The Blessings and Struggles of Pastoralist Commons: *Muzhayo*, Culturalscape and More-than-Humans Amidst Nationalisation in Chitral, Pakistan

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Abstract

Based on 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork involving *mashqulgi* conversations, participant observation, and analysis of Khowar poetry, this thesis examines how Chitral's Indigenous pastoralists perceive, manage, and resist threats to their *muzhayo* (commons) amid state nationalisation and neoliberal change. The analysis is presented through four interconnected articles that collectively support a pluriversal political ecology, combining rural political ecology, more-than-human geography, and decolonial Indigenous scholarship. Article 1 explores apoliticisation as the discursive and structural suppression of rural agency through territorialisation and elite capture linked to the 1975 notification. Article 2 describes muzhayo as a culturalscape, a multidimensional ontology encompassing material utility, socio-communal rituals, spiritual guardianship, and emotional belonging. Article 3 advances more-than-human rights through pastoralist poetry, recognising *mal* (livestock) and *nangini* (fairies) as agents of the commons, challenging anthropocentric views. Article 4 examines boomki (Aboriginal) clan-based tenure as a form of legal pluralism that contests state property regimes. Three main arguments arise: first, that apoliticisation illustrates how state discourses of civility, depicting Chitralis as peaceful and educated, alongside structural bureaucratic exclusion, marginalise pastoralists from political participation, making their agency and resistance less visible; second, that culturalscape redefines the commons beyond resource management by emphasising the importance of enclosure; third, that pluriversal frameworks incorporating Indigenous ontologies, multispecies agency, and customary tenure offer viable alternatives to postcolonial land seizures, with significant implications for global pastoralist commons research and mountain governance.

Keywords: Commons, Pastoralism, Chitral, Political Ecology, More-than-human

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Note: Grammarly and Paperpal were used for editing, grammar, and language improvements. I understand that these software tools now have AI embedded, but they were initially used solely to enhance writing quality.

Introduction and Background

Initial Encounter: Belonging and Resistance

In the summer of 2021, I returned to my hometown, Chitral, Pakistan, to conduct research for my master's dissertation and visit my family after a year in Oxford, England. In accordance with local customs, I visited all the families in the village to reconnect and share updates about my experiences over the past year. During these visits, I also stopped by the village shop to greet the shopkeeper and to chat. The shop, situated near a small stream fed by a glacier above the village, provides an ideal spot for enjoying the summer. The shopkeeper, a young leader in the village, resides there year-round, managing his small superstore and actively participating in social and communal activities in Meragram No. 2, Yarkhun, Upper Chitral. While discussing his experiences over the past year, one particular issue he mentioned caught my attention and significantly influenced the direction of my PhD project. He recounted his frequent journeys to cities to address the provincial government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's wildlife department about the nationalisation of pastoralist commons. I later incorporated his narrative into my PhD research through a formal *mashqulgi*, a local interview method. He stated:

> A few years ago, the wildlife department hired watchers (forest guards) in our village without our permission in our *gole* (high pastures) area. I was the manager of the Babalandeh *Tanzeem* (a village organisation established by the local people), and someone called to inform me that personnel from the wildlife department had come to employ someone from a different clan (who did not benefit from the same pasture) as a wildlife watcher. After a few days, I visited the wildlife department in Chitral town (100 km away from the village where the district government offices are situated), where I was shown a picture of our Urkhan Gole (the village pasture) on a computer screen. They showed me a photo (map) and said that it would be owned by the *sarkar* (government). They displayed a map with a red line marking that "this whole area is sarkari and no one will be able to use it. You are not permitted to take your mal (livestock) into this region, nor can you send your cows and bulls for *heti* (free summer grazing in the high mountain pasture) or bring any firewood from there.

> I said, "You do not let me keep mal or bring firewood; I rely on this livelihood to pay my children's school fees. I eat food because of that resource, as I burn the wood from Gole to cook it. I do not have any other means of survival." If you do not allow me to go to Gole for firewood, then I demand that firewood be provided from elsewhere. The officer stated that he would imprison me. I returned to the village and called a meeting of all the elders, updated them on the situation, and they said that they would not let this happen at any cost. We would continue to use the common land for our pastoral livelihood and to collect firewood for our households. It had reached a point where the wildlife department had demarcated the pasture white with lime to show that it had been nationalised, and it is still present there. There are trees in our high pastures, and the wildlife department has shown that they have protected these trees. That is a forest that we have used and preserved through the local conservation practice called *saq* (rotational grazing and resource use), but the wildlife department now wants to conserve it by nationalising the commons that we have owned and managed for thousands of years? So, when I told the elders, they agreed that we must raise our voices but asked who would lead us in this matter. We did not have any money, so the person who would be the leader would also have had to pay for going around and travelling. Later, the 75 families using the *gole* (pasture) wrote a *qarardad* (a memorandum resisting the nationalisation) and gave it to me, and I was assigned a leadership role (Personal Communication, 2022).

He was required to visit numerous offices and gain recognition from various wildlife and government agencies, which involved extensive travel to the cities. Caught in the typical Kafkaesque web of power, he often faced bureaucratic hurdles, accusations of personal motives, and offers of employment or bribes–all of which he refused. His inability to speak Urdu, the national language, or Pashto, the dominant provincial language, added to the difficulties, as did the lack of effective community engagement by state officials, which worsened local frustration and suspicion of the state. Ultimately, he travelled for approximately 14 hours to Swat, over 300 kilometres from the village where the divisional offices are located. Officials were sent, and the villagers negotiated to allocate only an inaccessible mountain for conservation while protecting their commons for pastoral use. He repeatedly told me that the pasture was not only part of his identity as a pastoralist but also a shared space for other *makhlooqat* (creatures/more-than-humans) with whom he has ancestral, spiritual, and social bonds. Despite repeated government efforts to claim ownership and mark the land with lime, local resistance persists. However, the locals do

not know how long they can continue to resist due to financial constraints in their fight against the state and fatigue from the broader neoliberal changes affecting pastoralist livelihoods (Khan, 2025). This situation highlights the tensions inherent in bureaucratic nationalisation efforts over common land, where issues of ancestral ownership, resource rights, and the interconnectedness of livelihoods with nonhuman ecologies, such as forests, fairies, livestock, and grazing lands, remain fiercely contested.

This encounter, along with several similar situations in Chitral and other parts of the world during my role as the communication adviser for the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP2026), clarified the main purpose of this research. The question I aim to answer is how to understand and conceptualise commons not simply as isolated resources to be managed, but as lived ontological arrangements that represent complex, relational ways of existence, belonging, and interaction with land and more-than-human worlds (Abram, 1996, 2024; Todd, 2016). This view challenges the idea of reducing commons to purely economic concepts (Hardin, 1968; Ostrom, 1990), which, when linked to the 'tragedy of the commons' (Hardin, 1968) and degradation discourses, has led to the dispossession of pastoralists or unfavourable land policies (see Williams, 2002). This thesis contributes to the broader literature of political ecology (PE) and more-than-human (MTH) geography by providing a comprehensive analysis of Chitrali *muzhayo,* while also contributing to and being informed by scholarship on mobile pastoralists. Additionally, the research highlights the consequences for communities and scholarship when states, under the pretext of conservation, climate initiatives, or development paradigms, implement nationalisation frameworks that ignore or dismiss these local ontologies and lived understandings of the importance and meaning of pastoralist commons (Chatty, 2025; Chatty and Colchester, 2002; Alden Wily, 2011).

A Personal and Scholarly Positioning: Between Worlds, Across Epistemologies

I am both a Chitrali pastoralist with deep roots in the commons and a researcher educated within the Western geographical traditions of Oxford. This dual perspective grants me unique intellectual opportunities, while also presenting notable challenges and inherent tensions. As someone from a pastoral background, I hold embodied memories and experiential knowledge of life in the commons that many academics, particularly those from Western institutions, may not have direct access to. I recall *sotsiri* (the communal rotation of goat and sheep grazing across high pastures), *heti* (the seasonal migration of livestock to high mountain meadows during summer and their return to lower elevations in autumn), and the rituals of paying tribute to ancestral spirits before entering the common mountain pastures and to *nangini* (fairies, literally "mothers"). These *nangini* are considered in local cosmology as the spiritual guardians of the mountains (Khan, 2025a), and I remember the annual village assemblies before the summer migration, where decisions on pasture use, grazing practices, and resource management are made collectively. These are not merely abstract data points but lived experiences deeply woven into my sense of self, belonging, and relationship to the commons as a place and space.

However, my education in Western academia initially left me feeling a deep sense of alienation from these lived experiences. During the “Economy for the Environment” class in my first term of master’s studies at Oxford, I encountered Garrett Hardin's (1968) influential essay “The Tragedy of the Commons” in a lecture held beside Port Meadow, one of England's renowned commons. Hardin's (1968) argument, that humans are inherently rationally greedy, which leads to the inevitable degradation and overuse of shared resources in the absence of central state control, starkly contrasted with my embodied knowledge of Chitrali pastoralist commons as sites of care, reciprocity, livelihood (Khan, 2025), and careful coexistence with human and more-than-human kin.

The universalist claims of Western theory appeared parochial, rooted in the specific historical trajectories of industrial capitalism, nation-state formation, and individualism that do not reflect diverse human possibilities (Ostrom, 1990; Scoones, 2023).

This dissonance became a source of intellectual growth during my DPhil project. This led to the vital realisation that dominant Western frameworks, while claiming to be universal or neutral, are rooted in specific historical trajectories and epistemologies, tied to an overarching capitalist, modernist, and colonial framework, as well as individualism and nature-culture dualisms (Demeritt, 2002; Braun, 2007). More troublingly, these frameworks have historically justified the enclosure and dispossession that I witnessed in my homeland while growing up (Alden Wily, 2011; Peluso, 1995). I am aware and acknowledge in the thesis that the study of the commons has significantly advanced beyond Hardin's initial framework. Nevertheless, state and capitalist entities continue to invoke the tragedy of the commons as a justification for nationalisation, privatisation, or a combination of both (Harvey, 2011). I encountered several scholarly fields celebrating community-based commons governance, particularly Elinor Ostrom's pioneering work from 1990, which offered important corrections to Hardin's pessimism and provided empirical evidence that locally managed commons can be maintained sustainably. However, even this more developed scholarship remains largely centred on resource management and institutional design using an economics perspective (Ostrom, 1990; Robinson, 2019) rather than exploring the deeper meanings, spiritual dimensions, and more-than-human relationships that make commons a space that is more than just a resource (Er, 2023; Khan, 2025a).

The intellectual foundation of this research stems from my personal commitment to supporting my pastoralist community's survival and a scholarly conviction that existing frameworks for theorising, governing, and studying commons are notably insufficient

(Khan, 2025b). These dominant structures do not fully explain why commons deserve reconsideration, not merely as systems for efficient resource management but as ontological entities that embody unique ways of human existence, relationships with land and more-than-human beings, and the organisation of collective life based on principles of reciprocity, care, spirituality, and stewardship rather than solely on extraction, accumulation, corporate profits, and individual greed (Blau, 2021; Bresnihan, 2015; Bawaka Country et al., 2016). Furthermore, this study includes a case study of Chitral as a practical example and extension of my critical scholarship, which I find intellectually meaningful and well-founded beyond the perspectives of Hardin and Ostrom. Various scholarly efforts have sought to reimagine the concept of the commons, including viewing it as care (Blau, 2021), reciprocal (Lu, 2001), livelihood-based (Scoones, 2023), spiritual (Khan, 2025), affective, emotional, and subjective (Singh, 2017), free, fair, and alive (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019), or as careful coexistence with human and more-than-human kin (Bresnihan, 2015), specifically rooted in the sustainable practices of mobile pastoralists across generations, drawing on Indigenous knowledge systems (Ahearn & Chatty, 2020).

Finally, in this study, I utilise the concept of the commons to highlight the broader misrepresentation, exoticisation, and marginalisation of local perspectives in Chitral. The existing academic literature on Chitral is notably scarce, mainly consisting of accounts by colonial travellers and anthropologists who have often misunderstood and misrepresented the region's people (Schomberg, 1938; Biddulph, 1880), as well as reports by colonial military officials documenting their conquests (Beynon, 1896). Some Western anthropologists have recently spent extended periods residing in Chitral and produced exploitative narratives that fail to meet ethical research standards and are not endorsed by the local community (Marsden, 2005). The urban population of Pakistan tends to perceive the northern areas, including Chitral, simply as tourist destinations characterised by high

mountains and terra nullius, as well as sites for settler tourism (Ali, 2025). These discourses, which I examine further in the literature review chapter and subsequent articles, do not adequately address the challenges faced by the local community, which are driven by regional political issues and the complexities of life as a marginalised rural community. In my scholarly investigation of the neglect of Chitral, I focus on the category of *muzhayo* (commons). When designing my DPhil project, I was conscious of the opportunity to contribute to the community through my studies at the University of Oxford. I chose to focus on the commons as an entry point, given that the loss of Chitral's commons due to nationalisation would result in the loss of 97% of Indigenous pastoralist land (Mulk, 2019). What could be more meaningful than this? My aim with this PhD project is to stimulate intellectual efforts that bring these issues into the light, transforming Chitral into a place for its residents rather than a tourist's idyllic destination or a living museum. The mountains should be recognised as *muzhayo* with inherent value for locals, and the region should become a focal point of political attention rather than a romanticised, peaceful refuge. Conducting research within my home community in Chitral redefines the ethnographic project as an essential act of decolonising research practices, serving as a necessary counter-hegemonic strategy against the dominant Western, state, and colonial literature, which often reflects exploitative and extractivist ethnographies that render knowledge inaccessible (Burman, 2018). This approach demands deep reflexivity, moving beyond the myth of the *Lone Ethnographer (*Rosaldo, 1989, cited in Jacobs-Huey, 2002) by recognising that one's positionality is not a noncritical privilege of insider status but an ongoing aspect of identity (Narayan, 1993) subject to shifting internalities (Nelson, 1996). It must embrace the dialogic and political nature of enquiry, allowing for admissions of failure (Kondo, 1990) while addressing ethical issues of translation and accountability beyond the field, so that the necessary critique does not reveal "cultural secrets" or "dirty

laundry" (Jacobs-Huey, 2002) or inadvertently perpetuate the structural harms of the closed academic system (Burman, 2018). I discuss these questions of reflexivity in detail in the chapter on Research Design and Methods.



Fig 01: The author during *ghari nezik* (taking livestock to the high pastures in June). PC: Jahangeer

Rationale and Objectives of the PhD Project

This study investigates the urgent and complex changes affecting the pastoralist commons (*muzhayo*) of Chitral, Pakistan, where state nationalisation, policy shifts, and evolving development regimes are rapidly transforming centuries-old land-use and governance systems. While mainstream frameworks often concentrate on statistical evaluations or the economic efficiency of commons management (Mansfield, 2004), this study moves beyond such simplified views by engaging with the growing global literature on lived ontologies, local knowledge systems, and more-than-human relationships that form and uphold the commons for the Chitrali pastoralist communities. I offer a detailed and nuanced overview of how commons studies have evolved in the literature review chapter. The weakening of customary rights and local governance, driven by increasing

state influence, especially since the 1975 notification that transferred large areas of common land into state ownership, poses not only economic and ecological risks but also existential threats to Indigenous ways of being and knowing.

In this context, this study aims to critically examine how Chitrali '*boomki'* (aboriginal) people conceptualise, practise, and defend their commons amid ongoing processes of enclosure and nationalisation. Drawing from and synthesising insights across four empirical chapters, which have been submitted as individual papers for publication, this project seeks to illuminate how the commons are understood, used, and protected by local actors and explore the multiple dimensions of the commons, including material, spiritual, symbolic, gendered, and multispecies aspects. Through immersive ethnographic fieldwork, oral histories, participatory methods, and the creative use of poetry, this research highlights voices and knowledge systems that are often sidelined in official governance processes and wider Western academia. By weaving local perspectives with broader theoretical debates in political ecology, more-than-human geography, critical agrarian studies, and decolonial Indigenous studies, this research aims to contribute both empirical evidence and conceptual innovation to the governance of commons in marginal mountain regions and to mobile pastoralist studies.

Ultimately, the core objective is to offer a nuanced and situated account of the Chitrali commons that recognises their ontological complexity and political vibrancy. By uncovering the strategies communities use to resist dispossession, rearticulate Indigenous pastoralist land rights, and negotiate with both the state and more-than-human actors, this work underscores the potential for locally grounded, pluralist, and justice-oriented alternatives in commons governance, which may hold relevance far beyond the Chitral context.

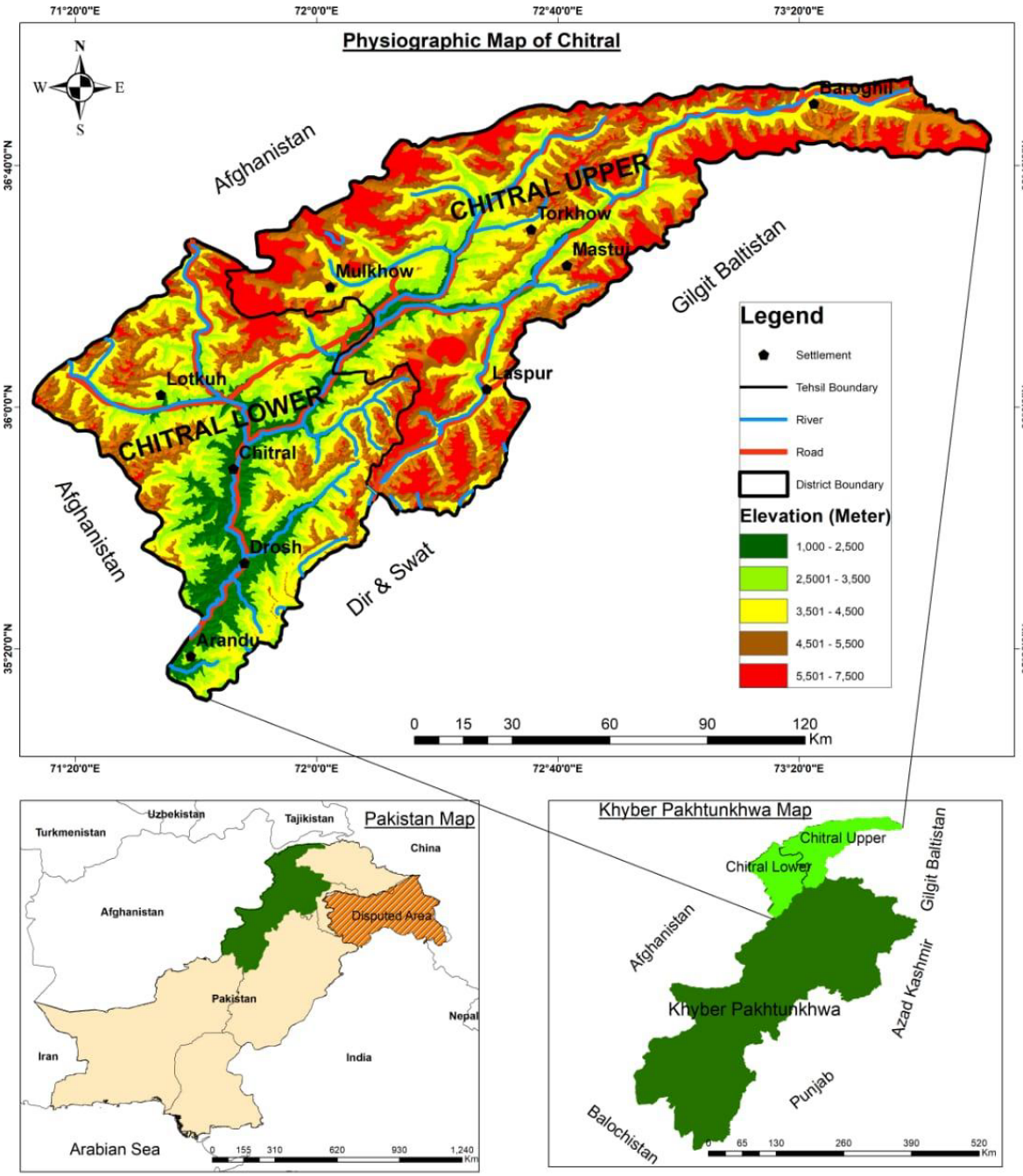


Fig 02: Qaqlasht pasture turned into a 3-day sports festival in April 2024. (PC: Sohail Ahmed, with permission to use)

The Chitral Context: Landscape, Governance, and Socio-Cultural Dynamics

Chitral, situated in the far northwest of Pakistan within the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, serves as a key geographical and cultural hub in the Hindu Kush Mountains. The region is internationally renowned for its rich linguistic diversity, deep cultural heritage, and distinctive position at the crossroads of Central Asian, Iranian, and South Asian linguistic and historical traditions (Decker, 1992; Marsden, 2009; Young et al., 2000). In 2018, Chitral was divided into two districts, Upper and Lower Chitral, for administrative purposes (see Figure 03). According to the 2023 census, the population of the Lower Chitral district is 320,407, while that of Upper Chitral is 195,528 (Dawn, 2023). Despite this official division, the Chitrali people retain a unified cultural identity rooted in a shared language (Khowar), collective historical narratives, and a strong connection to their

mountains (Marsden, 2011). This section offers a brief overview of Chitral's topography, historical background, linguistic landscape, and cultural features to situate this PhD project within its geographical context.



(Figure 03: Map of Chitral by the Author. Special gratitude to Zahir Ahmad.)

Geography and Topography

Chitral, locally known as ćhitrār, is mainly situated in the foothills of the Eastern Hindu Kush (EHK), near the meeting point of the Hindu Kush and Pamir Mountain ranges (Haserodt, 1996). This region is essentially surrounded by mountains and covers approximately 14,850 square kilometres (km²), with elevations ranging from 1,094 meters at Arandu (on the border with Afghanistan) to 7,726 meters at Tirich Mir. It includes over 40 peaks that rise above 6,100 meters (Nüsser, Holdschlag, and Rahman, 2012). In the Chitral area, barren land and alpine pastures comprise 67% of the total area, followed by snow cover and glaciers, which comprise 25%. Forests account for 5%, and only up to 3% of the land is suitable for cultivation (Ahmad et al., 2025). The terrain is particularly rugged, characterised by steep, narrow river valleys and numerous high-altitude barriers.

The district is bordered by the Afghan provinces of Badakhshan, Nuristan, and Kunar to the north and west; the Swat and Dir districts to the south; and the semi-province of Gilgit Baltistan to the east (Nüsser, Holdschlag, and Rahman, 2012), with the Wakhan Corridor separating it from Tajikistan (Marsden, 2009). This geographical positioning places Chitral at the forefront of trans-montane geopolitical and trade routes (Kreutzmann, 1998). Despite its historical significance for movement, access remained severely restricted by major mountain passes, notably the Lowari Pass (3,118 m), Dorah Pass, and Baroghil Pass (3,807 m) (Marsden, 2009). These passes were historically closed due to snow for five months each year, typically from October to May, contributing to the region's historical isolation (Haserodt, 1996; Robertson, 1899). The challenging terrain necessitated reliance on difficult passages for trade and movement, or historically, routes through neighbouring Afghanistan when direct passes were inaccessible (Marsden, 2009). However, the Lowari Tunnel, which opened in 2019, now provides year-round connectivity between Chitral and the rest of the country.

Environment, Resources, and Livelihoods

The climate of Chitral is classified as temperate within the dry subtropical zone, characterised by arid summers and winter precipitation driven by westerly winds (Haserodt, 1996; Shehzad et al., 2014). Survival in this region is closely linked to the demanding physical conditions. Flat land suitable for intensive agriculture is scarce, and where it exists, the soil quality is often poor (Young et al., 2000). The valleys frequently experience rain shadow effects because of the presence of mountains, and the absence of monsoon rain means that intensive agriculture depends entirely on artificial irrigation systems utilising snowmelt and glacial runoff (Young et al., 2000). The total cultivable land area comprises only a small fraction of the district's total area, estimated at 1.2%–3.5% (Young et al., 2000). Consequently, agricultural yields, particularly for cereal crops, are low, and the region generally cannot produce enough food to meet the subsistence needs of its population, leading to the annual importation of a significant amount of food (Ahmad et al., 2025; NWFP & IUCN-Pakistan, 1999; Young et al., 2000).

To achieve self-sufficiency, the inhabitants have traditionally used a combined approach of mountain agriculture and pastoralism, commonly called agropastoralism (Ahmad et al., 2025; Khan, 2025). Pastoralism, or *maldarai* in the local Khowar language, is a key part of the subsistence lifestyle for most of the community in Chitral, with over 80% of families in Upper Chitral participating in this practice (Young et al., 2000; Khan, 2025). This practice remains vital because much of the mountainous region is arid, and crops cannot be grown without irrigation, making livestock essential in unirrigated areas (Young et al., 2000; Ahmad et al., 2025). The primary livestock includes sheep, goats, yaks, and oxen, whereas horses are increasingly kept for polo by the local elites, and donkeys have been used for transport (Young et al., 2000; Ahmad et al., 2025; Khan, 2025). Goats often dominate herds because of their resilience in mountainous

environments (Khan, 2025). Animals provide vital resources, producing milk (used to make products such as butter, ghee, and cheese) and meat for consumption and rituals (Ahmad et al., 2025; Marsden, 2009). They also supply wool for local clothing and blankets, and oxen are essential for ploughing fields (Young et al., 2000; Ahmad et al., 2025). The traditional pastoral system operates through transhumance, moving herds to high summer pastures (*ghari*) (Khan, 2025; Ahmad et al., 2025). The herds are privately owned by families according to their capacity and available human resources to manage the livestock and participate in communal pastoral activities, such as *sotsiri*, where they take turns grazing village livestock in the shared pastures. Herds are often used as gifts in various rituals, including weddings, and are distributed among sons when they establish their own households, usually after their children have grown up (Khan, 2025). Ownership of communal lands is based on the clan system (*qawm*) (Fazlur-Rahman, 2009; Khan, 2025), which determines access to resources, while pastures are generally held as communal property by village residents (Fazlur-Rahman, 2009). Traditional grazing lands, which cover vast areas of alpine pastures, are crucial communal resources that provide fodder, medicinal plants, and fuel wood (Ahmad et al., 2025). The region's forest coverage is limited and has suffered significant degradation, with dense forests decreasing notably between 1992 and 2009 (Shehzad et al., 2014). Climate change, coupled with land nationalisation and shifts towards neoliberal lifestyles, increasingly threatens traditional pastoral practices, raising concerns about the disruption of livelihoods and ecosystems (Khan, 2025).

Socio-Cultural Dynamics

Chitral is notable for its extensive multilingualism, with 12 languages spoken within a relatively small area (Torwali, 2020). The most widely spoken and dominant language is *Khowar* (or Chitrali), an Indo- Aryan language of the Dardic subgroup (Decker 1992). Khowar acts as the primary regional lingua franca (Marsden 2009). The Khowar-speaking population, known as *Kho*, is estimated to comprise between 400,000 and 600,000 first-language speakers in Chitral (Parekh, 2024). Khowar is written using a modified Arabic/Urdu script (Marsden, 2009). The district also hosts several minority language groups, including the Kalasha language, spoken by the non-Muslim minority residing mainly in the Rumbur, Bumboret, and Birir Valleys of southern Chitral (Young et al., 2000). Chitral is recognised internationally and nationally chiefly for its unique Kalash community, the only pagan tribe in Pakistan (Ali and Chawla, 2019). Although Kalasha and Khowar share certain grammatical features, they are mutually unintelligible (Decker, 1992). The Kalasha community has historically declined due to conversions to Islam, with the current population estimated at fewer than 4, 000 individuals (Ali & Chawla, 2019). Other languages spoken in Chitral include Phalura, a Dardic language spoken in southern Chitral, which is closely related to Shina from Gilgit-Baltistan but is regarded as more ancient (Strand, 1973). Historically, the ethnic Kalasha community in Kalkatak village of Lower Chitral, after converting to Islam, chose to shift their language use to Phalura (or Khowar in other villages such as Suwir) to deliberately distance themselves from their previous religious beliefs (Decker, 1992; Cacopardo, 1996). Additional minority languages include Yadgha (spoken in the Lutkuh Valley), Dameli, Gawar- bati (spoken in the Arandu area), Eastern Kativiri, Shekhani, and Wakhi (Decker 1992; Strand 1973). However, this research focuses solely on the Khowar-speaking (Kho) community of the Yarkhun and Torkhow valleys in Upper Chitral.

The social organisation of Chitral, especially among the Khowar-speaking population (Kho), is heavily shaped by a widespread clan system. Each household is recognised as a member of and loyal to a specific clan, often called *qawm* (Khan, 2025). This structure is vital for social unity and influences individual identity and living arrangements, as housing clusters (*deh*) are often connected to patrilineal clan members. However, it is also common for a deh to include multiple clans and for one clan to be spread across different villages in Chitral. Notably, the clan system supports the traditional mountain pastoralist livelihood and regulates access to communal resources in the following ways. For example, the management of communal resource plots (*moshina*) directly follows clan genealogy and development (Fazlur-Rahman, 2009). Among the Kho, groups were historically divided into clans. This clan system was highly formalised as a class structure under the former Chitral state, with hereditary ranks: the ruling family (*Katoor*), a noble class (*adamzada*), and lower classes such as peasant farmers (*rayat or yuft*), and serfs (*cheermuzh*). Consequently, the clan system has functioned as a social hierarchy, a kinship and genealogy network, a resource management structure, and a political system. The clan system and its significance remain central to the region's internal cultural dynamics and politics. However, there has been a fundamental shift in its hierarchical role, as younger generations challenge its discriminatory facets and advocate for equality regardless of the clans into which people are born. The clan element is essential to this study of commons and will be explored further in Article 1, *Nationalisation of Pastoralist Commons and the Apoliticisation of Chitral, Pakistan: Towards a Critical Geography of Rural* Enclosure, and Article 4, *Kings have Armies, Pastoralists have Land: The Question of Ownership of the Pastoralist Indigenous Commons in Chitral, Pakistan.*

Brief History and Political Context

The historical narrative of Chitral is often characterised by ongoing turbulence and violence, especially concerning succession conflicts and intrigues among the ruling families (Robertson, 1899). In the mid-8th century CE, Chitral became a notable political and military centre, contested by the Chinese Tang Empire, Tibetans, and Arabs (Zahir, 2024). Evidence, such as Tang Dynasty coins found in protohistoric cemeteries, demonstrates its ancient strategic link to the Silk Routes and to Central Asia (Zahir, 2024). Before the 14th century, the Kalasha people primarily dominated the southern region of the Hindu Kush (Robertson, 1899). Their power declined after an invasion led by the Khowar-speaking Rais *mehtars* around 1320 A.D. (Robertson, 1899). The region remained an independent kingdom until 1895, when it became a semi-autonomous princely state under the British Raj's suzerainty (Marsden, 2009; Schofield, 2003). The state generated considerable revenue from trade, primarily through tolls on trans-montane commerce, making Chitral a critical hub linking Badakhshan, Xinjiang, and the Northwest Frontier Province (Kreutzmann, 1998; Biddulph, 1880).

Chitral remained a princely state governed by the local Katorae royal family under British colonial rule until 15 August 1947, when British rule formally ended in the subcontinent, leading to the creation of the new nation-states of Pakistan and India (Parkes, 2001). The then *mehtar* (king), His Highness Muzaffar Ul Mulk, voluntarily acceded to Pakistan on 18 February 1948. However, Chitral retained its status as an autonomous princely state, exempt from the jurisdiction of Pakistan's High Court or Supreme Court, until 1969, when it was officially integrated into the Islamic Republic of Pakistan (Mulk, 2019). Today, Chitral is formally and constitutionally part of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province of Pakistan, with representation in both provincial and national assemblies. The shift from princely rule to state governance disrupted the traditional resource management

systems organised under the *mehtar*'s authority. The 1975 notification that nationalised the commons exemplifies how state-led governance often marginalises local voices while imposing top-down policies that ignore Indigenous knowledge systems. Article 01 provides a detailed historical perspective on the transition from the Chitrali state to annexation by Pakistan and the process of nationalisation.

Chitrali Culturalscape and *Muzhayo* (Commons)

The term "culturalscape", as used in this thesis, denotes the multidimensional, co-constituted domain encompassing Chitral's physical environment, cultural practices, spiritual beliefs, and collective cultural identity (Cacopardo & Cacopardo, 2001; Israr-ud-Din, 1969; Jettmar, 1961). It encapsulates the lived experience in which land, commons, and more-than-human entities are intricately interwoven, thereby shaping and reflecting Chitrali modes of existence, belonging, and epistemologies. This concept challenges resource-centric or purely economic perspectives on commons by emphasising their material, social, spiritual, and emotional significance in the lives of Chitral's rural communities. It informs both the theoretical framework, bridging political ecology and more-than-human geography, and the methodological approach, which foregrounds ritual, poetry, gender, and evolving livelihoods. As an organising concept, culturalscape unifies the empirical chapters and offers a comprehensive analytical lens to demonstrate how nationalisation, development, and political transformation impact not only livelihoods but also the entire network of relationships and identities that constitute the commons in Chitral. The preference for the term "culturalscape" over the broader and more static term "culture" aligns with the critique in human geography of superorganic cultural determinism, exemplified by Sauerian landscapes (Hepach, 2023). This preference favours dynamic and relational concepts that incorporate commons within lived spatial practices

without requiring exhaustive cultural analysis (Anderson, 2020; Mitchell, 2000). This framework sees high mountain pastures as both spiritual realms and vital sources of livelihood, thus going beyond the traditional split between sacred mountains and practical human spaces (Mu et al., 2019; Reuter, 2017). It shows spirituality as an essential part of everyday pastoral life and the development of collective identity.

Central to the culturalscape is the concept of *muzhayo,* which includes pastures (*chiragahs*), hunting grounds (*shikargahs*), riverbeds, and mountains. The term "*muzhayo*" signifies “shared” and is an abbreviated form of “*muzhayo* zemeen” (shared land), which can be translated into English as “commons.” Historically, *muzhayo* has been governed by customary systems linked to clan ownership, hierarchies, and proximity to pastures, which form the foundations of Chitrali pastoralist livelihoods. The local people rely on these resources for grazing, firewood, water, and hunting (Khalid, 2019). The ontological and epistemological aspects of *muzhayo* are detailed in Article 02, *Land Ontologies, Place Attachment, and Commons in Chitral.* Meanwhile, ownership patterns are comparatively analysed in article 04 *Kings have Armies, Pastoralists have Land: The Question of Ownership of the Pastoralist Indigenous Commons in Chitral, Pakistan*. Specific information about *muzhayo* in the case study areas of Torkhow Valley, including the sub-valleys of Khot and Rech, as well as Yarkhun Valley, is presented in the Research Design and Methods Chapter. The traditional governance system faces challenges owing to nationalisation initiatives, such as the contentious 1975 notification by the provincial government of Pakistan. This notification declared most shared lands as state property without adequately consulting local communities or considering their customary rights (Government of NWFP, 1976).



