

SERIE ORIENTALE ROMA

n.s. 37

ROOTS OF PERISTAN
THE PRE-ISLAMIC CULTURES
OF THE HINDUKUSH/KARAKORUM

Proceedings of the International
Interdisciplinary Conference
ISMEO, Rome, Palazzo Baleani, 5-7 October, 2022

Part II

edited by Alberto M. Cacopardo & Augusto S. Cacopardo



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Kâambojâs and Sakas in the Holly-Oak Mountains On the Origins of the Nûristânîs

RICHARD F. STRAND

SUMMARY. Ethnonymic evidence (Strand 2022b) shows that the current Nûristânî peoples are descendants of ancient Kâambojas and Sakas, equestrian Steppe-Âryâs who entered the Indian subcontinent in waves as early as 1800 BCE and repeatedly established rule over the local Indo-Âryâs, whom genetic studies show to have arrived in the Indus Valley beginning some two millenia earlier (Narasimhan et al. 2019). The trajectories that took these onetime-hegemons to their current refuges in Nûristân are hypothesized, with additional ethnonymic evidence. The linguistic underpinnings of the phylogenetic model proposed by Morgenstierne (1974) for the Nûristânî languages are re-examined in the light of the ethnic evidence, resulting in the proposed elimination of the Northern Nûristânî linguistic subgroup, to be replaced by only Kâmkata-vari (“Modern Kâambojan”), and with the inclusion of Vâsi-vari and the Southern Nûristânî (“Kalaşa”) languages in an “Early Saka” subgroup.

1. THE HOLLY-OAK MOUNTAINS AS A REFUGE

One of the most frequent complaints that I heard from my Kom friends and neighbors in Kâmdeš was that they had been cursed to end up in such a difficult mountainous environment, after having been driven out of the flat lowlands around Jalâlâbâd long ago. They live their difficult, subsistence-level alpine lives because they are *majbûr* “compelled” to do so, as they say, by being the losers of a past conflict. Otherwise, what rational person would voluntarily choose to live in the mountains over the easy lowlands? But it is precisely the alpine ruggedness of their current territory that has saved the Nûristânîs from the ethnocide of bygone lowland conflicts.

The mountainous quadrant bounded on the South by the Kâbul River and on the East by the Kunař River was formerly known as the *Balût Tâğ* “Holly-Oak Mountains” in Moğol Turkish, a descriptive name that I find preferable to the more recent, ethnocide-glorifying *Hindû Kuş* “Hindu-Kill” of the Muslim Afğâns. The lowland valleys of the area (Kâpisâ, Lağmân, Nangarhâr, and

Kunar) have supported Indo-Âryan-speaking farmers and goatherders who have exploited the holly-oak forests of the valley flanks since early times.

But the coniferous forests of the highlands were the abodes of leopards, demons, and fairies, while the mountaintops were the abodes of the Divine Folk themselves (KmKt. *d'e lu*, Sanskrit *deva-loka*-). Aside from the occasional hunter or visitor to sacred sites such as the stone circle at Aştigar in Kalaşüm, these zones were mostly devoid of humans.

The ancestors of today's Nûristânîs took refuge in those highlands as losers of the ethno-religious war waged by invading Muslim Turks against Hindu Âryâs. At least some of the refugees were likely the local power-elites of the losing Hindû-Shâhî empire, along with their tribal segments.

The Kom claim that they once ruled the lowlands from as far away as Kandahâr, from where they migrated to Kâbul, Kâpisâ, Kâma, and Kâmnile before retreating into their alpine strongholds. All the tribal communities of Nûristân have origin stories that trace them back to abodes in the Lağmân and Kunar Valleys.

For the ancestors of the Nûristânîs, retreating from the lowlands, there was only the unoccupied zone of transition from holly oaks to conifers, lying above 1600 m, that was ultimately available for refuge. That environment profoundly changed their life-style by precluding the equestrian basis of their lowland society, allowing only tokens of their former glory in the form of the wooden equestrian statues that commemorated their dead and adorned their shrines. They gave up their horses for goats, which they could tend on the grassy mountaintops in summer, close to the leopards and divinities.

2. ETHNONYMS

The locally-recognized ethnic groups of today's Nûristânîs appear in Table 1.

3. NÛRISTÂNÎS DESCEND FROM STEPPE-ÂRYÂS

Genetic studies (Narasimhan et al. 2019) show that the Âryâs of the Central Asian Steppe split from their ethnic brothers, the early Indo-Âryâs, and left their common region in the Northeastern Zagros Mountains. From there they went North past the Caucasus to the Volga Steppe and developed horsemanship, while the bovine-raising early Indo-Âryâs went East to the Indus Basin.

Equestrian Âryâs from the Northeast Central Asian Steppe intruded into the regions South of the Balût Tâğ beginning around 1800 BCE and mixed with the Indo-Âryâs of the upper Indus Basin. From their ethnic names we can trace most Nûristânî peoples back to those ancient Âryâs. The Kom (and probably other Kâmkata-vari speakers) go back at least 3,500 years to the *Kâmbôjâs*, and most of the remaining Nûristânî peoples go back at least 2,200 years to the *Sakas*.

TABLE 1
Nûristânî Peoples and Languages (with Language-Name Abbreviations)

Local Language Name		Local Ethnic Name	Original Place	National Name	Administrative District
<i>Kâmk'ata-vari</i> ¹ (KmKt.)	<i>Kât'a-vari</i> (Western ²)	<i>Rângal'ei</i> (<i>Kât'a</i> of <i>Râng'al</i>)	<i>Kt'ivi</i>		<i>Mandol</i>
		<i>Kât'a</i> (of <i>P'aruk</i>)	<i>Rângal</i>		<i>Barg-i Matâl</i>
		<i>Kul'e-vrâ-i</i> (<i>Kât'a</i> of <i>Kul'em</i>)	<i>Kt'ivi</i>	<i>Kantozi</i>	<i>Doâb</i>
	(Eastern)	<i>Kt'i-vrâ-i</i> (<i>Kât'a</i> of <i>Kt'ivi</i>) (KmKt.ktv)	?		Central Nûristân
		<i>Kât'a</i> (of <i>Kât'agal</i>)	<i>Kt'ivi</i>		<i>Barg-i Matâl, Chitral</i>
<i>Kâmv'iri</i> (KmKt.km)	<i>Mum'iri</i>	<i>Mum'o</i>	<i>Mum</i>	<i>Mandagali</i>	
		<i>Kst'o</i>	<i>Küst</i>	<i>Kuštozi</i>	<i>Kâmdêš</i>
		<i>Bini'o</i>	<i>Büni</i>	<i>Binozi</i>	
	<i>Kâmv'iri</i> (KmKt.km)	<i>Jâmč'o</i>	<i>Jâmač</i>	<i>Jâmjozi</i>	
		<i>K'om</i>	<i>Kâma</i>	<i>Kâmozi</i>	<i>Kâmdêš, Naray</i>
<i>Vâs'i-vari</i> (Vâsi, Vâsi.u, Vâsi.šu)	<i>Āṣkuṇu-Ṣaṇu-vari</i> (Ā-S)	<i>Jâš'a</i>	<i>Tregâm</i>	<i>Jâši</i>	<i>Naray</i>
		<i>Vâs'i</i>	?	<i>Pâruni</i>	Central Nûristân
		<i>Āṣku' ~ (of Bâzâigal)</i>			<i>Doâb</i>
	<i>Ṣaṇu-vari</i> (Ā-S.s, Ṣaṇu)	<i>Āṣku' ~ (of Mâsegal)</i>	<i>Sâma</i> (<i>Wâmâ</i>)?	<i>Pardest</i> [?]	<i>Nurgrâm</i>
		<i>Āṣku' ~ (of Titin)</i>			
<i>Kalaṣa-âlâ</i> (Kal., Kal-a.)	<i>Grâmsaṇâ-viri</i>	<i>Ṣaṇu</i> (of <i>Sâma</i> [<i>Wâmâ</i>])			<i>Wâmâ</i>
		<i>Grâmsaṇâ</i> (of <i>Grâmsaṇâ Grâm</i>)	<i>Titin</i> ?	<i>Wâmâi</i>	<i>Čapa Dara</i>
		<i>Grâmsaṇâ</i> (of <i>Subligal</i>)			
	<i>Varjan-âlâ</i>	<i>Kalaṣa</i> , sub-group <i>Varjan</i> , communities <i>Vâi</i> , <i>Āmeš</i> , <i>Jâmâmeš</i> , <i>Žo'č</i> , <i>Veli-Vâ</i>	<i>Kâma</i> , <i>Dara-i Nâr</i>		<i>Wâigal</i>
		<i>Du ḡgalâ</i>	<i>Kst'o'rm</i>	<i>Wâigali</i>	<i>Čâziâbâd</i>
<i>Tregâmi</i> (Treg.)	<i>Čima-Niše-i-âlâ</i> (Kal.n)	<i>Kalaṣa</i> , sub-groups <i>Čimâ</i> , <i>Niše-i</i>	<i>Titin</i>		<i>Wâigal, Manogay</i>
		<i>Kalaṣa</i> , sub-group <i>Vanâ</i>	<i>Tregâm</i>		<i>Manogay</i>
		<i>Tregâmi</i> , communities <i>Gambir</i> , <i>Devov</i> , <i>Kajâr</i>	(mixed)	<i>Tregâmi</i>	<i>Wâtapûr</i>

¹ *Kâmk'ata-vari* is a neologism based on a reply to the question that I put to my Kâmviri consultants, "What name do you use for this language that all of you speak?" The answer was that there is no such name, but if they had to make one up, it would be *kâm k'ata mumkš'a viri* "Kom, Kâta, Mumo, and Kšto Language", which could be shortened to just *kâm k'ata viri*. I use a more conservative form of this name, *Kâmk'ata-vari*, with the earlier form *var'i*, as used in Kâta-vari; see below, §3.1.5.

