Dancing Cultural Sustainability at the Top of the World: A Hunza Wedding

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Abstract:

This brief article is part of a larger body of my research since 2016 on flows of migration--physical, discursive, and digital—of indigenous (and its hybridized "modern") performance in Pakistan, a most timely part of which is cultural sustainability in the face of climate change and irresponsible development. Here, I look at a specific ethnographic moment during my fieldwork in the spring of 2024, in Gilgit-Baltistan. This moment documents a Hunza wedding joining two prominent families residing in the provincial capital of Gilgit. As in most South Asian cultures, a wedding is often an encapsulation of the cultural ethos of a community. It is clearly apparent among members of the Burushaski community of Hunza, for whom communal celebration, comprising plenty of good food, live upbeat traditional music, and lively dance, is an integral part of their lifestyle and identity, of which there are multiple layers.

Hunza - A Contextual Snapshot

The remote, breathtaking Hunza Valley in northern Pakistan's Gilgit-Baltistan administrative territory borders China's Xinjiang province to the east and northeast, Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkwa province to the west, Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor to the north, Azad Kashmir to the south, and the Indian-administered territories of Jammu-Kashmir and Ladakh to the southeast. It has been invaded, occupied, settled since ancient times by diverse people, including Indic, Persian, Tibetan, Ladakhi, Turkic, Kashmiri, and the Mughal. Before the British annexed Hunza in 1891, it was an independent kingdom governed by hereditary autocratic rulers known as Thum in the local vernacular, or Mir in Persian. Upon annexation, the British made Hunza and the neighboring kingdoms Nagar, Gilgit, Skardu, Yaseen, Astor, and Chitral part of their Gilgit Agency, administered under the Jammu and Kashmir states but given full internal autonomy.[1] Following the partition of India and Pakistan, in 1948, the region was included in the area referred to as "Pakistan Administered Kashmir." In 1970, Gilgit-Baltistan became a separate administrative unit called "Northern Areas," an amalgamation of the former Gilgit Agency, Baltistan district, and the above-mentioned princely states, the largest of which are Hunza and Nagar.[2] The region was renamed Gilgit-Baltistan in 2009 and granted "limited autonomy." Hunza sits surrounded by the convergence of the towering peaks of the Hindu Kush, Karakoram, and Himalayan Mountain ranges; at least fifty-five of its peaks are over seven thousand meters (twenty-one thousand feet) in altitude. Its inhabitants, collectively known as Hunzakuts, are internationally renowned for their robustness and longevity, and, beginning in the late 1970s, their increasingly high literacy rate (currently 90%+), empowerment of women, and astute, intersectional engagement with international development. Gilgit-Baltistan, including Hunza, was very isolated from mainland Pakistan until the mid-1970s, when the Karakoram Highway was built, linking the region with lower Pakistan. While most of Hunza's inhabitants claim Burushaski, a language isolate, as their mother tongue, there are various other languages spoken in the valley: Wakhi, Shina, Balti, Kuar, and Domaki. Almost all Burushin

1 Sidky, M.H.,1994, "Shamans and Mountain Spirits in Hunza." In *Asian Folklore Studies*, Vol. 53: 67-96.
2 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gilgit-Baltistan

(Burushaski speakers) follow the Ismaili sect of Islam, while inhabitants of neighboring valleys tend to follow Shi'a Islam.

Oral and written sources offer contradictory information about when and from where Islam came to the Hunzakuts. Local tradition maintains that Shi'a Islam arrived in Hunza in the fourteenth century, when Ayasho, Thum (king) of Hunza, married the daughter of the King of Baltistan. There are narratives of Shia immortals, called Akhund, arriving in Hunza from Baltistan to disseminate the Asnahashari (Shia) religion.[3] According to other sources, Shia missionaries brought the sect from Baltistan and Kashmir in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[4] The Hunzakut converted to Ismailism, a Shia sect, in the late eighteenth-early nineteenth century, during the reign of Mir Silum Khan (1790-1824), or alternately, "during the fifteenth year of Mir Ghazanfar Khan (1824-1865).[5] Prior to Islam, the Hunza held diverse shamanistic and polytheistic beliefs and practices. Under the Islamic hegemony this rich indigenous knowledge has been stifled, either erased from sociocultural memory or minimized as quaint folklore. I will refer to this point later in the essay, pointing out how it still exists in performance practice.