Fig 04: *Mal* grazing in the Qaqlasht pasture of Upper Chitral in March 2021 (PC: Ijaz Ali- with permission to use)

Why Culturalscape? A Conceptual Choice beyond Commoning

A clarification is necessary at the outset of this thesis regarding a foundational conceptual choice: why employ the term "culturalscape" rather than "commoning"? Both concepts are rooted in the critical commons tradition, and both oppose the objectification of shared land as a mere resource. However, they are analytically distinct in ways that are crucial for the objectives of this thesis. This section clarifies the differences between the two concepts, their interrelationship, and why culturalscape serves as a more analytically productive framework for understanding muzhayo in Chitral.

Commoning, as theorised by Linebaugh (2008), Bollier and Helfrich (2019), De Angelis (2017), and García-López et al. (2021), refers to the ongoing, collective social

practices through which communities produce and reproduce shared worlds. It is an activity-centred concept: its analytical focus is on the actions of individuals, herding, regulating access, making decisions, resisting enclosure, and caring for one another and the land. At its most compelling, commoning theory asserts that the commons is not a noun but a verb, not a resource to be governed but a practice to be lived (Linebaugh, 2008; Euler, 2018). This perspective serves as a powerful corrective to institutional frameworks that treat governance as separate from social life. It emphasises the agency of commoners, the politics of enclosure, and the relational fabric through which shared existence is woven. In these respects, commoning is indispensable to this thesis: muzhayo is undeniably produced and reproduced through commoning practices, seasonal herding (heti), rotational grazing (saq), collective departure to the high mountains rituals (ghari nezik), and ongoing resistance to the 1975 nationalisation are all forms of commoning in precisely this sense (as established in detail in the literature review).

However, commoning as a theoretical framework has a specific scope and a particular centre of gravity. That centre is practice: the repeated, embodied, social activity through which a commons is made and remade. What it does not, and by design cannot, adequately theorise is the ontological substance of what is being produced and the relational spatial world within which those practices occur. Commoning describes the doing; culturalscape names the being that the doing produces and sustains. To articulate this differently: commoning theory asks, "how is the commons made?" while culturalscape inquires "what kind of world is the commons?" These are complementary yet distinct questions, and the latter cannot be answered using the conceptual vocabulary of the former.

The distinction becomes concrete when we consider what muzhayo actually is for Chitrali pastoralists. It is not merely a set of shared resources reproduced through

collective action. It is a multidimensional, co-constituted domain in which four analytically distinct but inseparable registers are simultaneously present: material utility (grazing, fuelwood, water, medicinal herbs), socio-communal belonging (clan obligations, collective rituals, trust-based governance), spiritual presence (the nangini as active custodians of the high pastures; the performance of dokhna offering before entry; the ancestral fabric woven into specific named places), and emotional identity (the grief of dispossession; the freedom associated with the high pasture ghari; the sense of self that pastoralists describe as inseparable from the land). These relationships function concurrently across material, social, spiritual, and emotional dimensions. For example, grazing practices cannot be comprehended in isolation from ritual obligations to spiritual guardians, clan-based tenure systems, or the emotional bonds pastoralists have with ancestral pastures. Thus, the notion of culturalscape facilitates the examination of how the commons simultaneously serves as a physical landscape, a social institution, and a moral realm. Commoning frameworks can register the first two of these dimensions and gesture toward the third, but they lack the conceptual architecture to give the spiritual and emotional registers equal analytical weight. De Angelis (2017) theorises commons as social systems producing use value; Bollier and Helfrich's (2019) Triad of Commoning organises analysis around social life, peer governance, and provisioning. Neither framework contains a theoretical position for fairies as co-governing entities, for grief as an epistemological index of enclosure, or for ancestral cosmology as a legitimate mode of territorial claim. Culturalscape is the concept developed in this thesis to hold all four registers simultaneously and grant each equal analytical dignity.

The theoretical framework of culturalscape is informed by three scholarly domains that are not centrally addressed by commoning theory. Firstly, Hirsch's (1995) anthropology of landscape suggests that landscape should be perceived as a cultural

process situated between the immediate, inhabited, working world (foreground actuality) and the ancestral, spiritual, and imagined worlds that provide meaning and direction (background potentiality). This foreground/background dialectic aligns precisely with muzhayo: the working pastoral landscape of daily herding and resource use represents the foreground, while the ancestral territories of the nangini, the spiritual obligations of entering the high pasture, and the cosmological framework in which land is understood as makhlūqāt (a created being with moral claims) constitute the background. Commoning theory captures the foreground; culturalscape encompasses both dimensions in a productive tension. Secondly, Ingold's (1993) concept of the taskscape, the interwoven pattern of dwelling activities through which landscape is temporalised and inhabited, provides the processual dimension required by culturalscape. Ingold argues that the landscape is never a finished form but is perpetually under construction through the rhythmic, interlocking activities of its inhabitants. The Chitrali practices of heti, saq, sotsiri, and ghari nezik are precisely Ingold's tasks: they do not merely occur within muzhayo but are the very process through which muzhayo is constituted as a temporal and social reality. By extending Ingold's taskscape into the domain of spiritual and cosmological practice, culturalscape names the fuller process through which the pastoral world is produced. Thirdly, relational ontology scholarship, particularly Escobar's (2016) work on territorial rights as ontological politics and de la Cadena's (2015) concept of earthbeings, provides the conceptual foundation for treating spiritual entities and ancestral presences as analytically real actors rather than cultural beliefs appended to otherwise secular commoning processes. Even at its most relational, commoning theory has not systematically engaged with this literature; culturalscape is the concept through which this engagement is made productive.

It is also important to note the commonalities between commoning and culturalscape. Both resist resource-centred and institutional frameworks that reduce the commons to a governance problem. Both emphasise the relational, processual, and social character of shared life. Both recognise that enclosure is not merely a legal event but an assault on a way of being in the world. These shared commitments indicate that culturalscape does not replace commoning but extends it: wherever this thesis engages with the political contestation of muzhayo, the anti-enclosure mobilisations of Chitrali communities, or the collective practices through which the commons is reproduced, commoning theory remains the relevant frame. However, wherever the analysis requires attention to the ontological thickness of muzhayo, its spiritual custodians, its ancestral temporality, its emotional registers, its cosmological embeddedness in spiritual lifeworlds, culturalscape is the concept that renders this visible. In this sense, the two frameworks are nested rather than opposed: commoning describes the practices that sustain the culturalscape, while culturalscape names the world that commoning practices produce and defend.

The analytical relationship between commoning and culturalscape has significant implications for the study of nationalisation. If muzhayo were solely a commons in the traditional sense of commoning, its enclosure through the 1975 notification would represent a political-economic injury: the loss of a resource, a governance system, and a set of collective rights. However, when understood as a culturalscape, nationalisation constitutes not only a material dispossession but also a social rupture, an ontological attack on the spiritual integrity of the high pastures, and an emotional-existential wound to identity and belonging. The culturalscape framework is thus not merely a conceptual supplement but an analytical necessity; without it, the depth of what pastoralists describe

as loss, and the full scope of what recognition and restitution would require, cannot be fully comprehended.

The application of the culturalscape concept also aligns with the disciplinary focus of human geography, where landscape is perceived not merely as a physical environment but as a relational configuration of social, cultural, and ecological processes (Ingold, 2000; Hirsch, 1995). In this framework, culturalscape offers a spatially grounded analytical perspective that situates commoning practices within a broader relational context. Rather than supplanting commoning, the concept of culturalscape complements it. By integrating culturalscape with commoning, this dissertation seeks to bridge two analytical levels: the practice of commoning and the ontological landscape that sustains these practices. This dual perspective enables a more comprehensive understanding of muzhayo as both an enacted commons and a lived relational world, thereby extending commoning scholarship into the realm of pastoral multispecies landscapes.

The Crisis of Nationalisation: the 1975 Notification and the Politics of Enclosure

For centuries, Chitrali pastoralist communities have depended on *muzhayo* for subsistence livelihoods, cultural renewal, ritual practices, and the expression of their collective identity. The commons were not merely external resources to be exploited but were central to Chitrali social and spiritual life (Khan, 2025a; Nüsser et al., 2012). This intricate governance system was significantly disrupted following Chitral's dramatic transition from an autonomous princely state to a district within Pakistan in 1969 (IUCN Pakistan, 2004). The formal abolition of the princely state triggered a series of bureaucratic measures aimed at “rationalising” land tenure in the region. During the early 1970s administrative reorganisation, the provincial government sought to clarify land ownership by establishing a Land Dispute Inquiry Commission in 1971 (Khan, 2025a). Importantly, this commission conducted no detailed survey of community landholdings, did not consult

pastoral communities, and lacked systematic documentation of customary ownership patterns in its report. Instead, after consulting only the Ex-*mehtar* (the region's former ruler), the commission produced a controversial document that would reshape territorial relations: the 1975 Notification (Khan, 2025a; Khan, 2025b). This administrative act declared all shared lands, except the Ex-*mehtar*'s private property, to be state property (Khan, 2025b). This is a legal document, and the language of the 1975 Notification reveals its broad and almost totalising scope. Articles 14, 16, and 18 declared the nationalisation of the commons, including: "(14) All forests, except trees standing on cultivated land, chiragahs (grazing land), shikargahs (hunting area), waste lands, and mines and minerals... (16) All rivers, riverbeds, rivulets, and nullahs. (18) All mountains." Crucially, the notification does not precisely define any of these terms or their combinations. Given Chitral's limited arable land and vast mountains and pastures, this vague language effectively nationalised over 97% of the district's territory (Mulk, 2019). Centuries of customary governance were, in administrative terms, "clarified" out of existence (Khan, 2025a). However, paradoxically, for decades after its enactment, the notification remained largely unimplemented and obscure, marginalised by limited state presence, extreme geographic inaccessibility, logistical constraints, and the government's indifference to enforcement in remote regions (Ali, 2019).

Only in the past decade has Chitral experienced the unprecedented and rapid implementation of nationalisation policies (Ullah, 2020). Shared pastures, which have supported pastoralists for generations, are being converted into national parks, wildlife reserves, and protected areas, from which pastoralists face increasing and often prohibitive exclusion (Ali, 2019). Riverbeds and hunting territories are leased to trophy-hunting entities, generating significant revenue for urban-based government officials while impoverishing local communities that lose access to vital resources (Khan, 2025b). The

internationally acclaimed “Ten Billion Tree Tsunami” afforestation project by the government, celebrated in global climate policy circles as a model climate adaptation and mitigation initiative, has resulted in the planting of non-native species on commons throughout Chitral (Nazir et al., 2019), displacing pastoralists and fundamentally disrupting traditional grazing systems that have evolved over centuries in sophisticated adaptation to the local ecology (Khan, 2025). Meanwhile, settler-tourism ventures (Ali, 2025), mining projects, and urban expansion encroach on lands that communities have carefully stewarded and managed for generations (Khan, 2025a). Through these processes, the government increasingly frames Chitral's shared lands not as spaces of livelihood, cultural reproduction, and spiritual significance but as sites for commercial development, extraction, and commodification (Khan, 2025b). This is not merely a policy shift but a fundamental ontological imposition - substituting state-centric, economically rationalised governance frameworks for locally embedded, relational systems of stewardship rooted in principles of reciprocity, spiritual obligation, and multispecies coexistence (Todd, 2016; Khan, 2025a). The question of the commons thus becomes a fundamentally normative enquiry into which frameworks, whose epistemologies, values, and cosmologies, will shape how land is understood, governed, and inhabited (Peluso, 1995; Bresnihan, 2015).

The 1975 Notification exemplifies the lasting impact of colonial property classification on postcolonial governance. Similar to other state initiatives worldwide aimed at “rationalisation” (Scott, 1998), it reasserted distinctions between public and private spheres, nature and culture, and legitimate and illegitimate users. By invoking the principles of development and conservation, the government claimed sovereign authority over highland ecologies, effectively erasing local tenure systems from the historical record. Such nationalisation policies form part of a broader neoliberal environmental agenda that commodifies landscapes through tourism, trophy hunting, and carbon sequestration

schemes (Jeffrey, McFarlane, & Vasudevan, 2012) or green governmentality (Yenneti & Day, 2016; Yeh, 2005). Local populations that oppose these policies are often branded as obstacles to progress.

This enclosure has both material and symbolic effects on residents. It displaces pastoral households from ancestral grazing routes, weakens customary systems of reciprocity, and undermines institutions for collective decision-making. More deeply, it threatens the moral order that links the Chitralis to their environment. *Muzhayo* is essential to local identity; its loss signifies not only economic insecurity but also a rupture in spiritual belonging and social cohesion, leading to cognitive enclosure (Habeck, 2013), as further analysed in Article 02, *Land Ontologies, Place Attachment, and Commons in Chitral, Pakistan*. Cognitive enclosure is the tangible result of sedentarisation or politically induced relocation, when a human population, or a significant part of it, no longer has access to the land they previously used and thus gradually forgets the skills, routes, and landmarks that they once knew (Habeck, 2013). Kalb (2017) argues that an ontological divide exists between the state's instrumental view of land as a utilitarian resource and the community's understanding of it as a medium of existence. Bridging this divide requires an analytical framework that considers both power and ontology; therefore, this study draws on pastoralist studies, the political ecology (PE) of rural areas, and more-than-human (MTH) geography to do so.

Theoretical Overlap: **Mobile Pastoralist Studies, Political Ecology, and More-Than-Human Geography in Conversation**

Mobile Indigenous peoples have historically experienced theory as a tool of oppression, where dominant methodologies have examined their histories and cultures in ways that distort and marginalise rather than ethically engage with them (Smith, 1999).

This theorisation has been mainly driven by anthropological perspectives that focus on origins and material culture rather than lived experiences (Smith, 1999). Despite this historical background, theory remains vital for Indigenous peoples, as it helps them understand reality, provides frameworks for assumptions, and offers methods for interpreting observations. Theorising allows for addressing contradictions and uncertainties while creating a platform for strategising and strengthening resistance (Smith, 1999). In this project, I use theories as a form of resistance to challenge the Westernisation of Indigenous theories (Todd, 2016), particularly how Western scholars have (re)labelled Indigenous ontologies as novel, such as more-than-human theories, which I explore further in Article 03, *More than Human Rights to Commons: A Poetic Resistance in Chitral, Pakistan*, and contest existing inequalities in the theorisation of the political ecology of rural areas. This thesis is grounded in a theoretical framework that combines political ecology (PE) and more-than-human (MTH) geography to provide a comprehensive analysis of Chitrali *muzhayo* while contributing to and being informed by scholarship on mobile pastoralists.

PE of rural areas investigates how power relations, historical processes, and political-economic structures influence rural environments, with particular attention to how marginalised rural actors negotiate governance, access, and livelihoods in the face of state intervention and capitalist extraction (Hinchliffe, 2008; Robinson, 2019). Similarly, MTH highlights the agency and participation of nonhuman entities, such as animals, fairies, and landscapes, in shaping ecological and social realities, challenging anthropocentric assumptions, and emphasising the interconnectedness of humans and more-than-humans (Whatmore, 2006; Lorimer, 2012; Hinchliffe, 2008). Importantly, integrating these frameworks addresses key gaps: PE has often under-theorised nonhuman agency and the affective, spiritual, and ontological bonds that influence rural life, while

MTH has sometimes overlooked the political-economic and structural inequalities underpinning human-nonhuman relations (Whatmore, 2002; Choi, 2016). Their synthesis, particularly when informed by decolonial Indigenous epistemologies, promotes an approach that is both politically attentive and ontologically broad, centring cultural, spiritual, and more-than-human dimensions alongside material and structural analyses (Bawaka Country et al., 2016; Todd, 2016; Schulz, 2017). When studying commons from this dual perspective, it also calls for epistemic justice by resisting the universalisation of Western concepts and instead recognising the legitimacy and authority of Indigenous and Global Southern knowledge systems (Todd, 2016). These frameworks will be elaborated further in the Literature Review chapter and in subsequent analytical articles where they are utilised, with particular focus on their synchronicity (also in Table 01 at the end of this chapter) and the inherent challenges in this coalescing process.



Figure 05: Women of Yarkhun valley collecting their mal after Sotsiri in October 2024 (PC: Author)

Research Questions

The central research question of this thesis is as follows:

How do Indigenous pastoralist communities in Chitral, Pakistan, conceptualise, manage, and resist threats of nationalisation to their *muzhayo* (commons), with particular implications for local livelihoods, cultural identity (culturalscape), and more-than-human relationships?

This overarching question is explored through four interconnected subsidiary research questions, each addressed in a corresponding analytical chapter.

1. How does apoliticisation, a relational process of discursive and structural denial of political legitimacy, facilitate state-led nationalisation of Chitral's pastoral commons while suppressing gendered agency through elite-mediated enclosure over 70 years?
2. How do the spiritual, emotional, and socio-communal dimensions influence Chitrali communities' perception of their commons as part of their culturalscape and the ontology of *muzhayo*?
3. How do more-than-human entities and local cosmology influence Chitrali pastoralists' conceptualisation of rights to commons in ways that can inform policymaking and progress the emerging field of more-than-human geography?
4. How do local resistance movements and traditional ownership systems among Indigenous pastoralist communities in Chitral respond to nationalisation efforts in ways that reconfigure commons dynamics and influence community-led governance and resource management?

These questions guide the research towards a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between political ecology, Indigenous ontologies, pastoralist studies, more-than-humans, and commons governance in Chitral, Pakistan.

Research Methodology

The research methodology employed in this study is firmly grounded in a reflexive, community-based, and multi-method qualitative framework to capture the ontological complexity and local specificity of the governance of commons in Chitral, Pakistan. As a native Khowar speaker and insider, I conducted 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork from 2022 to 2025, focusing on primary case study sites in the Yarkhun and Torkhow valleys, specifically the Khot and Terich subvalleys. Central to this methodology were semi-structured interviews and in-depth conversations, locally referred to as *mashqulgi*, which facilitated open dialogic engagement and enabled the inclusion of voices unfamiliar with formal research processes. Participant observation complemented these methods by providing experiential insights through direct involvement in daily life, resource allocation meetings, pastoralist rituals, and community gatherings. The research design also incorporated participatory focus groups, oral histories, and archival research, engaging a diverse array of local actors, including pastoralists, community elders, government officials, poet-philosophers, and clan leaders, both within Chitral and in urban policy centres. In a distinctive methodological innovation, Indigenous poetry and musical expression were integrated as research tools and epistemic practices, allowing for the articulation of affective, spiritual, and more-than-human relationalities that are often excluded from standard interviews. The research methodology is rooted in the culturalscape of Chitral, where poetic and musical expressions, along with mashqulgi, play a pivotal role in the community's daily epistemological engagement. The entire research

process was guided by an ethic of care and continuous reflexivity regarding the researcher's positionality, with critical attention to issues of partiality, bias, and politics of representation. This comprehensive, iterative, and context-sensitive methodology ultimately foregrounds community knowledge, historically situated experiences, and Indigenous epistemologies as central to understanding and theorising the transformation of the commons in Chitral. Chapter 02 provides an in-depth examination of the research design and methodologies utilised in this project, emphasising the unique opportunities and challenges I encountered as a Western-trained local researcher working in Chitral.

Critical Contribution to Commons Scholarship: From Tragedy to Blessing

This research addresses significant gaps in mainstream commons literature by exploring the ontological, political, and multispecies complexities of Indigenous pastoralist commons in Chitral, Pakistan, an area often overlooked in comparative commons scholarship. While traditional studies of commons have primarily concentrated on resource management and institutional arrangements (Ostrom, 1990), this project broadens the scope to include cultural, spiritual, and emotional aspects inherent in *muzhayo* (shared lands), portraying commons as an ontological connection tied to Indigenous identities, pastoralist governance, and more-than-human entities, such as livestock and spiritual beings. It challenges the dominant anthropocentric and economically narrow frameworks (Hardin, 1968) prevalent in policy and environmental scholarship by incorporating more-than-human geography to recognise nonhuman agency and Indigenous cosmologies as vital for understanding ecological governance (Lorimer, 2012; Abram, 1996; Todd, 2016). Furthermore, drawing on rural political ecology, it investigates the lack of detailed ethnographic research into the political dynamics and structural inequalities, such as state-led nationalisation and bureaucratic apoliticisation, that influence pastoralist governance and resistance in mountain commons, often neglected in urban-centric environmental

debates (Ali, 2019; Hinchliffe, 2008). This study also explores the gendered aspects of commons governance, addressing longstanding critiques of androcentric bias in commons research (Filipová & Johanisova, 2017), and showcases women's ecological knowledge and their evolving roles in resource stewardship (Blau, 2023). Employing decolonial methodologies such as Indigenous poetry and oral histories as epistemic tools, this project contributes to recognising and amplifying subaltern knowledge and embodied experiences, proposing a pluriversal framework for commons governance that resonates with global Indigenous and pastoralist struggles (Ali, 2025; Chatty & Colchester, 2025). In doing so, it advances commons scholarship from a narrow focus on institutional design towards a relational, justice-centred perspective that emphasises Indigenous self-determination, multispecies coexistence, and cultural resilience amidst contemporary enclosure pressures (Alden Wily, 2011; Robinson, 2019). This PhD thesis further contributes to the study of commons by engaging with mobile pastoralist studies, more-than-human geographies and Indigenous geographies.

Thesis Structure and the Coherence of Analytical Articles

This thesis adopts the integrated paper approach, and, due to the limited existing research on the commons in Chitral, it includes four academic articles instead of the usual three papers. The structure comprises an Introduction, followed by a Chapter on Research Design and Methodology, a Chapter on Theoretical Framework and Literature Review, four analytical articles, and a Conclusion chapter. The four analytical articles investigate different yet interconnected aspects of *muzhayo* (the commons) in Chitral, Pakistan, forming a cohesive PhD project by examining the political challenges, Indigenous meanings, multispecies relationships, and legal disputes related to the shared pastoralist land.

The first article, "*Nationalisation of Pastoral Commons and the Apoliticisation of Chitral, Pakistan: Towards a Critical Geography of Rural Enclosure*," explores the nationalisation of pastoralist commons in Chitral, Pakistan, by introducing apoliticisation as a framework for understanding how state power suppresses rural political agency in Pakistan. This study combines Political Ecology, Critical Agrarian Studies, and Feminist Political Ecology to analyse how the 1975 notification, which nationalised 97% of Chitral's commons, facilitated territorialisation and dispossession. The state's portrayal of Chitralis as "peaceful" and bureaucratic exclusion validate control, making rural residents unaware of their rights. Gendered exclusion creates a "double apoliticisation", undermining women's ecological knowledge. By examining these dynamics within critical geography debates on the commons, this study advances rural enclosure theory, arguing that in postcolonial contexts, state nationalisation exceeds market privatisation as the main form of enclosure, and highlights Majority World perspectives on how bureaucracy, patriarchy, and statecraft perpetuate dispossession. This underscores the importance of rural political ecologies as sites of struggle, challenging urban-centric views of power and governance. Addressing the first sub-question, this article sets out the structural and political context for the entire PhD project, introducing the major external threat, state nationalisation, and the key political concept (apoliticisation) that explains the rural community's vulnerability, thereby laying the foundation for analysing resistance and governance struggles in the subsequent articles.

The second article, "*Land Ontologies, Place Attachment, and Commons in Chitral, Pakistan*", explores Indigenous conceptualisations (ontology) of *muzhayo*, arguing that the commons represent a complex ontological reality extending beyond economic utility, which challenges conventional resource-centric approaches. This study introduces the "Chitrali culturalscape", integrating geographical features, cultural practices, and identity

formation into a distinctive framework. It identifies four dimensions of the commons' ontology: material utility (grazing, firewood), socio-communal (collective decision-making, rituals such as *ghari nezik*), spiritual (sacred sites, entities such as *nangini*), and emotional (identity, ancestral connection, and a source of freedom, especially for women). The findings emphasise the critical need for policy and the wider academic community to recognise these Indigenous ontologies and relational worldviews. Responding to sub-question 02, this article provides the essential foundational understanding of the local value and meaning of *muzhayo*, clearly articulating what the community stands to lose if apoliticisation (Article 1) and nationalisation (Article 4) succeed in the future. Defining the commons holistically justifies why the contestations analysed in the other articles are matters of cultural survival rather than merely resource management.

The third article, "*More than Human Rights to Commons: A Poetic Resistance in Chitral, Pakistan*," explores how the governance of commons (*muzhayo*) in Chitral, Pakistan, critiques anthropocentric frameworks and clearly differentiates "more-than-human rights" from universalist "rights of nature" approaches. It introduces *muzhayo* as a shared space for humans and more-than-human (MTH) entities, including livestock, wildlife, plants, birds, and spiritual beings, to coexist. Using poetry as a primary methodological tool, this research gathers 27 poems from Khowar-speaking poets, complemented by ethnographic interviews and observations over four years in the mountainous region of Upper Chitral. It emphasises Indigenous cosmologies and multispecies interdependence, showing how livestock demonstrate agency through movement across high pastures and how fairies (*shawanan*) serve as traditional custodians of resource management. Conventional commons theory often ignores these entanglements; this paper engages with recent animal turn and ontological turn research, addressing nationalisation and extractive policies that sustain colonial logics of

objectification. The findings reveal that agency is shared among both human and nonhuman participants, challenging Western nature-culture dualism. Livestock, wildlife, birds, plants, and fairies (*nangini*) are vital components of complex ecological networks that support pastoralist livelihoods and collective survival. The study outlines the practical legal implications of recognising MTH rights, such as the specific rights to movement, access, and protection, represented by pastoralists or spiritual custodians, with governance rooted in Indigenous practices. This study integrates insights from environmental law, political ecology, and Indigenous studies, proposing policy frameworks for environmental governance in similar pastoralist contexts. Recognising MTH rights and Indigenous ontologies is presented as a practical alternative to traditional nature rights and commons management, advancing the scholarship in decolonial ecology and more-than-human geography. Addressing Sub-question 03, this article extends the political sphere defined in Article 1 into a multispecies political ecology, illustrating that resistance to external threats is not solely human-led but also rooted in the non-human and spiritual dimensions of *muzhayo* ontology discussed in Article 2.

The fourth article, "*Kings have Armies, Pastoralists have Land: The Question of Ownership of the Pastoralist Indigenous Commons in Chitral, Pakistan*," addresses the fundamental dispute over the ownership of *muzhayo* between the state and the Indigenous pastoralist *boomki* (aboriginal) people. Using narrative enquiry and oral histories, this research reveals that ancestral, clan-based, and proximity-based traditional ownership systems have sustainably managed the commons for centuries. The central argument is that state ownership, as defined by the 1975 notification, transforms the community's traditional right to use the land into a fragile concession that the state can revoke at any time. The broader pastoralist literature shows that pastoralists worldwide have lost land to conservation, mining, and tourism due to government designations for these purposes

(Hassan et al. 2022; Flintan, Robinson & Allen 2021). Although pastoralists may utilise the commons, they do not legally own it (Gilbert, 2015). This article highlights that nationalisation, and "green grabbing" threaten pastoralist livelihoods and the epistemological bonds with land that shape *boomki* identity. This study advocates for the formal recognition of customary tenure rights grounded in *boomki* identity and ancestral sacrifices, as ownership is inextricably linked to their survival, livelihood, and identity. This article serves as the project's legal and institutional culmination, explicitly addressing the practical and historical core of the conflict instigated by state policies (Article 1). It contributes to critical agrarian, Indigenous, and pastoralist studies by conceptualising ownership as a bundle of rights and addressing Indigenous land rights and sovereignty issues. These insights have implications for rethinking legal pluralism and governance in post-colonial states. By detailing the resilience and adaptability of Indigenous ownership systems, it answers Sub-question 04 and offers a concrete argument that traditional governance is a viable alternative to state control, grounding the abstract concepts of apoliticisation, ontology, and MTH rights in a tangible struggle for legal recognition.
The four analytical chapters collectively address the project's primary research question and propose additional research directions, which are elaborated upon in the conclusion chapter.

Article	**Research Question Addressed**	**Theoretical Framework**	**Journal Submitted/Published**	**Fit Within Wider PhD Project**
Nationalisation of Pastoralist Commons and the Apoliticisation of Chitral	How have historical and contemporary power dynamics and processes shaped the governance of pastoralist commons in Chitral, especially in relation to the 1975 notification and subsequent nationalisation efforts?	Rural Political Ecology, Feminist Political Ecology, Critical Agrarian Studies.	*Antipode* (Received Reviewers' comments and incorporated)	Establishes political-economic and gendered context; exposes state mechanisms marginalising pastoralists, setting ground for later ontological and resistance analyses.
Land Ontologies, Place Attachment, and Commons in Chitral	How do the spiritual, emotional, and socio-communal dimensions influence Chitrali communities' perception of their commons as part of their Culturalscape and the ontology of *muzhayo*?	Ontological Pluralism, More-than-Human Geography, Emplaced Cultural Geography	*Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* (Comments received from reviewers and resubmitted to *Environment and Planning D).*	Unpacks cultural, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of *muzhayo*; foregrounds local epistemologies, expanding commons discourse ontologically.

More-than-Human Rights & Poetic Resistance in Chitral	How do more-than-human entities and local cosmology influence Chitrali pastoralists' conceptualisation of rights to commons in ways that can inform policymaking and progress the emerging field of more-than-human geography?	More-than-Human Geography, Decolonial Theory	Submitted to Special Issue "Indigenous Ecological Knowledge in South Asia – Lessons for Rights of Nature Discourses" *in Environmental Studies and Sciences Journal.* (Accepted for publication)	Introduces non-human agency and Indigenous spiritualities to commons governance literature; uses creative methods for epistemic justice; links ethics and ontology.

Kings have Armies, Pastoralists have Land: The Question of Ownership of the Pastoralist Indigenous Commons in Chitral, Pakistan	How do local resistance movements and traditional ownership systems among Indigenous pastoralist communities in Chitral respond to nationalisation efforts in ways that reconfigure commons dynamics and influence community-led governance and resource management?	Political Ecology, Indigenous Epistemology, Decolonial Critique	*Journal of Peasant Studies* (Submitted response to reviewers' comments)	Grounds claims to commons in lived collective memory and political action; highlights alternative, community-led governance frameworks resisting state enclosure.

Table 01: An overview of the analytical articles

This integrated table demonstrates that each article addresses a distinct research question through unique yet complementary theoretical perspectives. These articles are currently under review for publication in leading thematic journals specialising in human geography, pastoralist studies, and commons scholarship. Collectively, they form a cohesive, mutually reinforcing PhD thesis that deepens the understanding of the articulation, governance, and resistance of the commons in Chitral from multiple perspectives, thereby contributing to global scholarship on the commons and pastoralist studies.

Significance of the Research and Conclusion

The central contribution of this study resides in decolonising commons scholarship by redefining *muzhayo* through its political apoliticisation, exploring the

complex Indigenous ontology of the Chitrali culturalscape, advocating for pastoralist Indigenous conceptions of more-than-human rights (including those of fairies), and supporting Chitrali pastoralist ancestral *boomki* ownership in opposition to its nationalisation by the Pakistani state. This project makes significant advances in both the theoretical and methodological aspects of human geography and political ecology through an empirical investigation of *muzhayo* in Chitral, Pakistan. Theoretically, it combines political ecology and more-than-human geography, two rarely integrated frameworks, to offer a relational, ontologically plural understanding of shared lands. I also incorporate pastoralist studies and focus on mobile Indigenous peoples in these fields. This approach addresses key gaps: the neglect of nonhuman agency in political ecology and the limited focus on power and structure in more-than-human geography (Lorimer, 2012). Epistemologically and methodologically, the project employs an ethnographic approach and innovates through locally embedded, decolonial techniques such as *mashqulgi* (candid communal discussion) and Indigenous poetry, not merely as illustrative tools but as valid epistemological practices. This introduces the idea of "methodological pluriversality", which is rooted in lived ontologies rather than extractive data collection. Empirically, this project offers the first comprehensive and detailed analysis of *muzhayo* as a complex lived commons ontology in relation to the 1975 nationalisation, transcending economic or institutional frameworks to emphasise how Indigenous cosmologies, emotions, and more-than-human ethics actively influence governance in a rarely studied mountainous region. Moreover, by reclaiming rural agency within political ecology, it challenges the urban-centric bias common in political ecology scholarship, highlights the political, affective, and spiritual capacities of rural actors and environments, and repositions rural areas as dynamic sites of multispecies resistance, knowledge, and governance.

The subsequent analysis reveals that the nationalisation policies of the Pakistani state, initiated by the 1975 notification, systematically overlook long-standing Indigenous traditional ownership systems, including clan-based and proximity-based management, which have sustained land for centuries. This project demonstrates that if the 1975 notification remains unchallenged, over 97% of Chitral's land is at risk of being nationalised, directly threatening the cultural survival and pastoralist livelihoods of the local *boomki* (aboriginal) people. The articles show how dominant state and capitalist interests, in alignment with local elites pursuing ventures such as mining and tourism, perpetuate marginalisation, often targeting pastoralists who lack political awareness of the legal implications. Therefore, this thesis emphasises the urgent need for comprehensive policy reforms that go beyond state-centric claims and advocate for the formal legal recognition of customary tenure rights based on the *boomki* identity. Ultimately, establishing genuine environmental stewardship and achieving equitable rural futures requires political empowerment of local actors, particularly marginalised pastoralists and women, to influence the governance of their ancestral *muzhayo*.

In summary, this thesis offers a grounded, original theoretical synthesis and a decolonial multispecies methodological approach, delivering new empirical insights from the pastoralist communities of an underrepresented region of Chitral. While its findings have clear practical implications for policy and local governance, the project's main scholarly aim is to expand how geographers theorise, research, and depict the commons in the Majority World, thereby creating space for more justice-oriented, plural, and culturally rooted models of environmental knowledge and governance that are not Eurocentric.