² The Kât'a of Western Nûristân associate the name *Kât'a* with their "infidel" past, and prefer to be called just *Nuriston'i*, or by the more specific local names of Table 1.

3.1 *Kāmbojās*

The *Kāmbojās* are among the earliest known tribes of the *Âryās*. They are attested from the time of the *Mahābhārata* (c. 1000 BCE) and other ancient monuments down to the 12th century CE. They were warrior-caste horsemen who ranged and ruled across Asia from Armenia to Kampuchea, which bears their name. After migrating from the Northeastern Steppe, their home region on the Subcontinent extended from *Kāpisā* and *Kābul* to the Eastern Panjāb and to the North of the Hindu Kush range, and communities of them still live in India today.

They were close allies of the main branch of the *Kūru* tribe (the *Kauravās*) in the *Mahābhārata* war, and evidently remained so after the losing *Kauravās* apparently migrated from *Kūru Kṣetra* in North India to Irān, where their Persian descendants honored them through the royal names *Kūruš* and *Kambūjya*.

“*Kāmboja*” is the Indo-*Âryan* (IA) *guṇa* form of **Kambuja-*, which is also the basis of the Old Persian name *Kambūjya-* (<*Kambūjya*->). The tenseness or length of the *ū* in the Old Persian form likely indicates accent on that vowel, which is revealed by the Greek translation *Καμβύσις* “*Cambyses*.”

In 1880 Biddulph noted, “[The Kom] say that the name of [their] progenitor was Koorshye, which has helped to spread the idea among Mahommedans that they are of the Arab tribe of Koresh” (Biddulph 1880: 132). Indeed, today all the peoples of the region claim that the Kom are *Qureiš*, which makes them “Arabs.” But Biddulph’s assessment that the *Qureiš* hypothesis does not “rest on any adequate foundation” (*ibid.*) rather indicates that the Kom were *Kūrušī*, descendants of *Kūruš* (“Cyrus”), the progenitor of the *Kūru* tribe (the *Kauravās*).³

Although their home region fell under a succession of empires, the *Kāmbojās* perhaps managed to regain control of it during the 9th and 10th centuries CE. The rulers of that time, some of whom may have been *Kāmbojās*, were known as the *Šāhīs*, who ruled from *Sīstān* to the Panjāb until the *Ġaznavī* Turks under Sebük Tegin smashed their empire in the late 900’s CE and drove them out of the Helmand and *Kābul* Valleys. Sebük Tegin’s son, Mahmud *Ġaznavī*, pursued the *Šāhī* rulers into India and effectively removed them from further historical importance. The *Ġaznavīs* imposed Islām on the Hindu regions that they conquered, with the surviving unsubmissive population fleeing into the surrounding mountainous hinterlands.⁴

³ The current genealogy of the Kom goes back to a progenitor *Kom*, without mention of any “*Kuruš*.”

⁴ I have heard local accounts that within the population of the Mangal region of the *Spīn Ghar* (“White Mountains”) Southwest of *Kāma* there are remnants of refugees from *Kāma*, and that there are still people in *Kāma* who recognize that the *Nūristānīs* are their distant kin who refused to submit to Islām.

3.1.1 The Kom are Modern Kambojās

The Kambojās of Kāma are called *Kamôzî* or (formerly) *Kamôjî*, the modern word for “Kamboja” in Pashto and Persian, and *Kāma* or *Kām* in Nûristân.⁵ They call themselves *Kom* after the name of their putative progenitor, but the name probably derives from *Kāma*, their last homeland before their defeat, rather than from the probable true name of the Kambojās’ progenitor, **Kamb’u*. Most ethnonyms in Nûristân arise from a group’s alleged place of origin.

The Kom fled from the Turks up the Kunaṛ Valley to *Kāmn’ile* (“Kom Lake,” by modern Daṇḍuna⁶), where they settled for a while before again being driven out. Apparently, the main group of Kom migrated North up the Degal Valley and eventually over to the upper Laḡmān (Alingar) Valley, where they took refuge in Kulem before migrating once more to occupy the small valley of Kāmgaḷ on the West side of the upper Peč Valley. There they were surrounded by Kāta, Saṇu, and Vāi neighbors.

The relatively late migration of the Kom to Kāmgaḷ would account for their being considered outsiders by those earlier settlers. As mentioned above, local mythology identifies the Kom as Qureiš Arabs; but despite this myth, their Afḡān neighbors still call the Kom *Kamôzî* “Kambojās,” as well as *Qureiš* and *Sex*.

After arriving in Nûristân, the Kom professed hegemony over their neighbors through demands for tribute, thefts of livestock, and kidnappings. For such harrassments their neighbors united and drove them out of Kāmgaḷ. They escaped via the Pārūn and Paṛuk Valleys to the middle Lanḍay Sîn Valley, where they settled at Sāskū. A bad omen caused them to abandon that site and move to the heights of Clay Ridge, the site of modern Kombṛom (Kāmdeš). Another group of Kom apparently migrated from Kāmn’ile further up the Kunaṛ and into the Lanḍay Sîn.

The Koms’ oral history (Strand 1974; 1997-present) likely recounts their retreat as deposed rulers from Helmand, Kābul, Kāpisā, and Kāma as the Ġaznavî Turks overran their territory. But beyond that, today’s Kom are unaware that their ancestors ranked among the greatest Āryās of an epic age 2,500 years before the appearance of the Turks.

The Kom speak *Kāmviri* “Kom Language.” This dialect is also spoken by the Kṣto, Binio, and Jāši peoples, who are surrounded by the Kom and have

⁵ In Persian documents from prior Afḡān governments, the singular form is *Kamôzî* “Kamboja” and the plural is *Kamôzî-hā* “Kambojas.” In Pashto *Kamôzî* is understood as a plural form, “Kambojas,” with a back-formed singular *Kamôzay*, usually shortened to *Kamzay*. Alternatively, the final -î of *Kamôzî* is popularly interpreted as the Persian suffix of origin, leaving *Kamôz* as the incorrect name of the Koms’ territory. On the analogy of *Kom* : *Kamôzî* : *Kamôz*, the Afḡāns have also reanalyzed the other ethnonyms: *Kāta* : *Kantôzî* : *Kantôz* and *Kṣto* : *Kuštôzî* : *Kuštôz*. Nowadays most Pashto speakers call all Nûristānīs *ṣex* “sheikh,” a condescending term for new converts to Islām.

⁶ A lake formed when the Kunaṛ River was blocked by a side-valley debris outflow. It has since drained away.

adopted their speech. Kâmviri is a dialect of the same language spoken by the peoples that emanated from the Ktivi Valley.

3.1.2 Peoples from Ktivi: the Kâta, Mumo, Kšto, and Binio

The Kâtas are the most numerous of the Nûristânî peoples. Led by their mythical ancestral brothers Vřok and Břok (“Brother”), they escaped the low-land chaos and settled at the site of Ktivi, from where they established the further communities of Mum, Kušt, Buni, and perhaps Četras around the confluence of the Ktivi and Pârûn Valleys. According to Herrlich (1937: 241), the Ktivi Valley was occupied by Čânu people before the coming of the Kâtas.

The earlier form of the name *Kâta* was **Kânta*. The Pashto name is *Kântôzî* “Kântô-Born,” which is probably modeled after *Kâmô-zî* “Kâmô-Born (plural)” (Kâmbojâs). The name derives from that of their central community, *Kt'ivi*, which itself derives from an earlier **Kânti-vâ* “Almond Patch,” equivalent to the Pashto name *Kântiwâ*.

Another name for the Kâtas is *Kalaša-mandr* (Uçuñ) *Čâtram'a*, *Kalašamun* (Mumuret) *Čatrum'a*. But cognate forms point to other peoples as well: *Kal.n Čitremi* “woman from Wâmâ,” *Vâsi.u Âtam'a* “Vâigal,” both from **Čatrama*. This form is perhaps partially cognate with *Četrâs*, the name of a Vâi settlement in Jâv-Mountain Valley (*Jâv Dâ Gol*), a side valley at the entrance to the Pârûn Valley. Jâv-Mountain Valley is the major route over the easy Jâv-Mountain Pass between Ktivi and the Peč Valley on the West and Čâm Gal and Vâigal to the East, and further East via the Agok or Ničangal Valleys to the Lanđay Sîn Valley and across into Mumuret. The current Vâi residents of Četrâs informed me that when the Vâis arrived there, the indigenous population fled to the Mumuret Valley in Chitral. Whether those exiles were Kâtas, Mumos, or even Kâsios is unknown.

From each of the Kâta communities emigrants spread East into the Lanđay Sîn Valley at various times. The earliest Kâtas that migrated East (perhaps the **Čatrama* from Četras?) retained the normally-evolved form of the present participle in *-ta-*, < Âr. **-nta-*, which is a hallmark of the Eastern Kâta-vari dialect. Herrlich (1937: 242) stated that their migratory route was via the Pârûn and Škurigal Valleys into the upper Lanđay Sîn Valley. They occupied the highland pastures of the Eastern side-valleys from Mâjom to Rumbur.⁷ Later, the Kâm-kata-vari speakers remaining around the Ktivi-Peč confluence adopted a present-participle morpheme *-na-* < Ir. (?) **-nda-* < Âr. **-nta-*, before they migrated East and West. Those migrants included residents of Kušt, the *Kšto*, and of Mum, the *Mumo*, who were next to move East to the middle Lanđay Sîn Valley. At least some of the *Kšto* and *Mumo* probably followed a route up the Agok Valley and over into the Duŕgal or Mumdeš Valleys before crossing into the Ničangal, which empties into the Lanđay Sîn below Ürmür (despite Herrlich's

⁷ Some Kâtas also settled downriver at the site of Merořm, which is now a Kom village.

account that they came via the Paṛuk Pass [1937: 242]). The Kṣto established communities in Duṅgal and Ničāngal and spread down the Lanḍay Sīn to Kāmu, while the Mumo spread upriver and into the side valley of Māṇṇūl (the original form of which is preserved in Pashto *Mandagal* “Mumoṛm; Mumo Country”). The name of the Mumuret Valley clearly derives from *Mumo*, but it is unclear which migratory group introduced the name.

