

## Broghill Festival

While working on Earthquake Relief in Pakistan (2006) I had the opportunity of attending a mountain festival in Broghill, N.W.F.P. in July; two weeks after the famous Shandur event. This area, in the upper part of the Yarkun Valley, is the source of the Kabul River (a tributary of the Indus) and south of the Wakhan Corridor.

There are no roads or electricity and it takes three days on foot or one and a half by horse to go from the end of the jeep road to the last permanent village, less when glacial rivers are low in Spring. At least that's what it took me. Unfit after six months in an Islamabad office and suffering from the altitude, I hired a man and horse to take me up. This I then shared with a retired customs officer who was to open the festival that we met on the way.

On the way down I walked, taking a high detour that took me within a few miles of the border and views over the Afghani and Tajik mountains. Having to ford rivers in late afternoon when they are at their highest is to be avoided can be tricky. Head gear is essential for the heat and light, I had to compromise by wrapping a towel which I doused regularly in the river.

It is settled by Tajik Ismaelis who are recent migrants having moved from Tajikistan 100-200 years ago. The area was not settled before their arrival, possibly due to the onset of colder weather in the medieval times. In an earlier period it was part of the Silk Road economic network with wealthy and vibrant communities who were subject to invasion and conquest by many different kingdoms who build strongholds at strategic locations. Some mud walled ruins survive. Even up to the early 1900s cross-mountain trade was common until political changes, imposition of national boundaries and transport innovations left many mountain communities isolated.

The Tajik today are mostly pastoral with permanent settlements up to 3,600m and summer residences to 4,500m where they herd cattle, sheep, goats and yak during the short summer season of June to August. Summer diet consists of many different types of milk products (cream is the favourite), freshly ground (in local water-powered mills) whole-wheat bread pan-cooked over an open fire of dung and turf (found near hot springs) and occasional meat when animals are sacrificed. Tea is flavoured with salt; sugar is only used for special occasions.

I asked how the year had gone; the response was that it was good, "The animals are happy". This was easy to see with livestock young playfully bouncing around the meadows. Dogs are the only animals that have their young during the winter. I told one local person the Wicklow mountain story of the 'Hungry Grass'; the lore is that if a person steps on hungry grass, it will suck all one's energy away causing death. This belief has its basis on energy needs while on the mountains, which can become rapidly depleted; food is the best and only cure. My guide listened somewhat mystified and responded "Here no hungry grass, grass full!"

Permanent houses are stone-built, plastered with mud with turf sod roofs, though these are being replaced by CGI sheets. Summer houses are similar but are not plastered (and sometimes fall down) while higher houses are basic, often no more than stone-built windbreaks.

A half day is needed to reach Karamber Pass (4,300m) which leads down the Charpursan Valley. This is a stunning place with a large moraine dammed lake just below the pass surrounded by small glaciated valleys. Not all valleys have glaciers, as not all have cols. The lake is fed by glacier streams and by a hot spring, which gives the contrast of sterile moraines and living bog, 20cm thick, with warm streams flowing underneath.

Schools and mosques are being built and slowly the area is being developed with the assistance of the Aga Khan Development Programme. The process will accelerate with the completion of the Lowry Pass tunnel. The long term plan is to build a road connecting Pakistan with Tajikistan and Central Asia.

The Broghill Festival was founded in 2001 when local communities set up a three day competition involving the local villages in polo, races, football and tug-of war, enlivened by local poetry and dances and held at Shower Sheer (3,700m). It is supported by HOPE, a local NGO. Not many foreigners make it; in 2006 there were about ten.

Horse polo, the most important and prestigious, is free style; there is no referee, only a timekeeper and two men at either end to declare goals and throw the wooden ball in when it goes wide. Horses have an intuitive understanding of polo and are a joy to watch for their speed and grace. The field is roughly square except for one corner that has a small hillock. On the other side is another hill that is where the audience sit to watch the entertainment and drama. Polo is also played with donkeys in a smaller field which is very amusing and played at a trotting bouncing pace mostly by teenagers.

However yak polo must be the craziest sport I have ever seen. Yak, who spend 364 days a year peacefully grazing, are not the most intelligent of animals and don't have much of a clue what is happening. The rider, who sometimes has stirrups, controls the beast with a rope tied to a nose-ring which he jerks in the hope that yak will go in the right direction. In his other hand he has a home-made polo stick with which he tries to hit the ball and fend off his opponents. A great cheer goes up from the audience every time somebody successfully hits the ball and if it goes any distance it is often five minutes before anybody reaches it.

As yak are temperamental animals, prone to anger, they will often throw off their tormenter rider and stampede off, sometimes into the audience who have to scamper hurriedly out of the way. Confusion follows while a couple of brave souls attempt to capture the animal for the rider who remounts (if he can) and gallops back into the fray. This is all part of the fun and enjoyment. Goals are scored occasionally, more by luck than design, and at the finish the winning team attempt a victory gallop in traditional style though this isn't very successful either.

The other yak sport is a race over about a kilometre. Again the yak need plenty of encouragement, but there is nothing like a herd of yak thundering across the plain, each being whipped to a frenzy; with clouds of dust and riders sometimes flying off.

The few Westerners and other Pakistanis who made up the audience decided on a friendly football match. Teams were chosen and on my side there was the local nazim (rural mayor) in goal; he was over sixty and believed that all this running around was for young people and us older ones should be more decorous and dignified. I took it a little more seriously but this time I was not my usual right back, I was the only back since all the others wanted the glory

of scoring goals. After we went about 15-1 down some reluctantly came back to defend but it didn't make much difference. Perhaps 25-2 was the final score; I stopped counting.

In the high altitude the air is thin so lowlanders need extra time to breathe in enough oxygen. Every time I was facing three attackers I had a burst of energy to try and defend and then it took about five minutes panting to try and get enough oxygen for the next attack. Sometimes I tackled, sometimes I blocked and sometimes I charged screaming but was rarely successful. A Swiss player said "The Irish have a good reputation as defenders" and, as I squatted gulping in air, I thought "Roy Keane would be proud of me".

After it was all over I was last back to the tent where everyone was sitting in a circle. A director, making a film documentary, said "A round of applause for the old man" and everybody politely clapped as I collapsed in a heap.

The concluding sport is Buz Kashi, which in this variation, consists of three teams of ten horsemen who attempt to capture the headless body of a goat and drop it into a hole. This usually is a melee as the competitors pull the body this way and that, each with a leg, to try and gain complete possession. The game is usually over when the goat's legs have been pulled from the body and whoever has a hold of the body drops it into the hole. One knows the end is near when you have counted three legs flying out of the dusty swirling mob.

All that remains is the prize giving when all the winners celebrate with a trophy victory dance with satiric ad-hoc poetry from a local poet and then all is quiet for another year.