Research Design and Methods

Introduction

This chapter details the epistemological commitments, methodological strategies, and practical processes underpinning my doctoral research on commons (*muzhayo*) in Chitral, Pakistan. My hometown, Chitral, significantly informs my study, including my familiarity with its residents, local language, and the particular challenges and opportunities of conducting research as an insider. As a native speaker of Khowar, the language spoken locally, I was able to facilitate smooth communication, grasp contextual nuances, and support translation processes. This research is based on an extensive, long-term study conducted in the northern Pakistani region of Chitral, with particular attention to the Yarkhun and Torkhow valleys in Upper Chitral (Figure 01). Fieldwork was undertaken over 14 months, with data collected at various intervals from 2022 to 2025, covering different seasons and communal activities to reflect the variability and richness of local dynamics. The selection of Meragram No. 2 in Yarkhun, Khot, and Rech in Torkhow as the main case sites demonstrates their representativeness and highlights the distinctive practices involved in managing the commons within these communities.

A mixed-method strategy was employed to address the complexity of resource governance, including semi-structured interviews and focus groups (*mashqulgi*), participatory observation, archival research, and collaborative poetic and musical expressions. I adopted the local conversation methods of individual and focus group interviews, known locally as *mashqulgi,* to deal with the power relationship and speak to people who had never been interviewed for academic research before. These communal discussions promote open dialogue and mutual learning, aligning with the notion that research communities should serve as sites of conversation rather than mere discoveries

(Haraway, 1988). This discussion is very candid (closer to walking interviews). The m*ashqulgi* method puts this theory into practice. These techniques were supplemented by engaging with government officials, poets, historians, and intellectuals in urban centres such as Swat, Peshawar, Chitral Town, and Islamabad, facilitating a multiscale understanding of the issues under investigation. Throughout the research process, reflexivity and ethical considerations remained central.



Figure 01: The author engages in *mashqulgi* with an elder local leader in Meragram No. 2.

It is not solely the positionality of the participants that is significant; the researchers' self-analysis regarding their own positionality as embodied actors is equally crucial. This introspection informs the formulation of questions, analyses, and representational choices, thereby significantly enhancing the comprehension of how research participants' lived experiences and meaningful perspectives are historically and socially situated (Haraway, 1988; Jacobs-Huey, 2002; Narayan, 1993). Reflecting on

one's positionality, which includes factors such as gender, class, and race, is essential for critically assessing the researcher's biases and addressing the research discipline's historical ties to colonial endeavours and exploitation (Burman, 2018; Mignolo, 2009). Through a rigorous examination of how their subjectivity influences the research process, ethnographers can avoid generating monolithic or romanticised representations and instead recognise the inherently intersubjective nature of fieldwork (Abu-Lughod, 1991; Haraway, 1988; Jacobs-Huey, 2002). Addressing these power asymmetries is a vital strategy for countering the production of biased knowledge and avoiding exploitative "extractivist ethnography," which benefits the scholar at the community's expense (Burman, 2018; Sukarieh & Tannock, 2013). Articulating one's ethical-political commitments explicitly and engaging in research through continuous dialogue with collaborators fosters politically engaged and accountable scholarship, resulting in deeper and more comprehensive knowledge production (Burman, 2018; Hale, 2001; Juris, 2007).

The researcher's dual identity as an insider and academic influenced both access and interpretation, offering advantages for trust and communication but also necessitating critical reflection on power relations, bias, and representation. To mitigate the risks of partiality and potential conflict, particularly concerning clan-based resource ownership, clan identities have been anonymised, multiple valleys have been considered as case studies, and the evolving nature of communal resources has been foregrounded. This chapter presents the overarching research design, details the integration of multiple qualitative and participatory methods, and articulates how these strategies advance the study's aim of exploring the social, historical, and institutional dimensions of commons in Chitral. By emphasising community voices, lived experiences, and Indigenous epistemologies, the methodology aims to facilitate a nuanced and context-sensitive

analysis. It embodies an "ethic of care" for both the participants and the information collected (Reich, 2021), thereby laying the groundwork for subsequent analytical papers.

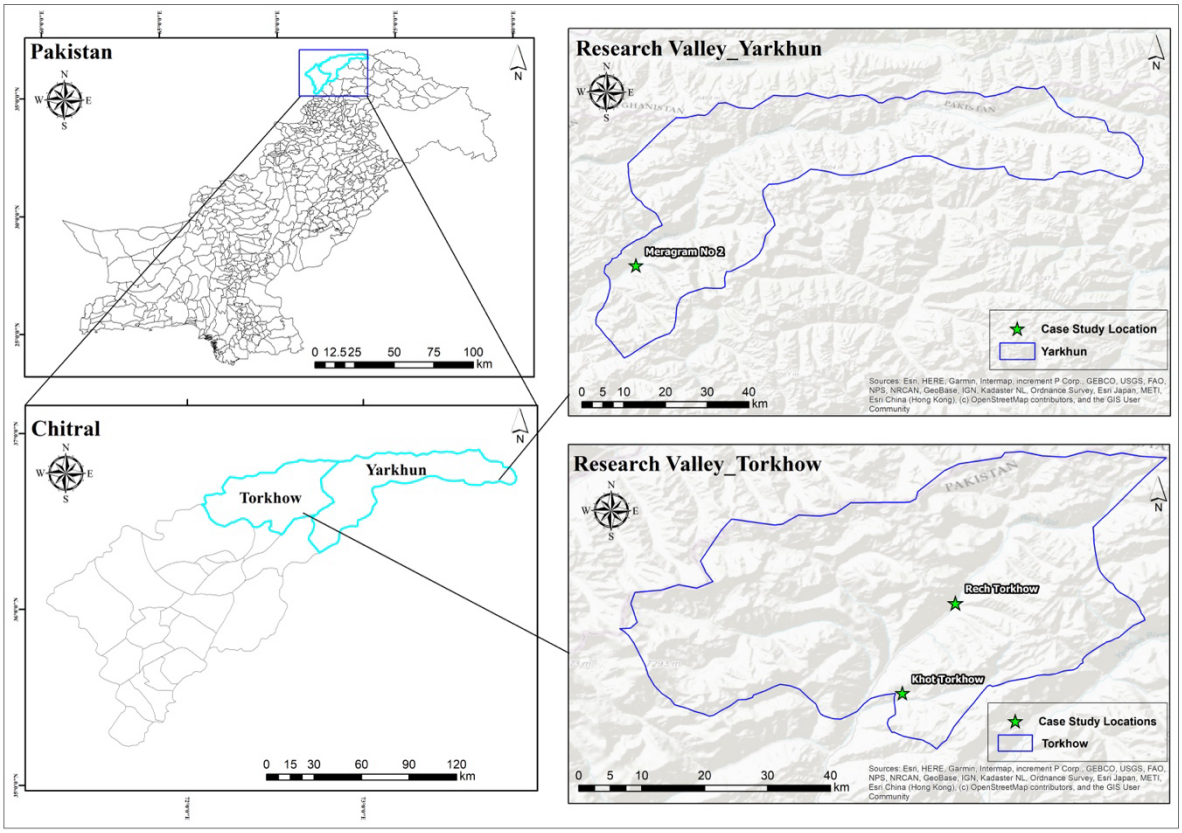


Figure 02: A map of the study areas developed by the author (Special thanks to Aslam)

Methodological Approach

To comprehensively capture the complexity and richness of commons management and community organisation within Chitral, this study employs a multi-method qualitative design that integrates ethnographic, poetic, participatory, and archival research methods. This approach facilitates a holistic understanding of the social, historical, and institutional dimensions shaping local practices, prioritising the voices, lived experiences, and epistemologies of the communities themselves.

Central to the methodology was ethnographic fieldwork conducted over fourteen months between 2022 and 2025 across three principal case study sites: Meragram No. 2 in Yarkhun Valley, and Khot and Rech in the Torkhow Valley. These sites were

selected for their representativeness of distinct commons governance systems and the presence of unique local conflicts and practices. Data collection comprised semi-structured individual interviews and in-depth conversations with the participants. I conducted 70 interviews and engaged in participant observation with local communities, including pastoralist groups, individuals with familial histories of leadership in resolving disputes over shared land (*aan waal*), local forest guards employed by the government to prevent hunting and grazing activities, and leaders of local resistance movements opposing the nationalisation project of the *muzhayo*. Furthermore, I travelled to the cities of Swat, Peshawar, Chitral Town, and Islamabad to interact with government officials, examine archival materials, and consult poets, historians, and Chitrali intellectuals, as most officials are based in these urban centres. Emphasising local modes of knowledge sharing, focus group discussions aligned with the traditional *mashqulgi* format fostered open dialogue and collective reflection.

Participatory observation facilitated immersive engagement with the community's daily life, including participation in pasture allocation meetings, livestock mobilisation events, and informal gatherings such as savings groups. Participant observation (PO) is a vital methodological approach as it offers an embodied, experiential form of knowledge acquisition that provides both humanistic insights into lived experiences and the development of effective, generalisable theories (Bernard, 2011; McGranahan, 2018). This comprehensive and sustained method is essential for ensuring data validity, as prolonged immersion reduces reactivity and fosters rapport necessary to ask meaningful questions and gather sensitive information (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002). Beyond mere observation, PO acts as a transformative praxis by compelling researchers to critically examine their foundational theoretical assumptions and investigate the holistic, interconnected context of individuals' lives, thereby generating novel knowledge and general propositions (Shah,

2017). This approach allowed for nuanced insights into social relations and resource dynamics that extend beyond the scope of formal interviews. Additionally, the study incorporates archival research conducted in Peshawar and through local sources, revealing the historical trajectories of commons governance, particularly during significant events such as Chitral's accession to Pakistan and the 1975 notification.

A notable aspect of the methodological approach is the integration of poetry and musical expression as research methods grounded in Chitral's rich cultural traditions. Poetic expression and music are integral components of Chitrali culture and daily life (Marsden, 2005). Collaborations with local poets and the literary collective MIER facilitated the exploration of emotional attachments, resistance narratives, and indigenous epistemologies concerning land, the commons, and more-than-human entities. This participatory, decolonial methodology transcends mere text collection, fostering community-centred spaces for creative expression and collective memory.
Together, these methodologies offer complementary insights, capturing both micro-level social interactions and broader historical and institutional contexts. The iterative and reflexive nature of the research process entailed continuous dialogue with the participants, ongoing interpretation of emerging data, and adaptation of research strategies to enhance understanding and ensure ethical accountability throughout.

An overview of the stakeholders' interviews and methodologies conducted is listed in Table 1 and illustrates how the data are used in the articles.

Data	From where	Used in Articles
Interview [N=56]	Pastoralist households in Chitral (actively herding) Male: 65%, Female: 35%	1,2,3, 4
Interview [N=4]	Government officials in Booni, Chitral town, Peshawar and Islamabad.	1,2, 3, 4
Interview [N=5]	Government Watchers (forest guards) (Present and Retired) in Yarkhoon and Torkhow.	1,4
Interview [N=5] (Oral History focused)	Local leaders of the pastures (aan waal) in Yarkhoon and Torkhow.	1,2,3, 4
Participant observation	The two main valleys in Upper Chitral: Yarkhoon and Torkhow.	1,2,4
National Archives	Peshawar Archives	1,4
Poetry	12 poets responded to my call for poetry, and I collected 15 poetries from mushaira and other digital sources, like social media, websites, etc.	03

Table 1: A summary of the data collection process and its use in articles

Field Work: Process and Reflexivity

In the summer of 2022, I returned to Chitral, Pakistan, after residing for a year in Oxford, and stayed there until 2023 to conduct fieldwork in the Yarkhun, Khot, and Rech valleys of Chitral. During the summer of 2022, my fieldwork was partially impacted by heavy flooding in Chitral, and I spent a few months helping people affected by floods. In 2023, I travelled to Australia, where I analysed the data during my fellowship at the Australian National University. I returned to Chitral in the summers of 2023 and 2024 for four months each to collect additional data, particularly informed by the analysis and the necessity for follow-up interviews. My initial research in 2022 commenced in the villages of Meragram No. 2 in Yarkhun and Khot in Torkhow, as both regions possess extensive commons and a diverse population comprising several clans, which facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the situation. While in Khot, I was informed of an active conflict over commons in the sub-valley of Rech, prompting its inclusion in my study to further explore the complexities of ownership, utility, and conflicts surrounding common land. Although I initially intended to include the Laspur Valley in my research, I reached a point of saturation after completing the data collection in these two valleys. Following the guidance of Gerson and Damaske (2021), I employed the "sampling for range" strategy, which requires researchers to achieve "theoretical saturation." This approach involves collecting data until no new insights emerge, necessitating the sequential analysis of each interview to assess its contribution to the research and ceasing data collection when subsequent interviews fail to yield additional relevant information. I observed that discernible patterns had emerged, which were sufficient for my DPhil project, and further data collection did not provide additional insights.



Figure 03: A house destroyed by floods in Chitral in 2022, captured by the author.

Case Studies and Sampling: Interview, Oral History and Participatory Observation

A case study is defined as "an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the 'case') in depth and within its real-world context" (Yin, 2014, p. 16). The case study method was helpful in this study in bringing together the theory and practice of the commons, using specific examples from different parts of Chitral to analyse the conception of *muzhayo* and how it has changed over time. Employing a case study methodology that focuses on specific local instances enabled me to conduct cross-case analysis, thereby facilitating the development of robust knowledge about observed local practices (Ebneyamini and Moghadam, 2018; VanWynsberghe and Khan, 2007). Details of the commons in the field sites are provided in Appendix 1.

1. Meragram No. 2, Yarkhun

Data collection was initiated in Meragram No. 2, my native village, which provided a setting with which I was intimately familiar. Initially, I employed snowball sampling with multiple entry points, subsequently transitioning to random sampling to mitigate potential sampling bias. Interview participants were selected based on criteria such as age, gender, clan affiliation, and their roles and responsibilities in the region. The village is predominantly inhabited by three principal clans based on shared family lineages: Zondrae, Riza, and Khanjarae. Additionally, several smaller clans, each comprising a limited number of families, have been integrated into these three primary groups for the use of the commons through the *gram* system. A *gram* is a collective of households comprising either the same or different clans residing in close proximity within a village. Within the gram, individuals participate in communal activities, such as assisting with food and other necessities during events such as funerals or weddings and collectively engaging in *sotisiri* (taking livestock out for grazing in turns). The Zondrae clan, along with a few smaller clans such as Syed and Zilae, shares common pastures characterised by abundant greenery, animal fodder, trees, and water, and these muzhayo are relatively large in area. In contrast, the other two clans utilise a distinct, smaller communal grazing and hunting area. There is no historical record of how these commons were distributed among the clans, but the consensus is that they acquired these lands for settling in the village earlier than others, for services to the ruler, or for other sacrifices to the ruler. I explore these claims in detail in Paper 04. My objective was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the community's perspectives on the traditional distribution of commons and their preferences regarding the potential opening of these commons to all individuals, irrespective of their clans, as the nationalisation of commons could potentially entail, and I address some of the findings in paper 01.

During the initial phase of the interviews with a select group of pastoralists in the village, the participants referred me to additional individuals, some of whom were not originally on my list. I proceeded to conduct interviews with these individuals and, where feasible, randomly selected households within each group for the interviews. This process was sustained over several months, culminating in approximately 25 interviews before transitioning to the next valley. Among these were interviews with five community elders, aimed at collecting folk tales and oral histories of conflicts over commons, which are particularly relevant to paper 04 on land ownership. Oral history is of considerable significance to Indigenous communities, serving as an essential mechanism for transmitting cultural knowledge, identity, and language. Indigenous oral histories are not merely traditions; they constitute legitimate historical accounts that have been conveyed across generations. These narratives sustain intergenerational linkages between the past, present, and future, thereby ensuring the survival of cultural identities. The primary function of oral history in Indigenous communities is the transmission of knowledge. In Chitral, stories, songs, and narratives are communicated from older to younger generations, often in ceremonial contexts or daily activities. This practice is instrumental in preserving cultural knowledge, language, and traditions (Mahuika, 2019; Toorn, 2000). Furthermore, oral traditions are deeply intertwined with the land and environment, forming an integral component of the community's worldview. This interconnectedness underscores the ties to ancestors, land, and living entities, making it an ideal methodology for this study. Such a holistic perspective is crucial for the resilience and psychological well-being of Indigenous communities (Chua et al., 2019). Oral history reinforces community cohesion and fosters a sense of belonging and identity among its members. It plays a pivotal role in identity formation and cultural continuity, which is vital in the face of pressures from modernisation and globalisation (Asamoah-Poku, 2024; Shiri et al.,

2021). By safeguarding stories and narratives, communities protect their cultural heritage for broader access, which is particularly important for preserving rare narratives (Shiri et al., 2021). Hence, I chose the Oral History method, both within and beyond the interviews, across all my study areas, because oral history remains crucial for Indigenous communities, preserving cultural heritage, and empowering them to define their identities in a world that challenges their existence. I am fortunate to have preserved the knowledge of older members of the community, many of whom have passed away over the last four years. Additionally, I interviewed a diverse range of participants, including young and elderly male and female pastoralists, community leaders, hunters and government guards.



Fig 04: *Mashqulgi* with an elder pastoralist in Meragram No. 2, Urkhan, Yarkhoon.

The interviews were predominantly semi-structured and conducted in a manner consistent with the local *mashqulgi* traditions. I sought permission to record the interviews and took notes on key points and follow-up questions during the *mashqulgi* sessions. These discussions typically lasted between 45 minutes and an hour and were often accompanied by salty tea, snacks, or local cuisine. I prepared an interview questionnaire for each group and carried it out on my iPad. This allowed me to refer to the questions and redirect the

discussion back to the interview topic if the participants deviated for an extended period. All interactions were conducted in the Khowar language. As a native speaker with extensive experience reading, writing, and translating this language, I did not require a translator. However, I occasionally paused the interview to clarify the meanings of complex terms, some of which were new to me as well.

Living in the village provided numerous opportunities for participatory observation. I attended several community meetings, including one focused on allocating a newly reforested common area near the riverbed (*shotar*). This land, previously used for grazing, has been repurposed over the past five years for the Ten Billion Tree Tsunami (TBTT) project by the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Government (Nazir et al. 2019). The TBTT initiative has generated conflicts within the community, as the government has ceased to pay the salaries of the three designated local forest guards. Consequently, the community is considering privatising the land by distributing it among families who have historically benefited from it, now perceiving it as a forest rather than a communal grazing land. Conversely, some members advocate for retaining it as common land. These discussions were supplemented by several informal meetings, some of which I attended as a beneficiary of the program. I expand on these findings in Paper 04. Additionally, smaller savings groups convene monthly to deposit funds, engage in recreational activities such as playing carrom board, and share meals. I was invited to some of these gatherings, where discussions often encompassed topics such as the ownership of commons and pastoralism, which I documented using the notes application on my phone. Furthermore, I conducted interviews with the three government forest guards to comprehend the government's strategy, their training, and the current situation, which are explored in Papers 03 and 04. I also participated in community meetings before sending livestock to higher pastures (*ghari nisik*). These meetings also served to recruit a new client shepherd (*gujjur*), summoned by

some community elders from the town. During these meetings, an official written agreement was executed between the gujjur and community leaders, who were the eldest and possessed substantial livestock. Several such meetings occurred before a final decision was reached, and livestock were dispatched to the high pastures. I engage with these traditions and rituals and their impact on the conception of commons in Paper 02.

Reflections, Positionality, and Challenges

Conducting research within my village provided the advantage of being an "insider"; however, the research process was complex and multifaceted. Ethnographers must maintain a heightened level of self-awareness, recognising how their presence and identity can influence access, disclosure and interpretation throughout the research process. It is important to convey this self-awareness to readers to clarify the researcher's influence on the research process (Small and Calarco, 2022). I was welcomed by the community as one of their own, which facilitated access to their homes and lives, as anticipated. My familiarity with the language further eased interactions, allowing me to engage with any community member, irrespective of gender, religious affiliation, or clan system. Kacen and Chaitin (2006) highlight the advantages of studying familiar subjects, including easier access, understanding of the topic, and ability to comprehend participants' reactions. However, this insider perspective poses risks, including blurred boundaries, imposition of the researcher's values and perceptions, and projection of biases (Drake, 2010). This is evident in research involving minority groups, where the 'dual identity' of being both a researcher and a community member influences the process (Brayboy, 2000; Chaudhry, 2000). When researchers and participants share experiences, participants may withhold information they assume the researcher knows, and researchers may overlook certain aspects of participants' experiences (Daly, 1992). Hence, it is imperative to discuss

aspects of positionality to provide a comprehensive understanding of conducting research in one's own village.

While there are numerous advantages to conducting research within one's own community, subtle challenges are also inherent in this process. As a male student at Oxford University, belonging to the higher Zondrae clan and having been away from home and pastoralist activities for an extended period, each aspect of my positionality influenced the research process. The most challenging aspect was the respondents' assumption that, as a member of the village, I would inherently possess comprehensive knowledge. Many perceived me as someone studying abroad with extensive knowledge, and some had already begun referring to me as a PhD "doctor", a common practice in our village to address individuals by their current or aspirational rank as a sign of respect. For instance, an accountant might be called "manager," and a teacher "professor." The title conferred a considerable challenge, as participants frequently commented, "you already know this" or "these are your commons as well, so what else can I tell you?" This familiarity with the context led to incomplete sentences, predicated on the assumption that I was already aware of the subject matter (Berger, 2015). They usually thought that their knowledge was not worthy of being shared with someone studying at a foreign university. I had to emphasise that, despite any prior knowledge, I was eager to learn from them and wished to share our way of life with the world, encouraging them to provide detailed explanations. I engaged in ethnographic open-mindedness, characterised by the dedication to observe and listen attentively and document with astonishment and wonder that which one could not have anticipated (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 71). This often led to reluctant elaborations, as if the information was already apparent to me. This hesitation was minimised by my engagement with them in "*Mashqulgi*" and by keeping the conversations going by sharing what I

know, but, more importantly, by giving the participants the space to speak in detail about my questions.

During my research, the complex issue of reflexivity arose from my connection to a prominent clan that traditionally controls significant parts of the commons. This affiliation may have led individuals from other clans to hesitate to share their honest opinions for fear of disapproval. Conversely, participants from my clan often eagerly shared stories, emphasising ancestral claims to the land. I aimed to clearly communicate my genuine interest in capturing a range of perspectives, especially regarding clan systems and traditional land ownership issues. There was also a risk that my research might be perceived as supporting my clan's status quo within the village. Fortunately, my outspoken opposition to clan systems during previous general elections and resource distribution, along with my well-known stance on social media, helped build trust. Throughout the research, I made a conscious effort to critically reflect on this aspect of my positionality and to maintain self-awareness during data collection, analysis, and writing. However, this may have limited open discussion on certain topics during the interviews in my village.

Gendered Positionality, Methodological Complexities, Ambivalences, and Gendered Fieldwork Contradictions

It is essential to more thoroughly examine my gender positionality, moving beyond the brief mentions in the articles within this thesis. As a male researcher in a society dominated by patriarchy, my position is far from neutral; it influenced whom I could engage with, what people felt comfortable sharing in my presence, how I interpreted their words, and whose perspectives I subconsciously prioritised. This reflection is not about self-criticism but is an epistemological requirement, as the data underpinning this thesis are marked by my gender position in ways I can only begin to identify, not fully explain.

In practical terms, my interview sample was male-dominated. Out of the roughly 70 individuals I formally interviewed in Meragram No. 2, Khot, and Rech,65% were men, especially elders, clan leaders, male government officers and those involved in formal disputes over communal resources. Women were a smaller portion of the formal interviews and poetry collection, and the conditions of many of these interviews were less than ideal. This underscores a key methodological issue highlighted by feminist scholars: the production of knowledge is influenced by the researcher's positionality and the social dynamics of the research context (Haraway, 1988; Nightingale, 2011). In many instances, I interviewed women in their homes with male family members present. In these situations, I observed what can only be described as systematic mansplaining: male relatives would answer for the women, steer conversations towards land tenure and legal politics, and subtly signal to the women that their input was secondary. Even when women spoke openly, the presence of men inevitably limited what they shared. Women were noticeably more expressive, detailed, and emotionally open in the instances where I spoke with them alone or in small female-only groups, indicating that the formal interview setting with a male researcher and often male observers was not ideal, or even particularly effective, for gathering women's insights and perspectives.

The gender dynamics inherent in this study have significantly influenced one of its most distinctive methodological contributions: the employment of Indigenous poetry as an epistemic practice, particularly in paper 03. Despite reaching out to multiple women and explicitly soliciting poetic submissions for the research, I received only a single poem from a female participant. This stands in stark contrast to the male participation, where male poets responded readily and in substantial numbers, reflecting the publicly and socially validated nature of male poetic practice in Chitral. Conversely, women's poetry predominantly exists within private, informal, and domestic spheres, sung quietly at home,

shared among female friends in the high pastures, and exchanged in spaces that are not easily accessible to a male researcher. The women I approached may have been reluctant to submit poetry to a male researcher, not due to a lack of poetic knowledge or practice, but because doing so would necessitate making public, and to a man, an expressive tradition that thrives on its privacy and informality. In Chitral, women poets do not receive encouragement from men; their poetic expression is often met with ambivalence or outright discouragement within patriarchal social norms, and sharing poetry with a male academic may have been perceived as a transgression of both gender propriety and the intimate social context in which women's poetry exists. The near-absence of women's voices in the poetic corpus of this thesis is thus not merely a gap in data collection but a methodological symptom of the same patriarchal dynamics that the thesis empirically analyses: the structures that exclude women from formal commons governance also constrain their participation in the forms of knowledge-sharing through which this research was conducted. I attempted to address this limitation by engaging with women through Mashqulgi, yet it is conceivable that a female researcher might have produced more responses to the call for poetry than I did.

During my fieldwork, I encountered a structural access limitation that I initially underestimated. As a man, I was unable to accompany women to the high pastures (ghari) in ways that would have been most methodologically beneficial. Women's connection to muzhayo is most vividly expressed in the high pasture setting, through their seasonal dairy production labour, the social bonds formed in female-only spaces, the ritual knowledge linked to nangini encounters, and the embodied grief for a way of life that has been lost. Much of this knowledge I obtained indirectly, through women recounting past experiences in retrospective interviews, rather than through direct presence in the pastoral landscape. Although this is partly due to the significant changes in women's travel to the high pastures

resulting from shifts in pastoralist livelihoods (Khan, 2025), a female researcher from Chitral conducting similar research would not face this limitation. She would likely have been able to be present during dairy processing and sotsiri rotations currently, observe the spatial practices through which women's commoning knowledge is passed on, and perhaps access the oral traditions and informal networks through which women's pastoral expertise is shared. The knowledge gap in this thesis, between the detailed male political narratives and the more retrospective nature of women's accounts, is at least partly a result of this gendered access constraint.

There is a deeper and more uncomfortable aspect of this positionality to acknowledge. I grew up in Chitral, socialised in a culture that organises knowledge hierarchically by gender. Despite my conscious commitment to feminist methodology and awareness of these dynamics, I cannot dismiss the possibility that I unconsciously gave more interpretive weight to male testimony, particularly from elder male clan members, who spoke with authority, certainty, and a political vocabulary I recognised. Women's knowledge in this context is often conveyed through different registers: emotional testimony, embodied memory, domestic metaphor, and narrative rather than argument. These registers risk being undervalued not because they are less epistemologically valid, this thesis explicitly argues they are not, but because the training a male researcher receives, even in critical human geography, primarily prepares him to receive and analyse the former. Sultana (2021) argues that feminist political ecology requires researchers not only to address gendered inequalities in their field sites but also to interrogate the gendered assumptions embedded in their own analytical frameworks. I took this seriously in my interpretive approach, particularly in Article 01's development of "double apoliticisation," but the reflexive process needs to be more honestly acknowledged here: my data, my field

presence, and quite possibly my analysis are marked by a male perspective that I could mitigate but not completely eliminate.

These contradictions do not invalidate the findings of this thesis, but they do define its scope. Recognising this limitation is consistent with intersectional feminist approaches in political ecology, which emphasise that gender intersects with class, kinship, and authority to shape both environmental governance and research practice (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, & Wangari, 1996; Nightingale, 2011). My position as a Chitrali pastoralist offered cultural familiarity and trust but did not neutralise the gendered hierarchies embedded within the social organisation of pastoral life. A female researcher from Chitral, or a team that includes a female Chitrali researcher, would likely produce a distinct and, in several significant respects, more comprehensive account. This would particularly pertain to women's embodied and spiritual connections to the high pasture commons, the informal networks and knowledge-sharing practices that persist among women at the periphery of the formal commons governance system, the women's poetic traditions that address the commons in registers not fully accessible to this thesis, and the experiential nuances of the pastoral freedom represented by the *ghari*. I identify this gap not as an excuse but as an invitation for further research to address it.

Gradation of Endogeny:

Initially, I perceived myself as an insider at the beginning of the research process. However, it soon became apparent that my insider status was not as comprehensive as anticipated. This realisation necessitated my navigation through the fluctuating "gradations of endogeny" concerning my positionality (Jacobs-Huey, 2002). This was often complicated by my ascribed role as an educated pastoralist, the associated risk factors of physically going to the high mountains with the pastoralists, and the recognition of the

complex nature of the researcher-participant dynamic. Consequently, my participation in pastoralist activities during the research required continuous negotiations. During a meeting between the pastoralists of my village and the gujjur (hired shepherd who comes from lower Chitral to take care of the village herd in summer in the high pastures), tensions escalated significantly due to strong disagreements, raising concerns about the potential for conflict over unresolved issues from the previous year involving the same gujjur. Such tensions are not uncommon in these gatherings, as individuals who have previously lost livestock seek greater assurances for their animals, and *gujjurs* sometimes depart without adequate accountability for the preceding year, leading to minor conflicts at the start of the subsequent year. My elder cousins promptly advised me to leave the meeting, citing the potential for physical danger. Although I wished to observe the resolution process, I was urged to leave. This experience highlighted that I was perceived as someone who should not be present in potentially volatile situations despite being part of the pastoralist community. This perception underscored my position as an outsider-insider, as these events are typically non-violent, yet there was a desire to protect me, indicating a nuanced insider status.

Similarly, my family did not allow me to conduct participatory observation in the high pastures, especially on the day of the event of taking the *mal* (livestock) to the high pastures (*ghari nisik*). Although I had undertaken this activity a decade ago, they now expressed concerns about potential dangers, such as falling rocks dislodged by the goats or the difficulty of the hiking paths, which they believed I might not be able to navigate effectively. Despite my efforts to obtain permission, my request was denied. As a result, I asked my cousins to take pictures and record videos, and I was only able to visit the area later when I met with the Gujjur and spent some time in the high pastures. These experiences underscored my position as an insider, while simultaneously explicating the

complexities faced by insider scholars in navigating exclusion, a phenomenon Collins (1991) termed “the outsider within.”



Fig 05: *Mashqulgi* with an elder pastoralist in Meragram No. 2, Phordugher, Yarkhun.

A critical aspect of reflection in the research process is effectively communicating the concept of research to individuals who have not received formal education and are unfamiliar with academic practices. The notion of an "interview" is often perceived by these individuals as something encountered only through media portrayals featuring prominent figures. Consequently, when approached to participate in an interview, they may perceive it as trivial due to their lack of public recognition. This perception can lead to feelings of pressure and concern about being featured on television or social media. To address this, I adopted a natural approach, explaining that I was conducting a "*mashqulgi*"

for my university work and that I would record the conversation on my phone for later reference when translating the discussion into English. This method occasionally resulted in the entire family participating, creating additional background noise and diverting the topic of discussion. However, I tried to steer the conversation back to the main subject during my speaking turns. I also requested that the interviewee sit outside or in a guest room, when feasible, to minimise background noise and prevent unnecessary participation. I preferred conducting interviews on sunny days, sitting outdoors, and asking the family to refrain from interrupting our "*Mashqulgi*," as it was significant for my university. This strategy has proven effective in making the participants feel more comfortable during discussions. This reflection is based on my master's degree interviews in Chitral, where I aimed to overcome these challenges by employing local techniques. Such an approach may also assist others in conducting research in similar settings in Chitral. To address the challenges of positionality encountered while conducting research "at home" within my own village community (Jacobs-Huey, 2002), I extended my study to encompass two additional valleys, Khot and Rech, where I occupied the role of an outsider rather than a familiar figure. Engaging with unfamiliar contexts presents several advantages. The researcher's lack of prior knowledge positions the respondent as an expert, thereby creating an empowering experience (Berger and Malkinson, 2000).

2. Khot Valley

In my research, the second village of focus was Khot, located in the Torkhow Valley, distinguished by its numerous small communal grazing areas and one of the most extensive pastures in Chitral, known as Shiaq Lasht. Prior to my visit in November 2022, I had established contact with several individuals from this region. Fortuitously, a friend, whose mother's house (*bapduri*) is in Khot, requested my assistance in delivering career

development sessions in local schools and religious centres, as he was affiliated with the Aga Khan Youth Sports Board (AKYSB). I readily accepted this opportunity as it allowed me to conduct my research while engaging with local youth. During our two-week stay, I conducted interviews with approximately 24 individuals, including two focus groups. Our accommodation was generously provided by my friend's uncle, who invited three representatives from each of the major local clans to his home for dinner during the first week of our stay. Afterwards, I conducted interviews. Subsequently, I contacted other acquaintances and spent a day in each sub-village interviewing individuals recommended by my hosts or previous respondents. For oral histories, I specifically sought out long-term residents involved in pastoral activities and elders knowledgeable about the region's history. We visited over seven sub-villages in Khot, conducted interviews with 20 individuals, and organised two focus groups. One focus group was unplanned; upon visiting the most remote village adjacent to the main pasture of Shiaq Lasht, we learned of a recent bereavement. While offering our condolences, an acquaintance of my friend invited us for tea in their village. During this visit, he gathered additional villagers who had come to pay their respects, resulting in an impromptu focus group discussion with seven male residents present. This dialogue provided valuable insights into the commons, perceived challenges, and opportunities. Similarly, an interview with a shopkeeper evolved into a focus group when his friends who regularly gathered at his shop in the evenings joined the discussion. Focus groups are inherently constrained by participants' willingness to share information, especially when they are aware that their remarks will be heard by others, whether acquaintances or strangers (Gerson, 2020). Nonetheless, the focus groups proved beneficial in several respects, as residents reflected on my questions and posed questions to each other. This spontaneous group interview, comprising four individuals,

offered a range of perspectives and highlighted several points of contention regarding the commons, some of which are addressed in Paper 01.



