

Houses in Chitral: Traditional Design and Function

by SHAHZADA HUSSAM-UL-MULK
and JOHN STALEY¹

CHITRAL is a semi-autonomous principality among the mountains in the north of West Pakistan. Its external affairs, defence and communications are controlled by the Pakistan Government, and before 1947 were supervised by the Government of British-India. Since 1953, when a minor succeeded to the throne, its internal affairs also have become the increasing concern of the Pakistan Government, but parts of the traditional administration survive.

Physically it differs from regions to north and south in its higher mountains, large areas of permanent snow and ice, and deeply-dissected arid valleys. Cultivation is possible only where irrigation water — the source of which is the melting snow and ice of the highest altitudes — can be brought to flat land at altitudes low enough for the grain crops to ripen. Villages are found in the valley bottoms, often at the mouths of tributary valleys, and typically consist of 10–100 houses surrounded by a clearly-defined area of cultivation — by an oasis, in fact (Plate IV).

Most of the inhabitants are peasant farmers, with individually-owned holdings of 2–5 acres. Farmers also have animals: two or three cows and bulls, twenty or more sheep and goats, a few chickens and perhaps a donkey. During the summer most of the animals are taken to the pastures high on the mountains, returning to the village in winter for stall-feeding. An important feature of the combination of cultivation and livestock-husbandry is the collection of the winter's manure, which is applied to the fields and partly accounts for grain yields that are well above the averages for the whole of West Pakistan. The agriculture appears well-adapted,

¹ The authors are indebted to Janet Pott for Figures 1 and 2, and to Dr Sardar-ul-Mulk for help with earlier drafts.

the farmers making efficient use of the resources available to them.

There is a long history of local centralized rule, with traditions of kings of Chitral going back at least 1,000 years, to before the conversion of Chitral to Islam. For the last three centuries parts of what is now Chitral have been ruled by kings of the Katore dynasty, a cadet branch of the Timurids and collaterals of the Moghuls. The kings, known in Chitral as *mehtars*,² were supported by courtiers and state officials drawn from a land-owning but non-cultivating aristocracy some of whom, like the Katore *mehtars* themselves, were of foreign origin. Beneath this hereditary aristocracy — known as the *adamzada* (literally 'son of man') — was a large and loosely-defined class of farmers, whose members were entitled to respect as landholders, and who were categorized by their varying obligations to the state. Beneath them was a lower class of landless labourers, tenants and artisans, some of whom served the *adamzada* and tended their estates. There was some social mobility, and by acquiring the *mehtar's* favour — which could be done by showing prowess in battle, or by skill in guiding him to the best hunting ground, or by some other particular service — a man might be rewarded with the grant of some land and rise in the social scale. The traditional social divisions have tended to break down in the present century, especially in the last decade or two, so that criteria that separated them are no longer infallible, but much of the system remains.

Many ethnic groups are represented in the population of Chitral, but the great majority,³ including almost all the farmers, are Kho. The culture of the Kho is dominant in the country, and has been adopted by the Katore and the *adamzada*. Khowar is spoken by all except recent immigrants and a few small groups in the south who became subject to Chitral only within the last 100 years.

One of the most striking expressions of Kho material culture is the plan and construction of the houses built in Chitral. The core of these houses is the main room, which itself is built to the same basic plan whatever the social position and wealth of the

² The foreign words in this description are those used in Khowar, the language that is almost exclusive to Chitral. The transcriptions are approximate.

³ Eighty-five per cent according to the *Population Census of Pakistan 1961* 'Census Report of Tribal Agencies', Part II, Karachi, n.d., p. 8.