Exiles from Buni followed a similar route to the uplands above the Ničāngal-Lanḍay-Sīn confluence, where they founded the small community of Binoṛm.

The Kom in Kāmgal also adopted (or perhaps introduced) the *-na-* form of the present participle. Their expulsion from Kāmgal to the Lanḍay Sīn Valley occurred after the migrations of the Kṣto, Mumo, and Ĵāši peoples to that region.

A major migration carried *-na-* dialect speakers from Ktivi West into the Kulem and Rāmgal Valleys. Recent attempts by Kāta clergymen to characterize their countrymen as descendants of Arabs from Badakhshān who arrived via Rāmgal must be seen as misguided Islāmist revisionism.

3.1.3 Peoples from Ktivi: “Sātruk and Kātruk”

A local myth states that there were two brothers, Sātruk and Kātruk, who came from Ktivi. Sātruk was the ancestor of the Sātra [Gawār] people,⁸ while Kātruk’s descendants settled in the Lanḍay Sīn Valley. This myth raises the question of the relationship between the alleged brothers, because the Sātra speak the Indo-Āryan language Gawār-Bāti, while the Kāta speak Nūristānī Kāta-vari, languages of two widely-separated branches of the Āryan family.

According to local lore, before the Vāi occupied Vāigal, the residents of that site were ancestors of today’s Gawār-Bāti speakers. There were allegedly people from Ktivi also living there. When the Vāi arrived at the site via the Šigal Valley and Mādeš, they expelled the Gawārs and drove them East to their present locations in the upper Kunaṛ Valley. The myth of Sātruk and Kātruk may recall the Vāis’ expulsion of the Gawārs and Kātas from Vāigal. The expelled Kātas may have been linguistically absorbed by the Gawārs, which would account for local claims that the Gawārs were Kātas.

3.1.4 The Ĵāsis

According to the Ĵāši elder Nūr Muhammad Khān of Ucuṇ, the Ĵāsis came from the Tregām Valley to Pitigal.⁹

⁸ *Sātra* originally meant “lowlander.” The Kom and Kāta apply this name to the Gawārs of upper Kunaṛ, and the Vāsi and Vāi apply it to the Afgāns of the Peč Valley.

The Saṇu name *Gavār* for the Kāta might have represented a conflation of the Kāta and the Gawār; or it simply might have been Persian *gabr*, *gawr* “Zoroastrian, non-Muslim,” which appears in ethnonyms across the region (Strand 2022a: 493).

⁹ The current account updates that of Strand 1997-present, “At the outset, most likely, the Ĵāša occupied the highlands above the confluence of the Ničāngal and Lanḍay Sīn Valleys at the site of the present Kom town of Kombōm (Kāmdesh), as well as other unspecified sites up and

The Jâsis came from Kâtor. Up and in there from Čağan Sarai. They came from Kâtâr and Gâmbir. The Kâtâr people are Jâsis. They came away and came to Pitigal. In Pitigal they shot four arrows up. One arrow landed here [Ućun]; one arrow landed at Suwir; one arrow landed at Veruk; one arrow is at Pitigal. ŪHist2: 497-504.

From here they went, all of them, in Vâigal from one place to another, and in Ktivi somewhere. ŪHist2: 509.

It is not clear if the alleged Jâsis in Ktivi and Vâigal migrated back from the Lanđay Sîn or were there originally. According to Kom accounts, there were Jâsis living on Clay Ridge when the Kom arrived there, but those Jâsis were so intimidated by the Kom that they left Clay Ridge without a fight and retreated to Pitigal. It is also unclear what the genealogical relationship between the Kâtas and the Jâsis was, if any.

3.1.5 The Shared Language: *Kâm-k'atamumkšt'a-Vari*

The Kom, the Jâsis, and the people from Ktivi all speak dialects of the same language, but it is difficult to reconcile this common language with their disparate origins. Each people calls its language by its own ethnonym: *Kâmv'iri* “Kom language,” *Kât'a vari* “Kâta language,” *Kšt'aviri* “Kšto language,” *Mumv'iri* “Mumo language,” and *Jâšv'iri* “Jâši language.”¹⁰ There is no native name for the entire language; *Kâm-k'atamumkšt'a viri* “Kom, Kâta, Mumo, Kšto Language,” or *Kâm-k'ata viri* for short, have been proposed by the Kom linguist Qâzi Ghulâmullâh.¹¹

The dialects of Kâmkata-vari are shown in Table 1. The major division is between Kâmviri and Kâta-vari, with Mumviri being phonetically closer to Kâta-vari, but with certain articulatory assimilations characteristic of

down the Lanđai Sîn Valley. It is uncertain whether they were exiled there from the upper Pech region as a result of the Kâtas' arrival or were already dispersed throughout central and Eastern Nuristân.” Nûr Muhammad Khân's account to me in Kâmviri (in preparation) confirms the genealogies he provided to Augusto Cacopardo two years earlier (A.S. Cacopardo 1991: 337-339) and complements Alberto Cacopardo's further-detailed account of the *Jâši* (Cacopardo A.M., Cacopardo A.S 2001: 173-225).

¹⁰ The Kom sometimes jocularly call their language *Jâšviri*.

¹¹ The term “Kati,” invented by Morgenstierne after a Persian neologism *kata'î*, should be avoided, as should the phonetically incorrect “Katë,” as they imply precedence of the Kâta over the Kom, and they are not indigenous words. Furthermore, the *close* vowel [i] in Kâmkata-vari should not be represented by the *mid* vowel symbol *ē*, as recently advocated by some scholars who do not speak that language. For the same reason the mid-vowel symbol *ə* should also be avoided for that vowel. I have used *a* to represent the vowel since the 1960's, when symbols for computer processing were limited, with the understanding that it is a phonemic symbol representing the phonetic sound [i], and that it preserves the tradition of using *a* to represent the default vowel ([e] or [ə]) in the ancient Āryan languages. Otherwise, any symbol that represents a close central unrounded vowel is valid, including IPA *ɨ*, Turkish *ı*, or even *ĩ*, but never *ē*.

Kâmviri. Because all Kâmkata-vari speakers consider the Kom to be late-arrival outsiders, the question arises: do Kâmviri and Kâta-vari have a common origin, in which case they probably continue the ancient Kâamboja language, or did the Kom Kâambojâs abandon their language for an early form of Kâta-vari?

In favor of all dialects descending from an early Kâamboja language, most words in each dialect can be traced back to single proto-Kâmkata-vari forms through regular sound changes in each dialect. The Kom have a stronger expressive attitude than the Kâta, which drives the phonetic distinction of their dialect from a common Kâmkata-vari source (Strand 2022b). Grammatical differences have also arisen within the individual dialects from common proto-forms.

It is possible that the hegemonic Kom were ruling-class Kâambojâs who retained memories of their former greatness, while the Kâta and others from Ktivi were from other Kâambojan lineages that lost track of their Kâambojan roots.

It is perhaps less possible that the Kom adopted the Kâta language, of unclear Steppe-Ârya origin, after they settled next to them in central Nuristân. In favor of this language-replacement hypothesis is the fact that all modern Kâambojan communities, scattered throughout the world from Irân to India to North America, have adopted the national language of the larger community in which they live. However, the Kom did not end up surrounded by a national language in Nûristân. There they were in close contact with Kâta-vari speakers, but equally so with Sañu- and Âškuñu-viri speakers and somewhat less so with Kalaša-alâ speakers across the Peč Valley. Indeed, the Kom may have sought out closer contact with the Kâta precisely because they both spoke the same language.

Unlikely is the possibility that the more numerous Kâta adopted the Koms' Kâamboja language, because the Eastern Kâta were already separated before the other dialects, including Kâmviri, adopted the progressive participle in *-na-*.

3.2 Sakas

The ethnonyms *Sañu*, *Gřâmsañâ*, *Âškuñu*, *Prâsun*, *Pašaî*, and *Vâi* may all contain the element *Saka*, which is the generic name of the equestrian hordes that succeeded the Kâambojâs and their Steppe-Ârya cohorts in the steppes of Eastern Central Asia.

"Saka" is the Irânian form of a name that derives from the Proto-Indo-European root *kak-* or *kek-* "power," which became Âryan **ćaka-*, Indo-Âryan *śaka-*, Steppe-Âryan **ćaka-*, and Old Irânian *saka-*. The latter form evolved through **sag-î-* (as in Parthian *sgyst'n* "Sakastân" [Durkin-Meisterernst 2004: 306]) into later *sai*, *sei*, or *sî(-stân)*, with regular loss of intervocalic **-g-* < **-k-*. The

modern names are mostly based on Late Middle Irânian forms, rather than ones directly inherited from Steppe Âryan.¹²

Table 2 shows the possible derivations of the modern ethnonyms, which

come from the genitive plural or nominative singular forms of the ancient name of the Sakas (from the PIE root **kek* “power, ability”). In the ancient Irânian names an **a* in parentheses was elided, while the sequence **rs* regularly became **rš* and then *š*. An ancient **k* between vowels was regularly elided in the Nûristânî languages. Forms listed as “via Pašai” are so marked because of the loss of the intervocalic **s*, a key characteristic of that language. The ancient Irânian names are proposed reconstructed words, with the prefix **para-* meaning “beyond” or “further.” (Strand 2022b)

The Sakas were a multi-tribal people known from at least the 8th century BCE in Eastern Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where they developed out of earlier nomadic societies of Steppe Âryas (Gnecchi-Ruscone et al. 2021). They probably first appeared in the region of Nuristan during the Parthian Empire in the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE. Successive migrations of Saka tribes moved through the Hindu Kush and Karakorum Ranges into Northern Afġânistân, the Panjâb, and Irân as far as Sîstân. They ruled over these regions from Parthian times until they were displaced by the Kušânas (the “Smiters”) during the 1st to 4th centuries CE. Like the Kâmbojâs, the Sakas persisted in the region during the hegemonies of later empires.