Fig 06: A focus group with the members of Khot village near Shiaq Lasht

During my fieldwork in Khot, a participant informed me of a conflict regarding the commons in the neighbouring Rech Valley. Although our initial plan was to return home from Khot, this new information necessitated including Rech as an additional field site before my departure. It was winter, and the following day we encountered three feet of snow, which led to road closures. Consequently, I was compelled to stay for two more days. I utilised this opportunity to conduct interviews with four additional individuals, bringing the total to 24 interviews and two focus group discussions from Khot. On the third day, we successfully departed Khot by equipping a small Suzuki vehicle with tyre chains. These challenges underscore the unique experiences inherent in conducting

research in remote rural areas and emphasise the importance of being prepared for unforeseen circumstances.

3. **Rech Valley**

Upon our arrival in the village of Rech, my friend had already informed a community leader about our visit, and he graciously hosted us on the first day. Our host, a teacher and community leader, was the initial interviewee and provided a comprehensive account of the conflict over the pasture known as Shaa Junali, which involved the high and lower clans. He also recommended several individuals for subsequent interviews over the following two days. In the ensuing days, I contacted acquaintances and relatives from previous visits, aiming to interview one individual from each of their networks. During our stay, we interviewed approximately 13 participants. On the third day, I undertook a lengthy journey on foot to a village inaccessible by road due to snowfall, where I interviewed a well-known hunter. Additionally, I interviewed several women from that village; however, their insights into the ongoing conflict were limited because of their minimal involvement in political matters, which I explore further in Article 01. Throughout my visits to various households in Rech, I held numerous informal discussions concerning my research focus. After several days, I observed a repetition of information, prompting our departure from Rech to return to Booni. There, I interviewed my friend's mother, who had grown up in Khot, and engaged in a meaningful discussion about her childhood experiences with the pastures and the commons.

Reflections, Positionality, and Challenges

In terms of positionality, the benefits and challenges I encountered were similar to those previously described for Meragram Yarkhun above. My proficiency in the local language and extensive network of acquaintances, many of whom are familiar with me through social media owing to my academic journey at Oxford, significantly facilitated

the establishment of trust. These acquaintances often accompanied me and introduced me to respondents. However, I perceived myself as more of an outsider at these two field sites, having visited them only once before. This outsider status was advantageous because it prompted participants to provide more detailed information and explanations. Nonetheless, there were instances where I needed to interrupt and request clarification on the names of places and individuals that they assumed I already knew. My engagement with the youth during my research further contributed to building trust, as many of the interviewees had children or siblings who attended my career guidance sessions in the village. I am particularly grateful to my friend Fida, who remained with me throughout the fieldwork process and facilitated connections with numerous individuals, given his familiarity with the area and its inhabitants through his professional engagement and familial ties to Khot. While I actively tried to identify multiple entry points for my interviews beyond Fida, I remain cognisant that some of the interviewees may still be more linked to Fida and his connections in Khot.



Fig 07: *Mashqulgi* with an elder in Torkhow sitting next to the fire stove at his house

A distinct challenge encountered across all field areas in Chitral was navigating and negotiating participants' expectations, particularly those unfamiliar with academic research interviews. In Chitral, the closest experience to being interviewed occurs when NGOs conduct surveys in these villages before distributing aid or providing training. The individuals conducting these surveys are referred to as "*niweshak*" or "note takers." These individuals often create expectations among locals that they will return with some form of support, which extends to academic researchers visiting such locations (Koen, Wassenaar, & Mamotte, 2017). In certain areas of Rech, some individuals assumed that I was an NGO worker visiting from abroad. While seated in the home of a participant, a woman entered hastily, sat down, and began recounting her problems, ranging from her husband's unemployment to the recent death of her cow, believing that she deserved aid. Fortunately, another participant clarified that I was conducting an interview for my

university "studies" and was not affiliated with an NGO. I offered my apologies, and we subsequently discussed some of her cherished memories of communal grazing areas. She volunteered to participate in the study, and I included her as a research participant. Several similar instances occurred in which either participants or observers of the interviews expressed expectations that I would undertake significant actions for Chitral because of my affiliation with a prestigious institution. Numerous individuals expressed interest in observing the results of my research, anticipating that it might lead to practical applications for them. Jacobs-Huey (2002) explains this challenge of the positionality of native researchers as follows:

Native researchers, perhaps more than others, often experience pressures to “translate” their work so that it is accessible to both lay/communal and academic audiences. This task, however, can be difficult for native ethnographers to reconcile because each constituency has multiple, and often contradictory, standards governing how to ask and how to say things (and what) in published reports (p. 793).

Having submitted four papers for publication, I now face the dilemma of whether the theorisation I have undertaken will be readily accessible to the participants I interviewed. I intend to explore more accessible dissemination methods, such as poetry gatherings and policy white papers, although the immediate outputs of my DPhil, in the form of academic papers, may remain beyond the reach of the general Chitrali pastoralists’ access.



Figure 08: After getting stuck in Khot valley due to heavy snowfall with my friend Fida

Finally, I had to deal with the challenge of not selecting a more opportune time to conduct interviews, as winter is not ideal for fieldwork in these remote mountainous regions, with limited facilities during snowfall. However, I was unable to visit these villages in the summer due to road closures caused by flooding. This underscores the impact of climate change and adverse weather conditions as significant obstacles to my research in the Chitral region. Overall, the experience was enriching, providing valuable insights into the area, its challenges, and its people during the fieldwork.



Fig 09: After *mashqulgi* with women elders in Torkhow

Additional Interviews

In addition to conducting interviews with community members, I engaged with esteemed historians in Chitral who have conducted extensive research on the region. Our discussions were particularly enlightening regarding the circumstances surrounding Chitral's accession to Pakistan and the enactment of the 1975 Notification. These historians provided historical insights based on the primary sources they examined, although these sources have not been explicitly documented or published. Furthermore, I interviewed five local professors who conducted research on Chitral during their doctoral studies, and their insights proved invaluable. Three of these scholars were based in Chitral, while I travelled to Peshawar and Islamabad to interview the remaining two. One academic in Peshawar has also researched commons, offering insights that were especially beneficial

in considering various aspects of commons, such as their similarities and differences with nearby regions**,** such as Dir District and Gilgit-Baltistan. In Peshawar, I also interviewed a lawyer representing the people of Chitral in a legal case against the state concerning common land. Our discussion at his residence was productive, focusing on the case proceedings and complexities, which are further explored in Articles 01 and 04. Additionally, I interviewed two government officials: one from Chitral and the other from the forest department in Swat. Securing these interviews was challenging and required persistent efforts over several days. I stayed a few days in Swat, navigating the bureaucratic processes, and was shown around different offices in the area. However, initially, no one was willing to be interviewed for this study. Finally, one of the officials agreed to speak with me, as explained in detail in Article 01. Although I visited the forest department in Peshawar, I was unable to identify a relevant individual for an interview there. I also interviewed several poets to explore Chitral's poetic tradition and uncover historical instances of poetic performance as forms of resistance, in addition to collecting their poems from them later. To my surprise, numerous examples of historical poetic resistance exist, which will be discussed below and in Article 03.



Fig 10: After *mashqulgi* with an intellectual and poet from Chitral in Peshawar.

Poetry and Musical Expressions as Research Methodologies

This research utilises poetic and musical expression to investigate the relationships among local communities, commons, and more-than-human entities and to trace situated forms of resistance to the nationalisation of commons, particularly in Article 03. Recent work by Segura and Sekulova (2024) explores how Mongolian poetry serves as a form of nonviolent resistance against cultural assimilation in Inner Mongolia. In this context, poetry functions as a decolonial method rooted in Chitral's epistemological practices, illuminating relationships that conventional research methods often overlook (Wright, 2022; Kovach, 2009). A young Chitrali poet, Ayoubi (2024), encapsulates the relationship between place, poetics, and dwelling within the specific context of Chitral:

“We have settled among the mountains, for we cherish nature

We have settled among the mountains, for we are poets and writers” [1]

This approach is consistent with poetic enquiry, an arts-based research paradigm (Leavy, 2015) that prioritises experiential, affective, and community-centred knowledge practices. It is extensively employed to address environmental transformation, Indigenous resistance, and decolonisation of academic practice (Prendergast, 2009; Faulkner, 2020). Within the context of this study, poetry serves as a critique of the Western more-than-human turn, which claims to position individuals within multispecies worlds and responsibilities (Choi, 2016; Abram, 1996) and aligns with Indigenous scholarship that emphasises relational accountability, sovereignty, and place-based ethics (Justice, 2018; Simpson, 2017).

Community Partnership and Poetry Gathering

At the start of my fieldwork in 2022, I collaborated with the Mother Tongue Initiatives for Education and Research (MIER), a local organisation in Chitral that is committed to preserving regional languages. Through this partnership, I issued a call for poetry focusing on the commons and more-than-human entities in Chitral. I provided a research summary and invited poets who had explored or intended to explore this theme during my three-year study from 2022 to 2025 to submit their work. The call was disseminated through word of mouth and Facebook and WhatsApp groups comprising regional literary figures. As both a poet and a member of the organisation, I received substantial support, although some community members expressed reservations about engaging with poets through social media. A historian questioned the relevance of poets’ insights into the nationalisation of the commons. This online dialogue on Facebook

[1] فطرتو خوش داراک بیکن زومان موژو آباد
شاعر، نیویشاک بیکن زومان موژو آباد

encouraged poets to demonstrate both subject knowledge and civic commitment, ultimately leading the initial objector to acknowledge the value of their contributions to knowledge creation.

Between 2022 and 2025, I received twelve poems from local Khowar poets who responded directly to the call, and I collected an additional fifteen poems from mushaira gatherings through in-person participation and online circulation. I ceased considering further poems for this research in 2025 when thematic saturation was reached or when I had sufficient poems to present the poetic case. However, the process of collecting poems continues. Concurrently, I remained attentive to new poems emerging in public settings and included seven publicly performed poems that were not formally submitted but clearly addressed pastoralist and more-than-human commons. All the participating poets granted me permission to translate and use their work for this academic project.

The participatory process described above is consistent with the established best practices of poetic enquiry (Prendergast, 2009). This approach incorporates community calls, collective validation, shared authorship, and open peer review to emphasise voice, accountability, and co-production in both the creation and dissemination of information (Leavy, 2015).

Translation, Verification, and Analysis of Poems

The poems were originally compiled in the Khowar language of Chitral. As a native speaker of Khowar, I undertook the task of translating these poems into English. It is widely acknowledged that translations, particularly of poetry, often fall short of capturing the whole essence of the original work, as poetry is deeply rooted in localised meanings, traditions and emotions. My prior experience translating over 100 Khowar

poems in collaboration with Chitral's leading artists for dissemination on YouTube channels significantly facilitated this process. The translations were anonymised and subsequently reviewed by seven Khowar-speaking academics and poets, four of whom also contributed to the collection, to ensure both poetic integrity and the accuracy of the translations. Their feedback was meticulously incorporated into the translation process. For words lacking direct English equivalents, I consulted a WhatsApp group comprising 300 Khowar enthusiasts, named *Khowar Khosh Darak* (The Lovers of Khowar), and translations were made based on their suggestions, while retaining the original Khowar terms where translation failed to convey the complete meaning. To address the challenge of preserving the essence and context of poetry in translation, I have included the original poems as footnotes or endnotes of the papers for the benefit of Khowar readers.

Following the transcription and translation of the poems, I performed a thematic analysis to discern the predominant themes that emerged from the data. This process was consistent with the overall thematic analysis procedure of my PhD project using NVivo, as detailed in the subsequent data analysis section. In accordance with the traditions of arts-based and poetic enquiry, I considered performance contexts as data in their own right rather than merely as neutral vessels for text (Prendergast, 2009; Leavy, 2015). This perspective is consistent with the disciplines of ethnomusicology and performance studies, which conceptualise poetry and music as epistemological modes and forms of social action that shape relationships, memories, and futures (Small, 1998; Turino, 2008). This analytical approach yielded rich, grounded information through the poetry methodology, which facilitated the conceptualisation and writing of article 03.

Why Choose Poetry as a Method in Chitral?

In his commentary on Noor Shams Uddin's translation of Beynon's (1900) book "*With Kelly to Chitral*," Farnood Alam (2022), a distinguished Pakistani writer, observes:

In the hierarchy of Iqbal (the national poet of Pakistan), martial symbols such as the sword and spear are prioritised[2], whereas cultural symbols like the peacock and lute are secondary. Conversely, in Chitral, the peacock and lute are both primary and secondary symbols. When presented with a firearm, the Chitrali people might adorn it with an apricot blossom or use sitar strings to embellish it. Rather than advancing toward conflict, they gravitate toward the river, singing love songs and spreading the melodies of the spring. They metaphorically dip bullets in ink to compose poetry (Translated from Urdu to English by the author).

Alam (2022) provides an insightful portrayal of the Chitrali people's profound affinity for music and poetry, while simultaneously critiquing colonial narratives, such as those by Beynon (1900), which predominantly focus on military expeditions in Chitral, neglecting its rich cultural and musical heritage. Although this depiction may appear to romanticise the Chitrali people, it poetically highlights their deep-seated passion for music and poetry. Chitral boasts a vibrant poetic and musical tradition intricately woven into the fabric of daily life (Marsden, 2005), rendering poetry an ideal research method. In my previous research in Chitral, I discovered that the locals perceived interviews as alien and felt unworthy of participation, associating interviews with celebrities or famous people due to interviews seen on television. To mitigate this, I refrained from using the term "interview", opting instead for "*mashqulgi*", the local term for discussion, and employed poetic methods to alleviate the pressure of sharing valuable information. Poetry serves as a natural mode of expression for poets who are already engaged in singing and recitation, making it a more effective method. Through *mashqulgi* with Chitrali poets regarding the

[2] He refers to Iqbal's famous Urdu poem from his work, Payaam-e-Mashriq:

"The destiny of nations I chart for you:
At first the sword and spear; the zither's, the lute's soft sighs at last."

history of local poetry, it was revealed that much of Chitral's early poetry was pastoral, frequently referencing life forms in *muzhayo*, such as *lowah, baseer, barwazi, ghoru, northerk*, and *phastek*[3], transmitted across generations through oral and musical traditions (Wali, Personal Communication, April 2025). For example, one of the oldest hunting folk songs, *ghoru*, illustrates a dialogue between a child and an ibex upon sighting an approaching hunter in the high pastures of the region. This poignant poetry fosters anti-hunting sentiments by depicting the ibex consoling the child about the hunter's approach:

Mother, dear mother, who is coming from down there?

Oh, mother's darling, he is only the shepherd of the pastures

Mother, dear mother, isn't that the gun shimmering?

Oh, mother's darling, it is only the rays of the sun[4]

The intimate relationship between humans and nonhuman entities has prompted poets to integrate animals, flowers, plants, fairies, and similar elements into the poetic tradition. In exploring methods to engage with the community to comprehend more-than-human entities within the commons, I naturally gravitated towards poetry. This approach sought to illuminate how communities perceive their relationship with communal environments and demonstrate poetry as a political instrument. As Justice (2018) has explained, the role of Indigenous poetry:

> Poetry makes intelligible a whole range of emotions and embodied understandings that we otherwise struggle to articulate or at least gives voice to our lack of understanding; sacred ceremony and song connect us with one another, and with

[3] These are different poetry forms in Khowar.

[4] A full version of the poem can be found here. Please note that there are several versions of ghoru: https://www.mahraka.com/ghoru.html?fbclid=IwY2xjawKPavFleHRuA2FlbQIxMABicmlkETFWT3h6b3Jqd09QMWZlbms3AR4bJXe__7mICW7Wl5KtEyigTVglT_X9fIzEsbFNVv_Z_mFpToqfR-OTAsEmfA_aem_ek_MMd9Xd1Grbl6GH8feig

> the other-than-human world, and simultaneously remind us that we matter to the world, but that we're not the centre of that world (Page 66).

In Chitral, poets articulate more-than-human entities as political actors through their poetic expressions, both in their submitted works and during *mushāira* (collective poetry recitals). Globally, Indigenous communities employ poetry to contest colonisation and the injustices perpetrated by modern nation-states (Justice, 2018). Chitral has a longstanding tradition of utilising poetry to resist local and national political circumstances, religious issues, and social challenges, often resulting in imprisonment or exile of poets. One such poet, Gul Azam Khan Gul (Phuruluko Zhaw) from Mulkhow, composed poetry opposing the clan system and authorities, leading to the Chitral state's prohibition of his work. His contemporary, Ziyarat Khan Zeerak (Sonoghro Malang) from Sonoghur, was exiled by the *mehtar* (ruler) Shuja-Ul-Mulk to the Mulkhow area for religious and rebellious reasons in 1917 (Parvaz, *mashqulgi*, 14 December 2022). Upon the ruler's seizure of his house and subsequent exile, Zeerak wrote a famous poem that is sung even today:

"We are seeking and feasting on the charity feasts of the deceased world
The officers of the town do not find a knife when they find us."

This poem illustrates the poets' ongoing struggle and resistance against local governance, leading local officials to harbour animosity towards the poets for causing disruptions. During this period, singing was integral to poetry, with poets vocalising their compositions for audiences to memorise. Both Gul Azam Khan Gul and Ziyarat Khan Zeerak address political issues through their performances. Poets such as Shereen from Kesu, Takbir Khan (Suero Malang), and others from the Lotkuh Valley also composed political poetry (Faizi, Mashqulgi, 12 December 2022). This tradition of employing poetry for socio-political commentary was prevalent when Chitral was a princely state, before its integration into Pakistan in 1947.

Following the incorporation of Chitral into Pakistan, poets began to address themes of neglect, socio-political conditions, and criticism of Pakistani national leaders who failed to advance the welfare of the Chitrali populace. Both Faizi and Haider, poets and participants in my study, highlighted a distinctive poetic form known as "*tarhi mushaira,*" which involves composing poetry based on a specific "*tarah*" (theme or verse). This verse is typically derived from a renowned poem but has been adapted to reflect contemporary circumstances. The tradition of *Tarhi Mushaira* began in 1978 when Anjuman-Taraqi-e-Khowar, a literary organisation, initiated poetic gatherings. A notable political "*tarah*" from that period was "*Na Shukur Bunayadam, Shukur no aratam Tan Chitraro sum*", originating from a folk song and translating to "Look at me, thankless person, I was not thankful to live in my Chitral", thereby underscoring socio-political issues (Faizi, *Mashqulgi*, 12 December 2022). Haider explained that poetic gatherings may be free-form (*gher-tarhi*), where participants present poetry without adhering to a specific style, pattern, or verse, or they may be *tarhi mushaira*, where all participants must utilise a prescribed verse as a template, maintaining the same meter and theme and responding to each other. He provided an example: "*kara ki sharif nameran, ma hato mararu goyan*," a political satire meaning "I want to finish those who take the name of Sharif," from a mushaira he attended (Haider, *Mashqulgi*, 03 December 2022). Poets frequently compose works in response to each other. While academics may not observe direct referencing in poetry to other academic works, many participants highlighted evident references to both contemporary and historical poetry. *Tarhi mushaira*, rooted in Indo-Persian literary traditions, functions as a medium for political engagement in Chitral, enabling poets to convey challenging truths through satire and indirect expressions. This form of poetry is invaluable in showing the resistance of local communities against the nationalisation of

pastoralist commons. I aim to hold a tarhi mushaira in Chitral upon returning in early 2026.

Reflexivity, Limits, and Dissemination of Poetic Methods

This grounded, community-centred methodology integrates local epistemologies of the commons, encompassing more-than-human entities, with global rights and resistance discourses. However, the poetry method in this study has some limitations. Despite repeated outreach efforts, I was able to obtain only one poem from a female poetess, highlighting the gendered dynamics inherent in public poetry performance. Poetry does not invariably serve as an emancipatory tool; it can perpetuate patriarchal structures and other forms of exclusion. Translation inherently mediates both affect and meaning. In contrast to prose or interviews, poetry often arises spontaneously rather than through direct enquiry, and there is little recourse if individuals do not respond to its call. Despite these constraints, the method proved effective in highlighting embodied and emplaced knowledge, further explained in Paper 03, substantiating Justice's assertion that poetry renders a spectrum of emotions and embodied understandings intelligible, reminding us of our significance in the world without necessitating a central position (Justice, 2018). In alignment with arts-based best practices and the open dissemination of findings, I will collaborate with MIER to organise a public mushaira (gathering of poets in which they recite poetry in turns and receive praise from fellow poets and the general audience) in early 2026. This event will facilitate the sharing and discussion of research through poetic and musical performances, multilingual presentations, and collaborative discussions. It will also serve as a means of communicating my research back to the community, which may not have direct access to academic publications.

Archival Methods

Given the limited academic research on Chitral and its historical context, particularly concerning the commons, I attempted to examine the available archival materials related to Chitral. This study focused on the period surrounding the partition of India in 1947, Chitral's accession to Pakistan in 1969, and the 1975 notification. To this end, I sought archival materials from various sources and successfully acquired several documents from an archival library in Peshawar, resources from a lawyer, a government booklet on commons from a government official, and additional materials from a journalist and a historian from Chitral. Notably, accessing the archives in Peshawar required an arduous journey. Below, I transcribe a voice note detailing this experience.

> "It is 10 January 2023, I am standing outside the archives in Peshawar, where I finally succeeded in obtaining copies of nine files after considerable effort. Initially, my access was denied because the head of the archives was absent, and I was instructed to return in a week. I shared my experience on Twitter, expressing frustration about the lack of resources for my own region and the need to extend my stay in Peshawar by a week. Upon my return yesterday, a senior official summoned me to his office, referencing my tweet and advising against such actions, as it had attracted the attention of his superior. He assured me that the staff would assist me in locating the necessary resource. However, the individual assigned to assist me refused to allow me to photograph or copy any materials, insisting that I provide a printed application and more details about my research. Despite presenting my university identification and national identity card, he remained unyielding, citing concerns that archival materials could be misused for claims, including land claims. Although I assured him of my purely academic intentions, he only permitted me to review the archives briefly. Today, I returned with the required printed letter and a research summary of the study. I was then asked to submit a handwritten application detailing the specific files and page numbers I required. Unfortunately, the photocopy machine was inoperative, so I used my phone to scan the document. After nearly two weeks of persistent effort, I gained access to nine files. One file, pertaining to Mastuj from the British era in Chitral, was shown to me the previous day. Still, access was denied today as the responsible individual claimed ignorance of its whereabouts".

Ultimately, I obtained several documents from the extensive archival collection, providing firsthand experience of the state's control over knowledge systems. National archives are often situated within specific government departments, which can affect their autonomy

and willingness to grant access to information (Ngoepe and Keakopa, 2011). Despite being a well-connected student from Chitral, I encountered numerous challenges, and I can only imagine the issues that students face who do not have the opportunity to travel to Peshawar or access other government officials who can help them obtain this information. This inaccessibility is one of the factors contributing to the low standard of historical knowledge production locally in Chitral. The state appears reluctant to allow access to archival materials that could reveal historical realities impacting the apoliticisation and marginalisation of regions like Chitral, a topic I explore further in Article 01. The archival documents I accessed include communications between British authorities and political agents in Chitral, correspondence and applications from the kings of Chitral to the British administration, meeting minutes of government meetings from the 1950s, reports on Chitral forests from the 1960s, and Pakistani government documents from the post-Partition period. Additionally, I discovered archival materials from local sources concerning land ownership during the Chitral state era, written in Farsi, which I translated into English with the assistance of Farsi-speaking colleagues. These documents helped write the Introduction chapter and Article 04 of my research.

Ethical Considerations and Crediting

All due credit is accorded to the individuals who contributed their knowledge and expertise to this study. In adherence to ethical research practices, this project received approval from the Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) of the University of Oxford. Additionally, informed oral and/or written consent was obtained from the research participants, and the collected data were securely stored on a password-protected laptop belonging to the researcher. These data will not be used for any other purpose unless prior notification is provided to the participants. To ensure the project's

relevance and utility to the local community, I initiated the project in 2022 by organising an online session with the Chitral Academics Circle, a consortium of academics from Chitral who convene online to discuss academic research pertinent to Chitral and beyond. I presented my research proposal to them and received positive feedback, which encouraged the continuation of the project. Throughout the writing process, I have consistently engaged with the community, shared my research at various local conferences, including the International Hindukush Conference in Chitral in 2023, and plan to disseminate my findings upon the completion of my thesis through academic publications, discussions on various local platforms such as the Chitral Academics Circle, publications in local blogs such as MIER, and through poetry gatherings. As a local researcher, I have consistently prioritised the community and research participants, providing them with opportunities to shape and inform this research actively.

Transcription and Translation

The transcription and translation of the *mashqulgi* interviews and poetry undertaken in this research were exhaustive and intricate, requiring more than a year to complete. Engaging with interviews and poetry in Khowar, my native language, I faced the dual challenge of accurately conveying not only the words but also the cultural context and emotional resonance in English. This task was particularly demanding because research conducted in a language different from that of academic publications inevitably introduces significant time constraints and complexity. I engaged in a thorough familiarisation process with the data by repeatedly listening to the voice recordings and subsequently translating the complete interviews, with particular emphasis on the pertinent sections. The selective inclusion of specific interview segments, while omitting others, is crucial as it renders the transcript more concise and facilitates analysis (Brady, 2015; Lamba et al.,

2022). Effective transcription necessitates the selection of segments relevant to the evaluation objectives, thereby guiding the extraction of essential data from transcripts rather than prescribing specific findings (Thomas, 2006).Throughout this process, I consulted local literary figures when encountering words or phrases that lacked direct English equivalents, ensuring that the translations remained as accurate and meaningful as possible. In such instances, I retained the original Khowar terms within the English text to enhance accessibility for Khowar readers and to preserve the nuances often lost in translation. Translating poetry presents even greater challenges, as it embodies abstract notions and layered meanings that are unique to Chitral's cultural and emotional landscape. My prior experience, translating several poems and documents between Khowar and English and writing numerous Khowar articles, proved invaluable, equipping me with the skills and sensitivity required for this demanding work. Ultimately, translation in this context was not a mechanical act of substituting words but a careful process of conveying context, emotion, and cultural specificity, which is especially crucial when working with poetic and oral forms, central to Chitrali expression. This experience underscored the significance of proficiency in the local language to conduct such research, while also highlighting the considerable time investment required for translation projects, a challenge not encountered by English researchers conducting interviews in English. Nonetheless, my aim has been to convey both the essence and the literal content of the text throughout this extensive translation process.

Data Analysis

Following the transcription and translation of the interviews and field notes, the collected data were analysed using NVivo software. Although digital software was employed for the analysis, the selection of codes and determination of the analytical

technique remained a manual process. Ultimately, although software can be beneficial for data storage and categorisation and may aid in the analytical process, it is important to recognise that systematic analysis cannot replace creative synthesis (Huy, 2012). The software does not, and should not, conduct the analysis on behalf of the researcher, as the "[I]nterpretation of the analysis still reside[s] with the researcher" (Humble, 2012, p. 125). I employed Andrea J. Bingham's five-phase process of qualitative analysis, which flexibly adapts its systematic and transparent structure to enhance the trustworthiness and rigour of my study while acknowledging the adaptability of this approach to suit specific research needs (Bingham, 2023). This framework typically progresses through Phase 1: Organising the Data (utilising deductive attribute coding to manage data source details), Phase 2: Sorting Data into Relevant Topical Categories (employing deductive topic codes aligned with research questions), Phase 3: Open/Initial Coding (applying inductive coding (abductive in my case) and constant comparison to identify emerging themes), Phase 4: Identifying Patterns, Themes, and Findings (using pattern coding to consolidate initial codes into themes and findings statements), and Phase 5: Applying Theory and Explaining Findings (utilising deductive codes based on existing literature/theory and inductive strategies such as analytic questioning to contextualise and explain results) (Bingham, 2023). By selectively engaging with specific phases, such as the initial data organisation (Phase 1) and the explicit connection between findings and theory (Phase 5), I conducted a systematic analysis while maintaining the necessary flexibility required by my methodology (Bingham, 2023). The data were coded employing an abductive coding system (Vila-Henninger et al., 2024). Deductive coding represents a top-down approach, applying codes developed a priori from existing theory, conceptual frameworks, or literature to organise data. In contrast, inductive coding is a data-driven, bottom-up approach in which codes, categories, and themes emerge organically from the data during

analysis (Bingham, 2023; Naeem et al., 2023). Abductive coding transcends the simple dichotomy of these two methods by intentionally integrating them by initiating theoretical frameworks or literature reviews (deduction) while systematically searching the data for anomalous or surprising empirical cases (Vila-Henninger et al., 2024; Naeem et al., 2023). This integrated process employs existing theories as benchmarks to identify unexpected observations, enabling researchers to generate novel theoretical explanations and insights to account for these anomalies, thereby facilitating knowledge construction (Elliott, 2018; Vila-Henninger et al., 2024). In a similar vein, I engaged in a reflexive thematic analysis, which significantly influenced the study's focus and culminated in the four principal analytical chapters of the thesis. Thematic analysis is a versatile and widely used research method that systematically identifies, examines, and interprets patterns or themes within a dataset, ultimately yielding novel insights and understandings (Naeem et al., 2023; Elliott, 2018; Thomas, 2006). This analytical approach enhances the rigour and trustworthiness of qualitative studies by providing a systematic process that is both organised and iterative, allowing researchers to balance organisation with the inductive capacity of qualitative work to generate or relate to theory from data (Naeem et al., 2023; Ravitch and Carl, 2019). By identifying themes as patterned meanings that connect data to the research questions, thematic analysis facilitates the reduction of dense qualitative text data into meaningful, manageable units, thereby ensuring a detailed and exhaustive examination of the data necessary for developing robust findings (Creswell, 2015; Naeem et al., 2023; Nowell et al., 2017). Through the application of these analytical methods, I developed a comprehensive understanding of the pastoralist commons in Chitral from multiple robust perspectives. This approach significantly enriched the overall project and ensured transparency in the methodology employed to produce the analyses presented in subsequent articles.

Writing Up from the Study Area and Afar

Writing findings, which encompass the critical stages of pre-writing and composing, is recognised as the fourth phase of the qualitative research process, following study design, data collection, and analysis (Rockmann & Vough, 2024). The composition of analytical articles is often considered the “main event” of the project, where authors must effectively summarise their extensive data to persuade the audience of the research's credibility and contribution (Goldberg & Allen, 2015). To achieve this, proficient qualitative writing necessitates a balance between “showing” the data through quotations and "telling" the interpretive narrative through the author's voice, which serves as the narrative "cement' that links claims and provides essential context (Rockmann & Vough, 2024). While the writing process is lengthy and complex, I wish to highlight an aspect of writing that requires attention in academia: writing up research from the study area. Composing research findings from the study site, rather than from the distant, controlled environment of a university library, offers a distinctive methodological perspective that significantly influences the research process and analysis. Unlike the conventional academic practice of disengaging from the field to compose findings, I had the opportunity to return to Chitral to draft two substantial articles for my thesis. I am conscious of the fact that this experience was obviously possible because of the privilege for me to return “home”, and not every scholar can afford the time, resources, and community relations to do this. This continuous immersion ensured that I remained closely connected to my research context; the issues, relationships, and observations central to my work continued to evolve around me daily. This proximity enabled me to write with an enhanced sense of realism and immediacy as I continually observed, reflected, and sought new perspectives through my ongoing engagement with the community. While seated in my backyard to write, I could discern the sounds of sheep and goats returning from the pasture, and the

discussions were centred on pastoralist practices. I could easily walk to one of the commons for an evening respite. This setting continually reminded me that the study area is a living, dynamic space rather than a static entity frozen in the past, as I had seen it a few years earlier. This highlighted the reflexivity needed to ensure that my writing resonated with the local individuals I met daily.

However, this approach also presents notable challenges. The risk of being overwhelmed by a constant flow of new data and observations was always present, complicating the boundaries of research and making it difficult to decide when to stop collecting and start synthesising the data. Furthermore, writing from within the study area exposed me to frequent social obligations and community events, such as funerals or weddings, which, while culturally significant, often disrupted my writing flow and focus. These distractions contrasted sharply with the more controlled and silent environment of university accommodation or a library, where I completed most of my dissertation and where my writing time could be more easily protected. Reflecting on this experience, it becomes clear that writing from the field is not simply a logistical choice but a methodological one that offers both advantages and vulnerabilities: it fosters ongoing reflexivity, deeper engagement, and richer insights but also requires careful management of boundaries, distractions, and the emotional labour of being both a researcher and a community member at home. Because I am interested in research methodologies, I plan to write a journal article on the importance, challenges, and opportunities of writing from the study area after completing my PhD, which may help other scholars consider this vital yet often overlooked step in research (Goldberg & Allen, 2015).



Figure 11: The Urkhan shotar common, a 15-minute walk from the author's writing spot

Conclusion

This chapter on research design and methodology presents a comprehensive and transparent approach to examining the *muzhayo* in Chitral. Throughout the research, a reflexive stance was maintained by critically engaging with my positionality as both an insider and an academic researcher, thereby enhancing ethical accountability and trustworthiness. The detailed description of the multi-method qualitative design, including ethnographic fieldwork, participatory observation, interviews, oral history, and local cultural practices, demonstrates a carefully considered methodology tailored to the context. By explicitly articulating the rationale for the methodological choices, the analysis, the challenges, and the reflexive practices, this chapter provides transparency that strengthens the study's integrity. Overall, the transparent and reflective methodology

outlined here establishes a robust foundation for subsequent analytical chapters and contributes to context-sensitive and ethically grounded knowledge production.

Locating Chitrali *Muzhayo* in the Wider Literature and Theory

Introduction

The concept of the commons has consistently been a focal point in discussions across geography, political ecology, anthropology, mobile pastoralist studies, development studies, and Indigenous scholarship. However, the way pastoralists in mountain communities conceptualise, inhabit, and govern their shared lands remains inadequately explored in mainstream academic discourse (Khan & Haque, 2021). Much of the foundational literature on commons governance is rooted in Western epistemic traditions (for instance, Hardin, 1968), which are shaped by the assumptions of rational choice, individualism, and capitalist property regimes. This body of literature typically centres on universalising narratives of scarcity, overuse, and state intervention, often neglecting the lived ontologies, emotional landscapes, and more-than-human worlds that characterise rural life. These frameworks frequently misrepresent the relational, spiritual, emotional, and multi-species dimensions that inform commons governance outside the Euro-American context (Locher, 2016). Pastoralist scholars, including many who come from pastoralist backgrounds, have drawn attention to contestation over land, including sedentarisation and dispossession, and have pushed back against the Tragedy of the Commons (Lesorogol, 2008; Galaty, 2016; Dell'Angelo et al., 2017; McCabe, 1990). The scholarship on the commons emerging from economics is inadequate for understanding pastoralist commons; hence, scholars working on pastoralist commons and others interested in commoning are pushing back with different perspectives (Makki, 2014; Scoones, 2023; Tsering & Unks, 2024; German, Unks & King, 2017; Fratkin, 1997). Thus, my thesis contributes to the literature that explores the commons from these alternative conceptualisations. As demonstrated throughout this thesis, the Chitrali pastoralist

commons, locally referred to as *muzhayo*, function not only as resource pools but also as ontological fields where multiple beings coexist, interact, and confer mutual obligations.