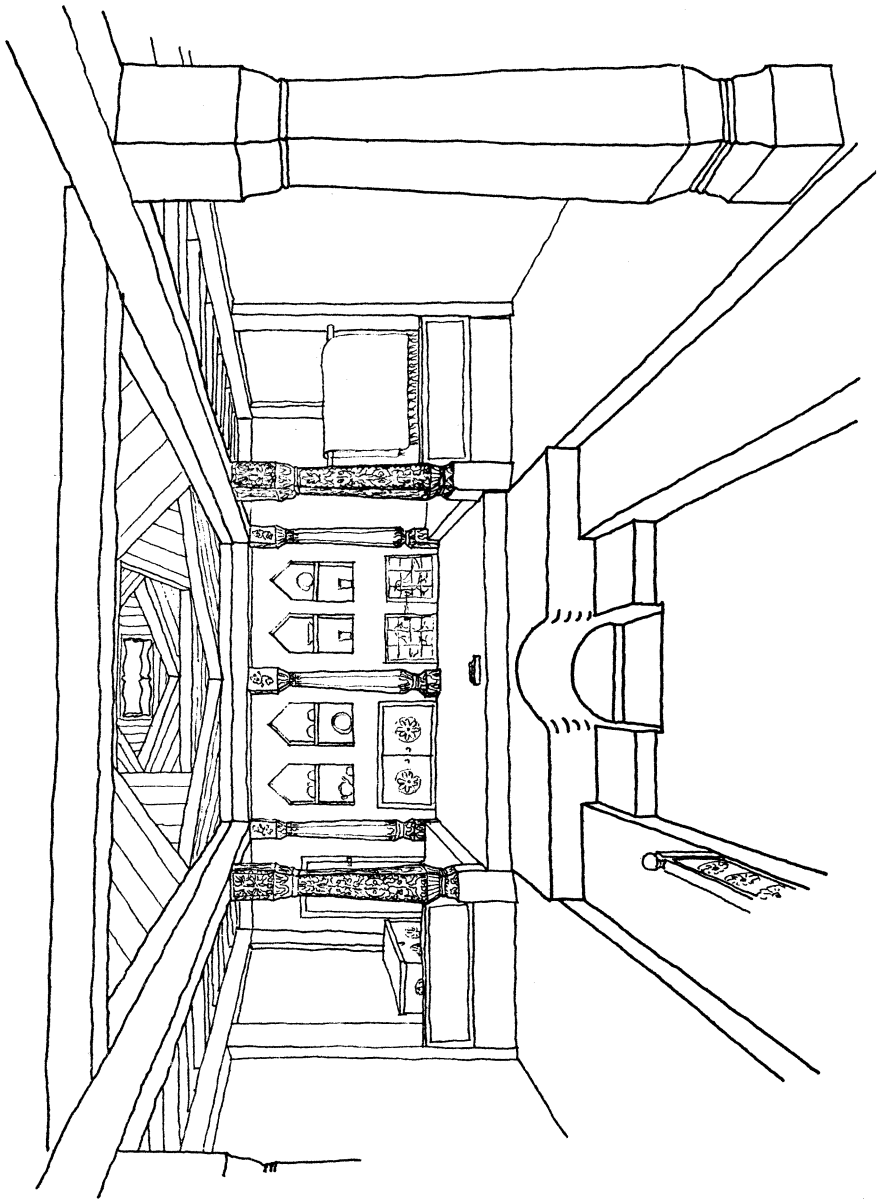


FIG. 1. Sketch of Baipash from Shom

HOUSES IN CHITRAL

FAR
SIDE

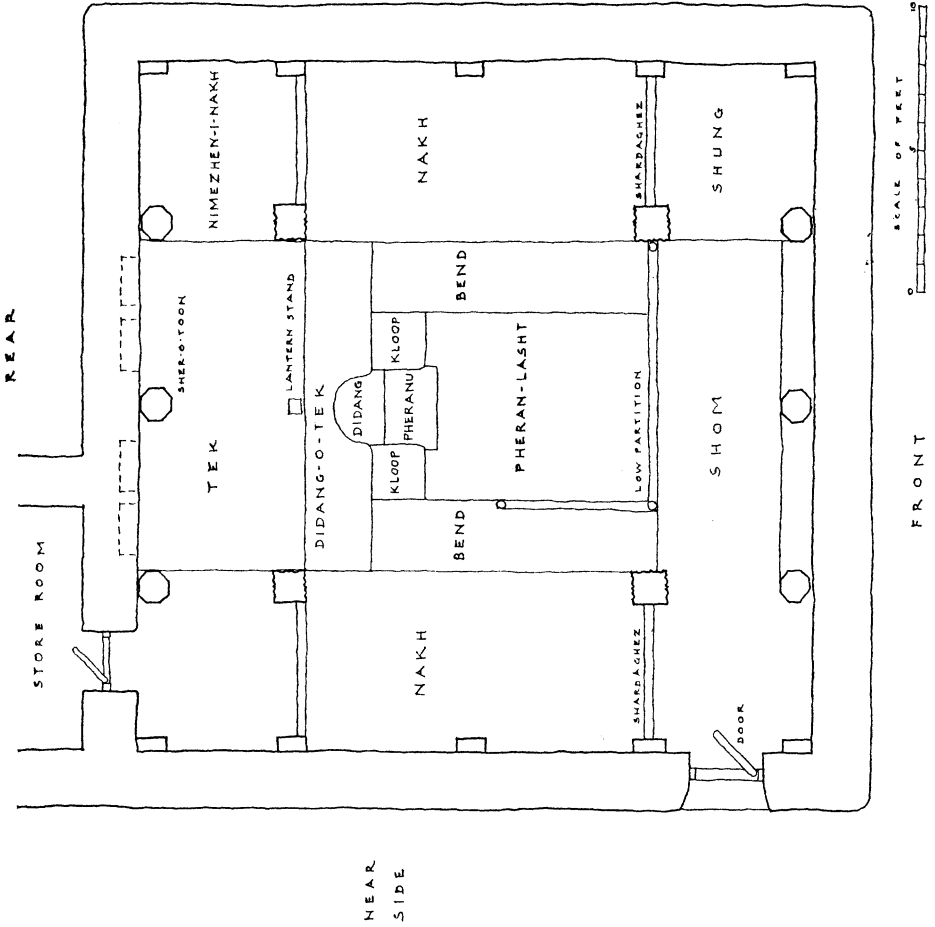


FIG. 2.
Plan of
Typical
Baupash

houseowner.⁴ Among the farming and landless classes it is often the only room, but houses of the *adamzada* generally include separate guest-rooms and store-rooms. This is partly a consequence of the greater sophistication and wealth of the *adamzada*, but is also because a house-owner receives visitors in number roughly proportional to his social status, and so the *adamzada* require more space for entertaining.

