DEMUTA, FOLK-HERO OF NISHEIGROM: MYTH AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE

BY

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I

Nuristan ('land of light') is the name that was given to Kafiristan ('land of infidels') by late 19th century Afghan conquerors. Nuristan is a region of high mountains and deep valleys on the southern slopes of the Hindu Kush in Afghanistan. Nisheigrom is one of nine villages in Waigal Valley, the valley itself being one of the five major valley regions of Nuristan. Together, the nine villages in this valley form a single political community, the members of which speak a common language—Waigali.

According to genealogies obtained in the field,¹ Demuta lived in the village of Nisheigrom eighteen generations ago.² The story of his birth and death is given here in translation from Waigali, together with a discussion intended to show why this particular story has persisted in this particular society and also to attempt to account for certain features which the story presents.

¹ I carried out anthropological fieldwork in Waigal Valley in the summer of 1966, the winter of 1966-67, the summer of 1967, and again in the winter of 1967-68. My earlier fieldwork in Nuristan had been confined to the Ashkun-speaking peoples of western Nuristan (winter 1960-61) and the Bashgal Valley of NE Nuristan (summer 1960, spring 1966, spring 1967). In 1967 I also spent a short time among the Kalash Kafirs of the Rumbur, Bomboret, and Berir Valleys of Chitral. This article was written and accepted for publication in 1969.

² If we arbitrarily reckon a generation as twenty years and accept the genealogy as given, then Demuta lived some 360 years ago. My personal opinion is that he probably lived much earlier, partly because there is a tendency for genealogies to become compressed as unimportant links are forgotten, partly for reasons explained in the text.

II

The Birth of Demuta

Pātūl had seven daughters. Six of them were married. One, the youngest daughter, still lived with her father. She was not married.

One day she went with Pātūl to the mountain pastures. When they came to a resting place on the mountainside, the girl told her father that she had to do something. She went into the bushes and Pātūl went on ahead. When he was gone, a large bird (called *pāñi*)³ flew down. Its wing brushed the girl's shoulder.

After three months, the girl knew that she was pregnant. She went to her father and said, "Please find a husband for me." Pātūl was angry. "You are not married," he said, "and yet you are with child. Why have you done this bad thing?"

Pātūl would not listen to his daughter's explanation. He sent her away.

When the influential elders (*dūštū-dūštū*) of the village heard that Pātūl had sent his youngest daughter from his house, a few of them went to talk to him as mediators (*dūwāñi*).

"Why did you send your daughter away?" they asked. "You have gotten husbands for your other daughters. What has happened?" Pātūl told them that his daughter was with child.

The mediators went to see the girl to hear her story. She told them about the *pāñi* and what had happened on the mountainside. When the mediators heard this they at once returned to tell Pātūl. He heard them, but he refused to accept the story. Again, the mediators went to see the girl. "What shall we do?" they asked. "Your father does not believe the story."

"Wait until my son is born," she told them. "If he speaks before drinking milk, then you will know that my story is true. If my son cannot speak at once when he is born, then my father can do as he likes about me."

When the mediators told this to Pātūl he said, "I do not want to see her in my house until this problem is settled."

Because Pātūl would not let her live in his house, the girl had to go to the *šawar/ ama* [segregated birth and menstration house]

³ Prof. Georg Morgenstierne, in his book on the Waigali Language (Norsk Tidsskrift for Sprogvidenskap, vol. 17, pp. 146-324, Oslo, 1954) translates *pāñi* as 'falcon, hawk, kite', but I had thought from my informants that it was an eagle.

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before the usual time. There she stayed until her son was born. As soon as the child was born, Pātūl's daughter told the *šawarfi* [woman in charge of the *šawarfi ama*—a kind of midwife] to hurry and fetch the influential elders of the village.

The woman brought them and they stood at a distance while she went into the *šawarfi ama*. "Take my son to them," said the girl. When the *šawarfi* carried the new-born boy out to show the elders, he spoke to them, saying, "Bring me a bow and arrows." One of the elders sent to his house for a bow and arrow.

These were given to the infant. The boy took the bow and shot an arrow high into the air. It came down on top of *diyastūn* [the great rock, representing the creator Imra, that dominates Nisheigrom].

At once the elders went to the house of Pātūl to tell him what had taken place. "I am pleased that I was wrong," said Pātūl. "The boy's name will be Demuta."