This literature review places the pastoralist commons of Chitral within the wider global debates and theories. It explores six interconnected areas of scholarship: classic and critical commons theory, enclosure and nationalisation, pastoralist land rights and mobility, Indigenous ontologies and relational geographies, and the theoretical framework that unites more-than-human and political ecology scholarship, followed by a decolonial approach to Chitral Studies. Each area offers a conceptual framework for the thesis while also highlighting the significant limitations of universalist theoretical models when applied to the Indigenous culturalscape of Chitral.

The chapter unfolds as a narrative, beginning with global theories of the commons, before gradually shifting towards more grounded, relational, and place-based approaches. This progression echoes the central argument of this thesis: understanding pastoralist commons requires moving away from resource management frameworks towards ontological, emotional, spiritual, and multispecies relationalities that influence everyday governance. In this way, this chapter contributes to the decolonisation of commons scholarship by highlighting conceptual vocabularies arising from the experiences, epistemologies, and ecological worlds of Chitral's Indigenous pastoralist communities, thereby enriching the broader fields of geography, anthropology, Indigenous Studies, and South Asian Studies.

The Evolution of Commons Scholarship: From Foundational Tragedy to Ontological Pluralism and Commoning

The commons scholarship has undergone a significant conceptual shift, moving away from pessimistic views on the use of collective resources towards modern analyses that emphasise relationality, power dynamics, affect, and ontology. This transition, from Hardin's (1968) tragedy narrative to the "commoning turn" (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019), is crucial for understanding pastoralist commons such as the muzhayo of Chitral, where communal land functions not only as a grazing resource but also as a relational, multispecies, and historically embedded domain. This section explicitly explores commons scholarship to establish a conceptual foundation for later discussions on pastoralism, enclosure, and Indigenous ontologies.

From Hardin's Pessimism to Early Correctives

The modern academic debate on the commons was sparked by Garrett Hardin's (1968) renowned essay, *The Tragedy of the Commons*, which argued that individuals exploit shared resources and tend to overuse them because of self-interest. Hardin's claim, later reinforced in *Extensions of the Tragedy* (Hardin, 1998), rested on an individualist worldview in which humans are rational choosers and commons are unregulated free-for-alls. His argument suggests that this destructive cycle can only be broken through exclusive control, particularly via state regulation or privatisation (Hardin, 1968). This reasoning, expressed as a straightforward yet flexible general theory, has gained widespread popularity and greatly influenced legal education and policymakers (Locher, 2016). It became one of the most cited scientific papers of the 20th century (Ostrom et al., 2002), shaping policy changes worldwide, including nationalisation and privatisation (Harvey, 2011; Mansfield, 2004). Hardin's ideas were directly adopted into policy and fed

into the ‘degradation discourse’ that linked pastoralist overgrazing to environmental damage (Yeh, 2005).

Critics quickly pointed out that Hardin conflated the ideas of "open access" and "common property”, failing to recognise the role of local regulations, authorities, and institutions (Feeny et al., 1990; Ostrom, 2000; Ssekajja, 2021). Ciriacy-Wantrup and Bishop (1975) notably argued that Hardin was criticising an “unmanaged” commons rather than a genuinely self-regulating system. Lewis Hyde, an expert on the commons, suggested renaming Hardin's concept to better reflect the conditions in which self-interested, non-communicating individuals exploit an unmanaged resource (Hyde, 2010, p. 44). Significantly, Hardin's (1968) parable was not based on empirical observations of real communal resource use but rather stemmed from a specific intellectual tradition: the stadial theory of the Enlightenment. Hardin also held a Malthusian view and worried that population growth would surpass food supplies. This historical perspective depicts societal progress through changes in property types, viewing communal systems associated with hunters and herders as less "civilised" than those based on private property associated with farmers and merchants (Schorr, 2018). This framework effectively offered a conceptual reason for the enclosure of communal lands as an unavoidable step towards progress and efficiency (Locher, 2016; Schorr, 2018). Consequently, the tragedy narrative provided an ideological justification for enclosure, colonisation, and modern state territorialisation, dynamics that remain common in many Majority World contexts, including Pakistan (Dove & Rao, 1990; Harvey, 2011; Jeffrey et al., 2012).

While Hardin's argument has significantly influenced policy discourse, it is important to recognise that critiques of Hardin's tragedy thesis have not been peripheral but have instead become the predominant perspective within commons scholarship over the past three decades in Western academia. Despite this consensus, it has had limited

impact on deterring states and international agencies from employing degradation discourse and the tragedy narrative to justify the enclosure of communal lands. Feeny et al. (1990) offered a foundational empirical correction, demonstrating through multiple cases that common-property regimes are distinct from open-access systems and function effectively across diverse ecological and social contexts. Cox et al. (2010), through their systematic meta-analysis of Ostrom's design principles across 91 cases, found that these principles consistently distinguished between successful and unsuccessful commons governance, directly challenging Hardin's assertion that collective management is inherently prone to failure. Bromley (1992) presented a more fundamental philosophical critique, contending that Hardin's model misrepresents the nature of property rights by conflating the absence of private ownership with the absence of regulation, thereby providing ideological justification for enclosure by portraying communal tenure as an institutional void rather than a distinct and legitimate form of property. A substantial body of empirical research has shown that communities frequently develop robust institutions and social norms capable of sustainably managing shared resources (McCay & Acheson, 1987; Ostrom, 1990; Agrawal, 2001). Rather than inevitable degradation, commons management often reflects complex systems of cooperation, monitoring, and mutual obligation embedded in local social relations. Economic and legal scholars have demonstrated that Hardin's essay systematically conflated regulated commons with unregulated open-access regimes, overlooking the long histories of common-pool institutions that successfully prevent overuse (Frischmann, Marciano, & Ramello, 2019). Historical analyses of English enclosures and agrarian change similarly reveal that the destruction of commons was driven less by inherent ecological unsustainability and more by capitalist pressures, class power, and state-sanctioned enclosure, contradicting Hardin's claim that commoners are doomed by their own rational greed (Harvey, 2011). In essence,

what Hardin presented as a universal ecological law was, as critics argue, a political narrative aligned with the rise of neoliberalism and the World Bank/IMF agenda of privatisation and structural adjustment (Frischmann et al., 2019).

The political and ideological functions of the tragedy narrative have been most incisively analysed by Mansfield (2004), who illustrates how the tragedy framework has been utilised in fisheries management to justify privatisation and the exclusion of small-scale fishing communities, a pattern that directly parallels the justification of Pakistan's 1975 notification. Cavanagh and Benjaminsen (2014) expand this analysis to "virtual nature reserves" in Sub-Saharan Africa, demonstrating how conservation organisations routinely invoke Hardin's logic to justify the exclusion of pastoralists from protected areas, framing mobile land use as a threat to biodiversity even in the face of contradictory ecological evidence. Schorr (2018) provides a historical genealogy of the tragedy narrative itself, tracing its origins to Enlightenment stadial theory and illustrating how it served as the conceptual framework for colonial land enclosures, transforming communal tenure systems into signs of civilizational backwardness rather than sophisticated adaptive governance. That Hardin himself later partially recanted his original argument and acknowledged the role of social institutions in governing commons only deepens the irony of the framework's continued policy life long after its intellectual foundations had crumbled. Collectively, this body of Western scholarship not only refutes Hardin on empirical grounds but also dismantles the ideological apparatus through which tragedy narratives continue to justify the dispossession of pastoral communities in Chitral and beyond.

Research conducted in Southwest Asia and the broader Middle East similarly contests Hardin’s assumptions, extending beyond the European context. Investigations into high-mountain pastoralism in northern Pakistan and adjacent areas, such as Shimshal in

Hunza and the Pamir-Karakoram interface, reveal that village institutions, pasture committees, and gendered duty systems have historically managed stocking levels, migration routes, and conflict resolution. These mechanisms have enabled the sustainability of communal rangelands over generations (Kreutzmann, 2025; Hussain, 2015). Contrary to the notion of inevitable degradation, these instances illustrate complex, adaptive commoning arrangements that incorporate rights, responsibilities, and sanctions. Comparable findings from Jordan, Syria, and Iran indicate that tribal and village institutions overseeing hima, water points, and tribal grazing territories have long operated as effective common-pool systems, despite current challenges presented by sedentarisation, land reforms, and conservation enclosures (Behnke, 2008; Chatty, 2003). Research from the Middle East and Southwest Asia further complicates the tragedy narrative. Studies of Bedouin rangelands, for instance, demonstrate that customary grazing rights and tribal authority have historically regulated pasture access, balancing ecological sustainability with social cohesion (Chatty, 2006; Lancaster & Lancaster, 2011). Similar observations are noted in Iran, Afghanistan, and neighbouring regions, where communal pasture management has been deeply embedded in kinship structures and seasonal migration patterns (Tapper, 1979; Kreutzmann, 2012). These cases emphasise that commons governance cannot be comprehended solely through abstract economic models but must be analysed within historically embedded social and political contexts. Building on this broader literature, my argument suggests not only that Hardin's framework is empirically inaccurate for Chitral but also that its persistent presence in Pakistani policy debates reflects a political decision to overlook well-documented commons governance traditions in favour of nationalisation and privatisation.

The Institutional Turn: Ostrom and the CPR Framework

The critique of Hardin's tragedy theory prompted an institutional shift in commons scholarship, shifting the focus from the resource itself to the governing institutions (Agrawal, 2003; Ostrom et al., 2002). A crucial conceptual distinction was drawn between physical resources and the social rules that govern their use, especially regarding Common-Pool Resources (CPRs), which are characterised by costly exclusion and subtractability (McKean, 1992; Ostrom et al., 2002). Ostrom (1990) empirically showed that communities worldwide have established complex and resilient institutions for managing shared resources. Her influential work, *Governing the Commons*, identified eight "design principles" that support sustainable commons governance: clear boundaries, collective decision-making, local monitoring, sanctions, and conflict resolution mechanisms, demonstrating that commoners can cooperate effectively without external coercion (Ostrom, 1990). This institutional shift refocused attention from resource scarcity to institutional arrangements, contributing to the wider debates on polycentric governance (Ostrom, 2010; Dietz et al., 2003).

Despite establishing the viability of communal management, the Common-Pool Resource (CPR) framework has faced rigorous geographical and sociological critiques. Critics argue that in its effort to propose policy models for community-based resource management (Agrawal, 2003), the CPR approach often reproduces the methodological individualism and economic assumptions inherent in the liberal theory it critiques (Bresnihan, 2015; Singh, 2017; Seitanidis & Gritzas, 2022). By focusing mainly on institutional design, rules, and economic incentives, the CPR literature tends to reduce commons to simple technical "resources" for management, thus overlooking the non-economic, political, emotional, and cultural dimensions intrinsic to communal life (Bresnihan, 2015; Khan, 2025a). Agrawal's (2003) influential critique pointed out that

CPR studies gather numerous variables, such as resource size, group heterogeneity, leadership, enforcement, and market integration, making causal analysis difficult and overly abstract. Furthermore, the CPR school has been criticised for its emphasis on small-scale, locally bounded systems, which can lead to an unexamined "scale problem" where successful local solutions do not necessarily apply at larger, global levels (Harvey, 2011). It has also been criticised for insufficient attention to power dynamics, discourses, and external influences (Clement, 2010; Haller, 2019), including the effects of external drivers and politics on resource access (Narayan et al., 2000). This is especially problematic in pastoralist and Indigenous contexts, where power relations strongly influence access to land (Khan & Haque, 2021; Khan, 2025a). Due to these limitations, I do not base my thesis on Ostrom's "design principles." Instead, I conceptualise the commons as ontological spaces, although some overlap may occur. While some of these critiques have been incorporated into Ostrom's later work (Ostrom, 2010), the institutional turn nonetheless laid a crucial foundation for recognising collective governance as viable, efficient, and resilient.

Critical Commons Scholarship: Commoning, Relationality, and the Ontological Turn

Recent scholarship in commons studies promotes a paradigm shift that goes beyond traditional resource management, arguing that the conventional framework is insufficient because commons are inherently social systems designed to meet collective needs (Bollier and Helfrich, 2019). This shift calls for an "OntoShift", a fundamental change in how we view reality, recognising that relationships and collaboration are primary existential categories (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019, p. 38). This perspective sees the commons not as a static entity, resource, or object, but as a dynamic process, activity, or ongoing social relationship (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019; Bresnihan, 2015; Linebaugh, 2008). The term "commoning" describes the continuous collective activity of creating and

recreating a shared existence, emphasising the inseparability of societal relationships from those with nature (Linebaugh, 2008). Bollier and Helfrich's (2019) "Triad of Commoning" captures this shift through three dimensions: Social Life, where commons emerge from shared lifeworlds, identities, trust, and conviviality; Peer Governance, where rules and norms are formed relationally rather than imposed externally; and provisioning, where commons support livelihoods through cooperation rather than competition. This body of work highlights care, reciprocity, and interdependence as central to commons governance (Tronto, 1993; de la Bellacasa, 2011; Blau, 2021; Fernandez-Gimenez et al., 2025). Singh (2017) persuasively argues that commoning produces alternative subjectivities, affective relations, socio-nature entanglements, and ethical orientations that differ fundamentally from those of capitalist individualism. This perspective maintains that the main struggle is not solely over resources but against enclosure (Jeffrey et al., 2012), which is understood as decommonisation, the appropriation of wealth, social relationships, and the very drive toward striving produced in common (Jeffrey et al., 2012; Khan & Haque, 2021). This critique is fundamental because enclosure depends on the epistemological separation of the social and natural spheres, rendering the essential work of social reproduction, care, and the nurturing of life invisible (Blau, 2021).

This emphasis on care, relationality, and lived experience initiated the Ontological Turn of the Commons. The ontological turn underscores relationality and the concept of "Nested-I", focusing on transcending the I-versus-we binary and revealing the contextual relationships between the individual and the collective, a reality often overlooked by Western thought (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019, p. 23). This discourse challenges the language of market economics, arguing that terms like "resource" imply instrumental relationships unsuitable for the commons, while the private/public duality fails to fully capture the reality of the commons (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019). Commoning is inherently connected to

an ethic of care, broadly defined as “everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible,” including bodies, selves, and the environment (Tronto, 1993, quoted in de la Bellacasa, 2011; Blau, 2021). This relational ethic, often central to Indigenous moral frameworks, stresses interdependence and reciprocity (Fernandez-Gimenez et al., 2025; Tronto, 1993). This highlights that through embodied caring practices, such as patrolling a forest, known as Thenga Palli in India, individuals become commoners, fostering subjectivities of “being-in-common” (Singh, 2017). Neera Singh (2017) advocates for understanding the commons as “affective socio-nature relations,” in which affects (pre-cognitive forces) flow between bodies (human and non-human), nurturing alternative, other-than-capitalist subjectivities.

The most profound extension of this perspective is the concept of the “more-than-human (MTH) commons" (Bresnihan, 2015). This viewpoint rejects anthropocentric dualisms, such as nature versus culture, which are common in liberal thought (Braun, 2007), and recognises that the commons are co-formed by both human and non-human entities (Escobar, 2016; Rigkos-Zitthen & Kapitsinis, 2025). The *muzhayo* in Chitral aligns with this view, including livestock, wildlife, plants, and spiritual custodians such as fairies (*shawanan*/*nangini*) as active stakeholders (Khan, 2026). This challenges the traditional idea of humans as either exploiters or custodians, instead highlighting the practices of interaction, care, and coexistence in a shared world (Khan, 2025b). The push for MTH rights in the commons, rooted in Indigenous cosmologies, challenges the singular, modernist ontology of the state and advocates for a world in which many worlds can coexist (Escobar, 2016).

In summary, contemporary commons scholarship has shifted from its original emphasis on economic scarcity and institutional failure to a lively field focused on ontological complexity (Khan, 2025b), political contestation (Jeffrey et al., 2012), and the

nurturing of life-in-common through practices of care and relationality (Blau, 2021). This development provides a crucial theoretical basis for analysing the pastoralist commons of Chitral as both a political and ontological endeavour (Khan, 2025b).

Muzhayo as Commons and Commoning: Adequacy and Limits of the Scholarship

Having examined the progression of commons scholarship from institutional design to relational ontology, this section addresses the central theoretical inquiry within commons scholarship: in what respects does muzhayo constitute a commons, and how do Chitrali pastoralists participate in commoning? Equally significant is the question of where existing commoning scholarship serves as an adequate analytical framework for muzhayo and where it proves insufficient.

Recent scholarship has emphasised a conceptual distinction between "the commons" as a configuration of shared resources and institutions, and "commoning" as the ongoing social practices that establish and maintain these arrangements (Euler, 2018; García-López, Lang, & Singh, 2021). In this perspective, commons are not merely pre-existing goods but rather "the social form of matter determined by commoning" (Euler, 2018, p. 10); commoning engenders commons. This transition from noun to verb has been pivotal in recent human geography and anthropology, where scholars investigate how individuals coexist "in common" with one another and with more-than-human worlds under conditions of crisis and enclosure (García-López et al., 2021).

In accordance with this distinction, Muzhayo fulfils the foundational criteria for a commons across multiple frameworks. From the perspective of resource governance, it is classified as a common-pool resource: a pastoral landscape utilised collectively, characterised by a shared land, and historically regulated through customary rules, social boundaries, and authorities (such as aan waal), as well as overlapping clan and proximity-based entitlements (Ostrom, 1990; Partelow & Manlosa, 2023; Agrawal et al., 2023).

Muzhayo clearly exemplifies these characteristics: recognised seasonal rights, locally enforced rules governing movement and use, and collective sanctioning, which are the classical institutional markers of a commons, even when state law renders those rights precarious. Institutional analyses of commons, along with the extensive critique literature, particularly the Ostrom tradition and its critics, demonstrate that commons can exhibit durability when rules, monitoring, nested governance, and social norms are effectively employed to manage exclusion (Partelow & Manlosa, 2023). By this more comprehensive criterion, Muzhayo is evidently a commons in its material and institutional form, as further explored in article 02.

Simultaneously, *muzhayo* is both produced and perpetuated through a complex array of commoning practices, including seasonal movements such as sotsiri and heti, collective rituals like ghari nezik, pasture inspections (sotkorik), and daily negotiations concerning grazing, firewood, and access. These practices continuously redefine inclusion, exclusion, and obligation, thereby sustaining the commons as a dynamic socioecological relationship rather than a static resource (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019). In this context, the Chitrali case effectively exemplifies GarcíaLópez et al.'s (2021) assertion that commoning fundamentally involves "nurturing life-in-common" through affect, care, and co-becoming with both human and nonhuman entities. This nuanced understanding of commoning is most systematically theorised by De Angelis (2017), who theorises that any commons is constituted by three inseparable elements: the commonwealth (shared resources), the commoners (those who pool and share), and commoning itself (the ongoing social practice through which the shared world is reproduced). All three elements are fully present in muzhayo. The shared pastureland, its wildlife, water, and spiritual custodians constitute the commonwealth. The Chitrali pastoralist community, with its clan obligations, gendered labour of herding and domestic care, ancestral territorial claims, and shared Khowar moral

vocabulary, constitutes the commoners. Furthermore, the daily practices of moving livestock, regulating seasonal access, maintaining watercourses, performing rituals at sacred sites, and narrating ancestral rights enact commoning as a living social form. Singh's focus on affect and the concept of becoming-a-commoner underscores the significance of emotions, memory, and identity. Muzhayo functions through these affective processes as much as it does through formal regulations (Singh, 2017). Caffentzis and Federici (2014) emphasise that commons are not merely inherited; they are actively produced and reproduced in opposition to enclosure. The ongoing efforts of Chitrali pastoralists to sustain muzhayo in the face of the 1975 nationalisation, through assertion, grievance, customary practice, and poetry, exemplify this form of anti-enclosure commoning. This assertion is consistent with my argument in Article 4, which suggests that nationalisation and cadastral reform should be interpreted as efforts to supplant pastoralist commoning with state-imposed property classifications.

Recent scholarship has further deepened the understanding of the commons. García-López et al. (2021) propose conceptualising commons through the framework of co-becoming, suggesting that commons are not pre-existing resources awaiting governance but are actively produced through practices of care, labour, and interspecies relations. Chitrali pastoralists do not merely utilise the muzhayo; rather, they become pastoral commoners through their interactions with livestock, the land, the seasons, and spiritual entities. Similarly, Euler (2019) conceptualises the commons as a social form characterised by voluntariness, autonomy, and the satisfaction of needs, with practices oriented toward sustaining life rather than generating profit. Euler argues that this is precisely what positions commoning as a foundation for post-capitalist futures. The subsistence-oriented, care-based, seasonally structured practices of highland pastoralism in Chitral closely align with this formulation (Blau, 2021). Nightingale (2019) advances the analysis by

demonstrating that commoning is not merely a set of material practices but a performative set of socionatural relations through which new subjects and political communities emerge, albeit contingently, through the exercise of power. Her framework clarifies both the generative and exclusionary dimensions of muzhayo. While the commons produce commoner subjectivities, they simultaneously reproduce gendered hierarchies in which women are marginalised from formal governance, even as their labour sustains the commons (this is explored in detail in Article 01 and Article 04).

Current academic work highlights the importance of examining commoning alongside power relations and the legal-institutional framework. Partelow and Manlosa (2023) present a recent systematic review demonstrating how commoning both generates and is constrained by power relations. They advocate for the integration of commoning analyses with frameworks capable of accounting for institutional change, de-commonization, and unequal recognition. This argument directly pertains to muzhayo: the 1975 notification and subsequent nationalisation represent processes of de-commonisation, reframing shared pastoral territories as state property and thereby undermining customary commoning practices. The commoning literature thus explains how everyday stewardship practices are rendered legible (or illegible) to state law, and how legal reclassification processes transform relational worlds into administrable territories (Partelow & Manlosa, 2023). Villamayor-Tomas et al. (2022) similarly illustrate that commons and social movements co-evolve, asserting that the commoning process cannot be understood apart from the political mobilisations that defend, reclaim, and reinvent it, a dynamic clearly visible in Chitrali communities' ongoing resistance to nationalisation. Richardson et al. (2024), synthesising a broad evidence base, advocate for commoning scholarship that transcends single case descriptions and employs methods attentive to causality,

contingency, and the values of the communities being studied, a call to which this insider-researcher ethnography directly responds.

While commoning scholarship offers essential analytical tools, it also exposes notable limitations when applied to muzhayo in Chitral. The first limitation is both empirical and geographic. Recent empirical studies have predominantly focused on urban, digital, or deagrarianised contexts (e.g. Henderson & Escobar, 2024; Dengler et al., 2025) or on established European commons (Olsen, 2024), with relatively few investigations addressing mobile pastoralists in the highlands of South Asia. Agrawal et al. (2023), in their comprehensive recent survey of commons research, acknowledge that despite significant advancements in methods and theory, the field continues to underemphasize issues of power, equity, and cultural specificity, particularly in pastoralist and Indigenous contexts in the Global South. Caffentzis and Federici (2014) further caution that commoning frameworks risk co-optation unless they are rooted in the specific material conditions and political histories of the communities they aim to illuminate. In Chitral, these conditions encompass colonial land law, postcolonial nationalisation, Islamic and Indigenous spiritual moral ontology, Khowar cosmological knowledge, and a highland pastoral economy embedded in a distinct regional geography that cannot be equated to a Western counterpart.

The second limitation is ontological. Even the most relational commoning frameworks remain implicitly anthropocentric, theorising commoners as human social actors, even when acknowledging non-human participation in commons governance. However, in Chitrali muzhayo, the moral and practical community of the commons includes livestock (mal) as beings with agency and dignity, wildlife as rights-bearing subjects, plants and water sources as relations rather than resources, and spiritual entities (nangini, or fairies) as active custodians of pastoral territory. Recent scholarship has begun

to address this gap. Samakov and Berkes (2017) illustrate through their study of sacred sites in Kyrgyzstan that spiritual commons, territories governed through cosmological obligation, taboo, and pilgrimage, function as effective community-conserved areas yet cannot be adequately theorised using Ostrom's institutional design principles, as increased engagement with a spiritual commons strengthens its binding power rather than diminishing through use. This insight resonates profoundly with the Chitrali nangini territories and the shawanan relation: the fairies' custodianship is not a governance mechanism to be designed or reformed but an ontological fact that constitutes the commoners' obligations and identities. García-López et al. (2021) and the circle of commoning framework proposed by Arbell (2023) have both advanced the concept of more-than-human commoning as relations of care between human and non-human actors, yet even these contributions tend to operate within a naturalist or materialist ontology that cannot fully integrate the spiritual ontological framework in which humans, animals, fairies, and the land are all makhlūqāt, created beings, whose relationships are governed by moral obligation rather than property rights or institutional rules.

The third limitation pertains to epistemological and decolonial considerations. The literature on commoning, even in its most critical forms, predominantly theorises from perspectives rooted in the Global North and subsequently applies these frameworks to other contexts (Nightingale, 2019; Varvarousis, 2022). Villamayor-Tomas and García-López (2021) note that although political ecology has long addressed commons struggles in the Global South, the theoretical frameworks used to analyse these struggles are not derived from within those contexts. This results in a form of epistemic asymmetry: Chitrali pastoral experiences provide the empirical data, while Northern theoretical frameworks are employed for analysis. Few studies seriously consider Indigenous cosmologies that recognise spirits, fairies, or other non-human entities as co-commoners, or treat poetry and

song as central epistemic practices of commoning rather than mere cultural background. Additionally, the commoning literature has been slow to engage specifically with pastoralism: as Fernandez-Gimenez et al. (2025) demonstrate, mobile pastoral commons are governed through ecological knowledge, kinship, and spiritual obligation in ways that resist translation into standard commoning frameworks, yet they represent one of the oldest and most globally widespread forms of commons governance. More broadly, Euler (2018, 2019), Caffentzis and Federici (2014), and De Angelis (2017) develop their commoning frameworks in relation to capitalist wage labour and urban enclosure in the industrialised world. The commoning relevant to muzhayo is not only a response to urban dispossession but to the postcolonial state territorialisation of ancestral pastoral landscapes in highland Asia, a context that necessitates conceptual tools tailored to its specific history, cosmology, and political formation.

My analysis, therefore, builds upon and extends existing schools of thought on commoning. It embraces the core insight that commons are best understood as relational processes of life in common (García-López et al., 2021), yet contends that in Chitral, these processes are ontologically richer and more-than-human than most existing frameworks allow. By interpreting muzhayo simultaneously as a commons, as a field of pastoralist commoning, and as an Indigenous culturalscape inhabited by livestock, ancestors, and fairies, the thesis situates the Chitrali case within contemporary commoning debates while also urging these debates to better account for mobility, cosmology, and legal plurality in the Majority World.

Enclosure, Nationalisation, and State-Making

Building on the previous section's exploration of the shift in commons scholarship from "tragedy" narratives to relational and ontological perspectives, the next focus is to

investigate the processes through which commons are enclosed, the mechanisms involved, and the political objectives they serve. Enclosure, broadly conceptualised as the transformation of shared or customary territories into state- or market-defined regimes of control, remains a key framework for analysing state formation, capitalist expansion, and rural dispossession (Marx, 1990; Harvey, 2003). Contemporary political ecologists argue that enclosure is not merely a historical event (Watts, 2004) but an ongoing political technology used by states, conservation actors, and capital to make landscapes understandable, reorganise social relations, and create new opportunities for extraction (Blomley, 2003; Peluso & Lund, 2011). Within this expanded discourse, nationalisation emerges as an important form of enclosure in the Majority World: a legal strategy through which post-colonial states reassert territorial sovereignty and appropriate communal lands under the guise of development, conservation, or administrative rationalisation (Ali, 2019). The pastoralist commons (*muzhayo*) in Chitral exemplifies this phenomenon. Here, nationalisation is not a neutral bureaucratic act but a political and ontological intervention that restructures Indigenous land relations, marginalises rural agency, and embeds state authority within previously autonomous pastoral landscapes (Khan and Haque, 2021). Situating Chitral within broader debates on enclosure, territorialisation, and legal pluralism clarifies the conceptual stakes of this thesis: enclosure must be understood not just as legal reclassification but as a multi-layered project through which the postcolonial state remakes land, subjects, and relations of belonging (Scott, 1998; Bollier & Helfrich, 2019).

Recent scholarship within the "government of paper" literature underscores the active role of bureaucratic instruments, such as files, notifications, maps, and land titles, as governance technologies that shape ownership by rendering certain claims visible while obscuring others (Hull, 2012). The concept of legibility, as articulated by Scott (1998), is pivotal in this context and warrants a more comprehensive analytical integration. In

"Seeing Like a State," Scott suggests that modern state power fundamentally operates through the endeavour of rendering complex social realities, such as customary tenure, diverse knowledge systems, and mobile livelihoods, legible to central administration by simplifying, standardising, and presenting them in formats amenable to counting, mapping, and administration. The 1975 Notification in Chitral exemplifies this legibility project: by legally designating all non-arable, non-privately titled land as state property, the Pakistani government redefined centuries of intricate, multilayered, customary pastoral tenure, traditionally governed by clan obligations, kinship, seasonal access, and ancestral claims, into a singular administrative category, "state land," thereby erasing the specificity of muzhayo by rendering it administratively invisible. Scott's analysis is particularly pertinent as it demonstrates that legibility projects are not neutral rationalisations but politically motivated simplifications that systematically disadvantage those whose livelihoods rely on complexity, mobility, and local knowledge, precisely the attributes of Chitrali pastoral governance.

Ferguson's (1994) notion of the "anti-politics machine" extends the analysis from state administration to the broader sphere of development discourse and is more directly relevant to the Chitrali case. Through his examination of Lesotho, Ferguson demonstrates how development projects systematically reframe political issues as technical ones: poverty is reinterpreted as a problem of resource distribution, dispossession as a capacity gap, and political conflict as a need for improved governance. This technical framing depoliticises disputes by presenting them as amenable to expert intervention rather than political claim-making, inadvertently expanding bureaucratic reach and state power into areas previously governed by local institutions. The Pakistani state's portrayal of Chitral's pastoral commons as unmanaged, environmentally degraded, and in need of scientific conservation management exemplifies Ferguson's anti-politics machine: what is, in reality,

a political conflict over ancestral land rights is recast as a technical issue of rangeland management, wildlife protection, and sustainable tourism development. This reframing is not incidental but structural; it is the mechanism through which the state extends administrative control over muzhayo while simultaneously denying the occurrence of any politically significant events. Foucault's (1991) concept of governmentality provides the third analytical layer, directly connecting to the apoliticisation argument developed in Article 01.

Foucault suggests that modern power mainly functions not through coercion, but by producing subjects who govern themselves. These individuals internalise norms, identities, and self-understandings that make certain behaviours seem natural and others unthinkable. The discourse of samajdar (wise/sensible), puraman (peaceful), and taleemyafta (educated), through which Chitrali pastoralists are addressed by state and development actors, exemplifies Foucauldian governmentality. These designations shape pastoral subjects who see political quietude as a sign of their intelligence, dignity, and modernity, making political claim-making feel like a threat to their self-image rather than a legitimate right. The power of this mechanism lies in its invisibility: it operates not by denying rights but by creating subjects for whom claiming rights feels inappropriate. Scott's concept of legibility, Ferguson's anti-politics machine, and Foucault's governmentality are thus not three separate frameworks to be used interchangeably in the Chitrali context, but three interconnected dimensions of a single political technology. This technology has enabled the Pakistani state to achieve the nationalisation of muzhayo, making them administratively visible, discursively technical, and experientially unchallengeable by pastoral subjects who are made to see themselves as too wise to protest. The following section synthesises these broader literatures to lay the foundation for understanding how nationalisation reshapes pastoralist commons such as the *muzhayo*,

with the Chitrali case examined empirically in subsequent articles, serving as a concrete example of these wider dynamics.

From Primitive Accumulation to Accumulation by Dispossession

Marx's analysis of "so-called primitive accumulation" remains the foundational reference for examining the concept of enclosure. He characterises it as "the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production" (Marx, 1990, p. 874) and scrutinises how English parliamentary enclosures dispossessed peasants of common lands, dismantled customary rights, and engendered a propertyless proletariat (Watts, 2004). For Marx, the coercive transformation of the commons into private property, sanctioned by law and violence, was not a peripheral anomaly but rather integral to capitalist social relations (Marx, 1990). Harvey (2003) reformulates it as primitive accumulation, viewing it as a persistent logic rather than a concluded historical event. He designates this as "accumulation by dispossession", including privatisation, commodification of public goods, financialisation, and enclosure of common property resources (Harvey, 2003, pp. 137–182). According to Harvey, enclosure continues through legal reforms, debts, and administrative reclassification. Other scholars have highlighted enclosure as a recurring strategy. Perelman (2000) examined how classical political economists extolled dispossession as an improvement, thereby obscuring the coercion involved. Glassman (2006) explains how primitive accumulation is reenacted in postcolonial contexts through state violence, market reforms, and extra-economic coercion. These perspectives are essential because, in the context of the Global South, nationalisation, the conversion of community land into state-owned territory, operates as a specific, non-private form of accumulation by dispossession (Borras et al., 2012; Wolford et al., 2013). These accounts relate to the focus of this study on the 1975 notification and state policies, as they emphasise that contemporary enclosure is often legalistic and bureaucratic rather than

solely physical: statutes, notifications, cadastres, and conservation plans can accomplish what fences once did- reconfiguring relations of access and authority over land (Blomley, 2003; Lund, 2011; Hull, 2012). I also problematise the concept of the "state" as a dynamic power relation and as a composite of institutions (in Articles 02 and 04) by focusing on the various agents and layers of state power rather than the fictional monolith referred to as "the state" (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019). This study situates Indigenous pastoralist communities within the Pakistani state, within which they are negotiating their ancestral rights to the land. In doing so, this study highlights the uncertainty and emerging development of state policies for rural communities such as Chitral.