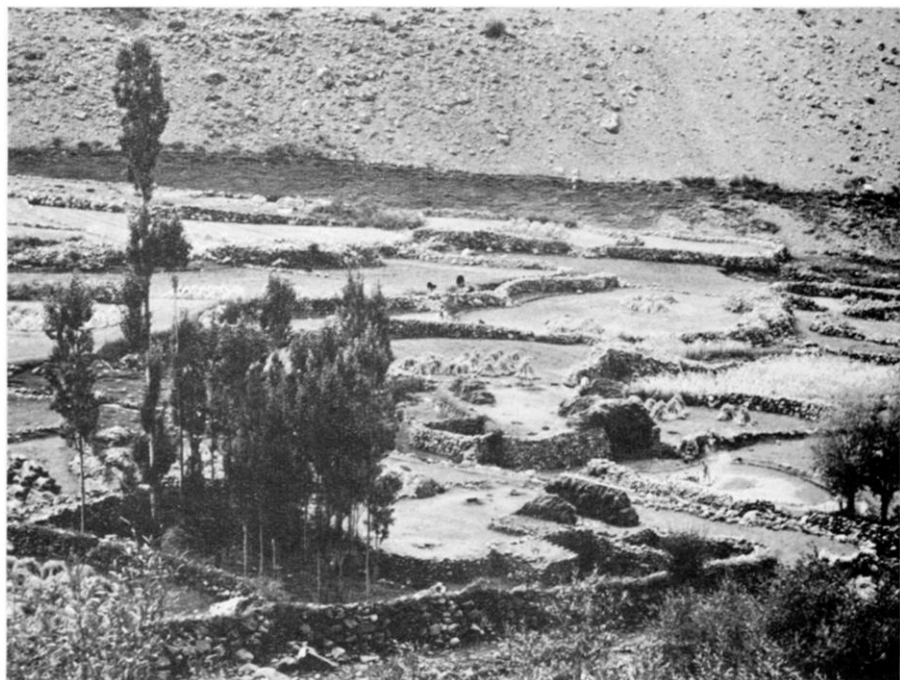
The main room itself varies in some details with the owner's status, and also with the locality and with personal taste. Those of the *adamzada*, which are larger, more elaborate, more comfortable and more highly decorated, are called *baipash* (literally 'a state room'); while those of farmers, which are generally smaller and simpler, are known just as 'Kho houses'. It is these rooms — both simple and elaborate — that are the subject of the following description (Fig. 1).

Houses in Chitral are essentially family homes, and throughout the long and hard winter, while there is no cultivating to be done, the main room is the focus of family and social life. It serves for sitting, sleeping, cooking, eating, entertaining, story-telling, storage, birth, death, festivities and prayers. 'It is at the centre of our life and our culture' a Chitrali friend remarked, 'and many of our customs and idiomatic expressions are related to it.'

In it live the owner, his mother if she is alive, his wife, perhaps his unmarried sisters, his unmarried children and perhaps married sons and daughters-in-law. Households vary from only two permanent members to more than fifteen: the average number is six or seven. In addition there is a constant flow of guests many of whom, especially if there is no separate guest room, are received in the main room. Male relatives, who may have come from distant villages, often stay for several nights, while friends and neighbours 'drop in', sit for two or three hours and drink tea or eat a meal. Married daughters visit their parents and stay for several weeks, and old women come to consider prospective brides for the young

⁴ There are the beginnings of change in house-building, and some of the main rooms are now being built to different plans. This is partly because of the difficulty and expense of getting enough wood for the old style, but also represents a change in taste. New techniques in construction are also being introduced — for example, all materials were previously obtained and prepared locally, but now manufactured items such as nails, screws and hinges are imported into Chitral and are beginning to be used in new houses even when built in the traditional style.

PLATE IV



men of their own family. The men of the household (especially a farmer's household) come and go, inspecting their land and tending their animals, visiting other houses, going to the bazaar, and sometimes making longer journeys to other villages.

In plan the main room is roughly square (Fig. 2), varying from 20 ft × 20 ft to 30 ft × 30 ft along the internal walls.⁵ The walls are about 2 ft thick, and are of roughly-dressed stones set in a mud

⁵ A description of a farmer's house, with scale plans, section and photographs is given by Janet Pott, 'Houses in Chitral: West Pakistan', *Architectural Association Journal*, LXXX, March, 1965, pp. 246-8. Brief accounts are also given by Aurel Stein, *Serindia: Detailed Report of Explorations in Central Asia and Westernmost China*, Oxford, 1921, Vol. I, pp. 48-9 and photographs 15-16, and by R. C. F. Schomburg, *Kafirs and Glaciers*, London, 1938, pp. 222-5.

PLATE IV

Above. A house in Sor Laspur village. The square blackened smoke-hole of the *baipash* can be seen to the right of the clump of poplars. In front of this (nearer the photographer) is the smoke-hole of a kitchen and the square flat roof of a small store-room. To the right of the store are sheds for livestock, with fodder on the roofs, and a small livestock compound. A pole across the fodder prevents it from being blown down. Behind the *baipash*, in the far corner of the building, is the guest-room with direct access from the path beyond: guests can thus come and go without disturbing the women of the household. The courtyard wall to the left secludes the women while outdoors. The poplars are grown for building, firewood and fodder; natural timber is scarce in the Laspur valley. Across the path, near the second house, a man is winnowing grain. In the fields some crops have been harvested and some are still standing. Fruit trees are absent in Sor Laspur because of the village's high altitude (10,000 ft.). At the edge of the village, clearly demarcating it from the arid valley side, is the irrigation channel on which the cultivation and settlement depend.

Below. Part of the *gherarum* showing the method of raising the roof to the smoke-hole, which is in the top left corner of the photograph. The round posts provide additional support for this particular roof which is old and has become unsafe. The posts are of poplar and the beams of mulberry. Shortage of timber in the locality forced the builder to use woods grown on irrigated land, and allowed him little latitude for trimming and finishing the beams. The decoration is flour-and-water paste, applied in Ismaili houses in spring when the family moves outdoors.

mortar and bonded on both inside and outside with horizontal wooden beams at intervals of 1 ft–3 ft depending on the local availability of wood. The Chitralis claim that this combination of wood and stone is particularly resistant to earthquake shocks, of which there are many. The walls are plastered on both sides with a clay and chopped straw mixture.