When forty days had passed after the birth of her son, Pātūl's daughter could leave the *šawar! ama*. She took her son home to her father's house. There Demuta again asked for a bow and arrow. He took these and climbed to the top of *diyastūn*. From there he shot an arrow high into the air. It fell in that part of the village called Demučem [also, sometimes Sunaratčem] where the houses of the lineage (*māta*) of Sunarat are today. Demuta asked the people to build a house for him there where the arrow fell.⁴

Demuta was a poor boy, because he had no father. His grandfather (Pātūl) gave him some goats. Demuta worked very hard. He became a rich man. He killed many men and he gave many feasts. He was famous all over the Kalashum.

Demuta had one son. His name was Āstān. From that Āstān all the people of the clan of Āstān are descended.

III

I first heard this story when I asked an informant to describe the genealogical relationship between the two clans of the village. Later, over a period of months, I heard it several times from different informants in Nisheigrom. In each case the story was not only substantially the same, but there was remarkable agreement in regard to details. The story as given here was tape recorded when Nurulla Khan of the Kusugdari, a descendant of Demuta, told me the story. Later, with the help of Persian speak-

⁴ The house is still there. It is called *Demuta kōl* or *Kantar kōl*. It is said to be the oldest house in Nisheigrom. I believe that, in Kafr times, it served as a kind of clan shrine, the spirit or deity of the clan of Āstān being *Ayan prāṇā*. This house was probably identical in function to the clan houses of Parun discussed by Lennart Edelberg in *A Kafr Goddess* (Arts Asiatiques, vol. XVIII, Paris, 1968).

ing informants from Nisheigrom, including Nurulla, I was able to complete my translation of the tale in Kabul.

In the course of studying the social, economic, political, or religious institutions of a society the investigator may find himself on occasion listening to long, repetitious, and sometimes tiresome stories of days gone by. No matter how astounding the details of such stories may be, they are always presented by informants as solemn fact. Unless one is particularly interested in mythology these tales may come as unwelcome interruptions in the middle of an otherwise satisfactory interview about inheritance, land tenure, or kinship terminology. As more is learned about the society, however, these stories often take on a deeper significance. They no longer appear as a kind of entertainment that has evolved in the absence of literature, or the form which history has taken in a pre-literate society. Most of them, like the stories we have inherited from an earlier age in Europe, contain morals and the student of society can learn much about societal values from them. It is, however, in the realm of social relations that many myths serve their purpose in a society and are therefore of particular interest to the social anthropologist. It is commonplace to point out that myths are remembered and told and re-told down through the generations, not for their entertainment value, but because they explain something that needs explaining and cannot otherwise be explained. The story itself is a vehicle for an idea or moral and implicitly indicates correct behaviour and attitudes, thus reflecting cultural values.

In many cases the original meaning and purpose of European folk stories has been lost—only the stories remain. We may speculate on moral themes but in the absence of contemporary comments it remains speculation. In pre-literate societies we have the opportunity not only to record folk stories uninfluenced by written forms, but also the opportunity to record the comments of those who relate the stories. I suggest that the comments are more important than the stories themselves. If the story has socio-political significance then it would be well to attempt to discover that significance in the field, just as we investigate other social phenomena. The story itself is relatively unimportant, being merely an interesting and attractive package for a social

theme. Unfortunately it is difficult if not impossible to distinguish what is wrapping and what is content without a thorough understanding of the society which gave birth to the story. After all, we are dealing with another culture; aspects of a folk story which attract our interest and excite our curiosity may be considered irrelevant by those who tell the story.

The story of Demuta, 'the man who had no father', is a story that has socio-political significance in Nisheigrom. By itself it is an interesting example of a folktale from an isolated and remote region in Afghanistan, but to understand the story's function in its indigenous setting and therefore the significance of the story to those who tell it, we need to know something of the social structure of the community where the story was recorded.

There is much in the literature of social anthropology to show that in some societies myths exist in order to account for relationships that are not accounted for in the genealogies. Genealogical knowledge is often not only insufficient, but is frequently in the hands of a few specialists such as chiefs, headmen, members of a royal family, or royal advisors and the biological realities of descent can then more easily be manipulated to serve socio-political ends. On evidence which is presented here I suggest that the same phenomenon—myth creation—also occurs where genealogical knowledge is extensive both with regard to generational depth and with regard to the number of people possessing such knowledge. In such cases the myth is necessary because the genealogical reality known to so many either does not agree with social reality or it does not agree with some desired social reality. How the myth comes into being and who creates it is quite another question. The important point is that the myth has a function in the society, hence its existence.⁵ When it was created and who created it are irrelevant considerations, though it would be interesting to observe and record the process. In the case of the myth which is presented here, it may have already existed from an earlier period and the hero of it was subsequently given a place in the genealogies to serve a particular purpose.