Postcolonial Territorialisation, Nationalisation, and the Afterlives of Enclosure

Research on postcolonial territorialisation shows that state control over commons in countries such as Pakistan is deeply connected to colonial legal legacies and ongoing state-building efforts (Dove & Rao, 1990; Gilbert, 2015; Gabbert, 2021). Colonial land systems established fictional classifications, most notably terra nullius, "land belonging to no one" (Hendlin, 2014; Ali, 2025), which treated landscapes unsuited to sedentary farming as "empty" and available for appropriation (Gabbert, 2021; Bresnihan, 2015). These classifications created hierarchies in which pastoralist mobility and communal land rights were considered 'backward' or 'unproductive,' thereby justifying state intervention and dispossession (Naylor, 2023). In South Asia, the postcolonial state's expansion of these ideas involved replacing princely and customary authorities with centralised departments, especially forest and wildlife agencies, which transformed large rangelands from shared management to state property, a process known as decommonisation (Khan & Haque, 2021). In Pakistan, this culminated in sweeping nationalisation laws, such as the 1975 NWFP Notification, which declared forests, grazing lands, hunting grounds, "wastelands", rivers, and mountains as state-owned (Government of NWFP, 1976; Mulk,

2019). Such notifications act as coding systems of possession (Lund, 2011), turning diverse customary claims into official property categories and rendering Indigenous land tenure invisible. Recent research in the “government of paper” literature highlights how bureaucratic tools, such as files, notifications, maps, and titles, are not passive records but rather active governance technologies that establish ownership (Hull, 2012; Scott, 1998). Bureaucratic procedures often create a distance between decision-makers and customary users, establishing practical barriers to challenges. Ferguson's seminal critique of the "anti-politics machine" shows how framing social issues as technical enables the state to depoliticise disputes and marginalise local claims (Ferguson, 1990). Building on these critiques, the idea of apoliticisation, as discussed in Article 01, describes how the state and its allies preemptively shape and structurally uphold rural communities as non-political or "amenable." This process normalises top-down interventions and prevents meaningful political recognition (Li, 2007; Khan, 2025a).

The processes discussed are reinforced by the discursive enclosures. Political ecologists have demonstrated how “green grabbing” appropriates land under the pretext of environmental rationales, often by establishing protected areas that disrupt Indigenous resource systems (Fairhead et al., 2012; Colchester, 2003; Laltaika & Askew, 2021; Milne et al., 2023). Conservation narratives, especially those promoting “fortress conservation”, depict pastoral or mobile land use as being incompatible with ecological protection (Khan & Haque, 2021; Neumann, 1998; Brockington, 2002). The creation of Protected Areas (PAs) acts as a significant driver of decommonisation, frequently disrupting local resource-use systems and excluding Indigenous peoples from their resource legacies (Khan & Haque, 2021; Chatty, 2001; Colchester, 2003). In Chitral, the Pakistani state employs conservation and climate initiatives as a justification for "protecting" the land, while simultaneously facilitating the dispossession of communities for ventures such as tourism,

trophy hunting, and mining (Khan, 2025). Development discourse also reflects this dynamic: by describing land as "unused" or "underutilised", states justify dispossession as necessary for modernisation (Achiba, 2019; Naylor, 2023; Makki, 2014). Collectively, these literatures highlight that nationalisation, central to the Chitrali case examined in this thesis, is not merely an administrative clarification but a postcolonial technique of enclosure, drawing on colonial categories, conservation logics, and developmental ideologies to transform Indigenous commons, such as the *muzhayo*, into state-coded territorial assets.

Two key analytical lessons emerge from this body of literature for studying pastoralist commons, such as the *muzhayo*. First, nationalisation functions as a multidimensional enclosure, legal, discursive, bureaucratic, and ontological, redefining who speaks for the land, which knowledge is recognised, and which beings are represented in governance (Harvey, 2003; Peluso & Lund, 2011; Escobar, 2016). Second, enclosure mechanisms, via green grabbing, technical rationalisation, documentation, and elite mediation, shape possible forms of pastoralist resistance. Recognition strategies that mimic state vocabularies may achieve limited concessions while reinforcing categories that undermine customary tenure (Hull, 2012; Milne et al., 2023). For *muzhayo*, the challenge is to connect these macro literatures to practices of maintaining multispecies commons. The literature explains how policies enclose commons through codes and maps, utilise degradation narratives to justify exclusion, and create inequalities in access to the commons. It highlights the counterstrategies, legal claims, cultural assertions, and ritual politics that communities employ to contest state impositions (Colchester, 2003; Wolford et al., 2013). This thesis, therefore, documents and analyses the mechanisms of nationalisation while ethnographically exploring the relational worlds they displace.

Pastoralism and Nomadic Lives: Mobility and Commons in Mountainous Regions

Research on pastoralism provides a vital framework for understanding why the Chitrali *muzhayo* cannot be simplistically divided into separate land parcels or generalised as mere rangeland resources (Godoy-Sepúlveda et al. 2024). Pastoral systems across Africa, Asia, and Latin America are mainly characterised by mobility, collective grazing institutions, and deeply relational interactions between people, animals, and landscapes (Dong, 2016; Scoones, 2023; Fernandez-Gimenez, 2002; Kreutzmann, 2012; Schareika et al., 2021). Pastoralism is a globally important land-use system and, especially in mountainous regions, a finely tuned adaptation to environmental variability, rather than an outdated form of subsistence (Scoones, 2023; Briske et al., 2025). Analyses today highlight that mobility and nomadism, the regular and strategic movement of people and herds between seasonal pastures, form the core adaptive mechanism allowing pastoralists to follow patchy forage, reduce risks, and maintain productivity in highly variable rangelands (Krätli, 2016; Krätli & Schareika, 2010; Davies & Hatfield, 2007). This "non-equilibrium" view challenges static carrying-capacity models, showing that mobility promotes ecological diversity and resilience (Scoones, 1999; Sullivan and Homewood, 2003). Recognising mobility as an asset rather than a difficulty is essential when viewing the Chitrali *muzhayo* as a dynamic, seasonal common resource whose logic cannot be captured by sedentary property notions or fixed cadastral regimes (Briske et al., 2025). Economically, mobile pastoralism often exceeds sedentary options in marginal areas; however, its value is often undervalued by planners and statisticians (Chatty, 2003; Davies & Hatfield, 2007). Pastoral systems produce multiple benefits: meat, dairy, climate risk insurance, and market linkages, which are rarely reflected in narrow GDP metrics (Davies and Hatfield, 2007). This invisibility has serious policy consequences: when states nationalise or reclassify high pastures (as in Pakistan), they disregard the economic

rationale for mobility and prefer less productive land uses in marginal mountain environments (Mehta & Srivastava, 2019; Briske et al., 2025).

Pastoral tenure is often defined by overlapping temporal rights to access, passage, water, and rotational grazing, which are shared through kinship, reciprocal agreements, and seasonal rules rather than by exclusive private titles (Krätli & Schareika, 2010; Kavoori, 1999; Scoones, 2023). These adaptable governance arrangements enable communities to collectively manage uncertainty and allocate key resource areas (KRAs) during crisis seasons (Briske et al., 2025; Mehta and Srivastava, 2019). When conservation efforts, national parks, or cadastral regulations intervene, they usually impose fixed boundaries and formal titles that are poorly suited to seasonal regimes, often leading to de facto enclosures and dispossession (Hassan et al., 2022; Mauerman et al., 2023). Mobility is vital to a population's resilience. The Pastoralism, Uncertainty, and Resilience (PASTRES) programme, for example, highlights that the core strength of pastoralism lies in its ability to navigate uncertainty by relocating animals, adapting herd composition, and renegotiating social relations across spatial dimensions (PASTRES, n.d.). In the Mongolian and Tibetan rangelands, mobile pastoralists use flexible, negotiated land use rather than fixed boundaries, applying kinship, reciprocity, and local knowledge to manage pastures (Ahearn et al., 2017). Similar patterns are observed in the Andean Altiplano, where communal tenure and seasonal transhumance support both ecological sustainability and social cohesion (Damonte et al., 2019). However, this mobility faces increasing challenges from the state and market forces. Policies promoting sedentarisation, individual titling, and fixed land units often misinterpret pastoralism, viewing movement as irrational or environmentally damaging (Niamir-Fuller, 1999; Krätli & Schareika, 2010). Hassan et al. (2022) demonstrate how Kenya’s Community Land Act and devolution reforms, although ostensibly aimed at securing communal rights, tend to promote sedentism and

encourage individualised holdings, leaving Samburu pastoralists with no option but to settle in one place. Similarly, Mehta and Srivastava (2019) describe how water infrastructure, industrial expansion, and marketisation in Kutch, India, have enclosed traditional grazing routes, resulting in "pastoralists without pasture" and forcing herders into precarious wage labour. These dynamics strongly resonate in mountainous regions, such as Chitral, where mobility across high pastures and riverine commons has historically been essential to pastoral livelihoods. The Chitrali case, however, further extends this literature by emphasising how such mobility is rooted in spiritual, ancestral, and more-than-human relations, a theme explored in subsequent articles.

Pastoral commons are social and spiritual landscapes (Fernández-Giménez, 2002). Ethnographic studies emphasise that pastures are sites of memory, ritual, and identity; high pastures host seasonal rituals, provide women with spaces of relative autonomy, and are inhabited by nonhuman agencies in local cosmologies (Archambault, 2016; Hendlin, 2014). Fernández-Giménez et al. (2022) and Blau (2021) highlight that pastoral care practices, such as mothering, tending, and ceremonial obligations, serve both as ecological stewardship and as social reproduction. In Chitral, these relational and multispecies dimensions (ancestral ties, *nangini*, livestock personhood) suggest that nationalisation does more than change tenure; it disrupts the moral and spiritual frameworks that make commons meaningful and governable locally. The literature on “green grabbing” and conservation enclosures is especially relevant, as conservation narratives often depict pastoral mobility as a threat to biodiversity, justifying protected areas and interventions that restrict movement (Sternberg & Chatty, 2013; Fairhead, Leach & Scoones, 2012; Briske et al., 2025; Yeh, 2005; Chen, 2013). However, recent ecological syntheses have shown that pastoral grazing can sustain rangeland biodiversity and ecosystem functions, and grazing, fire, and animal movement are natural disturbance regimes that many species

depend on (Briske et al., 2025; Fernández-Giménez et al., 2022). Therefore, conservation-driven nationalisation in mountain contexts often replaces a complex, mobility-based stewardship that local communities have practised for generations with a more impoverishing, sedentary ecological model (Ali, 2019, 2025).

Mountain pastoralism in the Hindukush–Karakoram–Himalaya (HKH) region is characterised by distinct forms of vertical transhumance and relational governance (Ahmad et al., 2025; Khan, 2025; Fazlur-Rahman, 2009). Highland communities organise seasonal movements across steep altitudinal gradients, ranging from winter villages to spring/autumn fields and high summer pastures, over vertical distances that can exceed several thousand meters (Nüsser et al., 2012; Kreutzmann, 2012). In such contexts, the nationalisation of pastures into state land or protected areas, exemplified by the Khunjerab, Chitral, and Shimshal national parks, constitutes not only an economic challenge but also an ontological one: it redefines relational landscapes, places inhabited by people, animals, spirits, and histories into administratively recognisable entities (Kreutzmann, 2012; Hamid et al., 2021; Ali, 2019; Abidi-Habib & Lawrence, 2007). Empirical research from the HKH region shows how state interventions, labour shifts, and market connections are transforming pastoral lifestyles (Khan, 2025; Ahmad et al., 2025). Field studies in Chitral and Lotkuh document a decline in seasonal migration, labour shortages caused by younger individuals migrating for work, and an increasing reliance on hired herders and stall-feeding, trends that weaken customary rotational practices and concentrate grazing pressure (Hamid et al., 2021; Ahmad et al., 2025; Singh and Kerven, 2023). These processes reflect broader patterns seen in regions such as Samburu, Kutch, and Mongolia, where formalisation or "community" land laws often lead to unintended sedentarising effects, elite capture, and reduced mobility, leaving pastoralists with no choice but to settle (Hassan et al., 2022; Mehta & Srivastava, 2019).

Climate change and market integration further complicate the future of pastoralism (Omolo, 2010). Studies in Pastoralism and related fields document changes in snowfall, glacial melt, and seasonal predictability that disrupt migration calendars and fodder availability, necessitating adaptive strategies such as herd diversification, partial sedentarisation, or migration for wage labour (Yeh et al., 2014; Hamid et al., 2021; Gentle & Thwaites, 2016). These environmental stresses interact with policy pressures in ways that increase vulnerability. When mobility is restricted by national parks, infrastructure, or land privatisation, pastoralists lose the very flexibility needed to adapt to climatic shocks (Berhanu & Beyene, 2015; Briske et al., 2025; Mehta & Srivastava, 2019). Similarly, gendered analyses show that these transitions are not neutral in nature. Feminist pastoral scholarship highlights the erosion of women's labour, knowledge, and seasonal autonomy due to enclosure and sedentarisation (Becker, 2025; Mehta & Srivastava, 2019; Ahearn et al., 2017; Blau, 2023). In Chitral, women's narratives about summer pastures (*ghari)*, sites of solidarity and relative freedom, reveal a dual loss: economic access and social space (Khan, 2025b; Fratkin & Smith, 1995). This gendered dispossession often remains invisible in formal land adjudications, reinforcing the apoliticisation and marginalisation of women's claims (Fernández-Giménez et al., 2022).

For the thesis, this comparative pastoral literature presents three central claims. First, it legitimises mobility as an adaptive, productive form of governance that nationalisation undermines. Second, it provides empirical and theoretical reasons to view *muzhayo* as multispecies, seasonal commons, practices, and relations that cannot be reduced to cadastral parcels. Third, it shows that enclosure in mountain contexts operates through technical instruments (notifications, protected-area law, cadastral reform) which generate profound socio-ecological and gendered effects long before any physical fence is erected (Scott, 1998; Lund, 2011; Briske et al., 2025). Analysing Chitral within this

framework shifts the focus from "land as resource" to "land as a lived, moving, and shared world," revealing why nationalisation in the HKH is better understood as an ontological intervention into pastoral commons rather than a neutral tenure reform.

Pastoral Commons in the Middle East and Southwest Asia: Situating Chitral in its Broader Regional Context

To attain a more comprehensive regional understanding, it is imperative to engage with the extensive scholarship on pastoral commons in the Middle East and Southwest Asia, a geographic area that connects Chitral's Highland context to similar cases of tribal, nomadic, and agropastoral governance in Iran, Oman, Jordan, and the Arabian Peninsula. The foundational ethnographic work on pastoral commons governance in this region is Barth's (1961) study of the Basseri nomads of south Persia, "Nomads of South Persia," which documented the sophisticated system of the il-rah, the tribal road, as a form of collective tenure in which seasonal migration routes and their associated pasture rights were understood by tribespeople as communal property, governed by customary agreement and ancestral claim rather than formal title. Barth's analysis of how pastoral mobility itself functions as a governance system, regulating access, distributing risk, and maintaining ecological balance across altitudinal gradients, resonates directly with the seasonal transhumance structure of Chitrali muzhayo, in which movement between valley (deh) and high pasture (ghari) is itself the primary commons governance mechanism. Barth's earlier work in Swat (1956) similarly demonstrated that pastoral territories in the Hindu Kush and adjacent mountains are governed through overlapping social contracts and seasonal agreements that state cadastral systems routinely fail to register or protect.

Fazel's (1973) analysis of the encapsulation of nomadic societies in Iran provides a further critical reference point. Drawing on fieldwork among the Boyr Ahmad of

southwest Iran, Fazel demonstrates that nomadic pastoral communities are progressively incorporated, encapsulated into wider state structures that systematically delegitimise their customary tenure arrangements while simultaneously claiming to modernise and protect them. This encapsulation dynamic maps with striking precision onto the Chitrali case: the 1975 notification enacted precisely this form of administrative encapsulation, transforming muzhayo from a customary commons system into a state-defined tenure category while presenting nationalisation as rational governance rather than dispossession. The Iranian case is particularly instructive because it involves pasture nationalisation under a modernising state, Reza Shah's forced sedentarisation of nomadic tribes in the 1930s and the subsequent land reforms of the 1960s and 1970s, which are structurally analogous to Pakistan's own postcolonial nationalisation program. As Salzman (2004) demonstrates in his comparative synthesis of pastoral societies across the Middle East, India, and the Mediterranean, the recurrent pattern is one of pastoral accommodation to and resistance against state encroachment: pastoralists are rarely passive victims of enclosure but develop repertoires of negotiation, evasion, and assertion that parallel the "weapons of the weak" Scott (1985) identifies in other contexts. This comparative perspective illuminates the Chitrali pastoralists' own combination of formal legal petitions, informal resistance, and discursive compliance documented in Article 01 of this thesis.

Lancaster's (1981) ethnographic study of the Rwala Bedouin of the Arabian Peninsula explains how tribal territorial rights, articulated through genealogical obligation and social covenant rather than cartographic demarcation, constitute a robust commons governance system. This system has been systematically misinterpreted by pre-modern states and post-colonial governments as lawless, open-access, thereby justifying enclosure. In their subsequent work, Lancaster and Lancaster (2011) demonstrate that the misinterpretation of pastoral territory as legally vacant persists in contemporary state and

development discourse, facilitating its reclassification as state land in a manner structurally analogous to Pakistan's implementation of the 1975 notification. This enduring pattern, whereby tribal pastoral commons are rendered legally invisible and subsequently nationalised, is documented across the region by Salzman (2004), who situates it within broader dynamics of state formation and the suppression of nomadic political autonomy. Chatty (2003), through comparative research on mobile peoples and conservation across the Middle East, documents the consistent mischaracterisation of mobile pastoralism as a threat to resources that pastoralists have historically managed for centuries.

The Qashqa'i confederacy of southwest Iran presents a particularly direct comparative case for Chitral, as it involves pasture nationalisation by a postcolonial Muslim state with direct implications for customary commons tenure. Fazel (1985) documents how Iranian government-sponsored land reform in the 1960s and 1970s nationalised pasturelands, removed tribal leaders from governance, and placed seasonal migration under military control, a combination of administrative, legal, and coercive enclosure that dismantled a sophisticated multi-seasonal commons system governing hundreds of thousands of people across the Zagros Mountains. Similar to Chitral's 1975 notification, the Iranian pasture nationalisation was presented as rational resource management while dismantling the kinship-based, spiritually rooted, orally governed commons systems that had sustained pastoral livelihoods for generations. Chatty's (2001) analysis of wildlife conservation and pastoral tribes in the Middle East reveals a parallel dynamic: the establishment of protected areas dismantles multi-use, seasonally flexible commons systems that supported both pastoral livelihoods and biodiversity, replacing them with externally administered regimes that exclude the communities with the deepest knowledge of the land.

Sternberg and Chatty (2013) extend this analysis to the contemporary context, illustrating how modern conservation and climate initiatives across the Middle East and Southwest Asia reproduce colonial logics of pastoralist exclusion under the guise of environmental protection, a dynamic that directly mirrors the justification of Pakistan's 1975 notification through conservation and development discourse (Khan, 2025a). Ahearn and Chatty (2020), in their survey of Asian and Middle Eastern pastoralists, provide a recent comprehensive synthesis, demonstrating that across the Hindu Kush, the Zagros, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Levant, pastoral commons governance shares structural features, kinship-based tenure, seasonal mobility, multispecies relations, spiritual obligation, and oral customary law, that are consistently misinterpreted by states as the absence of governance rather than the presence of a distinct form of governance.

This regional literature offers a crucial comparative framework for understanding the Chitrali case. Muzhayo is not an isolated phenomenon but rather a well-documented form of pastoral commons in Southwest and Central Asia. Its destruction through nationalisation follows a pattern observed in scholarly studies of the Basseri, Boyr Ahmad, Qashqa'i, Rwala Bedouin, and Himalayan communities. The commonality across these cases is not coincidental; it reflects a shared political structure wherein postcolonial states inherit colonial land laws and utilise them against Indigenous pastoral commons systems, which these states simultaneously profess to protect.

Indigenous Ontologies, Land Rights, and the Culturalscape

This section shifts from Western common theories to the conceptual foundations of this thesis: Indigenous ontologies of land and what I call the Chitrali culturalscape. Drawing on global scholarship on relational worldviews, ontological politics, and Indigenous land struggles, this study suggests that *muzhayo* cannot be understood simply

as a neutral "resource" category. Instead, it embodies a living, ancestral, and more-than-human world in which land, identity, and cosmology are deeply interconnected. This conceptual change underpins the decolonial redefinition of the commons discussed in Articles 2, 3 and 4. In doing so, I connect the Chitrali case with global Indigenous struggles related to land, law and worldmaking.

Indigenous and decolonial scholars across various regions conceptualise territories as "relational ontologies" and "life projects," wherein humans, nonhumans, and spirits co-constitute one another through processes of dwelling, care, and struggle, rather than viewing them as inert surfaces subject to ownership and management (Escobar, 2001, 2008; Temper, 2019; De Leeuw & Hunt, 2018; Barker & Pickerill, 2019). For instance, the Nasa people in Colombia assert that territory is not land but life, a perspective that blurs the distinction between land and conditions of existence (Escobar, 2008). In the Peruvian Andes, mountains, referred to as apus, are perceived as “earthbeings”, sentient entities with whom humans engage in reciprocal relationships, such that mining and infrastructure projects pose threats not only to resources but also to the lives and relationships of these beings (de la Cadena, 2015). Similarly, Amerindian perspectivism suggests that humans, animals, and spirits share a common interiority, yet perceive the world from distinct bodily perspectives, thereby rendering personhood a more-than-human attribute rather than an exclusively human characteristic (Viveiros de Castro, 1998, 2014). In Native North American contexts, land and nonhumans are often described as relatives, and relationality, rather than individuality, is the proper unit of analysis for comprehending Indigenous worlds (TallBear, 2013). Collectively, these scholarly contributions challenge the modern dualisms of nature/society and subject/object, emphasising land as kin, an ancestor, or a co-traveller rather than as a commodity or a neutral substrate.

Because land is seen as both a relational and kinship entity, conflicts over land challenge both perceptions of reality and the criteria for political subjectivity. This has led scholars to view many modern land disputes as ontological conflicts or as political, in which differing worldviews clash (Blaser, 2009; Escobar, 2016; de la Cadena, 2015). On the one hand, the ontology of development treats land as a collection of resources within a sovereign state; on the other hand, relational ontologies view territory as a complex network of human, nonhuman, and spiritual relationships (Escobar, 2016). The legal recognition of "Indigenous territories" often forces these claims into frameworks of state property and sovereignty, despite communities basing their rights on relationships with nonhumans, ancestors, and place-specific practices (Blaser, 2013). Tuck and Yang (2012) argue that decolonisation is not just a metaphor but a call to restore land and life, warning that if decolonisation is reduced to mere recognition or inclusion, Indigenous ontologies of land as relation are subordinated to settler ontologies of land as property.

In this body of literature, the concepts of place, identity, and cosmology are deeply interconnected. Western Apache narratives demonstrate how place names and stories "stalk" listeners, imparting moral lessons and anchoring identity within specific landscapes (Basso, 1996). For Dene communities in northern Canada, landforms are the foundation of Indigenous thought and freedom; the struggle for land is synonymous with the struggle for the conditions of Indigenous existence (Coulthard, 2014). In Māori contexts, concepts such as whenua (land/placenta) and tūrangawaewae (a place to stand) express the idea that personhood and genealogy are rooted in specific lands and waters (Smith, 2012). Incorporating these discussions into my thesis allows me to frame Chitrali's assertion that "without these pastures, we would not exist as we are" as more than a mere metaphor; it articulates a relational ontology in which *muzhayo* is essential to the self and community, rather than a consumable asset.

To articulate this complexity, I propose extending the concepts of cultural landscape and taskscape (Ingold, 2000) into what I call the culturalscape for Chitral. Scholarship on cultural landscapes describes them as composite works of nature and humanity, shaped by long-standing interactions between communities and their environments (Mitchell et al., 2009). Ingold's idea of the "taskscape" builds on this by suggesting that landscapes are the hardened forms of interwoven activities such as herding, sowing, and praying, through which individuals engage with the world, implying that the landscape is the solidified expression of the taskscape (Ingold, 1993, 2000).

To fully integrate these frameworks, it is essential to consider the specific theoretical contributions each makes to the concept of the culturalscape and the understanding of muzhayo. Hirsch's (1995) anthropology of landscape is foundational in this regard, as Hirsch contends that landscape should be perceived as a cultural process characterised by a dialectical movement between foreground actuality; the everyday, inhabited, working world of immediate social life, and background potentiality; the ancestral, mythic, and cosmological horizon that imparts meaning, direction, and a sense of place to the foreground. According to this perspective, landscape is never merely a physical surface; it is continuously constituted through the tension between what is actively lived in the foreground and what is cosmologically potential in the background. This foreground/background dialectic aligns precisely with *muzhayo*. The foreground of muzhayo encompasses the daily working landscape of herding, dairy production, seasonal migration, and resource governance, akin to Ingold's concept of the taskscape. The background comprises the ancestral landscape of nangini custodianship, the spiritual obligations entailed by the *dokhna* ritual, the cosmological framework in which mountains are the abodes of unseen beings whose permission must be sought before entering sacred pasture zones, and the genealogical connections linking living pastoralists to the ancestors

whose remains lie in the soil. The culturalscape, as developed in this thesis, serves as the analytical concept for encompassing both foreground actuality and background potentiality within a single relational framework, which neither standard commons theory nor Ingold's taskscape concept alone can achieve, as both tend to privilege the active foreground of social practice over the cosmological background that renders that practice meaningful.

Ingold's (1993) concept of the taskscape offers insights that extend beyond what has been extracted in this thesis. Ingold suggests that a landscape is not merely a backdrop for human activities; rather, it is constituted through the interlocking rhythms of dwelling activities, tasks, movements, and attentions through which a community inhabits its world over time. In this context, the landscape is temporalised, bearing the accumulated record of past activities and projecting into future ones, thus serving as a medium of social memory and anticipation rather than a neutral spatial surface. When applied to muzhayo, this implies that the pastoral landscape is not merely a physical terrain for herding but is imbued with the temporal markers of generations of seasonal migration, rotational grazing, communal rituals, and oral testimony. The tasks of heti (seasonal movement to high pasture), saq (rotational grazing), sotsiri (communal rotation), and ghari nezik (collective departure ritual) are not solely practical activities; they constitute the temporal structure through which muzhayo is formed as a culturalscape, a world that carries the past into the present and orients the community toward a shared future. When nationalisation forecloses these tasks by delegitimising customary tenure and replacing seasonal migration with hired gujjur herding, it does not merely reorganise resource management; it disrupts the temporal and social medium through which the pastoral community constitutes itself as a community.

Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus provides a crucial theoretical framework for analysing the culturalscape. Habitus refers to a system of enduring, adaptable dispositions

acquired through experience within specific social and spatial contexts. These dispositions enable individuals to perceive, evaluate, and act in the world without necessarily engaging in conscious reflection on these perceptions, evaluations, or actions. The habitus is not a set of explicit rules but rather an embodied orientation, a practical sense of how the world is and how one navigates it. A pastoral habitus, as demonstrated by the empirical findings of this thesis, embodies precisely this: an orientation toward the land, the seasons, the animals, and the social relations of the commons, formed through generations of pastoral practice and transmitted through experiential learning; through the practice of ghari nezik, milking in the high pasture at dawn, and learning from elders about the boundaries of the nangini territory and the obligations it entails. Bourdieu's concept reveals what nationalisation destroys beyond material resources and formal rights: it eradicates the conditions necessary for the formation and reproduction of the pastoral habitus. When younger generations no longer ascend to the high pasture, when gujjur herders replace the community's own seasonal labour, the embodied knowledge and spatial orientation that constitute the pastoral habitus cannot be transmitted, resulting in the community losing not only a resource but also its habitual world. This represents the profoundest sense of ontological dispossession: not merely the loss of a tangible asset but the disruption of the pre-reflective orientation through which a community constructs its sense of reality, belonging, and identity. Bourdieu's habitus thus bridges the micro-experiential grief articulated in pastoralists' testimonies, "without these pastures, we would not exist as we are," with the macro-structural analysis of nationalisation as a form of enclosure, by identifying what lies in between: the embodied, spatially formed, intergenerationally transmitted practical sense of being a Chitrali pastoralist.

Simultaneously, Indigenous and decolonial theorists view land as both pedagogy and epistemology. De la Cadena (2015) demonstrates how rituals of offering to earthbeings enact and transmit knowledge of place. Simpson (2014) discusses "land as pedagogy" within Nishnaabeg contexts, where learning emerges from embodied, place-based practices and relationships rather than abstract instruction. The concept of Culturalscape used in this thesis combines various elements to understand *muzhayo* as a relational landscape in which material, communal, spiritual, and emotional aspects are deeply interconnected. This approach requires viewing the Chitrali commons not only as functional grazing areas but also as spaces filled with ancestral presence, spiritual risk, gendered memory, and poetic practice. Additionally, it involves recognising narrative, ritual, and poetry as crucial spatial knowledge practices that establish and sustain relationships among humans, animals, spirits, and places. By situating the Chitrali culturalscape within this framework, I argue that any analysis of the commons and land rights in Chitral must consider land as both epistemology and identity rather than merely a resource.

Examining dispossession from an ontological perspective changes the understanding of nationalisation and enclosure. These processes are not merely separate events transferring rights between actors; instead, they are ongoing structures that reshape identities and land relationships. Coulthard (2014) describes settler colonial dispossession in Canada as a structure, rather than an event, that continuously reconstructs Indigenous subjectivities and land connections. Tuck and Yang (2012) argue that when decolonisation is seen as symbolic recognition without land return, Indigenous ontologies of land as kin are absorbed into settler frameworks. De la Cadena (2015) shows how the destruction or relocation of mountains due to mining threatens not only livelihoods but the very existence of earthbeings, leading to what may be called ontological extinction. Legal scholars have

begun to describe similar processes as "dignity takings", in which the involuntary loss of land or home also strips individuals of recognition and personhood (Atuahene, 2016). Incorporating these debates into my thesis allows me to see the 1975 nationalisation and other *muzhayo* policies not just as changes in land tenure but also as forms of ontological dispossession that destabilise the relationships necessary to maintain Chitrali pastoral life.

Scholarship on legal pluralism and Indigenous land rights explores how ontological and epistemological conflicts appear within legal systems. In many postcolonial contexts, state law claims absolute ownership by declaring unregistered land as state property, whereas Indigenous systems base rights on ancestry, usage, and spiritual ties (Meinzen-Dick & Pradhan, 2002). The co-production of property and authority suggests that recognising one set of claims inherently supports certain forms of governance while simultaneously challenging others (Sikor & Lund, 2009). International frameworks for Indigenous rights aim to address these issues by emphasising "ancestral lands" and collective territories and advocating that customary possession should guide the identification and demarcation of Indigenous lands (Anaya, 2004; Gilbert, 2015). However, as Blaser (2013) notes, even progressive recognition often requires translating the relational ontologies of land into property concepts, thus maintaining the underlying ontology of land as a resource and territory. By situating Chitral's *muzhayo* within this landscape of legal contradictions, I argue that the process of nationalisation, which converts *boomki* (aboriginal) ownership into "state land," not only reallocates rights but also redefines the ontological nature of the land itself.

In sum, I incorporate this body of Indigenous ontologies and land rights literature into my thesis as it offers the conceptual frameworks necessary to perceive the Chitrali commons as a culturalscape and to interpret nationalisation as an ontological intervention. This literature enables me to position *muzhayo* within a global discourse concerning land

as kin, ancestor, and pedagogy, and to argue that any substantive account of commons and ownership in Chitral must view them as relational and ancestral, rather than merely institutional or economic.

Political Ecology of Rural Areas and More-than-Human Geographies in Conversation

This thesis combines two distinct scholarly fields, the political ecology of rural areas and more-than-human (MTH) geography, to build a theoretical framework that effectively understands Chitral's *muzhayo* as both a site of ongoing power struggles and a lived multispecies culturalscape. This combination is essential because neither approach alone is sufficient: political ecology, which traditionally focuses on power and political economy, tends to overlook nonhuman agency, whereas much of the MTH scholarship highlights the vibrancy of nonhumans but often downplays political issues such as dispossession, law, and capitalism. The Chitrali context, where pastoralists, livestock, wildlife, and spiritual entities collaboratively manage commons amidst nationalisation, requires integrating both perspectives. In this section, I aim to discuss the origins, development, limitations, challenges, and opportunities of integrating these two theoretical frameworks into cohesive dialogue.

Political ecology originated in the 1970s and 1980s as a critique of apolitical ecological and development studies, which blamed land degradation and environmental change on factors such as population growth, cultural practices, or mismanagement without considering the underlying power relations (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987; Greenberg & Park, 1994; Robbins, 2004; Wolf, 1972). Foundational texts in the field describe political ecology as the "shifting dialectic between society and land-based resources" under conditions of unequal power (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987, p. 17), illustrating how phenomena such as soil erosion, deforestation, and famine are connected

to colonial histories, land reforms, capitalist markets, and state policies, rather than to local ignorance or overuse (Peet & Watts, 1996; Watts, 2000; Escobar, 1999; Li, 1999). Over the following decades, political ecology has established itself as an interdisciplinary field that situates local environmental changes within broader systems of capitalism, colonialism, and the state while stressing environmental justice, subaltern agency, and conflicting knowledge (Peet & Watts, 2004; Robbins, 2004; Svarstad et al., 2018).

