

JÜRGEN WASIM FREMBGEN (2022): *At the Foot of the Fairy Mountain: The Nagerkuts of the Karakoram/Northern Pakistan*. 242 pp. and 40 figures. Reimer. Berlin. ISBN 978-3-496-01679-3 (print), 978-3-496-03067-6 (E-Book), €39,00.

Compared to neighboring Hunza in the Karakoram of Northern Pakistan, little is known about the culture and history of the former micro-state of Nager (or ‘Nagar’, as I prefer to spell it). This remote mountain community and former kingdom (until 1972) has often been side-lined by scholars working in the region. Reasons may include a perceived inaccessibility shaped by prejudices about Nagerkuts (‘people of Nager’ in the local language Burushaski) as somehow backward, unfriendly, and unwelcoming to outsiders. These and other, sometimes outright racist stereotypes have their roots in colonial writings and early travel literature but are still reproduced, among others, by local tour guides and other ‘gatekeepers’ providing field access in the region. The German anthropologist Jürgen Wasim Frembgen made it his mission already in the early 1980s to look behind such stereotypes and conduct in-depth ethnographic research on the rich local culture and history of Nager. Based on unique insights from extensive fieldwork over more than 20 years (1982–2004 and again in 2019), he has produced an impressive amount of literature covering the political organization and kinship relations during the kingdom of Nagar, material culture, and local saints, among many other topics.

At the Foot of the Fairy Mountain is Frembgen’s second and most comprehensive book on Nager. It offers a “historical ethnography” (p. 11) that builds on some of his previously published findings, but explores them in much more depth and covers entirely new aspects such as a detailed history of progressive settlement development. This book does not engage with present-day Nager, except for some discussions in the prologue and epilogue. Instead, it provides, first of all, an ethnographic snapshot of the local culture, traditions, myths, and daily life “between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth century” (p. 11). During this period, the semi-autonomous kingdom of Nager, while formally part of colonial British India, was still relatively isolated from outside influence. Second, Frembgen delivers in this book a comprehensive documentation of the history of Nager, which is primarily based on the rich knowledge of local elders and triangulated with the work of Nageri scholars and other available sources. In doing so, Frembgen seeks to present, as much as possible, an “emic” perspective of the Nagerkuts’ point of view of their history (pp. 8–9).

The book is structured into an introductory part, three main chapters, and a short epilogue. It begins with a prologue that offers a general introduction to the book and how it came about and convincingly outlines the author’s objective and scholarly attempt to document the ‘emic’ history of Nagerkuts. It is then followed by two sections on the ethnographic fieldwork approach, before the main part of the book begins. Chapter I is an overview of the ethnographic setting, offering a broader introduction to the population groups, their languages and forms of social organization, as well as economic activities, material culture, and arts in the agrarian society of Nager in pre-modern times. Chapter II offers a detailed history of Nager, with a focus on the settlement process from the ancient past until the rule of Mir Sikander Khan (1905–1940). Chapter III focuses on ‘folk-life’, describing in detail the rich and sophisticated traditions, rituals, and beliefs in the former microstate, many or most of which have since been forgotten by younger generations. Chapter III is then followed by a short epilogue with some reflections about the meaning of the past for the present and future of Nager, with a rather critical perspective on the challenges of modernity that Nagerkuts are facing today. The book also features an appendix with additional information about Frembgen’s main informants and important local scholars, among other useful material.

As a researcher with some first-hand knowledge of Nager and close friends from this community, I eagerly awaited the publication of this book and read it with great interest. Overall, this is an outstanding study and, without a doubt, the new standard reference work on the culture and history of Nagerkuts. While its scope is limited to Nager, I would consider this book useful for any scholar aiming to gain a deeper understanding of the history and rich cultural traditions in the Karakoram region, as Frembgen is one of the few scholars providing truly local insights into the diverse micro-histories by drawing on a rich body of oral history that is not documented elsewhere. This book speaks to various audiences. For geographers and archaeologists, the progressive settlement history of Nager, already studied (in much less detail) by Hermann Kreutzmann and myself, is of particular interest. Puzzling together the complex micro-histories and local myths reported by his many interlocutors throughout Nager, Frembgen offers a dense and comprehensive story of migration, village development, and forced (re-)settlement that pays close attention to the complex clan structures and the internal and external (particularly with neighboring Hunza) relations shaping and shaped by these processes. He



covers a long timeframe from the arrival of the first settlers (which cannot be dated) until the last members of the Moghlotkuts dynasty that ruled over Nager since at least the seventeenth century. For cultural anthropologists, chapter III is perhaps the most interesting part. Here, Frembgen dedicates particular detail to his descriptions of seasonal agrarian feasts and social life-cycle events and the unique traditions and rituals associated with them. But perhaps the main audience to benefit from this book, as Frembgen himself hopes, are the young generations of educated Nagerkuts who are interested in rediscovering their roots and learning about the rich culture and traditions of the past, much of which has already been forgotten and has remained undocumented so far. I appreciate the relatively low price (€39.00) compared to other academic books printed in Germany, and I am sure that Nagerkuts will find ways of accessing this work.

While I fully embrace this book, I also have two small points of critique. Frembgen makes clear that in his attempt to write the history of Nager from an “insider’s/native’s point of view”, his study is necessarily partial and, first of all, his own version of “how the Nagerkuts are represented to the outside world” (p. 8). Moreover, as Frembgen writes, it is obviously a partial perspective of culture and history because he could not talk to women in this strictly gender-segregated society. However, I believe it is also partial due to the background of interlocutors, many of whom were probably part of, or at least loyal to, the former ruling class of Nager. Frembgen is transparent about his research methods and field approach, and presents a list of his main interlocutors (in order of importance) along with their village and clan affiliations, making it possible for the informed reader to trace back whose stories are presented. However, the implications of a possible ‘elite bias’ when writing a story about the Nagerkuts could have been discussed more explicitly, although I do not think that it discredits the rich descriptions of local histories and traditions presented in the three main chapters of the book. In the prologue, I noticed one interesting discrepancy with my research in Nager. Frembgen cites elders telling him that “everything was better” in the past, “when we had plenty of butter and meat” (p. 11), but during my fieldwork in Nagar in 2014–2016, I experienced the exact opposite: elders telling me about the great hardships of the past, when they had to live under an oppressive ruler and faced poverty and starvation, and that everything is better today. I think this discrepancy must be a result of the choice of informants: Frembgen’s main field stations (Uyum Nagar and Askurdas) had many supporters of the local ruler during the final years of the micro-state, while my research was

rather focused on villages that used to be strongholds of the opposition movement leading to the deposition of the Tham in 1972. Secondly, for navigating through this empirically rich and densely-written book with its many names of places, clans, and historical persons, an index would have been valuable.

By and large, this is an outstanding and much-needed book that should be considered essential reading for any scholar aiming to gain a deeper understanding of the rich culture and history of this fascinating high mountain region. Today, most of the “local masters of memory” (p. 188), the knowledge of whom this book is based, have already passed away. Thus, this book makes a critical contribution to the preservation of a great treasure of oral history and traditional knowledge in Nager that would otherwise be irrevocably lost.

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