A factually correct genealogy is two things at once: a record

⁵ Cf. Bronisław Malinowski. *Myth in Primitive Psychology*, in *Magic, Science and Religion*. 1926.

of biological descent and a charter granting rights and obligations to a specific group of people. The first is biological, the second is social. Since the latter is more important than the former, the accuracy of the record of biological descent may be sacrificed in the interests of socio-political ends. It is often extremely difficult to investigate this process or even to perceive that it has taken place. In view of this it is more useful at the outset to regard genealogies as social phenomena rather than biological history. In any case, it is in the social realm that they are significant in every day affairs.⁶

The population of Nisheigrom, like the other villages of Waigal Valley, is divided into social classes. The socially, politically, and numerically dominant class, *atrožan*, is divided into clans and lineages. Skilled and unskilled craftsmen and workers (*bari* and *šewala*) make up the socially disadvantaged classes; they are distinguished from the politically significant *atrožan* by their modes of livelihood and by numerous negative social sanctions which effectively maintain the *status quo*.

In Nisheigrom all *atrožan* belong either to the clan of Pātūl (*Pātūldari*) of the clan of Āstān (*Āstāndari*). Descent is traced through the male line and a man of Nisheigrom can reckon his exact genealogical relationship not only in respect to every man in his lineage, but every man, woman, and child in his entire clan. Elders can recite genealogies by the hour. As far as I have been able to determine, none of the few literate men in Waigal Valley have actually written their genealogies down except for those which I encouraged a student to record.⁷ In Waigal Valley it is not uncommon for a man to be able to name twenty generations of his ancestors, though none of my informants there could seriously rival those elders in the Bashgal Valley who provided me with the names of up to 45 generations of their ancestors.⁸

⁶ See *A Genealogical Charter* by Laura Bohannon, *Africa*, vol. 22, No. 4, 1952.

⁷ In Kamdesh and Baragamatal in the Bashgal Valley I encountered a few men who, on their own initiative, had written their genealogies, but it is still very much the exception in Nuristan.

⁸ Cf. Jones, Schuyler. *The Political Organization of the Kam Kafirs*. Kgl. Dan. Vid. Selsk. Hist. Filos. Medd. vol. 42, No. 2, 1967. Copenhagen. In 1929 Georg Morgenstierne obtained a genealogy of 54 generations from an old Kafir in Chitral. Cf. *Ætteltrædisjon hos Kafirne i Hindukusj*. Maal og Minne, Oslo, 1950, pp. 155-162.

These genealogies are not merely lists of agnates, they ramify widely and I have spent entire afternoons recording the various branches of clan and lineage from a single informant.

Approximately half the *atrožan* of Nisheigrom belong to the clan of Āstān—those who trace descent from Āstān—while the other half belong to the clan of Pātūl by virtue of the fact that they trace descent from Pātūl. Since Nuristani villages are extremely compact, physically isolated from each other, and traditionally politically autonomous, it is not only desirable but essential that a high degree of social solidarity exist within the village. The political danger is that a dispute between members of one clan and those of another could divide the village into two opposing camps—one clan against the other. One way of forging a bond between the two clans is to show a genealogical relationship between Pātūl and Āstān and appeal to the principle that kinsmen should not fight with one another. I suggest that in a society where genealogical knowledge is less extensive the problem might be solved by general acceptance of the fiction that Pātūl and Āstān were brothers. No one would be able to contradict the story because the genealogical evidence would have been forgotten. In Nisheigrom, however, there are many men who can trace descent from the founders of the village down through Pātūl or Āstān to their own particular lineage segment. Such knowledge prevents acceptance of the obvious solution to the problem of village solidarity. Everyone knows that Pātūl and Āstān were not brothers. The myth must take a different form. The form it takes in this case is that while the hero's mother is known, his father is not. With Demuta's father out of the way several socio-political ends are attained:

- (i) the genealogical connection between the clan of Pātūl and the clan of Āstān is established without fear of contradiction (not knowing the father, descent can only be traced through the mother),
- (ii) the virtue of Pātūl's daughter is preserved, as the story makes clear,
- (iii) genealogical expertise is not offended.

mata = lineage

IV

Clans and lineages usually derive their names from the apical ancestor, but there are exceptions: Santok is the apical ancestor of the Dumdedari lineage but the lineage gets its name from the fact that Santok's wife was from Dumgal. There is a long story that tells how Santok came to get a wife from the Afghan Safis of Dumgal. The Buradari lineage is so named because the founder, Vösog, was *bur*—a deaf-mute.