Concurrently, the field of political ecology has experienced internal diversification. Feminist political ecology emphasises the influence of gender, race, and class on access to land, water, and forests, highlighting the importance of embodied and emotional experiences in environmental politics (Rocheleau et al., 1996; Sultana, 2011, 2015; Hovorka, 2022). Critical political ecology analyses the construction of environmental "facts", questioning the authority to define degradation and the validity of different forms of knowledge (Forsyth, 2003; Goldman, 2005). Urban political ecology (UPE) extends these concerns to urban environments, conceptualising "urban metabolism" to describe the mobilisation and transformation of water, energy, land, and waste through socio-natural flows and infrastructures (Swyngedouw, 1996, 2006; Kaika, 2005; Heynen et al., 2006). Drawing on Lefebvre's influence, UPE and planetary urbanisation theories suggest that urbanisation now infiltrates entire territories, dissolving rural–urban distinctions and integrating even remote frontiers into a global urban framework (Lefebvre, 2003; Brenner & Schmid, 2014; Soja & Kanai, 2007; Angelo & Wachsmuth, 2015). While analytically robust, the urban turn has often relegated rural areas to a subordinate status, portraying them as resource frontiers, waste sinks, or experimental sites for urban sustainability (Chen, 2013; Hidalgo-Bastidas & Boelens, 2019; Rademacher, 2015; Yeh, 2009). Although political ecology originally focused on the countryside and rural regions, investigations into China's "greening" programmes, Ecuadorian dams, and South African

waste infrastructures now show how rural communities are mobilised to support urban agendas, bearing the burdens of conservation, "ecocities", and risk management while being characterised as backward or underutilised (Zhang, 2010; Lora-Wainwright, 2017; Lord, 2021; Leonard, 2012; Cantor, 2020). In response, this thesis explicitly adopts a political ecology perspective of rural areas, re-centring rurality as a distinct socio-ecological condition and an active political arena rather than subsuming it within planetary urbanisation (Marsden, 1998; Little, 2017; Drobnjaković & Steinführer, 2024). It contributes to the critical existing work of political ecology of rural areas while also inviting an active critique of the current urban capture of rural agency in political ecology.

A political ecology of rural areas supports the critical realist, materialist approach of political economy and the environment by exploring how structural power relations, state actions, and historical processes shape environmental governance and resource access. However, it highlights the unique features of rural spaces, such as sparse settlements, agropastoral and commons-based economies, distinctive institutions (e.g. jirgas, clan councils, or village committees), and long histories of neglect and depoliticisation (Marsden, 1998; Bollman & Reimer, 2009; Robbins, 2004). Epistemologically, this suggests that structural forces create strong possibilities, yet rural communities actively interpret, negotiate, and resist these forces through everyday practices, alliances, and idioms (Watts, 2000; Li, 1999; Mosse, 2003; Rademacher, 2015). In the case of Chitral, this involves analysing nationalisation, conservation, and climate actions not as neutral technical measures but as effects of postcolonial state territorialisation and enclosure, while examining how clan hierarchies, gender relations, and elite mediation determine who can challenge these and on what basis (Ali, 2019; Hidalgo-Bastidas & Boelens, 2019; Lord, 2021).

However, political ecology, including its focus on rural areas, has historically been criticised for insufficient attention to the agency and vitality of nonhuman entities, often depicting animals, plants, spirits, and materials as passive components within human political contexts (Braun, 2008; Bakker, 2010; Hornborg, 2017). More-than-human (MTH) geography constitutes the second pillar of this framework, addressing this deficiency by asserting that nonhumans are active participants in the process of worldmaking. Emerging in the 2000s, MTH approaches have drawn on actor-network theory, vitalist philosophies, non-representational theory, and posthumanism to decentre the human subject and challenge the dualism between nature and society (Latour, 1987; Thrift, 2000; Whatmore, 2002, 2006; Hinchliffe, 2008; Lorimer, 2009; Bennett, 2010; Greenhough, 2010). Rather than viewing "nature" as either a passive resource or a simple social construct, MTH geography emphasises assemblages and "intra-actions" through which humans and non-humans co-constitute each other within material-affective entanglements (Barad, 2007; Haraway, 2008; de la Bellacasa, 2017; Choi, 2016). From this perspective, landscapes are shaped not solely by human labour and policy but also by the agency of animals, plants, microbes, infrastructures, and atmospheric processes; agency is distributed rather than solely residing in intentional human subjects (Braun, 2007; Hinchliffe, 2008; Lorimer, 2009). MTH political ecology has demonstrated, for instance, how elephants, tigers, wolves, invasive vines, and weeds respond to agrarian change, conservation regimes, and markets in ways that reinforce inequalities, while also creating frictions and opportunities for alternative practices (de Silva & Srinivasan, 2019; Margulies & Karanth, 2018; Argüelles & March, 2022; Barua, 2014, 2017, 2023; Donfrancesco, 2025). These studies show that non-humans are co-producers of socio-ecological change, neither passive victims nor autonomous agents outside politics.

Indigenous and decolonial scholars emphasise that relational ontologies and nonhuman kinship are not recent theoretical constructs but persistent features of Indigenous lifeways (Escobar, 2016, 2018; de la Cadena, 2015; Todd, 2016; Simpson, 2014). In many rural and Indigenous contexts, including the highlands of South Asia, entities such as animals, spirits, glaciers, and landforms have consistently been considered integral parts of a moral-political community, where the dichotomy between humans and nature has never been relevant. For this thesis, MTH geography provides a lexicon that engages with global discourses; however, its epistemological foundation is rooted in Chitrali cosmology, in which *muzhayo* is inhabited by livestock, wildlife, ancestors, and fairies, all of whom contribute to the governance of the commons.

Nevertheless, MTH geography has been criticised for its perceived lack of political engagement. Critics argue that some MTH scholarship, in its enthusiasm for assemblages and actants, risks depoliticising issues of dispossession and marginalisation by emphasising affect and ontology while neglecting capitalism, law, and the state (Castree, 2002; Arboleda, 2017; Hornborg, 2017; Büscher, 2018). There is a potential risk of describing phenomena as entangled without critically considering who benefits, who is disadvantaged, and how power dynamics operate in the process. It is precisely in this context that this thesis intervenes by developing the concept of "more-than-human rights to commons" as an explicitly political framework in Article 03, thereby guiding MTH approaches towards considerations of rights, justice, and governance. By analysing how Chitrali poetry, rituals, and everyday narratives assign rights and responsibilities in *muzhayo* not only to humans but also to fairies, livestock, and other entities, I extend MTH debates beyond recognising nonhuman agency towards a normative assertion regarding more-than-human entitlements and obligations within the governance of commons.

Epistemologically, this thesis recognises the inherent tensions between a Political Ecology of rural areas, rooted in critical realism and political economy, and MTH geography, based on posthumanist and relational ontologies. A strictly structuralist approach to rural political ecology may risk subordinating nonhuman agencies to human social processes, thereby explaining pastoral and ecological changes solely through the lenses of class, the state, and capital (Foster, 2000; Malm, 2016; Hornborg, 2018). Conversely, an exclusively MTH approach may risk weakening the political-economic critique by concentrating on affective relations while inadequately addressing issues of dispossession, legal violence, and nationalisation (Castree, 2002; Arboleda, 2017; Büscher, 2018). To address these tensions, this thesis employs a dialogical synthesis. Methodologically, this study integrates ethnographic interviews and archival research involving state officials, lawyers, and movement leaders, emphasising structural narratives of nationalisation, legal codification, and apoliticisation. This is complemented by poetic analysis, *mashqulgi* discussions, and accounts of encounters with fairies, wildlife, and glaciers, highlighting the relational and more-than-human dimensions. Epistemologically, this research prioritises Chitrali epistemologies that inherently blend sociopolitical and spiritual-ecological dimensions, challenging the dichotomy between macrostructure and microontology (Haraway, 1988; Escobar, 2016; Todd, 2016; Simpson, 2014). Thematically, the empirical articles focus on various aspects, including historical nationalisation and enclosure, apoliticisation, land ontologies, and more-than-human and Indigenous pastoralist rights, while interlinking both frameworks to ensure that neither political economy nor more-than-human agency is excluded (Khan, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c, 2025d).

Donfrancesco's (2025) concept of a "more-than-human political ecology" in a recent study acts as a conceptual bridge, showing how focusing on nonhuman agency can

strengthen rather than weaken the radical potential of political ecology. By emphasising reciprocity and mutual constitution, specifically how nonhumans respond to socioeconomic changes and influence humans, reterritorialisation, which involves incorporating nonhuman agencies into land acquisitions, conservation, or climate initiatives, and subversiveness, which examines how nonhumans create opportunities and alternatives within existing regimes, more-than-human political ecology maintains a critical focus on capitalism, the state, and legal frameworks (Barua, 2017; de Silva & Srinivasan, 2019; Donfrancesco, 2025). Article 03 advances this discussion by proposing "more-than-human rights to commons" in Chitral, suggesting that entities such as fairies, livestock, and other beings are not merely agents but recognised members of the commons community, and that their exclusion from state law constitutes a form of ontological violence linked to nationalisation.

Integrating a political ecology perspective of rural areas with more-than-human geographies is generative rather than merely additive. This approach fosters an understanding of *muzhayo* as both a site of structural contestation, covering issues such as state title, elite mediation, gendered access, and conservation, and as a culturalscape inhabited by human and nonhuman kin, whose relationships are crucial to the governance of commons. This comprehensive framework challenges conservation and development paradigms that view Chitral's commons as depersonalised "natural resources" or abstract "state land." Instead, it encourages policies and legal reforms that recognise rural ontologies and more-than-human rights, thereby enabling community-led, justice-oriented commons and environmental governance in the Hindukush.

Decolonising Chitral Studies

Scholarly discourse on Chitral has shifted from colonial misrepresentations and external anthropological frameworks to the emergence of local and reflexive scholarship. Initial accounts, mainly written by imperial officers and British travellers, portrayed Chitral primarily in terms of strategic imperial interests, such as managing "Frontier Politics" and controlling the Hindu Kush region (Robertson, 1977). These narratives often present a highly critical and derogatory view of the region's history and its inhabitants. Later works sometimes continued to define the Chitrali identity through external categories. However, more recent Indigenous and critical ethnographic studies have challenged these portrayals by emphasising local agency, complexity, and intellectual life.

Early colonial literature was more closely tied to "Frontier Politics" and the strategic governance of the Hindu Kush than to a natural understanding of Chitral (Kreutzmann, 1998). George Scott Robertson's work, *Chitral: The Story of a Minor Siege*, reflected this view by describing Chitral's history as "merely a crimson-stained record, a monotonous tale of murder and perfidy—the slaying of brother by brother, of son by father" (Robertson, 1977, p. 20). He stated that "no gleams of generosity or magnanimity illuminate the lurid pages, but naked treachery, wholesale betrayals, and remorselessness" (Robertson, 1977, p. 20), and argued that public opinion in Chitral and "the East" praised "these villainies, when successful, that the West awards to high-minded statesmanship" (Robertson, 1977, pp. 20-22). This moral condemnation extends to everyday dealings. One travel writer remarked that “it is this inveterate habit of lying which makes dealings with the Chitrali so tiresome for the traveller,” asserting that “the gratuitous and foolish lie, the unnecessary and futile lie, is ingrained in the people; and perhaps that is why the Chitrali is such a dull conversationalist. His talk is either a whine or a fable” (Schomberg, 1938, p. 156). He claimed that “from highest to lowest” Chitralis practised “the mean and scurvy

lie, told frequently out of the mere love of lying", so that "truth there is always at the bottom of a well" (Schomberg, 1938, p. 156). Robertson generalised this as frontier common sense: "all men being manifestly liars, verbal statements are worthless" (Robertson, 1977, p. 96), reducing local diplomacy to "Oriental stratagems" rather than strategic action in a complex political environment.

Colonial authors also depicted Chitrali men as effeminate, greedy, and lacking military "grit" (Marsden, 2007, p. 418). Marsden (2007) observes that British scholar-soldiers positioned Chitralis between martial Pukhtun masculinity and Indian effeminacy. Robertson described Chitralis as having "pleasant and ingratiating manners, an engaging light-heartedness, free from all trace of boisterous behaviour, a great fondness for music, dancing and singing, a passion for simple-minded ostentation, and an instinctive yearning for softness and luxury, which is the mainspring of their intense cupidity and avarice" (Robertson, 1977, p. 274). Even when guerrilla skills were acknowledged, Durand concluded that the Chitrali lacked something that made a soldier (Marsden, 2007).

Gendered labour and agropastoral practices were similarly misunderstood. One traveller, upon observing women herding, remarked that "this is a Chitrali custom and a thoroughly bad one. No woman can properly attend to goats and sheep on a hillside. It is not a woman's job" (Schomberg, 1938, p. 128). When watching villagers at rest, he criticised them as "parties of idlers. Feckless, aimless, uninterested, and drowned in laziness, they loafed away the long sunny July day. The fields urgently needed their care, their flocks were neglected, and they did not care a doit" (Schomberg, 1938, p.9). In contrast, he noted that in "Kashmir, Gilgit, and elsewhere the peasants were up before dawn and in bed after dark at this season" (Schomberg, 1938, p.9). In the fertile Shah Jinali valley, he concluded that, apart from a few of the *mehtar*'s animals, "for all the use these rich pastures were to the people, they might have been in the Sahara", adding that

such grazing “would have aroused the cupidity of the Chitrali who, for all his languor, is greedy enough” (Schomberg, 1938, p.146-147).

These judgments dismissed the realities of a high-mountain agro-pastoral economy. Later research shows that in Chitral, only a small portion of land is cultivable, and irrigation relies on complex gravity-flow channels that require significant labour (Ahmad et al., 2025; Young et al., 2000; Khan, 2025). Seasonal transhumance to high pastures, where women and girls milk animals, process dairy, and maintain settlements, is vital for household survival, not evidence of “idleness” or a “thoroughly bad” custom (Young et al., 2000). Robertson notes that the poor hygiene practices among locals necessitated a complete change of attire for the Englishman after an interview at one of their residences, as "his clothes swarm with vermin. It is a sickening experience for the Englishman." (p. 129). Furthermore, colonial authorities mainly aimed to exploit the military potential of the local population, observing that they could produce "10,000 excellent soldiers, which is probably all one wants to know." (Lockhart ca. 1896: 8)

Postcolonial anthropological and development studies have progressed beyond overt criticism, yet they sometimes classify Chitral using external frameworks. Marsden’s (2005) ethnography, alongside tourism-focused research such as Henderson and Weisgrau (2007), has helped chart religious changes and economic networks. However, these studies have also contributed to a somewhat fixed list of traits by which outsiders identify Chitral (Ali et al., 2013). In dialogue with a local participant involved in subsequent anthropological research, concerns were raised about the unauthorised use of his photograph on a book cover. Similarly, during a book discussion, Marsden’s (2005) work faced criticism for framing Chitral within a Western context, portraying it as “living Islam” with music and wine, while the West was experiencing Talibanisation in the early 2000s. There was also dissatisfaction with the authors’ disclosure of identities and details

that could be easily misinterpreted, placing certain families under scrutiny for permitting their women to converse with strangers at night, among other issues. These examples show that, despite the depth of such studies, they have maintained a Western viewpoint and have been somewhat extractive, thus raising significant ethical concerns. Discussions on heritage and tourism have focused on the Kalasha as a "unique cultural experience," potentially reducing Chitral's identity to its most commercially attractive minority rather than its full social fabric (Ali et al., 2013, p 84). Participants in local heritage initiatives have expressed worries that external groups "steal our culture and display it there, and when we go there, they ask for money to see our own things" (Ali et al., 2013, p. 91), highlighting how even well-meaning external portrayals can lead to dispossession.

In contrast, an increasing body of scholarship by Chitrali academics and critical ethnographers highlights the region's internal complexity and intellectual vibrancy. Historians such as Mirza Mohammad Ghufran and geographers such as Israrud Din have reconstructed Chitral's historical and ethnic diversity from an internal perspective, rather than portraying it solely as a stage for imperial conflict and intrigue (Israr-ud-Din, 1969, 1979, 1996; Kreutzmann, 1998). Local initiatives centred on Khowar literacy and scholarship demonstrate that Chitralis are active creators of knowledge rather than merely subjects of study. However, previous historical accounts of Chitral, including those written by local historians, were often commissioned and sanctioned by the mehtar (king) and his court (Mirza, 1962). As a result, these works primarily focus on the history of the ruling clan elites, with little attention paid to subaltern history and the wider socio-cultural realities of Chitral. Contemporary ethnographic studies of Muslim life in Chitral challenge the stereotype of Chitralis as "conversational bores" and innate liars. Marsden (2005) characterises Chitralis as "active, reflective and thoughtful" regarding religious norms, emphasising their high regard for "verbal skill and emotional refinement." Even Curzon,

despite his imperialist assumptions, noted “a certain natural dignity in the speech and bearing of those untutored men; and I have rarely heard an argument more fluently expressed or more cogently sustained” (Curzon, 1926, p. 139). Similarly, the work of the Italian brothers (Cacopardo & Cacopardo, 2001) has also contributed as critical literature towards understanding Chitral from a broader social and geopolitical perspective.

Taken together, this literature displays a progression from colonial and travel narratives that stereotyped Chitral as treacherous, effeminate, and lazy, through external anthropologies that continued to define its identity for outsiders, to local and critical scholarship emphasising labour, diversity, and intellectual vitality. Like many other colonised regions worldwide, Chitral has been subjected to misrepresentation and moral judgment. It has been stereotyped without meaningful engagement with the local population, and its culture and society have been superficially portrayed. Furthermore, Chitral has been ethically and intellectually exploited, mainly viewed through a Western lens, and documented primarily for a Western readership. This thesis aims to decolonise Chitral studies by emphasising the importance of understanding the Indigenous experience from an internal perspective rather than perceiving Chitral merely as an exotic, troubled, or strategically significant frontier zone. I recognise that decolonisation is not easy and may still be a metaphor (Tuck and Yang, 2012). Throughout my DPhil journey, I encountered systematic rejection of these efforts to "decolonise," both in internal assessments and in the peer-review processes associated with publication. For example, in Article 1, I sought to introduce the concept of "apoliticisation" using empirical and ethnographic evidence from Chitral, without relying on Western academic frameworks. However, peer reviewers indicated that the argument lacked coherence without incorporating the theories of Foucault, Scott, and other Western scholars, necessitating their inclusion for the papers to be accepted and for the progression of my PhD. This experience raises the question of

whether a subaltern can speak their perspective without dependence on dominant Western theories (Spivak, 1988). My experience underscores the considerable distance yet to be traversed in the decolonisation of Western-dominated academic institutions. Nevertheless, we persist in challenging and expanding the boundaries to convey our worldview independently (Smith, 1999). Finally, this thesis also seeks to explain internal challenges and active political dynamics, thereby contributing to the body of work produced by Indigenous and Native scholars who critically engage with and respond to external narratives (Jacobs-Huey, 2002). This undertaking carries significant responsibility, which I examined in depth as a local scholar in the previous chapter on research design and methodology and will continue to address throughout the thesis.

Decolonising Pastoralist Research and Commoning Scholarship: A Critical Assessment

The preceding section examined the evolution of Chitral studies from colonial misrepresentation to a more reflexive and internally generated scholarship, while also recognising the systemic challenges that decolonial academic practice continues to encounter. This section broadens that analysis to encompass the wider domains of pastoralist research and commoning scholarship, posing three interrelated questions that this thesis directly addresses: In what respects does pastoralist research still require decolonisation? In what ways is commoning scholarship already decolonial, and in what ways does it fall short? Furthermore, what contributions does this thesis make that have not been addressed by commoning scholars?

Where Pastoralist Research Still Needs Decolonisation

Over the past three decades, research on pastoralism has undergone substantial critical revision. The narrative ecology critique of the 1990s dismantled Malthusian and

equilibrium frameworks that attributed land degradation to pastoralists; non-equilibrium rangeland science reinstated the legitimacy of mobile herding as an ecological strategy; and an expanding body of critical agrarian and development studies has highlighted the political-economic dispossession of pastoral communities across Africa, Asia, and the Middle East (Scoones, 2023). Singh and Kerven (2023), in their synthesis of a special issue on South Asian pastoralism, illustrate that Himalayan pastoralists encounter converging challenges of state exclusion, knowledge erosion, and climate change, yet their adaptive strategies remain informed by ecological intelligence and social institutions that external development frameworks frequently misinterpret. Despite these advancements, several decolonial deficits persist significantly.

The first pertains to the geography of knowledge production. Research on pastoralism continues to be predominantly generated by institutions in Europe and North America, applied to communities in the Global South. Radcliffe (2017) contends that this epistemic geography is not incidental but structural: the colonial history of geography as a discipline has established enduring hierarchies wherein empirical knowledge is extracted from the peripheries while theoretical frameworks are developed at the centre. In pastoralist studies specifically, this implies that the conceptual vocabulary, including commons, governance, resilience, enclosure, and commoning, was crafted externally to pastoral communities and is subsequently employed to explain, evaluate, and prescribe for them. Scoones (2023) echoes this sentiment, advocating for a fundamental shift from a control paradigm, wherein development agencies, states, and researchers perceive pastoral uncertainty as a problem necessitating external management, towards a care paradigm rooted in pastoralists' own practices, knowledge, and relational ontologies. However, even this progressive call originates from a research program based at the University of Sussex,

funded by the European Research Council, and led mostly by non-pastoralist European academics.

The second deficit concerns the systematic marginalisation of pastoral ontologies and cosmologies. Historically, pastoralist research has treated traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) as a data resource to be extracted, integrated into scientific frameworks, and evaluated for its alignment with Western ecological categories (Fernández-Giménez, 2000; Sharifian et al., 2022). While recent scholarship has begun to challenge this extractive model, acknowledging that Indigenous pastoral knowledge encompasses its own epistemological standards, observational methods, and theories of ecological change (Jessen et al., 2022; Gazing Wolf et al., 2024), the field has been considerably slower to engage with the spiritual, cosmological, and ancestral dimensions of pastoral relations to land. Pastoralists across Central Asia, the Hindu Kush, and the high Himalaya govern their territories through obligations to ancestors, spirits, and sacred sites that are inseparable from their ecological practice (Samakov & Berkes, 2017; Khan, 2026). These dimensions are typically either absent from pastoralist research or relegated to footnotes as cultural background, rather than constituting the ontological substance of what pastoral commons actually are. Decolonising pastoralist research requires not merely including Indigenous voices but recognising Indigenous cosmologies as epistemologically valid frameworks for understanding human-land relations on their own terms, not as exotic supplements to a secular scientific baseline.

The third deficit is the near-total absence of pastoralist research produced by insider-researchers from the communities being studied. For instance, although local scholars have started to write now, most studies of Chitral's pastoralists, from colonial travel accounts through postcolonial anthropological monographs to recent development studies, have been conducted by outsiders (Robertson, 1977; Schomberg, 1938; Marsden,

2005). Even studies critical of colonial misrepresentation typically continue the epistemic arrangement in which an outside researcher represents an inside community to a Western academic readership. Smith (1999) argues that truly decolonial research cannot be achieved through changes in method or politics alone but requires a shift in who controls the production, interpretation, and dissemination of knowledge about Indigenous communities. This thesis represents one of the first comprehensive academic studies of muzhayo conducted by a Chitrali researcher, in Khowar as the primary fieldwork language, using methods, mashqulgi, poetic testimony, and oral history that emerge from within Chitrali epistemic practice rather than being imposed upon it.

Where Commoning Scholarship is Decolonial and Where It Is Not

The scholarship on commoning has made notable decolonial contributions that deserve acknowledgement. Linebaugh (2008) presents a critical counter-narrative of the commons, anchored in the experiences of dispossessed English peasants and the subsequent dynamics of colonial extraction. Caffentzis and Federici (2014) suggest that the commons must be conceptualised in opposition to capitalism's persistent enclosures, including those implemented by postcolonial states, asserting that any commons-based political framework divorced from anti-capitalist and anti-colonial resistance risks appropriation. The concept of "OntoShift" proposed by Bollier and Helfrich (2019), advocating a fundamental paradigm shift from individualistic market logic toward relational interdependence, demonstrates significant alignment with Indigenous relational ontologies and has been explicitly contextualised within Global South social movements. García-López et al. (2021) and Nightingale (2019) emphasise the necessity of understanding commoning as a situated, power-laden practice intrinsically linked to the specific historical contexts of its practising communities.

However, the decolonial aspirations of commoning scholarship exhibit substantial structural limitations. The primary empirical constraint lies in the limited geographical scope of existing research, with notably sparse coverage of South and Central Asia, Indigenous Highland communities, and postcolonial contexts where nationalisation, rather than privatisation, constitutes the primary mode of enclosure. Agrawal et al. (2023) acknowledge the persistent geographical and cultural imbalance in commons research, with disproportionate representation of Sub-Saharan Africa and Mediterranean regions compared to highland Asia. Notably, Chitral remains significantly absent from the global commoning literature. The second limitation manifests in theoretical frameworks. Commoning theories, even the most relationally oriented, have predominantly emerged from dialogue with European social movements and Global North academic traditions. De Angelis (2017), Varvarousis (2022), and Euler (2018, 2019) theorise commoning primarily through the lens of capitalist wage labour, urban dispossession, and post-socialist transitions, a theoretical framework incongruent with Chitrali highland pastoralism, spiritual land ethics, and postcolonial state enclosure in Pakistan. Villamayor-Tomas and García-López (2021) point out that although political ecology has thoroughly explored the struggles over commons in the Global South, the theoretical models used to analyse these conflicts still originate from the North.

The third limitation concerns methodology. Commoning scholarship has predominantly relied on conventional social-science methods, surveys, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis, applied externally to communities. The field has yet to adequately incorporate Indigenous epistemic practices, including oral history, poetry, ritual, and song, as legitimate forms of evidence and analysis rather than merely as data for coding and categorisation. Radcliffe (2017) argues that methodological decolonisation necessitates not only the adoption of less extractive methods but also the fundamental

restructuring of research relationships to ensure knowledge production is controlled by, rather than merely inclusive of, the studied communities.

Contribution of this Thesis to Decolonial Commoning and Pastoralist Studies:

This thesis offers at least five significant contributions to the fields of decolonial commoning and pastoralist studies that have not been previously explored. It presents one of the inaugural comprehensive, empirically based examinations of pastoral commons governance within an Indigenous Highland community in Pakistan, conducted by an insider-researcher fluent in Khowar. This is not merely a superficial distinction; it fundamentally alters what can be observed, articulated, and considered as evidence. Pastoral practices that might remain obscure to an external researcher, such as the moral lexicon of more-than-humans and boomki, the customs of ghari nezik, and the gender-specific knowledge inherent in dairy practices, are accessible here because the researcher shares the cultural context being studied.

I introduce decolonial methods as epistemological practices rather than just ethical gestures. Mashqulgi (open communal dialogue), poetic testimony in Khowar, and oral history collected through participatory fieldwork in high pastures are regarded as primary evidence, forms of knowledge that hold epistemic value equivalent to interviews or archival records. This is referred to in the thesis as "methodological pluriversality": a research design where the forms of knowledge validated by the study align with how Chitrali pastoral communities comprehend and convey their world (Smith, 1999; Tuck & Yang, 2012). The Research Methodology chapter explores this further in detail.

This is one of the few studies to seriously consider the spiritual aspect of pastoral commons governance as an ontological reality rather than merely a cultural belief. The nangini (fairies) as active guardians of the high pastures, the ritual of dokhna before entering sacred sites, and the ancestral duty inherent in boomki identity are not depicted

here as Indigenous metaphors for ecological stewardship but as essential components of what muzhayo truly is. Samakov and Berkes (2017) have shown the effectiveness of spiritual commons governance in Kyrgyzstan; this thesis builds upon that understanding by demonstrating how spiritual guardianship is woven into a comprehensive ontological framework that cannot be comprehended in isolation.

This thesis provides a detailed analysis of apoliticisation as the specific mechanism through which Chitrali pastoralists are excluded from commoner subjecthood. Commoning scholarship has extensively theorised enclosure as the material appropriation of shared resources, and to a lesser extent as an epistemological attack on commons-based ways of knowing (Nightingale, 2019; Caffentzis & Federici, 2014). However, the specific process by which community members are discursively labelled as samajdar (wise/sensible), and thus, internalising the incapacity to express political grievances, has not been identified in the commoning literature. This is an original analytical contribution that extends the commoning critique of enclosure from the material and legal to the relational and psychological.

This study explores the concept of culturalscape as a response to the ontological shortcomings of current commoning frameworks in understanding Highland pastoral commons. By illustrating that muzhayo is both a commons and something beyond commoning, a multifaceted ontological realm that includes material, socio-communal, spiritual, and emotional dimensions, this thesis provides commoning scholars with a novel conceptual tool for comprehending commons in Global South contexts, where ontological complexity cannot be simplified to issues of governance and collective action. Collectively, these contributions do more than just add new data to the existing commoning literature. They question its foundational assumptions: regarding who generates knowledge, which communities are examined, what methods are deemed valid,

which ontologies are considered real, and what decolonisation means in practice rather than just in theory. In this regard, the thesis does not merely address a gap in commoning scholarship but redefines it, decentralising its Northern frameworks and expanding it towards the pluriversal commons that Escobar (2016) and others have advocated for, but for which the field has yet to develop methods and concepts.

Note on Analytical Articles

For my DPhil project, I have opted for the paper-based route, with each article addressing one of the subsidiary research questions. Although I have predominantly employed APA citation style throughout my thesis, variations may occur depending on the specific requirements of the journals to which I have submitted my work. Additionally, some of the literature and concepts may be tailored to the journal's particular focus. I have received reviews for all my articles, and these are incorporated into the versions submitted for my thesis. It is important to note that there may be some repetitions and minor deviations from the overall thesis focus, as adjustments were necessary to align with the journal's emphasis or to address reviewers' feedback. While these articles are currently under review, they may undergo slight modifications by the time of the viva, as I hope all will be published by then.

Article 01: Nationalisation of Pastoralist Commons and the Apoliticisation of Chitral, Pakistan: Towards a Critical Geography of Rural Enclosure

Submitted Journal: Antipode

Reviews: Received and Incorporated

Abstract

This paper examines the state-led nationalisation of pastoralist commons in Chitral, Pakistan, through the framework of apoliticisation, a relational approach characterised by discursive interpellation and structural exclusion, which pre-emptively denies rural political legitimacy. Based on 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork across the Upper Chitral valleys, this study draws on rural political ecology, critical agrarian studies, and feminist political ecology to explore how the 1975 notification, which nationalised 97% of non-arable *muzhayo* (commons), sustains ongoing territorialisation and dispossession. The state's depiction of Chitralis as "peaceful" and "*samajdar*" (wise), combined with bureaucratic inaccessibility due to remote offices in Swat and Peshawar, leaves over 80% of herders unaware of the erosion of customary rights and excluded from decision-making over the commons. The empirical analysis uncovers relational dynamics in which discursive compliance coexists with "weapons of the weak," informal resistance, and elite capture through legal petitions, as well as tourism and mining royalties, further marginalising pastoralists. Gendered processes result in the double-apoliticisation of women, erasing their knowledge of dairy practices and transhumance in patriarchal councils and state forums. By situating Chitral within critical geography's debates on commons, this paper advances postcolonial rural enclosure theory, showing state nationalisation as the primary mechanism rather than market privatisation. Highlighting

the roles of bureaucracy, patriarchy, and statecraft in perpetuating dispossession, it repositions rural political ecologies as micropolitical sites of struggle. Policy recommendations include increasing transparency regarding legacy notifications, establishing gender-inclusive commons committees, and formalising co-governance to preserve customary tenure and counter apoliticisation in the pastoralist highlands of the Global South.

Key Words: commons, rural enclosures, political ecology, pastoralism, apoliticisation, Pakistan, critical agrarian studies.

Introduction

During my research on the commons (*muzhayo*) in rural regions of Chitral, I visited a government office located in Swat. Swat is a city situated 250 km from Chitral and serves as the base for most of the forest department's offices and also oversees Chitral policies. Upon arrival, I was redirected from one office to another, as officials were reluctant to provide information through interviews. Most of these officers are from cities outside Chitral and make decisions and policies about rural areas. Eventually, one government officer consented to engage in the discussion. The most notable aspect of our conversation was the response to my enquiry regarding the government's implementation of the 1975 notification, which called for the nationalisation of all common land in Chitral (Mulk, 2019) but not in other regions of the province. He said,

> Actually, the people of Chitral are *samajdar* (wise), and they understand. The people of other regions are *jahil* (ignorant); they resist and do not cooperate (with the government in the process of nationalising the common land) (Personal communication, 17th of August 2023, Swat).

A similar response was obtained from a government official in Chitral, who stated that the government could readily implement the 1975 notification to nationalise commons in Chitral because "the people of Chitral are educated and peaceful people, and they do not create troubles like others" (Personal Communication, 13th of December 2022, Chitral). These responses demonstrate a state discourse of "peaceful, understanding, wise, and educated" people that positions Chitral as inherently compliant, pre-emptively denying its political legitimacy, a phenomenon I term "apoliticisation".

Apoliticisation is understood as a relational process through which state discourses and structures obscure claims made by rural communities, combining Foucauldian governmentality (self-regulation via '*samajdar*' interposition) with structural exclusion from remote bureaucracies (Flinders & Buller, 2006; Foucault, 1991). Over three years of fieldwork, rural Chitralis were observed to be neglected, marginalised, and excluded from

political processes advocating for their land rights due to urban-centric governance. By portraying the populace as particularly obedient, government officials hide the coercive nature of the state's interventions. This discursive apoliticisation, coupled with structural barriers where non-local officials dominate offices in Swat, Peshawar, and Islamabad, renders pastoralists passive recipients of externally imposed policies. Non-local officials mainly staff government offices, and legal directives are issued from the federal capital, Islamabad, and the provincial capital, Peshawar, without meaningful consultation or involvement of local stakeholders. Consequently, apoliticisation functions both pre-emptively, by preventing contestation before it begins, and structurally, by reducing rural communities to passive recipients of externally determined policies. This contrasts with depoliticisation, which removes already politicised issues from public debate (Flinders & Buller, 2006). In Chitral, Pakistan, pastoralist users of the commons, who rely entirely on this land (Khan, 2025), are silenced in policy decisions through apoliticisation, which directly impacts their livelihoods due to a combination of historical marginalisation, bureaucratic distance, and elite mediation. Chitral's pastoral practices mainly involve transhumant herding across the *muzhayo* commons, which constitute 97% of the non-arable land and support livelihoods through community-regulated seasonal migrations for dairy and meat production (Fazlur-Rahman, 2007). Since 1975, factors such as youth out-migration, cash cropping, climate variability, market integration, and improved road access have led to partial shifts into other forms of employment (Khan, 2025). Nonetheless, the legacy of the notification persists, as over 80% of current herders, most of whom were born after 1975, remain unaware of their diminishing customary rights, worsening state and elite enclosure amidst these socio-economic changes (Kreutzmann, 2004).