3.2.1 The Prâsun

The *Vâsi* “Hither Sakas,” or *Prâsun* “Further Sakas” as outsiders call them, entered their current high-valley territory from “downriver.” They have maintained a close connection with their Kâmkata-vari-speaking neighbors, resulting in their having borrowed around 18% of their etymologized lexicon from that language (§4.3). The putative-Saka Prâsun share an important linguistic trait with Pašai (verb forms built on a verbal actor-noun ending in *-k*, §4.2), perhaps indicating a close social connection between their Saka forebears.

3.2.2 The Vâi

Local accounts claim that the Vâi (“Hither Sakas”) occupied some region of the lower Kunař and Dara-i Nûr Valleys, with their mountain pastureland around today’s Pašai-speaking Sum community of Oigal (< **Vâigal*). Accord-

¹² Some scholars have noted the similarity of the ethnonym *Saka* to the word for “dog” in the Irânian languages and suggested that the Sakas called themselves “Dogs.” Anyone familiar with the generally contemptuous regard for dogs in the region would reject this speculation. The convergence of Âr. **ćakânâm* “of the Sakas” and Âr. **ćuana-ka-* “dog” to CNur. **ćâna* and **ćona*, respectively, could have motivated adoption of Ir. **kuri* “pup” for “dog” in KmKt. (*kur’i*) and Â-S (*kur’i*), as well as promoted the borrowing of an IA form with *š*, *šō*, in Kal., rather than the expected form **ćō* for “Sañu;” cf. Kal. *ćū* “dog,” from earlier **ćō*.

TABLE 2
Cognate Ethnonyms Possibly Containing “Saka.” After Strand 2022b

Language					
Âryan	Indo-Âryan	Steppe Âryan	Old or Middle Irânian	Common Nûristânî	Other
*čak-ânâm “of the Sakas”	šakânâm	*čakânâm	sakânâm	*čânu	Â-S.s <i>sañu</i> ; Kal. <i>šō</i> < IA
			*p(a)ra-sakâna	*prâsun	KmKt.km <i>pṛās'ũ</i> ; autonym <i>vās'i</i>
				(via Pašaî)	Â-S.s <i>prâu</i>
			*p(a)ra-sakân-î	(via Pašaî)	Kal. <i>pâi</i>
*čaka-(ka-) “Saka”	šaka-	*čaka-	*par(a)-šaka-î	*pâšâi	autonym <i>paša'î</i>
			*vâ-saka-î	*vâsi	Vâsi <i>vās'i</i> (autonym)
				(via Pašaî)	Kal., Â-S, K. <i>vâi</i>
*arš-an “Studly” < PIE *h ₁ rs-en “male”		*arš-aka-	*aršakânâm	*âškunu	Middle Persian <i>aškân</i> “Arsacid”
			*kâl(a)-arš-aka- ?	*kalaša ?	

ing to their own traditions, the Vâi fled the Ġaznavî invasion of Kâma, following the Kunaṛ up to Mâdeš and Samâlâm in the Šigal Valley and thence over the watershed to their main community of Vâigal (as related above in §3.1.3).

There are other communities named “Waigal” in Mohmand Agency and Dir District of Northwest Pâkistân, now occupied by Afġâns. If these place names were connected with the Vâi, the geographical spread of these locations implies that the Vâi formerly ranged over a wide area to the East and South of Nuristân.

3.2.3 The Sañu, Âškuñu, Ġrâmsañâ, and Čima-Nišeî

Local accounts claim that the Sañu, Âškuñu, Ġrâmsañâ, and Čima-Nišeî came to their present abodes from Laġmân via the upper Alingar Valley. The Âškuñu remained in that area, intermingling with Pašaî-speaking communities. The rest crossed over into the Peč watershed, where the Sañu and the Ġrâmsañâ ended up in their current territories along the Peč, while the Čima-Nišeî pushed beyond Ġrâmsañâ territory into the lower Wâigal Valley and forced the resident Prejvñe people to migrate to Tregâm.

Today all these peoples except the Čima-Nišeî speak one language, Âškuñu-Sañu-Ġrâmsañâ-viri. The Čima-Nišeî apparently abandoned that language for the language of the Vâi residents of the upper Wâigal Valley (*Vâi-alâ*), while maintaining characteristics of their own dialect (*Čima-Nišeî-alâ*).

3.2.4 The Tregâmî

The “Three Communities” of Tregâm are Kaṭor, Gambir, and Devi. The residents of each speak dialects of a separate Nûristânî language, *Tregâmî*. Their

origins are unclear. The language is probably an offshoot of Vâi-alâ, with some influence from Kâta-vari and Sañu-viri, as well as from local Indo-Âryan languages. Notably, the name *Tregâm* contains the form *gâm* “community” from the Indus-Valley or lowland Indo-Âryan languages via the Kațâr-Qâlâi language of the lower Tregâm Valley, rather than from a Nûristânî form **gřâm* or a Pașai form *lâm*.

3.2.5 Kalașa Peoples

In addition to their more specific ethnonyms, the Sañu, Gřamsañâ, Âșkuñu, Vâi, and Tregâmî all call themselves *Kalașa*. I have tentatively speculated that a precursor to this name could be **Kâla-Arșaka*- “Black Arsaka,” based on the possible derivation of the ethnonym *Âșkuñu* from *Arșaka*^h (Greek *Ἀρσάκης*, Latin *Arsaces*, < Âr. **řś-aka-s* “Studly”), the name of leader of the Saka Parni tribe and founder of the Parthian Empire (Strand 2022b: 343). His name persisted as a synonym for “Parthian” for the half-millennium of the Parthian Empire (247 BCE to 224 CE), and further in Parthian *Arșak*, Middle Persian *Aškân* “Arsacid,” and Fârsî *Ašk* (Durkin-Meisterernst 2004: 56). However, there is another possible precursor: **Kâla-Šâh* “Black King.” The identification of **kâla*- with “black” seems probable, despite its origin as a distant Dravidian loanword. The question comes down to whether *-ša* is from “Studly” or “king” (or something else), which I discuss below (§3.2.7).

The Kalașa may have been a coalition of diverse Saka tribes: Arșakas (Âșkuñu), Sakas (Sañu), “Gathered-Together” Sakas (Gřam-sañâ), and some “Hither” Sakas (**vâ-saka-i* > Early-Pașai **vahâi* > *vâi*). Other “Hither” Sakas (**vâ-saka-i* > *vâ-s-i*) became “Further Sakas” (**p(a)ra-sakân-i* > Pașai **prahânî* > *pâi*) in Pârûn.

Today *Kalașa-alâ* is the name all Nûristânî residents of the Wâigal Valley (*Kalașüm*) call their language, regardless of dialect. The Vâi may have carried “*Kalașa*-ism” into Southern Chitral, imparting the name *Kalașa* to the Indo-Âryan-speaking residents of that area; see further §3.2.7.

3.2.6 The Pașai

The peoples that speak the Indo-Âryan language that we today call *Pașai* have multiple ethnic roots, as evidenced by their various ethnonyms and dialects. Overall, it would appear that Sakas from the West overran the indigenous Indo-Âryan speakers and adopted their language, probably through intermarriage, while imparting their own Steppe-Âryan pronunciation habits to it.

Notable is the development of PIE intervocalic *-s-, through -h-,¹³ to zero. PIE *-s in final position took the same evolutionary pathway throughout the Âryan group, but only in the Irânian stage of Steppe-Âryan evolution did it

¹³Attested by al-Birûnî in the 9th century CE (Morgenstierne 1967: 11, fn. a).

weaken to *h* in other positions. The Pašaī development perhaps represents the influence of Irānian-speaking Sakas.

That both Pašaī and Vāsi-vari (Prāsun) have verb forms based on an ancient Irānian verbal-actor noun in **-ak* may imply that Sakas, including Prasuns, imparted their **-ak* form to the Indo-Āryan-speaking Pašaī, who reformed their verbal system based on it (present: Verb-*k*-‘Actor; past: ‘Verb-*k*-Actor, with ancient PIE-style iconic accent placement depicting continuing vs. completed action). In Prāsun the **-ak* form became the past active participle in *-ok* (§4.2).

3.2.6.1 The Pašaī Proper

The ethnonym *Pašaī* properly applies only to the Pašaī-speakers of the Northwest. There has been a flow of Pašaīs who speak the “Northwest” dialect from West-to-East across the Southern Holly-Oak mountains, from ancient Kāpisā in the Ğorband-Panjšīr Valley to the Tagāb, Uzbīn, Ališang, and upper Alingar Valleys (Morgenstierne 1967: 11).

Some Further Sakas perhaps migrated across the upper Alingar Valley into the heartland of Nūristān at the confluence of the Kantiwā and Pārūn Valleys, before settling further up the latter. Samiullāh Tāza has this entry in his *Kalaša-alā* dictionary: *pašā; pašā deš* “The Kalaša people in the past used to know the region of Pārūn by this name” (Tāza 2017: 647). This is a further clue that the Pašaī, or *Pašā(i)* as they are known in the Nūristānī languages, and the Prasun shared at least a common name.

Indeed, the toponym Pārūn itself is derivable from a Pašaī form of **Para-Sakan*, with characteristic elision of the intervocalic sibilant and **k* and labialization of the nasalized **ā* to give **Paraha:n* > **Parān* > *Pārūn*.