Entrance is by a door in the side wall near the front. There are no windows, but light enters by a hole in the roof whose main purpose is to allow smoke from the central hearth to escape. The main weight of the roof is taken by up to 20 wooden pillars each called *toon*, four of which stand towards the centre of the floor (Figs. 1, 2). In a *baipash* these four pillars may be up to 1 ft 6 in. thick, and heavily carved on the sides facing into the room (Fig. 3). In a smaller room the central pillars may be only 6 in. thick. The remaining pillars are against the walls, either partially embedded or free-standing. The one directly behind the hearth, against the 'rear'⁶ wall, is known as the *sher-o-toon* ('the lion's pillar'). This pillar, together with those on either side of it, and those against the 'front' wall opposite, are also decorated in a *baipash* (Fig. 3), but those against the 'side' walls are plain.

The pillars and walls support a roof of beams⁷ and boards, which is flat over the areas between the central pillars and the side and front walls. Over the area in the centre between the four main pillars, and towards the rear wall, the roof is raised by an arrangement of beams, the lowest layer of which is laid diagonally across the corners of this rectangular space. Above are five more layers, each laid crosswise on the one below, so that the ceiling rises by six progressively-smaller diamond-shaped steps (Plate IV). This part of the ceiling is known as the *gherarum* (literally 'whirl').⁸ In a

⁶ 'Rear', 'front', 'far' and 'near' are used in relation to the doorway (Fig. 2) and are only a descriptive convenience.

⁷ Two Khovar proverbs refer to these beams: 'A nobleman's bones are as strong as the roof beams'; and 'He is carrying a roof beam on his own shoulders, but points to the hair on another's shoulders'.

⁸ Hope Bagenal, writing about the principles of dome design, mentions this method of 'bridging angles', and translates a description by Vitruvius (in II-1) of the building method of the Colchi beyond the Black Sea. Vitruvius '... describes an ordinary "log-house" or "block-house" construction upon a square plan and adds "in the same way cutting back their roofs they throw beams across the angles, drawing them together in steps (*gradatim contrahentes*). Thus from four sides they rear the cones (*metas*) in the middle, and covering these with both leaves and mud, make the roofs of the towers in a [foreign] fashion tortoise

baipash the sides of the *gherarum* beams are usually carved with simple patterns. The topmost 'diamond', about 1 ft 6 in. square, is open to the sky to allow smoke from the fire below to escape. Because the 'diamonds' are distorted towards the rear of the room, the smoke-hole is not directly above the open hearth in the middle of the floor; this allows the draught from the door to carry the smoke away through the hole, and prevents rain or snow falling directly through onto the fire. In wet weather a three-branched section of a tree trunk may be placed upside down over the smoke-hole and capped with a flat stone. In very high and cold villages, when cooking inside is finished and the fire is burning without much smoke, the smoke-hole may be closed altogether with a piece of stone. The relatively large size of the smoke-hole is an indication of the effectiveness of Katore rule in Chitral. In some adjoining regions, where traditionally there was no centralized government, blood-feuds between families and neighbours were so frequent that it was not safe to have a smoke-hole for fear that an enemy might climb onto the roof and shoot down through it. But in Chitral, when one enters a village and wants to know its size, one asks in Khowar 'How many smokes are there here?'

The roof timbers are covered with brushwood and then with a thick layer of mud. The upper surface rises to a low dome over the *gherarum*, and may slope slightly to the side or rear where a wooden spout carries off the snow melt-water and what little rain there is. The edges of the roof are protected from erosion by flat boulders embedded in the mud. On the front of a *baipash* there is also often a fascia board, with a fringe of carved wooden 'teeth': naughty boys throw stones at these to try to knock them down, one by one.⁹

It is however the floor of the room and the way in which this is divided into areas and levels, each with its name and particular uses, that holds the greatest interest for the student of Chitral. The

shaped." ' Hope Bagental, 'Principles of Dome Design Illustrated in the Historical Styles', *The Architectural Association Journal*, XLV, September, 1929, pp. 113-4. Stein, 1921, I, p. 48, remarks that this ceiling '... reproduces exactly the system of roofing which is known to us in stone from ancient shrines of an area extending from Kashmir to Bamian. . . .'

⁹ If it is well-built, a house may serve a family for several generations: or the pillars, *gherarum* beams and other carved portions may be moved from one house to another. There is a 20th century *baipash* in Chitral village whose beams and pillars date from the end of the eighteenth century.

floor itself is of beaten earth, but the edges of the steps, where the levels change, often have a beam inlaid to give a firm and straight edge. Reference should be made to Fig. 2, which shows the division of the floor.