Hunza Music and Performance Practice

The Hunza musical and performance practice consists of a lively, distinct blend of South and central Asian, Persian, pre-Islamic, and Ismaili Islamic elements. The iconic indigenous music of Hunza is Hareep—loud, upbeat celebratory instrumental music performed by ensembles. Ensembles consist of Dadang, a double-ended drum made of juniper wood and played with sticks; Dhamal, a pair of small metal kettle drums also played with sticks; and Surnai, a reed horn (shawm) made of apricot wood. Hareep music is so iconic of Hunza Valley that it is said people of all ages are unable to sit or stand still but are compelled to dance their version of the Sufi Raks (whirling dance) when they hear it.[6] Moreover, Hareep drumming, similar to other indigenous drumming traditions around the world, incorporates distinctly choreographed hand and arm gestures during its performance.

The rulers, or Mirs, of the princely states Hunza, Nagar, and Gilgit, were the principal patrons of Hareep music. In Hunza, the Mir family held direct rule until the 1970s, inhabiting the palaces of Altit and Baltit, one thousand and eight hundred years old, respectively. A Mir would have his court musicians create special rhythms, Dani-s, to honor an individual with whom he was especially pleased. Each specific Dani would bear the name of the individual being recognized or rewarded. Then people would dance in celebration as the Dani was played. Thus, a specific Dani came to be associated with a particular dance, to be performed by generally "prominent" people, not by the musicians. Each Dani came to be associated with a different clan and was connected to a historic event from which it was traced.[7] A Dani was also played and danced at occasions like weddings or festivals, spotlighted here. A Dani could also be associated with a famous love story, often named after its heroine. In former times, Dani-s followed the Mir's activities, like a polo match, to mark parts of the game: beginning, end, a goal made, a player's fall, etc.[8]

The traditional ensembles that played Hareep

3 Sidky, *op.cit.* p. 71
4 Staley, 1969, p.230, in Sidky, *ibid*.
5 Sidky, *ibid*.
6 Arieb Azhar, 2024, Sur Mein Rahe Video Blog
7 Personal Communication, Mujeeb ul-Rehman, July 2024.
8 Azhar, *ibid*., Willson, Stephen R., 1999: *A Look At Hunza Culture*.

music mostly belonged to the Bericho community, referred to in Burushaski as Bericho and in Shina, Domaki. In Hunza, they reside in the village of Mominabad (formerly known as Berishal), a short distance down the mountain from Altit, mentioned above. Although at the time of the Mirs' dynasties, the Bericho musicians were steadily employed in the royal court and valued for their musical work, they held an inferior position in society. At one point, Bericho were not allowed to speak their native language, Domaki, in the courts. Despite enduring discrimination and injustice, Bericho musicians remained the keepers of Hareep music, performing it at most occasions, both public and private. In addition to performing Hareep music, the Bericho were also master craftsmen who worked both as blacksmiths and instrument makers. Specific clans of Bericho specialized in crafting each type of instrument: Dadang, Damal, and Surnai.

By the 1980s, because of the lack of financial sustainability, Bericho musicians began leaving their profession to seek other means of earnings, so that the tradition almost disappeared, with only one group remaining in Hunza and one in Nagar. But in the 1990s, when His Highness the Aga Khan (the spiritual leader of the Ismaili community) visited Hunza and heard Hareep music for the first time, he decreed that this ancient music must be preserved. From that time, a revival began, which continues today. Hunza's Mir Ghazanfar Sahab was very involved in this revival. He is a member of the Aga Khan Historical Trust, Aga Khan Cultural Services, and Aga Khan National Council, who have been very involved in the revival of Hunza's traditional music and culture. In addition, in the early 2000s, the Karakoram Area Development Organization (KADO) launched an extensive upliftment project called Qasb-e-Kamal, focusing on young musicians belonging to the Bericho tribe, training them in their music, culture, and language.