Remarkable are the names of three communities that are connected by a traditional cross-valley path: *Sai-gal* “Saka Valley,” *Āla Sai* “Over-Here Saka,” and *Pašaī* (< **Par-Sai*) “Further Saka.” Add to these the ethnonyms *Saṇu* “Sakans,” **Pra-sun* “Further Sakans,” and **Vā-sī* > *Vā-i* “Hither Sakas,” and it would seem that the viewpoint of the pre-Nūristānī Sakas lay around the confluence of the Ališang and Alingar Rivers in Laḡmān, looking West. The Hither Sakas lay to the East of the Laḡmān-Kunaṛ watershed.

While the Further Sakas occupied their areas, the Hither Sakas (**Va(s)i*) reached Vāigal via the Kunaṛ and its tributary Šigal Valley. Further and Hither Sakas may have intermingled, with “Hither Saka,” in two dialectal forms, *Vāsi* and *Vāi*, ending up as the endonym for two separate linguistic groups. “Further Saka,” in its earlier forms **Par-šaī* and **Pra-sun*, ended up as the endonym for today’s Pašaī and the exonym for the Vāsi.

3.2.6.2 Eastern Pašaī-Speakers

In Laḡmān Pašaī speakers go by other names, such as *Sum* and *Damenč*, while in Kunaṛ and Peč there are the *Degan*, *Čalasī*, *Kuraṅgalī*, and *Čūganī*. They speak “Eastern” dialects of Pašaī, which they call by their own names

rather than “Pašaî,” although they will sometimes use that more well-known name to outsiders.

One such group are the *Čûganî* of Kordar, with offshoots in Kunaŕ. In neighboring languages they are the *Čûk-vñe* in Kal. and the *Čuãñi* in Sañu. The names all point to an earlier **Čûk-vãñi*. The etymology of **Čûk* is unknown; but the *u* probably precludes Steppe-Âryan **Čakânâm* “of the Sakas.”

Some residents of Kordar call themselves *Alinâ*, which they claim means “Âryan.” If indeed *Alinâ* and *Ârya* are cognates, the *l* could also represent an early stage, before the Indo-Âryan change of *l* to *r*; or an original *ry* could have changed to *l*, as in Alannic. Note also the Alina of the *Ṛg Veda*, who fought in the Ten Kings War against the Bhâratas.

3.2.7 The Medieval Country of *Šâma*

Previous researchers have noted the existence of toponyms that possibly derive from a PIE form **kiê-mo-*, Âryan **čyâma*, and Sanskrit *šyâma*- “dark-colored” (Chavannes 1903: 159, fn. 4; Stein 1907: 14; Morgenstierne 1932: 47; Tucci 1977: 80-81; Cacopardo A.M., Cacopardo A.S. 1992: 369; 2001: 29, fn. 13). Table 3 lists the toponyms noted so far. The variant initial consonants reflect the evolution of Âryan **č* to Indo-Âryan *š*, Steppe-Âryan *č*, or Irânian *s*. Later in Indo-Âryan the *y* was absorbed after the laminal *š*. Similarly, the Âryan **y* after **č* was absorbed in *Zümi* and *Čâm*, but not in the possible cognate *Čiâm* “mythical country of origin of some Kalaša,” unless the *i* in that form is epenthetic (see below). The toponyms point to a name **Šâma*/**Čâma*, which denoted a medieval country located somewhere within Peristân.

I waded into the mire of diverse speculation on the location and ethnicity of *Šâma* only to point out two important Nûristânî places that have not received attention: the home of the Sañu people, Wâmâ, which they call *Sâma* (from earlier **Šâma*), and *Čâm Gal*, the narrow valley that joins the Agok Valley by the community of Vâigal to form the main Wâigal Valley.

The essential controversy over the location of medieval *Šâma* is whether it was somewhere in present-day Northern Chitral or somewhere further South. Because *Šâma* has been identified with the country of *Shē-mí* of the Tang Dynasty records, its place must be found relative to better-identified countries within the often uncertain geographic mosaic of the Chinese sources. Crucial is the location of *Jiê-shī*, which borders *Shē-mí* to the North and East. Both countries have been identified as Chitral, despite being distinct.

A source of confusion was Morgenstierne’s erroneous conflation of *Shē-mí* with *Shāng-mí* “Mastuč” (Upper Chitral), which along with Vâsi *Šim* “Chitral” and Sanglečî *Šâm*- (location unspecified) convinced him to equate *Šâm* with Upper Chitral (1932: 47). Citing him, other scholars have been pointed toward Northern Chitral as the location of *Šâm* and *Čiâm*, the mythical place

TABLE 3
Places with the Name Šām(a)/Ćâm(a)

Location	Name	Language
in Tagâb	<i>Šim-käi</i>	Pašaî
in Sâi Gal, Ališang	<i>Šâma Kôṭ</i>	Pašaî
Wâmâ, in Peč Valley	* <i>Šâma</i> > <i>Sâma</i> * <i>Šâma-i</i> > <i>Šemi</i> * <i>Ćâma-i</i> > <i>Zümi</i>	Saṇu Kal-a. Vâsi
Peč/Kunaṛ Valley?	<i>Šâm</i>	Sanglečî
Peč/Kunaṛ Valley?	<i>Shē-mi</i>	Chinese
Peč/Kunaṛ Valley?	* <i>Šâm-i</i> > <i>Šemi</i> -(<i>R'êṇi</i>)?	Ačharêṭâ'
in Kalašüm	<i>Ćâm Gal</i> <i>Ćâm ?</i>	Kal-a. Kal-m.
in Šigal, Kunaṛ	* <i>Šâma Grâm</i> > <i>Sâma Lâm</i>	? + Pašaî
in Nur Gal, Kunaṛ	<i>Šim-ašt</i> ¹⁴	Pašaî
Chitral	<i>Šim</i>	Vâsi

of origin of certain Kalaša (Cacopardo A.M., Cacopardo A.S. 1992: 369). But *Shē-mi* was not *Shāng-mi*; its location was elsewhere.¹⁵

¹⁴ Morgenstierne 1967: 332. The *Šimašti*-speaking population of this community originally came from the Peč Valley.

¹⁵ The Sanglečî compound *Šâm-Ćatrâd* “Šâm and Chitral” implies that the two places were distinct, despite Vâsi *Šim* “Chitral.” The route from Pârûn to Chitral ran through Mumuret (Parkes 1991: 80-81), which may have been an ancient part of Šâma and which could account for the Vâsis’ ancient conception of *Šim*, perhaps running downriver from Oyón, but expanded later to all of modern Chitral. The border between Šâma and Chitral along the course of the Kunaṛ-Chitral River may have fluctuated or disappeared as Kalaša peoples from Šâma infiltrated Chitral.

Chavannes, who translated the Chinese records into French, equated *Shē-mi* (“*Che-mi*”) with Chitral (1903: 159, fn. 4). Tucci concurred and proposed that *Shē-mi* was named after a king *Šyāmaka* or *Šyāma Rāja* “Dark King” (1977: 62). Stein, however, equated another country, *Jiē-shī* (“*Chieh-shih*,” Chavannes’ “*Kie-che*,” “voisin du Pou-lu [Gilgit]”) with the main Chitral Valley; and he identified *Shē-mi* with “Kāfiristān” (1907: 14).

Of *Jiē-shī* Chavannes says, “Le climat y est toujours chaud; on y trouve du riz” (1903: 159). Speaking of another nearby country’s climate (1903: 160) he says, “Le climat y est doux; on y trouve beaucoup de riz de terrain sec et de riz de rizière, ainsi que du *che-mi*” (which he notes is rendered with different Chinese characters than “*Che-mi*”). If rice was grown in *Shē-mi*, that country could not have been in highland Nûristān; rather, it would likely be found in the rice-producing lower valleys of the Kunaṛ-Peč basin to the South of Chitral.

Stein (1907: 14) traced a pilgrimage route from Badaxšân via the “headwaters of the Varduj or Kokcha River” and through the valleys of Nûristān, arriving at *Udyâna* (Swât) “to the South” of *Shē-mi*. Although he proposed a route through Nûristān’s “Easternmost” valley to Dîr and Swât, the route from Badaxšân runs through Pârûn into the Peč Valley, right past *Sâma*/*Šemi* “Wâmâ.” The Peč Valley has long been culturally connected with the Bâjawîr and Swât Valleys to the Southeast.

The names of the communities of Sâma (Wâmâ) in the Peč Valley and Šâma Kôṭ (off the lower Ališang Valley in Laḡmân) argue for a more Southerly location of Šâma. Considering the evidence of its climate (rice-growing) and its position relative to *Jié-shī* and other countries, I would propose that Šâma was the region comprising the Peč and middle Kunaṛ Valleys, perhaps extending Eastward to include Baḡawīṛ and Dīr. This region would correspond to a later “Gabaristân,” which was linguistically dominated by a precursor to the modern Peč-Valley languages (Strand 2022a: 493).

Cacopardo and Cacopardo (1992: 369) suggested that *Ćiâm* is cognate with Skt. *śyâm'a-* and further to *Šâm* and *Shē-mí*, which they place in Northern Chitral, following Morgenstierne and Tucci. If they are true cognates, then *Ćiâm* must be a Steppe-Āryan or Kalaṣa-alâ loanword into Kalaṣa-mun (Kal-m.), because the phoneme *ć* in Kal-m. derives from either Indo-Āryan *ts* or from *ć* or *č* in loanwords (cf. Morgenstierne 1965: 198, §23).

Because of the legendary associations of the *Kalaṣa* peoples of both Kalaṣūm (the Wâigal Valley) and Chitral (as summarized in Cacopardo A.M., Cacopardo A.S. 1992: 367 ff.), I would associate *Ćiâm* with *Ćâm Gal* in Kalaṣūm. The name could be descriptive, meaning “Dark Valley.” The *i* of Kal-m. *Ćiâm* could have been retained from Steppe-Āryan **Ćiâma*, while having been absorbed in Kal-a. *Ćâm*; or the *i* in *Ćiâm* could have been an expressive prolongation of the laminality of the lamino-dental *ć* of *Ćâm*. Whether *Ćâm/Ćiâm* and *Šâm/Shē-mí* indeed denote a single place or are simply different manifestations of the meaning “dark” (“Dark Valley” vs. “Dark King”) is unclear.