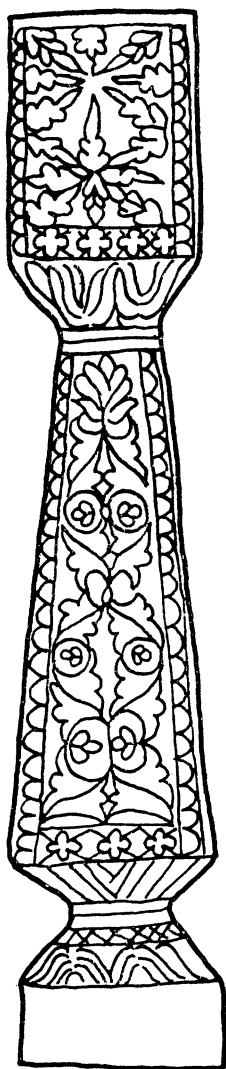
The heart of the floor plan — and of the whole house — is the hearth or *didang*, which is a semi-circular cavity, up to 2 ft 6 in. in vertical depth, in the edge of one of the steps up towards the rear of the room. Around its upper lip stone slabs may be set into the earth to prevent the lip from crumbling and to rest hot utensils on. The *didang* extends towards the centre of the room and, if the owner is one of the *adamzada*, there is a square space on either side of this extension, raised about 6 in. above the bottom of the *didang*, and therefore 2 ft below the level of the step behind. Each of these squares, about 2 ft × 2 ft, is called *kloop* (literally 'depression'), and they are considered the best seats in a *baipash* because they are nearest the fire, have 2 ft back-rests, and are each used by only one person. They are carpeted,¹⁰ and one is reserved for the owner of the house who sits roughly facing the door with the fire on his right. The other *kloop* is allotted to his mother if she is alive, or to very honoured guests. A farmer's room may be smaller and not have *kloops*, in which case the owner sits on the step behind.

The step behind, into which the *didang* is cut, is the *didang-o-tek* and on this (or if there is no *kloop*, further behind, on the *tek*) sits or squats the owner's wife, just behind her husband so that she can attend to him and receive his instructions. She is also well-placed to supervise the cooking at the *didang*, and to oversee the distribution of food to those present. Farmers' families do all their cooking in the room; but in a *baipash* the only cooking at the *didang* is the roasting of meat, especially the meat of animals killed in hunting, the occasional baking of bread with hot dripping from the meat, and any special cooking that the women of the family choose to do themselves. The other cooking is done outside by servants. In a *baipash* the other *didang-o-tek* seat, across the fire, is reserved for a maid servant whose chief duty is to keep the room illuminated by lighting and trimming slivers of the wood of a resinous

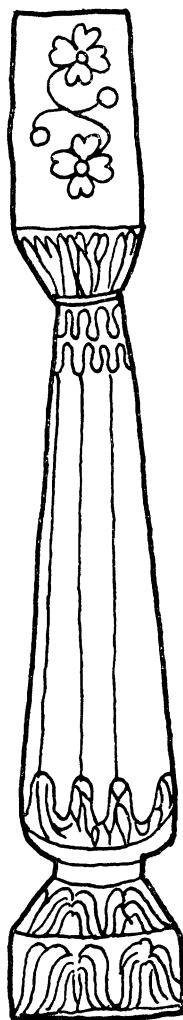
¹⁰ Some artisans in Chitral weave goat-hair rugs with patterns in natural colours, and wool-with-cotton rugs in dyed colours. These are the traditional floor covering for most people. *Adamzada* have had knotted rugs, imported from Turkistan, which are laid on top of the goat-hair rugs.

HOUSES IN CHITRAL

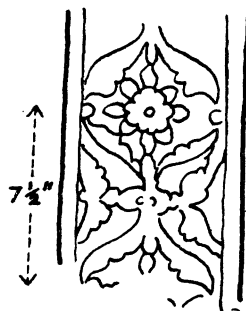
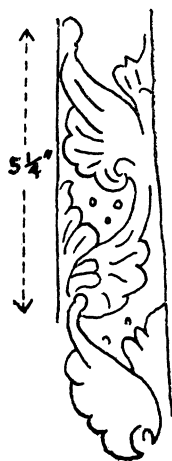
FIG. 3. Baipash Pillars



One of the four central pillars



A Pillar against the 'front' or 'rear' wall



Details of carving

conifer.¹¹ The maid servant's place is not carpeted, unlike the wife's.

Behind the *didang-o-tek* is the *tek* (literally 'top'), raised from it by a small step and extending to the rear wall. At either end of it, level with the roof pillar, there is another step up beyond which, in the corners of the room, are two square platforms. Whichever of these is on the side towards Mecca is reserved for prayers, so that those who pray there — mostly women and old people — have their backs to the activities in the room and avoid the distraction of people moving about in front of them. This platform is the *nimezhen-i-nakh* (*nimezhen* 'prayers', *nakh* 'platform'), and when it is being used it is spread with a prayer carpet or ibex skin. On a shelf above there may be kept the Holy Koran and other sacred books.

The space in the other corner is simply a *nakh*, and on it stand wooden store-chests, containing clothes in a *baipash*, and flour in a farmer's house. In some houses there may also be under-floor stores for grain and valuables. A door from this *nakh* may lead to a store-room, or kitchen if there is one. The kitchen is a similar room with a central hearth, etc., but smaller and simpler; it may be used for sleeping by servants.

At the rear of the *tek* the *sher-o-toon* and other pillars stand. When there is an earthquake the women on the *tek* run to the *sher-o-toon* and cling to it as the safest place in the house, and also as the part of the house that has 'sympathy' for its inhabitants, especially those born and brought up there, and especially at times of distress.¹² While making a wish, a promise or a resolution, a woman — or a man if he is about to start some dangerous undertaking, and especially if he is going to war — may hold onto the *sher-o-toon*. The 'sympathy' continues towards those brought up in the house but who now live elsewhere. When a married daughter visits her parents she expects to be given some present — a cow or cooking utensils — to take home with her. If she is disappointed she cannot of course express this, but the *sher-o-toon* is said to creak in sympathy and so reveal her feelings.

¹¹ Most rooms are now illuminated by a hurricane lantern, which is placed on the spot behind the *didang* where the pine slivers were previously burnt.