Another initiative, currently viable and rapidly growing, is the Leif Larsen Music Centre (LLMC) in Altit, located in the royal gardens below the Altit Fort/Palace, a community institution opened around 2014, dedicated to promoting and preserving the traditional music of Gilgit-Baltistan. LLMC is mainly supported by the Aga Khan Cultural Services Program (AKCSP). Approximately sixty-five individuals aged nine to twenty-five, both boys and girls, attend and learn music there. Some of them go on to perform locally, nationally, and internationally. This is my main field site. LLMC's principal tutor, Mujeeb ur-Rehman, in his early thirties, is an astute, talented musician, educator, mountaineer, and cultural activist. He and his family hosted me in their home in nearby Aliabad during my entire stay in Hunza. I write about the work of LLMC in detail and issues of Hunza music and cultural sustainability in the face of climate change in a recent article.[9]

A Burusho Wedding in Gilgit

In addition to my work as participant (guest instructor)/ observer at LLMC, I was invited to attend two days of a three-day-long wedding of ur-Rehman's family friend's/co--musician's cousin in the provincial capital Gilgit. As an honorary family member on the groom's side of the wedding festivities, ur-Rehman played an important role in facilitating the organization of the musicians at the wedding. The musicians included the core Hareep ensemble, whose instrumentation consisted of the above-mentioned Dadang (barrel drum played with curved sticks or hands), Dhamal (a pair of small kettle drums played with straight sticks), and

9 Paramashivan and Maciszewski in LaRue and Romero. Routledge: 2025, forthcoming.

one, sometimes two or three Surnai (shawm). There is no singing in traditional Hareep music; it is only instrumental music, very often accompanying dance.

Despite the prominent socioeconomic positions of both families, the décor, although attractive and festive, was not particularly lavish by Indo-Pakistani standards—typical of the Hunza people's ethos of communality and simplicity. In traditional Burushaski style, a professional Hareep music ensemble played multiple Hareep-s, mostly in Botahri style (for entertainment at festivals), from around 5:00 pm, greeting the groom's party as they arrived at the bride's home, and then leading the bride, groom, and guests into the large tent that served as the reception hall. The musicians would continue throughout the night, until 4:00 am, only taking short breaks. Guests danced throughout, starting with men only at the bride's venue, dancing with the groom and separately to honor the new couple. (Video - Bride and Groom Arrive) After sunset, the wedding party, together with the musicians' ensemble, moved to the groom's home, welcoming the bride to her Sasural, her new home that she would share with her husband and his family. There, later into the night, besides boys and men of all ages, young women and men (mostly extended family of the groom), a few mature women, and children of various ages danced in circling groups to non-Hareep, mostly Hunza, and contemporary repertoire. In one distinctive case, a solo elder woman interpreted a very special Hareep.

Dancing to the Hareep or Dani

Giratas refers to "dance." Depending on which Hareep or Dani, the Giratas is performed with varying degrees of individual creativity. In some cases, the "choreography" is set and no variation is allowed. Moreover, certain songs (Dani) can only be danced to by certain people. Generally, one, sometimes two men begin a dance, quickly followed by as many as ten others, usually friends or relatives. They dance together in a wide circle. They strike a pose by raising one heel slowly off the ground and lifting their arms and hands to face level. They continue with a sort of hopping step that is surprisingly fluid. They pause at the end of a sequence of gestures (ideally coordinated with a rhythmic phrase), striking the beginning pose again, awaiting audience reaction.[10] (Video-Giratas)

The rhythmically prominent Hareep can change frequently, as one phrase transforms into another. The short pauses between phrases indicate that the Hareep or rhythm is about to change into something else. Different Hareep or Dani have different choreographic sequences, emphasizing the shift. The dancer's steps reflect the coordination between them and the musicians and the spectators. Through movement of their eyes, eyebrows, and hand gestures, and certain body movements, a dancer communicates to the musicians what tune or rhythm the musicians should play; where they should pause, speed up, or slow down; where they should change the tune; where they should change the dynamics, etc. In addition, through their gestures, the dancer communicates to the spectators their identity and mood/ state of mind (including trance).[11]

If a dancer wants the musicians to play a particular Hareep, they will communicate the request by means of, for example, a movement of their shoulders, or Zaldelas. At the same time, such movements communicate the dancer's power, bravery—in other words,

10 Willson 1999:110, Sidky 1995:72
11 Sajid Ali, personal communication on WhatsApp, May 20-22, 2025.

masculine bravado. Another important means of nonverbal communication from the dancer to the musicians is through winking, widening the eyes, and rapid raising and lowering of the eyebrows. Referred to as Bershin, this playfully challenging behavior is a favorite means of communication between dancers and musicians, in which one challenges the other to reply using their respective medium (i.e., music or dance).[12] During and after the dance, the dancers frequently approach the musicians, giving them money held in their fists as offerings of gratitude. During the groom's dance, soon after the beginning of the reception, dancers and spectators attached money to the rim of the groom's traditional round Hunza cap, encircling it like a band of feathers surrounding the single peacock's plume attached to the front center of it. (Video - Hareep Dance & Music Communication)