Alternatively, there is a slight chance that the initial portion of Steppe-Āryan **ćâ-m* could derive from earlier **ćaka-* > **ćaa-* = **ćâ-*, with the remaining **-m* unclear, but perhaps seen in Kal-m. **ćâtra-mâ* “Kâta” and Kmkt. *-m* [locational gesture].

Regarding the meaning “dark, black,” there is a semantic equivalence of *Śyâma Râja* and Indo-Persian **Kâla Šâh* “Dark/Black King.” The sound *ś* is pronounced somewhat backed ([ʃ]) in Nangarhâr and was borrowed as *ṣ* into the Nûristânî languages in loanwords from that region, so that a loanword **Kâla Šâh* could have become *Kalaṣa*, similar to Middle Persian *šahr* “country” becoming Kal-a. *šâr*, Kmkt. *ṣ'or* “lowland territory.” The possibility of the *-ṣa* of *Kalaṣa* denoting “king” rather than “Arsaka” or “head” is compelling, assuming a laxing of the original *â*’s in the resulting loanword (cf. §3.2.5). Also notable is the Acharêṭâ’ ancestral name *Šēmi-R'êṇi* (< **Šâmi-R'âṇi*), which could have meant “Dark Queen” or “Queen of *Šâm*.” The title *Šâh* rather than *Râja* likely indicates an Irânian (Saka) rather than an Indo-Āryan hegemony.

Tucci (1977: 82) equated the Khasas, an ancient people of the region, with *Jié-shī* (“Ch’ieh-Shih”). Their name, Khasa, Khasia, or Khaṣa (with Irânian *s* or Indo-Āryan *ś*) appears to be the source of Kâmviṛi *Kâsi'o* and Kâta-vari *Kâsv'o*, their name for the Kalaṣa of Chitral (cf. Cacopardo A.M., Cacopardo A.S. 1992: 369, fn. 24).

The evidence points to a progression of Saka armies that overran the region and occupied various places they called **Ŝāma* or **Ĉām* from present-day Laġmān through the Peč Valley and Kalašūm to Chitral. A speculative scenario would be that first the Khasas (*Kāsio*) occupied Chitral from the North. Then the “Dark Šāhīs” (*Kalaša*) came from the South via *Ŝāma* and *Ĉām* (*Ĉām Gal*) and displaced the Khasas, who moved East. Also from Tregām in *Ŝāma* came the Jāsis, who occupied places in the Lanḍay Sîn and lower Chitral Valleys. Centuries later the Khów expanded South from Upper Chitral to occupy their present territory.

It would appear that since early times **Kalaša-mantra* was spoken in central Chitral, close to Khowār in Upper Chitral. It was transmitted as the mother tongue to the children of the women who lived there and interbred with the succession of invasive Saka males. The children grew up speaking *Kalaša-mantra*, rather than the languages of their fathers. The same process occurs today: when Peristān men marry Paštūn women, their children usually grow up speaking Pashto as their primary language, rather than their fathers’ languages.

Along with these possibilities is Morgenstierne’s derivation of the *Kalaša-mantra* word for “person from Chitral,” *p’atua*, from **pārtaw* “Parthian” (1932: 48).

These scenarios agree largely with those of Cacopardo A.M. and Cacopardo A.S. (1992: 370-371), except that I emphasize the South rather than the North as a main source of the *Kalaša-mantra*-speaking population. As a caveat, it must be restated that our reconstructions of ancient names are hypothetical and cannot be assured without historical validation.

If the names of Sakas and Parthians are indeed reflected in the modern Nûristānî ethnonyms, then why aren’t the modern peoples speaking an Irānian language today, rather than Nûristānî languages? A plausible answer would be that their ancestors were Early Sakas, who branched off from the remaining Steppe-Āryās before the characteristic Irānian changes occurred.

4. THE PHYLOGENY OF THE NÛRISTĀNÎ LANGUAGES

Competing hypotheses on whether the Nûristānî languages are “closer” to Irānian, Indo-Āryan, or are more independent, have arisen because their proponents have concentrated on either form or meaning. Those who concentrate on the phonological evolution of words group Nûristānî with Irānian, against Indo-Āryan (Konow 1911; Strand 2022b), while those who concentrate on meaning, as expressed through sets of cognate words, find that Nûristānî and Indo-Āryan form a subgroup against Irānian (Heggarty et al. 2023).

Such studies reveal the descent of human groups based on how they speak vs. how they think. The semantic closeness of lexical cognacy between Nûristānî and Indo-Āryan shows enduring social contact and shared culture, rather than descent based on the articulations of speech. It is “linguistic proteomics,” rather than “linguistic genomics.”

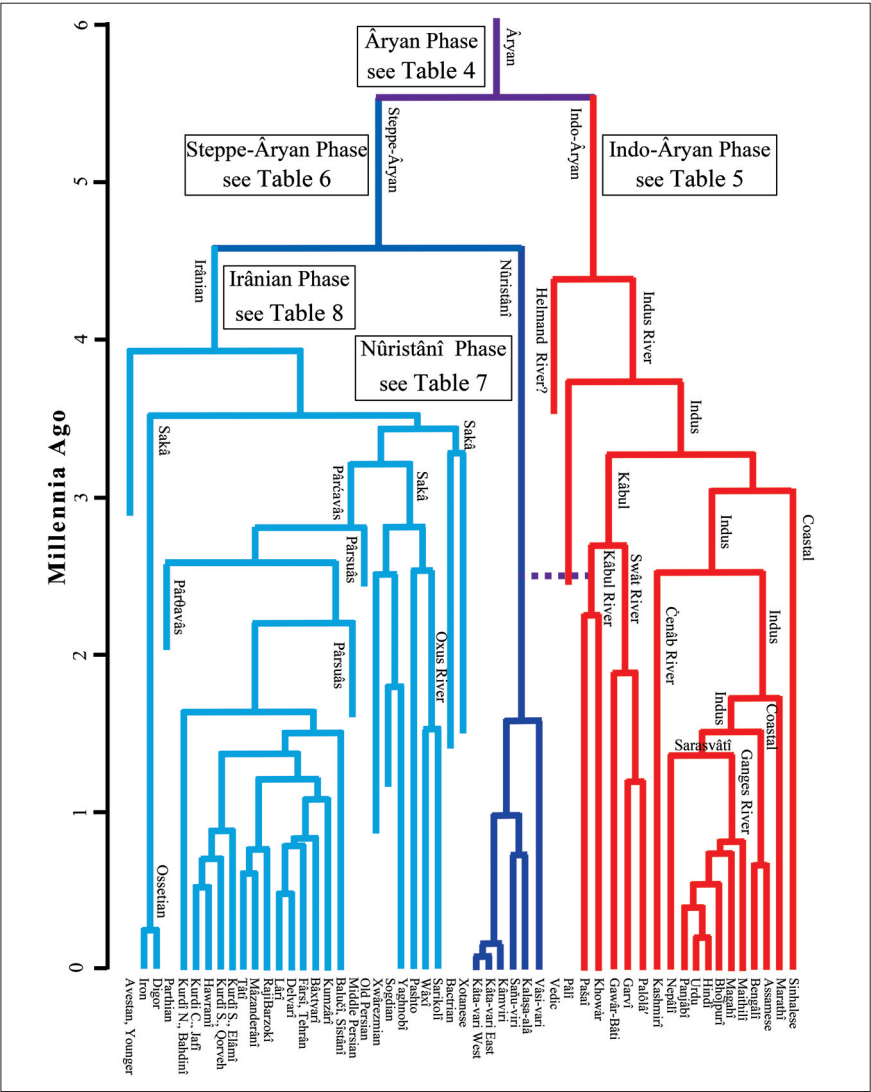


Fig. 1 - Āryan-Language Tree. Redrawn from Heggarty et al. 2023: fig. S6.1.

Fig. 1 combines the lexical cognacy results of Heggarty et al. with the major phonetic changes, chronologically-ordered, that occurred in the early Āryan languages (listed in the indicated tables).¹⁶ Heggarty et al. find that the

¹⁶ The tree in Fig. 1 has been redrawn, with topology maintained, from Heggarty et al.'s fig. S6.1 to show the geographic distribution of the sampled languages. Also shown are possible riverine and coastal migrational pathways of precursor speakers to their present linguistic territories.

Nûristânî languages form a sub-clade within Âryan that is most closely connected to the Indo-Âryan languages Gawâr-Bâti and Khowâr (dotted line in Fig. 1). The phonological data place the Nûristânî and Irânian sub-clades together (solid line) in a Steppe-Âryan clade, as against an Indo-Âryan clade.

The structure of Heggarty et al.'s Nûristânî clade is of interest here. Its branching depicts the three ethnolinguistic subgroups that the Nûristânîs themselves distinguish: the Kâmkata-vari speakers, the Kalaşa, and the Vâsi (Fig. 2, redrawn from Fig. 1 to show probable geographic distribution). However, Morgenstierne (1974) proposed that the languages of Nûristân consist of two subgroups: a "Northern" group of Kâmkata-vari and Vâsi-vari and a "Southern" group of Kalaşa-alâ, Tregâmî,¹⁷ and Âşkuñu-Sañu-viri (Fig. 3). The ethnonymic evidence presented above suggests a division between Kâmbôjan and Early Sakan (Fig. 4). In the light of our current knowledge, which descent diagram best describes the relationship of the Nûristânî languages? Is there a "Northern Nûristânî" node in the phylogenetic tree? Where does Vâsi-vari fit?