¹² Cf. Schomberg, 1938, p. 70; Halfdan Siiger, 'Ethnological Field-Research in Chitral, Sikkim and Assam: Preliminary Report,' *Historisk — filologiske Meddelelser udgivet af Det Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab*, XXXVI, (2), 1956, p. 16; and The Cambridge Chitrali Expedition 1960, *Report*, n.d., p. 11.

Between the *sher-o-toon* and the other pillars against the rear wall, at floor level, there may be small built-in cages, 1 ft 6 in. high, for keeping domestic birds in, e.g. *mynahs* which become very tame and learn to talk, and partridges which may be fattened for eating but which usually become pets, are reprieved, and finally escape when the door is inadvertently left open. Above the cages there may be cupboards and niches in the wall itself for women's sewing boxes and embroidery, and for salt and baskets of dried fruit, etc. In a farmer's room the spaces between the pillars may be shelved for utensils etc.

The *tek* is the woman's domain, and on it sit the younger women of the house — sisters, daughters-in-law and unmarried daughters, — the senior ones to the centre, nearest the owner's wife. Nursing mothers have their babies nearby. If a baby sweeps the floor it is taken as a sign that a guest is coming. When guests arrive — and especially if they come to discuss marriages with the father — the unmarried girls may feel too shy to sit out on the *tek*, but hide in the *nakh* at the end. In a house where most of the cooking is done in a separate kitchen, the *tek* is free of utensils. In a smaller house, where the preparation and cooking of food is done from the *tek*, the cooking and baking pots are kept there. Food is distributed from there, and hence the Khowar saying, 'If you have a well-wisher on the *tek* you will get a big piece of meat on your plate.' Another saying about the *tek* refers to the excitement of children when rice is being prepared for a meal. Rice was — and to some extent still is — a luxury, especially in villages in higher altitudes where it cannot be grown, and farmers seldom afford it. Children, especially, regard it as a treat; hence the saying, 'When there is rice for dinner, the *tek* looks more beautiful.' On the *tek*, just behind the *didang*, is the little mound or stone on which the resinous slivers are burnt. In a *baipash* of the royal family in former times these were burnt on a metal plate made for that purpose and to receive hot utensils, and called *tcharatsh*.¹³

The extension in front of the *didang* is the *pheran* (*pheru* 'ashes'), which is at the lowest level in the room and is where the ashes from the fire collect. Here lives a tiny fairy called Pherutis

¹³ *Tcharatsh* are rarely seen. When Shahzada Hussam-ul-Mulk wished to test the vocabulary of his children in their own language, he used to ask them the meaning of *tcharatsh*. See also n. 11 above.

(-tis is onomatopoeic for the hissing and flaring of hot wood ash) who is jokingly blamed for the disappearance of small objects such as needles, thimbles and fragments of rock salt.

In front of the *pheran* and below the *kloops* is a low sitting area called the *pheran-lasht* (*lasht* 'a level place or plain'). In a *baipash* this area is carpeted, and is reserved for the male members of the household and male guests, who sit round the front of the fire in the appropriate positions of seniority descending from that nearest to the owner of the house. If the house is unusually full at night, the children may have to sleep in the *pheran-lasht*, in which case they protest like children anywhere else who are turned out of their beds for their parents' guests.

At either side of the *pheran-lasht* is another level called the *bend*¹⁴ 3 ft wide and raised 6 in. above the *pheran-lasht*. The *bend* furthest from the door is carpeted and may be used for sitting by distant and foster¹⁵ relatives of either sex and by head servants. The owner of the house sometimes leaves his shoes there. The nearer *bend* is an uncarpeted passageway to the rear of the room. Those sitting in the *pheran-lasht* are protected from the traffic along this *bend* by a low partition, 1 ft 6 in. high, which also runs along the outer edge of the *pheran-lasht* and separates it from the *shom*.¹⁶ The partition thus demarcates the inner sitting area for more privileged men and also provides them with a backrest. In a *baipash* it is deeply carved, but in a farmer's room it is made of plain planks. To step over it is a breach of etiquette, and normally a visitor enters the *pheran-lasht* via the *bend*, passing round the end of the partition just in front of the *kloop*, and so into the *pheran-lasht*, where he sits down in the appropriate position. This position will depend upon his own status in relation to that of the owner of the house, rather than on the number and status of any other men present, but since they too will have taken their positions according to the same criterion, people of equivalent status will be sitting near each other. Even if he is the only person there, the visitor will still sit at the appropriate distance from the owner.

¹⁴ The word is also used for narrow terraced fields.

¹⁵ For fostering and its significance see: *Frontier and Overseas Expeditions from India*, Simla, 1907, I, p. 41; and R. C. F. Schomberg, *Between the Oxus and the Indus*, London, 1907, pp. 190-1.

¹⁶ Cf. the farmer's house described by Pott, 1965, p. 247, in which the partition is along the outer edge of the *pheran-lasht* only.

