

SUBCHAPTER

15.4

Snow Leopards in Art and Legend of the Pamir

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Throughout the Pamir–Hindu Kush region that spans the mountains of present day Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, parallels in complex symbolic categories suggest the mountain communities share knowledge that transcends linguistic and social boundaries (Mock, 2011). This indigenous knowledge is contextually grounded in people’s interactions with land, weather, and biodiversity over considerable time. Hence this indigenous knowledge can be said to have an ecological foundation (Kassam et al., 2010) and is recognized as essential to addressing complex environmental issues (Lynch and Hammer, 2013).

The symbolic linkages between biological and cultural diversity find representation in stories and art produced by indigenous people. This brief article presents examples of such representations from Afghanistan and Pakistan and discusses the role of indigenous knowledge in addressing environmental and conservation issues. Rock art uses rock surfaces as a “canvas” to tell stories grounded in indigenous knowledge that is specific and vital to the culture in which it was produced (Safinoy, 2009). In the Pamir–Hindu Kush region, we find numerous depictions of wild ungulates, and hunters with spears and bows on foot and on horseback

(Mock, 2013). The rock art was typically composed on several rock panels with multiple images on each panel. This clustering of rock art has led scholars to assume that such places were “sanctuaries” where symbolically significant compositions were made on rock. The context in which the person(s) who produced the rock art and the motivations for the production of particular images are often obscured by time. The “semantics” of the story of such rock art are also difficult to interpret. However, the significance of the rock art is not in doubt; it was produced to record important events or features of the environment that resonated significantly with the people who took the time to produce it. In Wakhan District of northeast Afghanistan, I observed a depiction of what appears to be a long-tailed felid, most probably a snow leopard (Fig. 15.4.1; Mock, 2013). This panel is located in the settled area of Wakhan, home to indigenous Wakhi people. Snow leopards (*Panthera uncia*) inhabit this area (Simms et al., 2011). Depictions of snow leopards in higher elevation areas of Wakhan have (so far) not been observed, which agrees with the observed presence of snow leopards in Wakhan; they seem to be more abundant in the side valleys of the settled area of Wakhan. It is not possible to say who made this depiction



FIGURE 15.4.1 Rock art depicting what appears to be a snow leopard in Wakhan District of northeast Afghanistan. (Photograph by John Mock).

of a snow leopard, when they made it, or why they made it. However, when viewed through the lens of indigenous knowledge of snow leopards contained in stories told today, we can understand some of the significance that snow leopards have to Pamir–Hindu Kush people and perhaps glimpse a motive for this rock art depiction.

One aspect of the region’s indigenous knowledge is the concept of alpine places as pure and separate from the lower, less pure human domain (Steinberg, J. *The Horns of the Ibx: Preserving and Protecting Mountain Cultural Landscapes in Central Asia*. Sacred Mountains

Program of The Mountain Institute, Washington, DC, unpublished report). Such high places are the realm of spiritual beings, and the plants and animals of the environment share an association with the cultural concept of purity and the presence of spiritual beings (Dodykhudoeva, 2004; Kassam, 2009; Mock, 1998). Plants such as primrose (*Primula macrophylla*) and wild rue (*Peganum harmala*) carry spiritual and ritual connotations and usages for mountain people (Mock and O’Neil, 2002). Wildlife such as ibex (*Capra sibirica*), urial (*Ovis orientalis*), argali (*Ovis ammon polii*), and snow leopard also carry connotations of purity and spirituality.

The mountain people of the region, and indeed throughout Central and South Asia, are familiar with *pari*, who are female supernatural beings of the high mountains. Wakhi people who live in Pakistan, China, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan have their own word for *pari*: *mergichan*. The *mergichan* inhabit the *mergich* realm, which is the realm of the mountains and high pastures. It is a pure, even sacred realm, where the supernatural mountain spirits tend their wild flocks of mountain sheep and ibex. Humans only enter the *mergich* realm during summer, and only after ceremonially announcing to the *mergichan* that the people will displace them for the summer and asking them for a favorable influence on the livestock and dairy production.

The *mergichan* are not malevolent beings, but their displeasure can be provoked. They are angered by “impure” actions that pollute the *mergich* realm. As powerful beings, they need to be propitiated to ensure the success of summer herding and dairy production by the community as a whole, and for success at hunting by individual men. The *mergichan* can assume the guise of a *mergich* animal, and in that form they can both harm and help men. Hunters cultivate a positive relationship with the *mergichan* and the *mergich* realm in order that the *mergichan* should reveal the location of the wild game to them through signs or through a dream. The knowledge of how to gain the favor of the *mergichan*

includes knowledge of the habits of the wild game, the landscape within which they dwell, the vegetation they prefer for food, and a general respect and reverence for all that is *mergich*. From a Western perspective, this seems much like an environmental ethic.