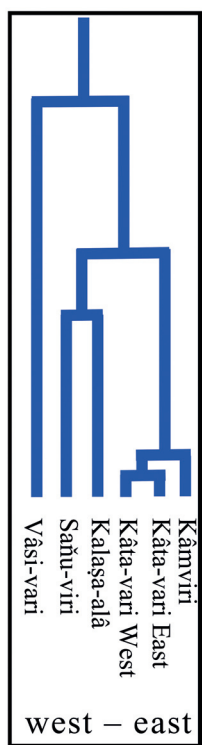


Fig. 2.

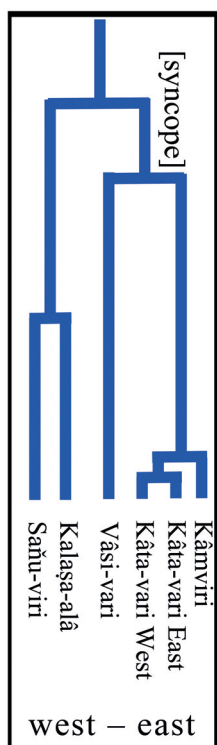


Fig. 3.

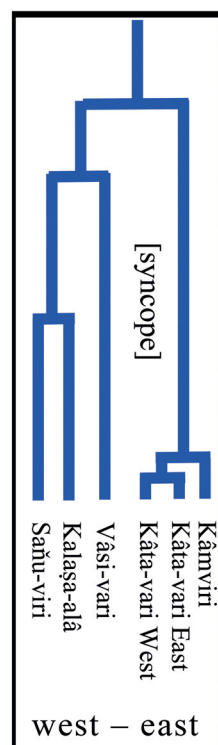


Fig. 4.

¹⁷ Tregâmî was excluded from Heggarty et al.'s study for paucity of data.

4.1 Phonology

The major phonological processes and their phonemic outcomes for each of the early Âryan-language phases in Fig. 1 appear in Table 4 through Table 8 (Strand 2008; 2010).

Steppe-Âryan was characterized by progressive anterior tensing of the laryngeal-lingual complex, which produced a cascade of phonetic consequences including exclusively anterior phonation, lingual fronting, prognathizing, stress-timed accent, syncope, and, later in Irânian, spirantization of stop consonants (Strand 1999: 237; 2013; 2022b).¹⁸ The opposite occurred in Indo-Âryan: progressive posterior tensing of the laryngeal-lingual complex, producing lingual backing and retroflexion, while maintaining a phonemic distinction between posterior and anterior phonation (Strand 2022a).

The evolutionary situation is much clouded by Indo-Âryan traits that have been adopted into the languages and cultures of the Nûristânîs since they intruded into South Asia from the steppes, as well as by uncertain chronologies of the sound changes.

TABLE 4
Reconstructed-Âryan Phonetic Changes

Reconstructed-Âryan	
Process	Phonemic Changes
Uniform Obstruent Voicing	$*g_s > *k_s$; $*gt > *kt$; $*g^{ws} > *k^{ws}$; $*g^{wt} > *k^{wt}$
	$*g^{fs} > *g^{zfs}$; $*g^{wfs} > *g^{wzfs}$; $*g^{ft} > *gd^{ft}$; $*g^{wft} > *g^{wdft}$
Laryngeal/Nasal Vocalizing	$*h, *h_i > *a, *n, *m > a : \#C_C$
Laminalized Sibilants	$*s > *š : \{ *i, *r, *k, *k^{w} \}_- ; *g^{zfi} > *g^{zfi}$; $*g^{wzfi} > *g^{wzfi}$
Dorsal Fronting 1	$g^i > *g^i > *j$; ($*g^i > *k^i$; $*g^i > *k^i$)
	$*k^i > *k^i > *č$; $*k^i > *k^i > š$; $*k^i > *k^i > *čš$
	$*sk^i > *s^i > *sč$
	$*g^{fi} > *g^{fi} > *j^{fi}$; $*g^{fi} > *g^{fi} > *gd^{fi} > *zd^{fi}$; $*g^{fi} > *g^{fi} > *j^{fi}$
Labial Tensing	$*o > *o : = *ô : _CV$
Scowling	$*k^w > k$; $*g^w > g$; $*g^{wf} > g^{fi}$; $*g^{wzfi} > g^{zfi}$; $*gd^{fi} > gd^{fi}$
	$*o(\cdot) > a(\cdot)$
Dorsal Fronting 2	$*k^i > *k^i$; $*g^i > *g^i$; $*g^{fi} > *g^{fi}$

¹⁸ The Irânian spirantization of preconsonantal stops may be the result of increased anterior glottal tension at the consonantal onset, which restricts the oral airflow to a level that cannot produce the “pop” of the the initial stop (Table 8). The speaker compensates with a laxer closing of the articulator. I have noted such glottal tension in the speech of various Darî speakers in Afġânîstân.

TABLE 5
Indo-Âryan Phonetic Changes

Indo-Âryan	
Process	Phonemic Changes
Lingual Fronting	* <i>a</i> > <i>i</i>
Lingual Backing	* <i>l</i> > <i>r</i> ; *[<i>u</i>] > [<i>u</i>]
	* <i>s</i> > <i>ʃ</i> : * <i>u</i> : * <i>s</i> > * <i>ʒ</i> : {...}
	* <i>ʃ</i> > <i>ʒ</i> , * <i>ʃ</i> > * <i>ʒ</i> : {...}
	* <i>čš</i> > <i>č</i> , <i>kʃ</i> ; * <i>ʒʰ</i> > <i>č</i> , <i>kʃ</i>
	* <i>t/d</i> > <i>t/d</i> : * <i>ʃ/ʒ</i> :
Spirant Laxing	* <i>aʒ</i> > <i>e/o</i> , * <i>Vʒ</i> > <i>V</i> : ; * <i>Vʒd</i> > <i>V:d</i>
Deaffrication	* <i>č</i> > <i>ʃ</i>
Dorsal Fronting 3	* <i>ḱ</i> > <i>č</i> ; * <i>ḡ</i> > <i>ʃ</i> ; * <i>ḡʰ</i> > <i>ʃʰ</i> > <i>ḥ</i>
Lingual Laxing	* <i>e</i> > <i>a</i>

TABLE 6
Steppe-Âryan Phonetic Changes

Steppe-Âryan	
Process	Phonemic Changes
Anterior Voicing	* <i>ḥ</i> > Ø, * <i>ḥ</i> > Ø (posterior phonation becomes anterior)
	* <i>ʃʰ</i> > * <i>ʃ</i> ; * <i>ždʰ</i> > <i>žd</i> ; * <i>ʒʰ</i> > * <i>ʒ</i>
	* <i>ḡʰ</i> > * <i>ḡ</i> ; * <i>gʒʰ</i> > * <i>gʒ</i> ; <i>gdʰ</i> > <i>gd</i>
Prognathizing 1	* <i>č</i> > * <i>č</i> ; * <i>ʒ</i> > * <i>ž</i> (not before <i>š/ž</i> ; * <i>čš</i> , * <i>ʒž</i> remain)
	* <i>sč</i> > * <i>sč</i> > <i>č</i>
Dorsal Fronting 3	* <i>ḱ</i> > <i>č</i> ; * <i>ḡ</i> > <i>ʃ</i>
Lingual Laxing	* <i>e</i> > <i>a</i>

It was after the Early Nûristânî Phase that the Nûristânî languages diverged. There is a clear distinction between the “Northern” and the Kalāṣa languages in their production of syllables, which underlies the syncope and anticipation of articulations that occurs in the Northern group (Strand 2022b). Syncope and anticipation are restricted or lacking in the Southern Nûristânî languages, as well as in Persian and the Indo-Âryan languages of the region.

TABLE 7
Nûristânî Phonetic Changes

Early Nûristânî	
Process	Phonemic Changes
Prognathizing 2	*čš > *ćs > ć; *jž > *źz > ź, or rarely *čš > č; *jž > j (e.g. PIE *koḱso- > Ar. *kačša- > KmKt., Kal. kač-)
Aspirate Loss	*h > Ø; *p ^h > p; *k ^h > *k; *t ^h > t
Close-Vowel Shortening	*i/u/r̥ > *i/u/r
ə-Opening	*ə > a
r-Dominance	*r{d, n} > r
Dissimilation	ČVC > TVC (*źasta > *dasta)
Epenthesis	*st- > *ist-
Kâmkata-vari	
Laminalization + Absorption	*ist- > *išt- > št-
Laminalization	*-st > -št
Âṣkuṇu-Saṇu-viri	
Spirantizing of Stop Onsets	*ć > s
	*j > ž : _i
Laminalizing	*k > č : _i
	*s > š, *z > ž : _i
Prognathizing 3	*č > ć, *j > ź, *š > s : _[not i]
	*ç > č, *š > š

However, because syncope happened at different relative stages and in more contexts in Vâsi-vari than in Kâmkata-vari, it could not have been a precursor change that defined a Northern branch (Fig. 3). Furthermore, syncope must have followed contact with the Kalaṣa languages in Nûristân, as shown by cognates such as Kal.n *kalaṣa* vs. KmKt.km. *kâlš'a*, Vâsi.ṣu *kuļç'u* “Kalaṣa,” Kal.n *paṭila* vs. KmKt.km. *pât'l'a*, KmKt.ktv *pṭ'ila*, Vâsi.ṣu *pšl'u* “foliated; shaggy,” etc. Because syncope happened within Nûristân, its occurrence was relatively late; and we must exclude Fig. 3 as a possibility.

Also relatively late was the distinctive Vâsi loss of nasal consonants before voiced stops, in common with adjacent Munjî dialects, and the loss of postconsonantal *r*.