To the sides of the *bends*, against the side walls of the room, are two more *nakhs*, whose ends are level with the four main pillars. At the ends of these *nakhs* nearest the front of the room (or maybe at both ends), and joined to the uncarved faces of the central pillars, are 6 ft partitions called *shardaghez*. The floor of the *nakh* is 6 in. above the *bend*, but in a farmer's room they also may be separated by a wooden plank 1 ft high, which is to keep in the straw and chaff that is spread in the *nakh* for sleeping on during the winter. On the straw are spread goat-hair rugs, and on these people sleep with blankets for covering. All members of the farmer's household, and — if there is no separate guest-room — guests who are staying, share these *nakhs*, adjustments being made to separate the sexes appropriately, to allow newly-married couples to sleep on their own, and to allow mothers to have their children near them. In an *adamzada* house there are usually additional sleeping quarters outside where guests, young couples and some of the junior members of the household — and also any servants — go at night. In a *baipash* belonging to a member of the royal family, the owner and his wife are secluded in the far *nakh* by a rich velvet curtain embroidered in the centre with gold thread. On the wall above his sleeping place hangs the owner's gun, and in less peaceful times he kept his sword and dagger under his pillow. The near *nakh* may be unoccupied at night if there is plenty of accommodation elsewhere, or may be used by the owner's wife. If it is not made up as a bed, this *nakh* may be used during the day as an additional sitting place, perhaps by servants receiving instructions before going outside, or by distant relatives. It may also be used by young children as a play area, where they cannot cause damage nor come to any harm.

The *shardaghez* that separates the near *nakh* from the doorway, as well as preventing draughts, also shields the women sitting on the *tek* from the view of casual visitors at the door, which is desirable because the women are in *pardah*. If the visitor is a relative or friend and if the owner — who can see the doorway from his *kloop* — bids him come in, he advances into the vestibule, 'salaams' those present, removes his shoes, and makes his way via the *bend* to his seat. It is considered ill-mannered to enter without sitting down or to leave too hastily.

The vestibule inside the door runs between the front wall and

the *pheran-lasht*, and is called the *shom*. It is 4 in. lower than the *bends* and is uncarpeted. Visitors leave their shoes there, and servants may remain there without removing their shoes. The *shom* is also the place to leave walking sticks and staffs, the axe used for chopping firewood, and the portable hand-basin and water jug which are carried round to all present before and after meals. In a farmer's room there may also be his plough, yoke, and other farming implements, baskets for carrying on the back, goat-skins to wear on the back to protect clothes while carrying loads, and sticks for goading cattle and donkeys. On top of the near *shardaghez* there may be a saddle for a horse if the owner is wealthy, and otherwise sickles and goat-hair ropes for tying bundles of firewood and straw. On the far *shardaghez* any extra blankets and quilts are hung.

An *adamzada* who is fond of hunting may own one or two dogs for retrieving, usually spaniels. These favourites are sometimes allowed inside, but not always, as the following proverb implies: 'If the dog had a home of its own it would not [climb on the roof and] bark through the smoke-hole.' When dogs are admitted they may sit in the *shom*, but may not go further into the house; hence the proverb, 'If you have a dog in the *shom*, the fox will not come to the smoke-hole.' Other dogs — hounds and shepherds' watch-dogs — are not allowed inside at all.

The *shom* is also the place where, on a festive occasion, a man may dance, while the company round the fire play, sing and applaud. As a bad workman blames his tools for shoddy work so a bad dancer may complain 'The *shom* is sloping'. *Tek shomo dik* (literally 'to jump from *tek* to *shom*') is said unkindly of someone — perhaps a new servant — who exaggerates his loyalty and anxiety to help by rushing about the house to perform everyone's tasks.

There may be an external store-room attached to the *shom*, with a door leading to it. When there is an external store-room it is built onto the house according to the size and shape of the site.

The *shom* does not extend right across the front of the room, but only as far as the pillar on the far side from the door, leaving a square in the far front corner. This is the *shung* (literally 'corner') and in a farmer's room it may be used in winter for housing chickens in a hutch on the floor while firewood is stacked on top. In a *baipash* these things are kept outside, and the *shung* is used for

bathing, with a soakaway and a perforated board across. It is then separated from the *shom* by a partition with a door in it, while on the other inward-facing side it is secluded by the far *shardaghez*. The bathing place is especially used by those who pray in the room for the ablutions necessary before prayer. In winter it is used also by the men before they go out to pray at the mosque, because at home they can have hot water which is not available for ablutions at the mosque.

During their menstrual periods and for 40 days after childbirth women are not permitted to cook, and are supposedly relegated to the *shom* and *shung*, although this is not strictly observed. Hence *shung-o-bik* ('to go to the *shung*') is a euphemism for menstruation, while *tek-tu-nisik* ('to climb to the *tek*') means that the woman is resuming cooking after menstruation or childbirth.

The door to the exterior is a solid slab of wood or is made of heavy vertical boarding, the ends on one edge being elongated to form pivots set into sockets in the lintel and threshold. The door can be fastened by a heavy wooden bolt on the interior. This bolt can also be operated from the outside by means of a 'key', a long curved piece of wire which is inserted through a tiny hole in the door 2 ft or so above the level of the bolt. The distance from this 'keyhole' to the bolt on the interior is different in every case, as is the position of the handle on the bolt on to which the end of the key is applied. Only the correct key will fit and allow the bolt to be worked from outside. Stories told in Khowar are often ended with the conventional sentence 'Good eating, good drinking, and a grape in the keyhole'. The exact meaning is obscure, but presumably refers to the additional security or intimacy that a closed keyhole gives.

Outside there may be a courtyard, outhouses and stores. During the summer months the family may live, sleep and cook out in the courtyard, which ideally has an irrigation channel running through it, fruit trees shading it, and is carpeted with short grass and a small clover whose flowers produce a silvery-white sheen over the surface of the lawn. Among the Ismaili Moslem farmers of the north and west of Chitral the time for moving the cooking to an outdoor fire-place is an indication of spring and a time for spring-cleaning the room, whose walls may be replastered and *gherarum* beams decorated with dry flour patterns (Plate IV).