Wakhi people regard the snow leopard as a *mergich* animal that lives in *mergich* areas. It rarely interacts with people, and it is hard to see, powerful, beautiful, and potentially dangerous. As such, it exemplifies many of the qualities of the *mergichan*, and so is an appropriate animal shape for them to assume. Currently, in the Wakhi community of Shimshal in Pakistan, villagers are engaged in a process of integrating their concept of *mergich* with a modern conservation ethic through the [Shimshal Nature Trust \(http://www.snt.org.pk\)](http://www.snt.org.pk). The younger generation sees this as a way to make the old concepts again relevant. A similar process is underway in the Wakhi villages that manage the buffer zone area of the Khunjerab National Park through the [Khunjerab Villagers Organization \(http://www.kvo.org.pk\)](http://www.kvo.org.pk). These community-based organizations, which both maintain websites, are important examples of cooperative efforts to integrate old and new knowledge into a framework that can be shared between people inside and outside the Wakhi community to develop a new significance for the mountain landscape ([Abidi-Habib and Lawrence, 2007](#); [Ali and Butz, 2003](#)).

The following Wakhi story from Shimshal village of how *mergichan* assumed the guise of a snow leopard and became the protective spirit partner of a Wakhi man exemplifies “old” knowledge that can serve as a scaffold for a new integrated significance. I recorded and translated the story as part of my research in northern Pakistan ([Mock, 1998](#)).

It is like a miracle. Someone sees something and then it vanishes. My own father, a miracle happened to him. What sort of miracle? My father went with the people to Lemarz Keshk, below Furzin. In the evening my father went to the spring for water. When he went for water, he saw a woman with a white scarf, a

pitek. He lay down into a low area so he was hidden, looking.

“What sort of thing was this?” he thought. People never came there, so a woman would never go there either. Then his uncle came, and he said to him, “O Uncle, a woman came here, a woman with a white scarf stood here, and now she has vanished down here.” He said, “Ya Maula, what can it be?”

Well, it became dark. Night fell, and they ate dinner and slept. They had nothing but an old blanket. They both covered themselves with that, and slept. In the night, my father dreamt that two horses came with two riders. He dreamt one horse came and passed over him, and one came and sunk its teeth into his leg. He awoke suddenly and something heavy was on his body. He tried to sit up, but he couldn't. It was very heavy. He was still sort of asleep, and he moved a little, then shook his blanket and saw a snow leopard, with eyes like that. And it sat on top of him, like this. And it moved off of him and slowly went outside. It went out, and he felt a lot of pain. He said, “O Uncle, wake up! My leg hurts, something came on top of me. Go out and shine a light.”

He got up and they made a fire, and saw a lot of blood. Blood, he was bleeding. And then he was very scared. He said, “What thing was this, what happened?” They sat a while, but it didn't come. Then they closed the door with a stone and slept. While they slept, it grabbed the door and tossed the stone aside. It came and yanked their blanket and took it down to the trees. Then they got up and made a fire.

“O God, what is this thing?” they said. They saw it seemed like a snow leopard. It came toward the door of the hut and his uncle was going to shoot at it when he fainted. He went unconscious and the snow leopard became a horse and went away. They sat and sat and it grew light.

Their companions were at the settled area down river, where they cultivated barley. People were there for harvesting. My father came there, and said, “Someone come with us, and give us a dog, too, we were so frightened.” They refused to come. He took a dog and tied it at the door that night. It came again and it grabbed that dog and tossed it far away. It came again and it wouldn't let them sleep all night long till dawn. It took the shape of a snow leopard. It put itself into a snow leopard skin.

They returned to Shimshal. There, the *khalifa* (spiritual leader) said that it was a *pari*. The *pari* itself took on the guise of a snow leopard. It took on the skin of a snow leopard and then attacked them like that.

Then what happened to my father? It happened like this, that this *pari* was with him continuously,

with my father. It came itself as a snow leopard. I myself and my brother Shifa, we both saw it. Our father was with us, at Arbob Purien. We were there together when it came. It came and I saw it first. I said, "Ya Ali, what thing has come? A snow leopard." It came and stood on the far side. It stood there and didn't come near us. It turned and left. My father was there, too. And until his dying day, that never was a danger to anyone, but to his dying day that *pari* was with him. A *pari* in the shape of a snow leopard. It would assume the shape of a snow leopard and come. That *pari* was ready to make friends with him. Whenever he was

preparing to hunt somewhere, that *pari* said to him at night in a dream, "In such and such place go and hunt. To such and such place don't go and hunt, no game is there." Whether ibex, or whether small game, he would go and it would be there. Such miraculous things happened with him. You can ask other Shimshalis if such things were or not. They will tell you. Up until his death, this was with him.

Then it ended when he went from this world. Now it is no longer like this with us. *Pari* are not close to us. We live more at ease. My father was different. A snow leopard came to him. This event occurred.

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