An earlier change was that of Vâsi *d* to *l*. This change also occurred in a group of languages that anciently centered on Bactria: Bactrian, Pashto, and Munjî. Such a grouping encompassed a portion of the Saka-dominated region of Northeastern Afghanistan, before the migration of the Vâsi to Nûristân. The

TABLE 8
Iranian Phonetic Changes

Iranian	
Process	Phonemic Changes
Laminalizing	* <i>s</i> > <i>š</i> ; * <i>u</i> _
Spirantizing of Aspiration	* <i>p^h</i> > * <i>pφ</i> , * <i>k^h</i> > * <i>kx</i> ; * <i>t^h</i> > * <i>tθ</i>
Spirant Laxing	* <i>s</i> > <i>h</i>
Spirantizing of Stop Onsets	* <i>čš</i> > * <i>šš</i> > <i>š</i> ; (* <i>jž</i> > * <i>žž</i> > <i>ž</i> ?)
	* <i>pφ</i> > * <i>φφ</i> > <i>φ</i> > <i>f</i> ; * <i>kx</i> > * <i>xx</i> > <i>x</i> ; * <i>tθ</i> > * <i>θθ</i> > <i>θ</i>
	* <i>t-t</i> > <i>st</i> ; * <i>t/d-d</i> > <i>zd</i>
	* <i>pt</i> > <i>ft</i> , * <i>pr</i> > <i>fr</i> , * <i>kš</i> > <i>xš</i> , etc.
ə-Syncope	* <i>ə</i> > <i>Ø</i>
Eastern Irânian	
Spirantizing of Stop Onsets	* <i>č</i> [ts]/* <i>ts</i> > * <i>ss</i> > <i>s</i> ; * <i>ž</i> > * <i>zz</i> > <i>z</i>
Prognathizing 3	* <i>č</i> > * <i>č̣</i> ; * <i>ž</i> > <i>ẓ̌</i> (> <i>z</i>) or <i>ẓ̌</i>
S-W Irânian: Early	
Lingual Fronting	* <i>č</i> > <i>θ</i> ; * <i>ž</i> > <i>d</i>
S-W Irânian: Middle	
Spirant Laxing	* <i>θ</i> > <i>h</i>

change of *d* > *l* and any Sakan commonality would have been in the Irânian period, probably after the divergence of Kâmkata-vari (at that time, Kâambojan) from Steppe-Âryan. Fig. 2 would therefore be excluded.

Fig. 4 presents a better option. It depicts the ethnic relationships as a split of the major Nûristânî subgroups from a common Nûristânî sub-branch of Eastern Steppe-Âryan stock. The two earliest subgroups (KmKt. and Vâsi) underwent later changes in common with regional Eastern Irânian groups, while the Kalāṣa peoples maintained a more conservative form of speaking.

4.2 Grammar

Certain features of Vâsi-vari grammar notoriously stand out from cognate features in the grammars of the other Nûristânî languages (Buddruss, Degener 2017; Morgenstierne 1949). Notable are:

Nouns:

- oblique singular in -*š* < PIE genitive *-*sio*, vs. KmKt. oblique singular -*e* (for *a*-stems) from PIE locative -*i*;
- a “citation” suffix, probably originally a vocative particle.

Pronouns:

- deictic pronouns containing PIE **l* appear in Vâsi-vari and Kalaşa-alâ, as well as in neighboring Paşaî and Kalaşa-mun, but not in KmKt.;
- “NUM and score” for the numbers from twenty-one to thirty-nine (as in ancient Âryan), vs. “score-NUM” for the other Nûristânî languages.

Directionals:

- Directions: “left”-“right” in addition to the common Nûristânî system;
- Directional Modifiers: a set of morphemes distinct from those in the other Nûristânî languages;
- Targets: a much larger repertoire than in the other Nûristânî languages.

Verbs:

- Progressive (“Present”) Participle *-mâ/-mi* < **-ma-na-*, rather than < **-n-ta-* (KmKt.) or **-â-na-* (Sañu); Kal. has evolved a separate periphrastic progressive;
- Past Participle (active) < **-âk*, an old agent-noun suffix, rather than < **-ita-*, the old past passive participle suffix;
- Prototypical: *-g'â/-'ik* < **-a-k'â/-'ik*, vs. *-la/-li* in the other languages; cf. “co-verb gerund” *-gæ* < Âr. instrumental **-akâ* in Ossetian, also *-gi* in Kal.n (*čüvegi omi* “I come walking”), all forming a concomitant adverb with motion verbs;
- Infinitive suffix *-inik*, cf. future participle *-inag* in Ossetian.Iron;
- 3rd-singular endings with vocative particle *-o*;
- 1st-plural endings indicating hearer-exclusive (*-m*) or hearer-inclusive (*-mš*) subjects;
- the verb “have” (*la-*) as both a possessive verb and an auxiliary verb to depict “perfect tense,” unlike in the other Nûristânî languages, which have no verb “have” to depict either possession or perfectivity.

In summary, Vâsi-vari stands substantially apart from the other Nûristânî languages grammatically, having shared some developments with Eastern Irânian.

4.3 *Lexicon*

Table 9 shows the approximate ancestral composition of the lexicons of the indicated languages, in percentages. The percentages are of all lexemes in each language that have established etymologies, not of all lexemes that have been recorded. The total number of etymologized lexemes in each language’s sample appears in the bottom row of the table. The first four sources (Eurasianic, Proto-Indo-European, Âryan, and Common Nûristânî) are ancestral stages leading up to the differentiation of the Nûristânî languages. The remainder are sources of borrowed words. The thousands of recent loanwords from Persian, Pashto, and other modern interlopers have not been included in this study of the traditional lexicon.

TABLE 9
Percent of Etymologized Lexemes from Selected Sources

Source	Vâsi.u	Kâmv.	Kal.n	Saņu
EurAs.	10	9	10	12
PIE	32	36	37	37
Âr.	3	4	5	4
CNur.	11	16	15	15
Inherited	56	65	66	68
OIA	17	22	26	24
MIA	2	2	2	3
Ir.	1	1	1	1
KmKt.	18		0	1
Kal.	1	0		0
Saņu	1	0	0	
Other	4	11	4	2
Borrowed	44	35	34	32
Sample Size	1406	2293	1415	951

What stands out is the larger percentage of loanwords in Vâsi,¹⁹ boosted by the 18% from Kâmkata-vari, which was the *lingua franca* of Nûristân. This is one reason why Vâsi and KmKt. seem “closer.” On the other hand, no Vâsi-vari words have been recorded as loanwords in the other languages, because almost no speakers of those languages are bilingual in Vâsi-vari.

4.4 Linguistic Summary: A Revised Phylogeny for the Nûristânî Languages

In summary, each Nûristânî language has evolved out of the Steppe-Âryan milieu during a period of almost a millennium from roughly 1800-800 BCE. There are a few changes common to the Nûristânî languages that probably developed during that period (Table 7). KmKt. and Kal. largely retain the Steppe-Âryan stage of phonological evolution, while Vâsi and Â-S have carried out later changes beyond those of that period.

In most measures, Vâsi-vari stands out from the rest of the Nûristânî languages, showing Saka characteristics that evolved in Northeastern Afġânistân.

¹⁹ The full Vâsi-vari lexicon in Buddruss and Degener 2015 was used to discover 1,406 entries with etymologies. My thanks to Dr Almuth Degener for providing me with a digital copy of the volume. Data for the other languages are from the author’s field research.

Although the Kalaša languages show lexical and ethnic communality, speakers of Â-S have partaken of a later, Irânian-style deaffrication of the Âr. “palatals” and fronting of retroflex consonants, as opposed to the speakers of Kal. and Tregâmî.

The individual Nûristânî languages each participated in the changes of Table 7. It is not possible to determine whether those changes occurred once in Kâmbata-vari and were adopted hundreds of years later by neighboring emergent Saka tribes (Fig. 5), or whether those changes occurred once in some Steppe-Ârya group that was ancestral to all Nûristânîs (Fig. 4).

Because the Sakas emerged a millennium after the Kâmbôjâs, it seems more accurate to say that the Nûristânî languages constitute a “phase” rather than a “node” in the evolution of the ancient Steppe-Âryan dialects into today’s languages. A better alternative to the tree in Fig. 4 might therefore be that of Fig. 5, with approximate dates.

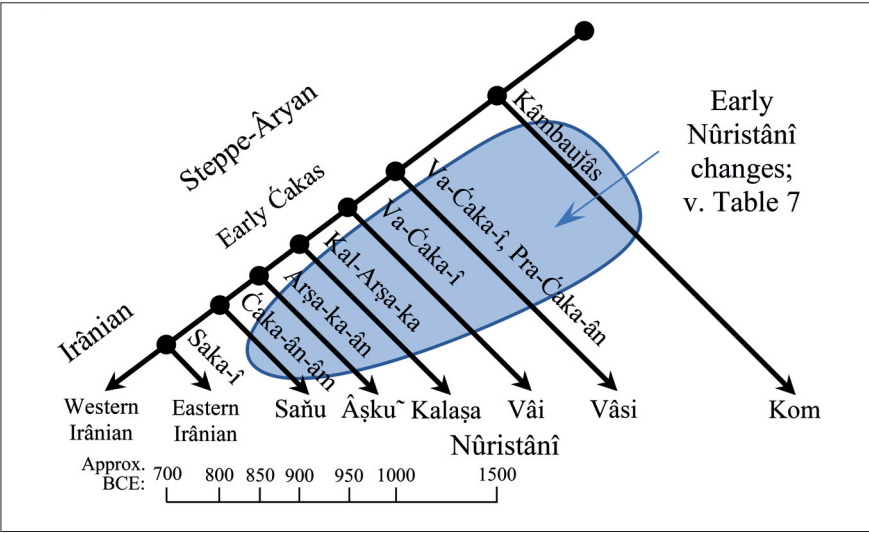


Fig. 5 - Steppe-Âryan Linguistic Sub-Family Tree.

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