When it is remembered that families may remain in their houses — often in the one room — for up to eight months during the winter, it is easy to see the necessity for order and convention. All articles of everyday use have their places, and it is thought tiresome and inefficient if anything is misplaced. Thus when it is not in use the axe is always kept in the *shom*; and hence, if someone claims to have found something that was not missing, people say, 'He has found an axe in the *shom*.' Similarly, all those living in or visiting the room have their places to sit. Even the domestic cat, seldom amenable to discipline, has its rightful seat on the *tek* or, if there are not many people present, on the *didang-o-tek* although, as the proverb has it, 'When it is cold and wet outside, even a cat on the *tek* is unwelcome.'

The strict order of seniority which is observed in sitting round the fire may seem surprising in view of the relaxed informality of much of life in Chitral. In certain circumstances, however, much attention is given to formality and to questions of precedence and procedure. This was seen at the *mehtar*'s court, especially at the daily receptions for the *mehtar*'s relatives and other *adamzada*, where those attending came in formal robes and sat in order of seniority according to birth, age, past and present positions in the *mehtar*'s administration, special skill or prowess, and the current internal political situation. There was a state official whose duty was to arrange the order, but this could be — and was — changed by the *mehtar* who moved individuals further away or nearer himself according to his favour.

Similarly within the household the father may temporarily promote a son or nephew who has distinguished himself, and on occasion may even give the honoured guest's *kloop* to a son who has been away from home for a long time or returned from a difficult and dangerous journey through the mountains, or whose wife has just given birth to a son. If a visitor takes too high a place in the sitting area it is much resented; disapproval is usually expressed by silence, but any who take particular offence can show their displeasure by walking out of the room, although this would be unusual.

Even on extraordinary occasions, such as marriages, the allocation of seats is so strictly observed that, it is said, if a stranger goes to a room where members of both parties are present he can tell the

relationships of those present from where they are sitting.¹⁷ For example, the maternal uncle of the bride, who accompanies the bride from her own home to her husband's, sits on the *nakh*; while her foster-brother or foster-father, who may also accompany her, sits on the *bend*. They remain for a few days to give the bride confidence in her new home and among strangers. During this period the maternal uncle is performing the duty of *nakh-a-nish-ak* (literally 'the man who sits on the *nakh*') and, if the families are rich, he may be given a horse, a bull, or a rifle on his departure, which is the *nakh-a-nish-ali* (*-ali* 'the reward for'). The *nakh-a-nish-ak* has a continuing duty as counsellor and, if necessary, mediator to the young couple. Similarly the foster-brother or father is the *bend-a-nish-ak*, and is offered clothes or some other gift which is called *bend-a-nish-ali*.

When the bride leaves her parents' home to go to her husband's, she pays her respects to the *sher-o-toon* and to the *didang*, the latter as the 'source' of food. Having bid her parents good-bye, she walks out through the door and may not look back at her parents; nor may they go with her beyond the partition at the edge of the *pheran-lasht*. If either of these conventions is not observed, it is believed to lead to bad luck, and particularly to unhappiness in her husband's home, so that the girl will be returned in disgrace to her parents. When she reaches her husband's home, which is in fact probably his father's house, she clings to the door and refuses to enter until promised a present — in a farmer's household it may be a piece of jewelry, while in an *adamzada* household it may be the services of a maid-servant. The gift promised is the *duwaht-it-chok-ali* (*duwaht* 'door', *tchok* 'cling'; so literally 'the reward for clinging to the door').

When she is pregnant the girl may return to her parent's home for the birth. When labour pains begin, the men depart and the girl goes to the place prepared — formerly the *shom* but nowadays not always so — where she squats during the delivery, attended by the most experienced women in the house or village. To attend a birth is *shom-o-korik* (literally 'to help at the *shom*'), while *shom-o-bik* ('to go to the *shom*') is the Khowar expression for giving birth. If a son is born the men announce this on their return by firing

¹⁷ These conventions are now less strictly observed than in the past.

guns through the smoke-hole. When the boy is later circumcised a gun is fired from the roof-top or elsewhere outside.

In every house there lives a guardian fairy called Khangi, who protects it from evil spirits, and should be rewarded with a share of the evening meal which is set aside for her. If not rewarded, Khangi expresses displeasure by rattling the utensils and banging the doors and by making creaks in the roof timbers; people then laugh and say, 'That's Mother Khangi. She is angry because she has not had her food.'

All through the cold winter days a fire burns in the *didang*. If it is allowed to go out accidentally the woman responsible is severely admonished, for it is taken as a bad omen. It is considered disrespectful for anyone to step over the fire, and doing so will bring bad luck.¹⁸ If the fire burns with a noise it is the sign of an impending quarrel in the house; the wood is therefore beaten beforehand so that it burns quietly. If the charcoal from a burnt length remains standing upright it is a sign that an unexpected guest is coming from a distant village. If it is mishandled, the guest will have an accident on his way, and so it is gently surrounded with ash — 'this is your food, and this is your tea' the imaginative say, as they put the ash round — and it is then gently laid on its side 'to sleep', and may not be disturbed.

The approaching guest meanwhile walks or rides through the mountains of Chitral, exposed to the wind and the snow of winter. But as he enters a village he sees smoke trailing from every rooftop, and perhaps he thinks of the warmth and welcome that await him. He is in a land where people understand the needs of a traveller and reserve a place for him in their culture and in their homes.

¹⁸ Cf. a similar superstition in Wakhan to the north, suggested as a relic of fire-worship by John Wood, *A Journey to the Source of the Oxus*, London, 1872 (new edition), p. 218. Both superstitions are found among old people in neighbouring Gilgit.