Giratas/Agiratas – Burushaski / Naachna/ Nachaana/Nachwanaa - Hindi-Urdu
Dancing/ Being Made to Dance

In the process of communication between dancers and musicians, the level of skill of each determines who has agency (or control) in the dyad. A skilled dancer *dances/Naachta Hai*. They steer the musicians' performance, indicating which beats to play and how, through their gestures/Deshing, which include the eye and eyebrow movements, hand gestures, shoulder movement, and (sometimes stomp-like) steps. Much of the time they do so in a jousting manner that indicates bravado. The audience members also get involved in the mood and energy created by the *Naachnaa* of this skilled dancer. They respond verbally with shouts and other vocalizations of approval or nonverbally with semiotic gestures and loud claps. Thus "*Naachtaa Hai"* indicates that the dancers are skilled, strong enough to lead the performance. On the other hand, *Agiratas/ Nachaana* or *Naachwaanaa* occurs when the dancer is weak, less skilled, in which case the musicians *make them dance*, leading the dancers in sequences that the dancers must follow as much as they are able.[13]

Rather late on the first evening that I attended, at the groom's home, a mature woman next to whom I had been sitting stood up and began to dance boldly. Her erect posture, mischievous smile, together with eye and eyebrow movements, and strongly executed arm movements and steps, indicated that she was very much in control of the piece, in Giratas. She was flanked by a very young woman who was obviously not familiar with the specific traditional dance that her elder was performing. She led the musicians through a section of a Hareep known as "Shireen Zabaan" in a rhythm called "Tajwaar." "Shireen Zabaan" is a popular Hareep in the repertoire of the Bitan, or shamans, people possessing special powers such as, direct communication with the fairies inhabiting the mountains. Although not a shaman herself, the dancer's steps, raising the feet high as if climbing a mountain, and gestures, pointing towards the mountains, asking to be connected with the fairies, identified this dance as part of the Bitan's repertoire. (See video clip "Hareep Bitan Dance.") The dancer's face has been obscured to protect her privacy. Normally, this dance can be done simply for entertainment, as in this case, but if a shaman performs it, its meaning and intention change to connect with the fairies. Significantly, there is no restriction against, or stigma attached to women in Hunza being Bitan. It is considered a "natural" occurrence; there have been several female Bitan documented in nearby town Karimabad,

12 Sajid Ali, personal communication on WhatsApp, May 22, 2025.
13 Ibid.

one of the centers of the Mir dynasties.[14] More information about Bitan can be found in Willson (1999) and Sidky (1995), among others.

Both nights I attended, the music began with the traditional "fife and drum" ensemble, its members performing traditional Hareep repertoire with only men of various ages dancing. As the night went on, they were joined by ur-Rehman on Daph (frame drum) and two Rabab players, the most advanced of the LLMC students, themselves preprofessional level performers and multi-instrumentalists. The Surnai players gradually stopped playing and either left the stage area or shifted to percussion. Finally, a skilled guitarist/vocalist specialized in modern Burushaski and Urdu songs joined in, performing contemporary repertoire. The dancers, too, shifted from mostly men, many of them mature, to considerably younger, mixed-gender groups, whose dance moves reflected a combination of Hunza, Punjabi, and Pashto moves, with even some Bollywood mixed in. The intensity of the drumming decreased, and the woody plucking of rabab began to dominate the soundscape, with the increasingly lyrical melodies such as Bazmi Hareep replacing the driving rhythms.

Although this contemporary repertoire is undoubtedly very popular among youth, I found in my fieldwork that there remains a strong interest in preserving the Hunza Hareep traditions in the context of community events. Such gatherings with live music and dance as an integral part exemplify how music mobilizes community in a layered, intricate manner, across generations and social groups, reinforcing, not always without contradiction, connection and identity—cultural sustainability--in the face of change.

14 Mujeeb ur-Rehman, personal communication through Whatsapp, May 27, 2025.

Screenshots from Author's Videos (Hunza Wedding)

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