Although descent reckoning in Nuristan is patrilineal, use is

occasionally made of female links. We have noted that there is a female link between the two clans of Nisheigrom. Furthermore the lineages (*māta*) of Brom and Sunarat are grafted onto the clan of Āstān by the genealogical knowledge that Āstān's *daughter* had three sons: Pātūl, Brom, and Sunarat. The name and lineage of Āstān's daughter's husband is not known and therefore is not important. The point is that Āstān is the grandfather of Brom and Sunarat—from this they and their descendants derive their social identity. It is known that both lineages originally belonged to the clan of Pātūl and that the lineage of Sunarat was adopted (*eken-tay*) by the clan of Āstān. At the same time, the lineage of Drunas was also adopted, though in that case there has been no corresponding adjustment of the genealogies to accommodate the new social fact.

The adoption of the two lineages came about in this way: Nisheigrom is located at the confluence of two streams which drain the valleys of Moraigal and Adrugal. The people of the clan of Pātūl own all the land in Moraigal; the people of the clan of Āstān own all the land in Adrugal. This arrangement caused problems, as one informant explained: "The Āstāndari had many fields, but few people. The Pātūldari had many people, but little arable land. The elders solved the problem in this way: the Pātūldari agreed to give two lineages to the Āstāndari. They gave the lineages of Sunarat and Drunas. These two lineages joined the clan of Āstān. The problem was solved."

V

I suggest that there is some ground for considering the story of Demuta, as Pātūl's grandson and Āstān's father, to be a fabrication. It may well be that there was an ancient folk-hero of Nisheigrom named Demuta who did remarkable things and lived so long ago that he had no place in the genealogies. It subsequently became convenient to place him in the genealogies as a link between Pātūl and Āstān for the reasons given above. My reason for suggesting this is not complicated. If descent had been traced from Demuta all along, one would expect a descent group bearing his name to have evolved. Yet the clan is named

after Demuta's son (Āstān). This in itself is an anomaly, particularly as the son was in no way as distinguished as the father. As it is, it seems that the clan name Āstān had already become established long before it became useful to regard Demuta as Āstān's father. This was only possible if Āstān's father had been forgotten.

In Nuristan descent is normally traced through the male line, but use is made of female links whenever it is expedient to do so. Acceptance of the female link in this case means that every *atrožan* in Nisheigrom can trace descent from Pātūl. In this light, the story of Demuta is a kind of mandate for maintaining social solidarity in this village.

VI

The Death of Demuta

Demuta had a *solī* from Gemir.⁹ Demuta had made *solibar* [brotherhood] with this man because he had asked it. Demuta's *solī* had no son. He went to the seer (*wřěďř*) to talk to him about not having a son. The seer told him, "You have a famous *solī*. Let him sleep with your wife. Then you will have a son." The man went home and thought about it. Then talked to his wife, telling her what the seer had suggested. He told his wife to do it.

When Demuta next came to his *solī*'s house in Gemir, the man greeted him and said that he had to go away for a day or two, but Demuta should stay in his house while he was gone. Demuta agreed and when the husband had left, the wife tried to get Demuta to do what the seer had suggested. Demuta refused, saying, "My *solī* is like my brother. Therefore you are like my sister. I cannot do what you ask."

Two days later the husband returned to Gemir and at once asked his wife what had happened. She told him that nothing had happened; Demuta had refused.

⁹ Two men may become 'brothers' by participating in a ceremony in which a goat is sacrificed and the kidneys are removed and cooked. A witness then formally announces to the men that "as these kidneys are a pair, so you will be a pair throughout your lives". One man then eats one kidney and his friend eats the other. *Solibar* establishes a relationship identical to that between men who have the same father, though biological brothers call each other *brā*.

The man was suddenly afraid that Demuta might return to Nisheigrom and tell someone what his wife had asked him to do. Demuta's *solì* watched his chance and put poison in Demuta's food. When he had eaten, Demuta began to feel ill and decided to go home. He set out at once from Gemir, crossed the Aštaragala Pass and started down into the Waigal Valley. When he reached Chimi he was so ill that he could not walk further. The men of Chimi carried him to the edge of Nishei territory where they met people from Nisheigrom who took Demuta from there.

