

44. Hegland 1983.

45. Singh 1996: 90ff.

and Congress parties. The former being more politically proactive and the latter more connected with the *status quo*. Thus, there is an ideological coherence within each of the factions and in their relationships to politics beyond the local level.

Nevertheless, the politics of the *yokma-pa*, particularly the millenarian doctrine, cannot be regarded either as simply oppositional to the Indian state or its rule in the area, or as a response to a threat to Islam, as Ahmed suggests.<sup>46</sup> In fact, the opposite seems to have been the case, since in the early 1960s Agha Hyder personally encouraged his followers to go and work on the building of the Leh-Srinagar road, which was strategically crucial to India.<sup>47</sup> Equally, although the faction's main focus was undoubtedly on the Shi'ite world which to a large extent provided a meta-state, at the same time the *yokma-pa* has been actively involved in state and national democratic politics for several decades.

Initially, the *yokma-pa*'s involvement in electoral politics seems to have arisen largely because Agha Hyder's following was the largest block of votes in Kargil, constituting about a quarter of the population of the *tehsil* and this vote was more or less determined by the *agha*'s directions. He and other *yokma-pa* leaders were accordingly wooed by the main political parties and apparently always supported the National Conference candidate. However, their enthusiastic support of the democratic process did not result in them receiving reasonable treatment from the administration. For example, in 1981, a non-Ladakhi DC ridiculed Agha Hyder's request for a female doctor in the area, claiming that the *agha* wanted her: 'like an elephant to tie in his yard'. These kinds of attitudes to Suru people, persist in the administration and affect Shi'ites in general in Ladakh. In the early 1990s, the budget for Kargil *tehsil* was about half that of Leh.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, Kargilis' demands for resources that are available in other areas, are often turned down with ridicule, both locally and by government officials.

By the early 1990s, the *yokma-pa* were more proactively engaged in electoral politics and for some years had had their own political candidate,

46. Ahmed 1976: 106.

47. On the wall of Agha Hyder's family's guest room in Sankhoo, there is a letter of thanks from Sonam Norbu who was the Ladakhi engineer supervising the building of the Leh-Srinagar road in the early 1960s. This letter commends him for insisting that his followers went and worked as labourers on the most difficult and dangerous part of the road near Lamayuru. It says that Agha Hyder told his followers not to return until the road was finished.

48. Kristoffer Brix Bertelsen, personal communication.

Qamer Ali, who is from an *akhun* family in Sangra near Sankhoo. He had briefly been the Member for Kargil of the Jammu and Kashmir Legislative Assembly before the suspension of democratic politics in the state in 1989 and stood as a candidate for MP in 1996 and was then re-elected as the MLA for Kargil and is now a minister in the State Government. Thus their relationship to democratic politics had changed significantly in the past decade and continues to do so.

### Conclusions

In this paper I have discussed how the legitimate beliefs, religious practices and politics of Shi'ites in the Suru valley are commonly both pathologised and ridiculed. This has had important consequences for their ability to be taken seriously in the politics of the area, and has contributed to the marginalisation of Shi'ites in general in Ladakh. Hence, in this article I have tried to contextualise their beliefs and politics and show that they have both a coherence and continuity with other beliefs and practices in the area.

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