On the trail they suddenly found a huge boulder blocking the way. They could not carry Demuta by this place because the mountainside was very steep. Demuta told them, "Put me down and give me my *waš'lik*.¹⁰ He could not stand, so, lying on the ground, he struck the boulder and it broke so that they could pass.¹¹

Demuta was tired. He told his friends, "Let us rest." From his resting place on the ground, Demuta saw bees round a honey tree. He asked a man to make a fire and prepare a bowl of warm honey for him. When he had eaten this, Demuta became quite well and walked on to Nisheigrom without help.

As he walked, he thought about what had happened. By the time he reached Nisheigrom, Demuta was angry with his *solì*. The next day he made preparations and set out for Gemir to kill the man who had poisoned him.

Reaching Gemir, Demuta went directly to his *solì*'s house and shot an arrow through the open door. From inside, the *solì* shouted, "Forgive me. I will do whatever you ask, but don't kill me."

The *solì*'s wife snatched the big iron griddle (*külüš*) from the tripod at the fireplace and held it in front of her husband like a shield. Outside, Demuta said nothing. He shot another arrow into the house.

With his wife protecting him with the griddle, the man reached

¹⁰ *waš'lik* is a special ceremonial axe—not used for cutting wood—but carried like a swagger stick by all men of high rank in Kašir times. In Nisheigrom I was told that Demuta's *waš'lik* still existed, but I did not see it. One member of Demuta's family said that a foreigner had taken it; others disagreed.

¹¹ Today this place is called *Demuta waš'lik vīna*.

back to get his bow and arrows. Then he shot an arrow and Demuta fell before the door and died there.

The people of Gemir were afraid. For a long time they did not go near the body and Demuta lay where he had fallen. After a time his body began to swell up. It became very big. Finally one of the men of Gemir approached the body and struck it with an axe. As soon as he had done this there came from Demuta's body thousands of locusts. They spread out over the village and ate everything. It was nearly harvest time. The locusts destroyed all of the crops and there was famine in the village. Never had the people of Gemir seen such a plague of locusts.

When the men of Nisheigrom heard that Demuta was dead they went to Gemir and killed the people; they destroyed the village and took away the goats and cattle. Later, when those men of Gemir who had fled to the mountains returned, they found their village in ruins. "We must sacrifice a cow for Demuta," they said.

Every year they sacrifice a cow for Demuta just before harvest time. If they do not do it, the locusts come and destroy the crops. They still do it today. If you go to Gemir before harvest you will see them sacrifice a cow for Demuta.¹²

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¹² Since the significance of Demuta's story is sociological rather than historical it is perhaps irrelevant to add that the people of Gemir appear never to have heard of Demuta and deny that they sacrifice a cow before harvest.

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Figure 1. Nisheigrom. The great rock of *dirqastân* is on the left. The very large boulder that forms the highest point was, according to one myth, placed there by a woman. In this picture less than one quarter of the approximately 400 houses of Nisheigrom are visible. This photograph, showing the view up Adrugal Valley, was taken in February, 1968.

Figure 2. Section of one of the four columns in the main room (*amū*) of Demuta's house in Nisheigrom showing human faces and, below, symbols of rank. Across the face on the right and above that on the left are wooden hooks for clothing. The face on the left has been partially destroyed by knife or axe—possibly an expression of Muslim dislike for anything resembling an idol. Photograph taken in March, 1967.

Figure 3. 'Demuta's helmet', pictured above, was found hanging at the top of a column in his house in Nisheigrom. Informants referred to the helmet as *mitaow sei tapi*, 'fighting head hat'. Demuta's descendants attached little importance to the helmet and it was purchased from the present owner of the house. It is now on loan with the Kafir collection at Moesgaard pr. Højbjerg, Denmark.

Figure 4. 'Pātūl's *bāšpe*', an example of an early type of Waigali table which gets its name from the fact that the wooden bowl is supported by 12 heavy rods of twisted wrought iron (*bāš*, 12). This particular *bāšpe*, said to have belonged to *Pātūl*, is the only known example of an early type characterized by a wooden bowl with rounded sides decorated with the carved heads of bulls, supported by very heavy iron legs. (Height: 54 cm; diameter of bowl: 30 cm.) Compare with the more common type of *bāšpe* pictured on p. 187 of Lennart Edelberg's article on *Nuristanske Solupokaler* (KUMIL, 1965).