This apoliticisation is particularly evident in areas such as local resource management, land rights, environmental challenges, climate change projects, new non-

pastoralist livelihood opportunities, and mainstream political activities. Examining other studies on rural areas from around the world, such as in China (Lord, 2021), Gilgit Baltistan (Ali, 2019), Serbia (Drobnjaković & Steinführer, 2024), and Ecuador (Hidalgo-Bastidas & Boelens, 2019), it is apparent that rural areas are depoliticised and apoliticised by central governments, authorities, and NGOs in these aspects. This article contextualises apoliticisation within the discourses of political ecology and critical agrarian studies, with a specific focus on feminist political ecology. It utilises frameworks from political ecology to examine how states and other entities categorise resource users, incorporates Marxist perspectives from agrarian studies on enclosure, state formation, and property systems, and emphasises the gendered and intersectional aspects of exclusion from feminist political ecology. Although pastoralist commons in Africa and Latin America have garnered considerable academic attention, South Asian highland pastoralism, particularly its governance amid state property reforms, remains insufficiently examined.

The apoliticisation of Chitral has its origins in the historical transitions from dynastic rule in the Chitral state, followed by the abrupt accession of Chitral into Pakistan in 1969. This process culminated in the 1975 notification issued by the Home and Tribal Affairs Department of the Provincial Government of North-West Frontier Province (NWFP, now known as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) that commanded the nationalisation of common lands, including most of the land in Chitral, and significantly remapped the traditional ownership and structures in the region. This event created distrust among the Chitrali population towards Pakistani government officers coming from the urban mainland. The discourse of "civilised" Chitralis, reflected in the article's opening vignette, has arisen from the historical surrender of the Chitrali princely state to the Pakistani government. This surrender impaired the development of robust local leadership and left the Chitrali community unable to advocate collectively and assertively for their rights and

land in disruptive local or national political processes. Some lawyers and local elites (high clan and/or businessmen) have raised legal proceedings against the state's initiative to nationalise commons through the 1975 notification over time. However, these petitions are also perceived by local populations as elite capture for their economic upliftment, as the individuals involved are primarily motivated by capitalist opportunities in political power, mining, and tourism. Frequently, the objectives of the state and those of the local elites converge in the name of business development, conservation, and climate projects. Still, they do not speak to the needs and demands of local pastoralist communities (Khan, 2025). The pastoralists of rural villages are most dependent on the commons, yet they are blocked from being recognised as political agents and politically legitimate. Similarly, the political system is patriarchal, with minimal representation of women in decision-making processes regarding the commons, further entrenching the apoliticisation of women. Finally, the inaccessibility of bureaucratic processes and the presence of government offices in distant urban areas add to this apoliticisation, as locals lack access to the process of raising their concerns or to official resources from offices in the province's main cities and the federal capital, including Swat, Peshawar, and Islamabad. This research indicates a propensity for resistance among the local population regarding the confiscation of their rights and land through 'weapons of the weak' (Scott, 1985), albeit without a clearly defined objective, as there are no civil society initiatives to facilitate this resistance, and mainstream political discourse is subsumed within broader national politics, disconnected from local issues.

Recent critical and radical geography has generated dynamic discussions concerning the commons; however, the recent discussions remain predominantly influenced by analyses grounded in urban political ecology and neoliberal paradigms, especially in the Global North (Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2015; Purcell and Tyman, 2015; Wachsmuth, 2014). These studies frequently emphasise conflicts over the democratisation

of property and urban rights (Harvey, 2012; Hodkinson, 2012); however, in doing so, they may overlook or generalise the distinct configurations and politics of commons governance in rural, postcolonial settings (Bollier and Helfrich, 2015; Borras and Franco, 2012). In contrast, this paper offers an ethnographic analysis of state-led commons nationalisation, rather than direct privatisation, in the rural context of Chitral, Pakistan. This approach challenges the dominant focus on urban movements and neoliberal enclosure by highlighting the lived experiences, exclusions, and apoliticisation of political agency among rural, pastoralist, and Indigenous actors in the Majority World (Global South). Moreover, this study employs Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) to highlight that women are "doubly apoliticised" by both state mechanisms and local patriarchal structures. This underscores how systemic exclusion based on gender, class, and locality fundamentally undermines authentic political agency in the governance of rural commons. It highlights the limitations of urban-focused commons research and advances a radical critique attuned to the rural-urban spectrum (Drobnjaković & Steinführer, 2024).

This article addresses an important question: How does apoliticisation, a relational process of discursive and structural denial of political legitimacy, facilitate state-led nationalisation of Chitral's pastoral commons while suppressing gendered agency through elite-mediated enclosure over 70 years? This adds to critical geographical debates in three linked ways. Theoretically, by engaging directly with critical agrarian studies, feminist, and rural political ecology, this paper explains how apoliticisation occurs through discursive, legal, and spatial strategies that systematically suppress rural and gendered agency within the context of state territorialisation (Bernstein, 2010; Nightingale, 2011). Empirically, building on prior ethnographies (like Ahmad, 2025; Fazlur-Rahman, 2009), it presents one of the first ethnographic analyses of commons nationalisation in Chitral, showing how pastoralist livelihoods changed after the 1975 notification and the

government's enclosure of commons without the prior and informed consent of the Chitrali pastoralist Indigenous population. This Majority World rural case broadens the largely urban focus of commons studies, highlighting how pastoralist and gendered struggles around commons unfold in peripheral geographies. Methodologically, it shows how insider ethnography can reveal the everyday politics of enclosure and resource governance that often remain hidden in the state and NGO narratives. Overall, these contributions aim to reposition rural commons as crucial sites for radical geographic exploration.

Research Methodology

This study was conducted using a mixed-methods ethnographic approach, employing interviews, participatory observation, focus group discussions, and archival methods in Chitral. Chitral is a district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, located in northern Pakistan, rising from 1,094 metres at Arandu to 7,726 metres at the mountain Tirich Mir, and encompassing over 40 peaks exceeding 6,100 metres. Chitral shares borders with Afghanistan to the west and north, Swat and Dir to the south, and Gilgit-Baltistan to the east (Nüsser et al., 2012). The research was based on 14 months of fieldwork (2022–2025) in three valleys of Upper Chitral, namely Meragram No. 2 in Yarkhoon Valley, Khot Valley, and Rech Valley, Torkhow, Upper Chitral (Figure 01), selected for their clan diversity and variability in commons. The local language is Khowar, and as a native speaker, I found it easier to communicate, understand contextual nuances, and translate. The study also involved trips to Swat, Peshawar, Chitral Town, and Islamabad to explore bureaucratic discourses absent locally and to meet historians and other intellectuals from Chitral. After transcribing and translating the 70 interviews and accompanying field notes, data were analysed using NVivo. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) was employed to examine the data and insights gathered during fieldwork. CDA is a qualitative method that

investigates how language constructs, sustains, and legitimises social inequalities (Mullet, 2018). It treats discourse as a social practice, recognising language use as both socially influenced and influential (Cots, 2006). Critical discourse analysts aim to understand, expose, and ultimately challenge social inequalities. CDA operationalised apoliticisation through codes for '*samajdar*' compliance (discursive), access barriers (structural), and gendered illegibility (FPE); also, probes such as "How do officials' views of Chitralis shape your rights claims?". This was triangulated with observations, archival data, and poetry methods to study intergenerational policy legacies from 1975 onwards. The approach is valuable for exploring how the commons in Chitral are nationalised by displacing local communities from their livelihoods without their political awareness or agency.

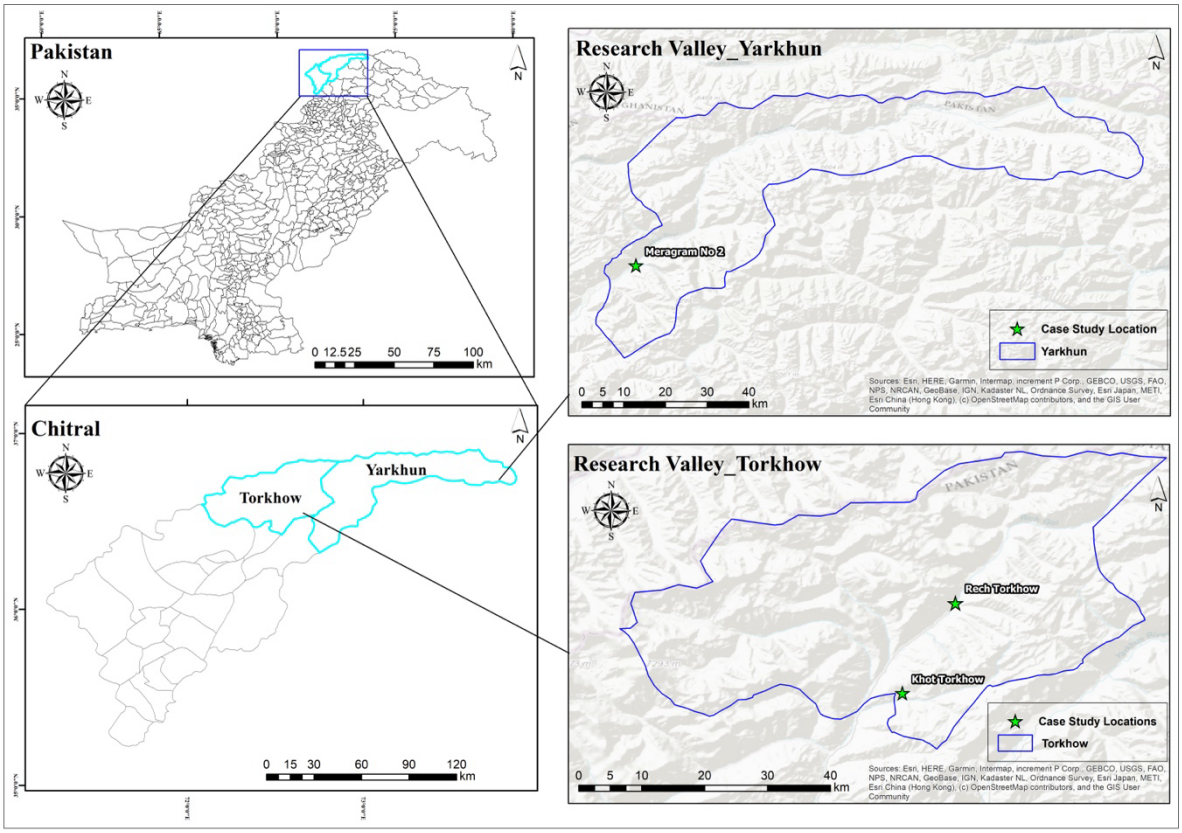


Figure 01: The study area in Chitral (Developed by the author with special thanks to Aslam)

The analysis was iterative and reflexive, informed by field observations, participant feedback, and my dual identity as an insider and academic. As a member of a higher-ranking clan with greater access to communal resources, I have been reflective about this positionality. My public address on clan-based discrimination and extension of my study to places where people were unaware of my clan, such as Rech and Khot, facilitated trust among participants from other clans. However, I acknowledge that my positionality as a male high-clan researcher may have influenced both the information shared and the analysis. This study prioritises ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for local customs. This methodology, which uses multiple methods and long-term engagement, provides a framework for exploring the commons in Chitral while centring on local knowledge.

Theoretical Framework

This study utilises and integrates perspectives from Critical Agrarian Studies (CAS) and Political Ecology (PE) of rural areas, with a focus on Feminist Political Ecology, operationalising apoliticisation as a relational framework of the commons in Chitral. This integrated approach facilitates a nuanced understanding of the interplay among state power, property regimes, class, gender, and discourse in shaping environmental governance and rural political agency. Expanding on the principles of political ecology, which explore the interactions among cultural, political, and natural environments (Watts, 2000; Robbins, 2004), this study focuses on rural areas, highlighting their unique agency, power dynamics, and socio-natural interactions. Watts (2000) characterised political ecology as a discipline that explains environmental conflicts through the lens of power struggles, governance issues, and justice concerns. Political ecology has comprehensively investigated the dynamics surrounding common property

resources, such as forests, rangelands, and fisheries. The common property theory emphasises how these resources are traditionally managed collectively owing to temporal and spatial variability, making it challenging to divide them into individual ownership units (Robbins, 2019). The "Tragedy of the Commons" (Hardin, 1968) discourse has been critiqued for overlooking the economic and political contexts influencing resource management, often criticising local communities while ignoring the roles of external forces (Muldavin, 1996); however, the government of Pakistan continues to implement policy based on this idea, resulting in the enclosure of commons (Hasan, 2020). Adding to Turner's synthesis, which positions commoning as a dynamic socio-natural practice beyond tragedy narratives, the use of PE critiques Chitral's positioning within postcolonial nationalisation (Turner, 2017). PE emphasises power relations in environmental governance, highlighting how dominant actors and states employ institutions and discourses to shape socio-natural affiliations and legitimise exclusion (Watts, 2015; Robbins, 2012). The conception of apoliticisation is thus theorised within PE as a proactive process in which communities are discursively presented and expected to act as politically inert and compliant subjects, averting contestation and rendering political claims invisible (Flinders and Buller, 2006). This strategy of discursive control is aligned with Foucault's concept of governmentality, in which power does not necessarily operate through overt coercion but rather through regulatory knowledge (Foucault, 1991). Apoliticisation is conceptualised as a relational and pre-emptive process that denies political legitimacy to rural subjects through discursive interpellation and structural exclusion. Drawing on Foucault's concept of governmentality, self-regulation through state discourses, such as '*samajdar*' (wise), renders claims-making illegible prior to its emergence (Foucault, 1991; Flinders & Buller, 2006). Étienne Balibar's violence-civility dialectic complements this perspective by portraying Chitralis as 'peaceful,' thereby

excluding disruptive acts from the political sphere (Balibar, 2009). This politics of civility does not eliminate violence but rather continuously manages and displaces it, thereby concealing ultra-objective forms of cruelty such as dispossession and bureaucratic exclusion.

Political ecology stresses the importance of local management structures and community knowledge in upholding the sustainable use of common resources. Community-managed resources have thrived globally, with local rules ensuring subsistence and the renewal of resources (Robbins, 2019). Stott and Sullivan (2000) further emphasise how political contexts influence narratives of environmental degradation, particularly in rural regions. These conceptualisations play a crucial role in confronting prevailing apolitical viewpoints that often oversimplify rural environmental issues or depict them as instances of ecological scarcity or modernisation. This analytical perspective is essential for comprehending the situation in Chitral, Pakistan, where state-led enclosures disrupt long-established communal governance systems, undermine local political agency, and facilitate elite appropriation of resources. In contrast to Urban Political Ecology (UPE), which has been the primary focus of much of the recent PE literature, emphasising urban metabolic processes and socio-natural changes in cities (Swyngedouw, 2006), PE of rural areas emphasises the importance of considering rurality as a separate analytical category. Using the core concept of urban metabolism (Swyngedouw, 2006), UPE has contributed tremendously to understanding how humans and nonhumans shape cities, but its dominance has not paid as much attention to rural areas and their transformations, especially as sites of political engagement with their own agency and priorities. Scholars of UPE have actively subsumed rural areas into urban spaces due to the expansion of cities, flows of capital from cities to villages, and the immense growth of the urban population (Lefebvre, 2003). The Lefebvrean concept of

Urban Political Ecology (UPE) suggests that all regions, not exclusively cities, should be considered as urban spaces (Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2015). The world is urbanising at a fast pace, but this should not mean ignoring the agency of rural areas, their unique challenges, and their intricate relationships with non-humans. The concept of rural metabolism encompasses the interaction of capital, labour, information, and social power with the biogeochemical cycles and biophysical processes that support both human and non-human life in rural settings. Social science scholars often trace the origins of this term to Marx's analysis of commodity exchange in capitalist systems and the fundamental interaction between nature and culture, in which human labour combines with and transforms the Earth (Rademacher, 2015). PE in rural areas should resist reducing rural spaces to urban-centric narratives and highlight their regenerative potential, rather than viewing them as sites of extractivism. Employing a political ecology framework of rural areas in Chitral clarifies how neoliberal interventions, such as nationalisation, tourism initiatives, and conservation programs, transform the governance of commons by disrupting Indigenous ecological knowledge and traditional land practices, including *muzhayo*. This approach also reveals the intersection of political-economic forces and local patriarchal structures that contribute to the marginalisation of pastoralist voices and women's participation. Through the lens of the political ecology of rural areas, this study highlights the power dynamics of enclosure and elite capture that underpin dispossession and political exclusion. In the context of this study, PE intersects with feminist political ecology (Hovorka, 2022), advocating greater attention to gendered apoliticisation, particularly in rural areas.

Feminist political ecology offers a relevant critique of the apoliticisation of women that invisibilises their role in environmental governance, highlighting how gender intersects with ethnicity, locality, and class to shape access and power (Nightingale, 2011;

Rocheleau et al., 1996). The exclusion of women from patriarchal decision-making practices on the commons is pertinent in pastoralist societies, even though women possess rich ecological knowledge and engage in extensive labour, as studied in South Asia and worldwide (Wako et al., 2025; Gupte, 2004). Feminist PE places these dynamics within the framework of capitalist social reproduction, stressing that changes in agriculture often deepen women's socioeconomic marginalisation (Federici, 2012; Cantillon et al., 2023). Nightingale's (2019) concept of exclusionary commoning reveals how gender and property relations transform socio-natural environments in rural contexts. Drawing on these FPE perspectives, a more nuanced understanding of gendered apoliticisation in the Chitrali commons is uncovered, and the changing and reduced agency of local pastoralists in local pastoralist politics is explored in this paper.

Critical Agrarian Studies (CAS), situated within the Marxist political economy framework, explain how capitalist states restructure land ownership and rural social dynamics through processes of enclosure and regulation. These processes culminate in dispossession and the transformation of rural class structures (Bernstein, 2010; Borras and Franco, 2012). Enclosure processes are examples of primitive accumulation, wherein commons are either privatised or nationalised through legal modifications, often marginalising peasants and pastoralists (Li, 2014; Peluso and Lund, 2011). The 1975 Notification in Chitral serves as a paradigmatic case of this pattern, demonstrating the state-driven territorialisation of commons that institutes governmental authority over commons previously managed under customary tenure (Khan, 2026). Local elites often facilitate these transformations, engaging in elite capture by leveraging legal opportunities for economic gain through tourism or mining favours and concessions while dismissing the livelihood needs of pastoralist communities (Borras & Franco, 2014; Levien, 2018). Kapila (2020) has worked in detail using an anthropological framework to explain how

legal systems in South Asia create dispossession and form political subjectivities through the “legal negation” of Indigenous rights, as is happening in Chitral.

The current state of commons research continues to grapple with the implications of neoliberal enclosure, property formalisation, and the biopolitics of governance (Bakker, 2007; Blomley, 2008; Purcell & Tyman, 2015). While urban political ecology has explained metabolic flows and conflicts over urban spaces (Swyngedouw, 2006; Wachsmuth, 2014), there is an increasing acknowledgement of the necessity to "provincialise" these perspectives by emphasising rural, Indigenous, and more-than-human actors as contributors to radical politics (Bollier & Helfrich, 2015; Tsing et al., 2017). This study integrates the political ecology of rural areas and feminist theory to challenge the reduction of rural spaces to mere extensions of urban capitalist expansion (Gupte, 2004; Hovorka, 2022). Recent studies on commons and debates on the “right to the city” risk perpetuating a narrow conceptualisation of collective resource governance (Hodkinson, 2012; Harvey, 2012). Borras, Franco, and colleagues (2012) advocated a broader perspective that highlights rural land struggles, state formation, and agrarian class dynamics, particularly in postcolonial and Majority World contexts. This paper emphasises the specificity and autonomy of rural commons and the intricate micropolitics of exclusion and resistance. In doing so, it directly addresses recent debates aimed at overcoming methodological “cityism” (Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2015) and persistent urban bias in radical theory (Drobnjaković and Steinführer, 2024). By empirically centring Chitral’s pastoralists’ apoliticisation and embedding the analysis within feminist and decolonial critique (Nightingale,2011, 2019; Rocheleau et al., 1996), this paper extends the boundaries of radical commons research through the following grounded empirical analysis.

The Historical Apoliticisation of Chitral and Commons (Post-1947)

To understand the apoliticisation of commons governance in Chitral, it is essential first to contextualise it within the district's turbulent political history. The apoliticisation of Chitral has unfolded through a protracted historical process, beginning with the dismantling of the political institutions of the Chitrali princely state between 1948 and 1969, following Pakistan's establishment in 1947. This apoliticisation was further evidenced by the pivotal 1975 notification regarding resource nationalisation. This process persists today, as the two districts of Upper and Lower Chitral are represented by a single seat in the National Assembly of Pakistan, which limits Chitral's capacity to influence policymaking at the national level. Furthermore, elites from outside, such as Senator Talha Mehmood, have invested their money to run for political seats from Chitral, further hindering the political agency of Chitralis in national politics (Dawn, 2024). Chitral has undergone several shifts in its rule and administration. The Chitral state was ruled by *the mehtar* (title of the ruler) of the Katur dynasty from 1571 until 1969, but their power was also influenced by the British forces from the late 19th century until the independence of Pakistan in 1947, when colonisation physically ended in the subcontinent (Cacopardo & Cacopardo, 2001). In 1947, Muzaffar ul-Mulk, the then *mehtar* of Chitral and a friend of the founding leader of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, decided to accede to Pakistan (Wadood & Islam, 2023). Following Muzzafar's death in 1948, his son Saif ur-Rahman served as the mehtar for a short while, as he was exiled to Peshawar after a controversial marriage in Dir district. In his absence, the Government of Pakistan appointed a board of administration comprising Pakistani and Chitrali officials. He died in 1954, and the Chitral Interim Constitution Act was passed that same year, making Chitral a federated state of Pakistan (Buyers, 2004). He was succeeded by his four-year-old son, Saif ul-Mulk, whose reign was supported, or, instead, controlled by a Council of Regency until 1966, thereby

increasing Pakistan's authority over Chitral. Eventually, Chitral was fully integrated into the Republic of Pakistan between 1969 and 1972. To reduce the influence of the last ruling *mehtar*, Saif was sent abroad to represent the country, and he spent most of his later life outside Chitral (Buyers, 2004). This brief summary of the power shift and leadership vacuum during the integration of Chitral into Pakistan shows that Chitral could hardly develop any local leadership to represent its people, especially the pastoralists, in Pakistan. The existing princes were kept detached from national politics, and external officers from mainland Pakistan came to shape the political situation and representation of Chitral in the newly formed nation-state of Pakistan. The monarchy, as observed in various global contexts (Cohen, 2007), has historically restricted the participation of ordinary people in politics or political organisations in Chitral. This shift from a monarchical system to integration in Pakistan further apoliticised the local people. MH, a local scholar, stated in an interview that there was some local leadership of the Muslim League in Chitral; however, even that was overshadowed by the downtown government officers who assigned them minor roles in the administration or religious matters (Personal communication, 06 October 2024). There was a sudden emergence of a stronghold of the Pakistani government in Chitral, from provincial or national centres, without providing adequate opportunities for the development of local leadership.

This unplanned and unanticipated historical transition not only hindered local political development but also led to unforeseen consequences, including the imposition of external governance structures in resource management and land distribution, which were unprecedented for the local population. There were land and other disputes before as well, but they were resolved by the local leadership appointed by the *mehtar*. It is particularly noteworthy that individuals tended to listen to local office holders, such as the *atalegh*, the senior minister subordinate to the Wazir-i-Azam, who was responsible for the royal

demesne, land records, and warehouses. Additionally, the *asaqal*, officials accountable to the *atalegh* for the management of storehouses, and the c*harvelu*, the principal official overseeing a large village or small district of hamlets, were influential. This influence was largely due to their status as local inhabitants rather than outsiders (Buyers, 2004). One of the local scholars, IF, elaborated on this issue during an interview:

> People used to peacefully utilise the commons because they had strong ownership of pastures, riverbeds, etc., before the partition of India. When Pakistan was formed, government officers visiting Chitral were seen as outsiders by locals. Their interactions made it clear that they were different and were perceived as intent on grabbing resources. This impression strengthened as people from Punjab, the Pakhtun areas, and elsewhere collected and removed local resources. They extracted wood from forests, antimony stones, and other minerals. They banned the use of the riverbed, claiming it belonged to them, not the locals. This has created an ongoing problem. Whatever was *muzhayo* until now, outsiders tried to snatch it from locals. The local people view Pakistani officers as aliens and attackers, outsiders taking away their rights and resources. They were not considered part of the community. This is a brief history of the commons problem in Chitral (Personal Communication, 08 October 2024).

This is a good depiction of the trust issues that emerged between the people and the government, which created even more problems for Chitral's political environment in the long run. Officers who came from urban areas were disconnected from rural histories, cultures, and resource utilisation requirements and regulations; rather, they focused on exploiting their authority to extract resources by evicting the locals. There were existing land disputes, and the main question was how to address them when Chitral became part of Pakistan. Previously, the *mehtar* was the state's chief executive, and his approval was required to convert barren land into cultivable land. The land might belong to the people, but they still needed *the mehtar*'s approval. The question was how to handle these conflicts when the system was changed to a new one. Speaking about such issues at the time, one of the local officials explained the situation:

> The accession agreement between the Chitral state and the government of Pakistan outlined the *mehtar*'s privileges and the government's rights and responsibilities. Land disputes took different forms, including those between the royal family and

> tenants, or between owners and tenants. It was also necessary to determine which land belonged to the *mehtar* and which belonged to the state. To address these issues, the provincial government created the Chitral Land Dispute Inquiry Commission. This commission had three members, including Rashid Ahmed, the settlement officer of Malakand (administrative division), and two others (Personal Communication, anonymous, 2023).

These officers came from the cities and were assigned the task of deciding the fate of not only the contested land but also of the common land of Chitral. The local officer I interviewed further explained the situation that when these government officials wanted to visit Chitral, their flights were cancelled a few times, so they could not come for four months in 1971. Finally, when they came, there were already 7,000 applications about land disputes submitted by people in Chitral. Most of these land disputes were between royal families or between locals and royal families. The person responsible for handling these cases lived in Chitral for only a few days and reviewed some of them. Still, he left soon, and responsibility for looking at all applications was given to the Deputy Commissioner or the political agent. Seven thousand applications were scrutinised, and only 600 were selected for resolution (Personal Communication, anonymous, 2023).

Examining these issues through the lens of political ecology in rural areas and critical agrarian studies, it becomes evident that these are distinctly rural challenges that require rural-specific solutions. Government officials either failed to reach these locations promptly or did not stay for an adequate duration. Furthermore, the absence of political leadership in Chitral to advocate these concerns has resulted in further political marginalisation (Borras & Franco, 2012). Based only on this limited interaction, the notification of 1975 was passed on 31 July 1975, giving rise to the political marginalisation of the Chitrali people, excluding them from the use and ownership of commons - on paper and officially, at least.

The 1975 Notification and the Political Distrust of the Public Regarding Commons

One of the locals had met with the person who was the Deputy Commissioner of Chitral during the 1970s, and he recalls his interaction, where he asked him about the transition from the Chitral state to joining Pakistan:

> The DC, who was from Punjab, came to Chitral a few years ago. I asked him how he decided on the resources in Chitral during the transition. He said he received a briefing from the chief secretary and governor, instructing him to fulfil all the *mehtar*'s demands. In Chitral, he was informed that the chief secretary had come to meet him. Worried that it was from the central government, he found it was from a local person, the *mehtar*'s chief secretary. He asked about the *mehtar*'s demands, who was a young boy attending an educational institution in the city and was not in Chitral at the time. The *mehtar*'s official gave him a file listing properties and forts throughout Chitral that belonged to royal families. He asked if anything else should not be nationalised, to which the official replied in the negative. He signed it and provided a copy. No one approached him about other land in Chitral or the locals' rights to the commons. The *mehtar*'s satisfaction resolved all issues. With good local leadership, they would have asked the DC about local people's rights over resources, but this never happened in Chitral. In Swat, the *wali* (local ruler) discussed with the government, securing benefits for himself and the locals. In Chitral, the government has taken over everything. The government now restricts the use of stones on private land controlled by the Pakistani Minerals Department, let alone the commons. This is unimaginable in Dir or Swat, but Chitral's lack of leadership has caused significant loss, and we obey government directives like slaves, including the 1975 notification (Personal communication, 06 October 2024).

The Commission has not conducted any comprehensive surveys regarding land and resource ownership. After consulting solely with the *mehtar* and receiving only limited cases through a radio announcement, the Commission issued the 1975 Notification, which excluded the *mehtar*'s private property and designated all other shared land as the property of the state of Pakistan (Mulk, 2019). This event can be seen as the formal beginning of the elite and Pakistani state collusion. This paper does not deal with the legal matter of the notification in detail, as that is out of the scope of the paper, but articles 14, 16, and 18 in this notification deal with the shared land of Chitral that was traditionally owned by the communities, but they were given to the government, as reproduced below:

“(14) All forests, except trees standing on cultivated land, *chiragahs* (grazing land), *shikargahs* (hunting area), wastelands, and mines and minerals subject to such concessions

to the public, which the government may determine and is especially subject to the following concessions to the public:

(a) Obtaining firewood from the forest (dry wood only);

(b) Obtain timber for private use under a permit; and

(c) The grazing of cattle is to be regulated by the government.

(16) All rivers, riverbeds, rivulets, and nullahs.

(18) All mountains".

This notification does not define any of these words, including "mountains", "riverbeds", or "forests", but because of the extremely limited arable land present in Chitral, this notification has declared more than 97% of Chitral to be government property (Government of NWFP, 1976). Upon inquiring of one of the attorneys representing a case in court challenging the 1975 notification regarding the validity of the claim that over 97% of the land is involved, as stated in the petition and in his interview with me, the attorney affirmed its accuracy. This assertion is based on the fact that the government has not contested this figure in court, thereby substantiating the claim. Since the 1975 notification, these resources have been shared by local communities as *muzhayo* (shared in Khowar) in every village in Chitral, and traditional access to these resources has been based on the local clan or tribal system (Fazlur-Rahman, 2000). The notification of 1975 remained a mystery to the local community for a long time, as the state did not implement the nationalisation order on the community's shared land, perhaps because of the ambiguity of the notification and the inaccessibility of the region due to bad roads and lack of communication, which meant that the government viewed the area as having less value. Nevertheless, the government made efforts over time, such as designating the shared land as national parks and sending notices to people to leave certain lands, as they were government property. After 2008, Chitral became the only place in the Malakand division

where the government formally started taking over the commons, including pastures, riverbeds, and mountains, despite protests from the locals (Ullah, 2020). The government's interest now lies in using Chitral as a tourist destination (Rehman, 2021) by advertising the shared pastures as conservation sites and presenting the riverbeds and *shikargah* (hunting areas) as neoliberal spaces for generating revenue through trophy hunting, mining (Dawn, 2025), and tourist activities.

The notification issued in 1975, which pertained to resources and commons, immediately prompted public distrust of the government among the few local residents who became aware of it. One of the local scholars shared these views in an interview:

> One year after the notification was issued, the government granted a royalty to Chitral's royal family for the mountains and forests. Elite and influential people in different regions resisted and claimed royalty for themselves, such as Janae and the Qazi family of Asuret. In some places, poor people like *gujjars* received a small royalty by claiming it as their home, and some *Khow* people also received a little. Any *junnali* (playgrounds) they saw were measured and declared government property of the North-West Frontier Province. The government paid the *mehtar* for two parade grounds and two *junalis*. This implied that all of Chitral was *sarkari* (belonging to the government), except for the land in the *mehtar's* jurisdiction in Chitral town. Contradictions arose, questioning why other *junali* are *sarkari* but Chitral town's are not? Similarly, if jungles are sarkari, why do *shahzadagan* (royal family) get royalty? These conflicts led to a later settlement in the region. Riverbeds and pastures beyond the main channel are sarkari, but this is not clearly notified in the records. Civil society, lawyers, and locals, especially influential people, are fighting against it by resisting and preventing its implementation through protests and petitions. These (commons) are already state land otherwise (Personal Communication, 08 October 2024).

The legislation is currently impacting local inhabitants and pastoralists by depriving them of their land and resources while simultaneously benefiting a selected group of local elites through government-granted royalties on supposedly government property, thereby exacerbating mistrust and discontent among the local population. Similarly, after a considerable period of inaction, the people are now dissatisfied with the government's initiation of the implementation of the 1975 Notification from Chitral.

The 1975 Notification on Commons and the Politically Uninformed Chitral

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the 1975 notification was supposed to be implemented in Dir, Swat and Chitral. However, it has not been implemented in the prior two regions, while the government is focusing on Chitral to start the implementation. I asked this question of the local government officials as to why the land settlement is implemented in Chitral, and one of them said,

> Land settlement has occurred in Swat but not in Upper Dir and Lower Dir. They (the government) have also started it there. This took a long time by default, and not by design. They started the land settlement in Chitral because they must have thought that Chitralis were rule-following people (*qanoon obey korak roi*). They do not cause any problems. They wanted to start from Chitral, as people there are educated and would not fight like others (*janjali no*). This is how the government started a land settlement in Chitral in 2002 (personal communication, 2023).

All the supposedly positive attributes associated with the Chitrali people, such as their purported non-disruptive nature, adherence to regulations, and educational attainment, may be indicative of the ongoing apoliticisation of the Chitrali population. Controlling the discourse is one of the most influential mechanisms of apoliticisation (Flinders & Buller, 2006), and the government is presenting a "positive image" of the Chitrali people to prevent them from engaging in processes that involve taking to the streets and fighting for their land rights and livelihoods. There have been examples of this discourse regardless of who is in the government at the centre. For instance, Imran Khan presented Chitralis as "resilient and people of high morals" (Khan and Peerzada, 2015), the military president General Musharraf presented Chitralis as role models for other Pakistanis (Mujtaba, 2023), and Nawaz Sharif announced his pride in Chitralis for how the number of people who can speak Urdu, the national language, has significantly increased since his last visit (Chitral News, 2016). All of these discourses have created a consciousness of the "role model community" in Chitral. In reality, it is an apoliticisation process that is used by the leaders from the centre to deviate from engaging the people in central politics or dealing with the

significant issues of the region, including lack of roads, education, electricity, and more importantly, the nationalisation of commons.

One of the daunting impacts of this apoliticisation in the context of the 1975 notification is the local communities' unawareness of the notification and of what it means for them. Many of the pastoralists in Chitral, whom I asked about the notification, were surprised to hear that this had happened, and many could not believe it at all. This is one of the most critical issues in Chitral for pastoralist communities, as their livelihoods depend on the commons. However, they were never informed of these political changes or their implications for their livelihoods. I asked 60 pastoralists whether they knew about the 1975 notification, and more than 80% of the respondents had no idea what it was. About 10% of the respondents connected it to some of the measures that the government was taking, when I simplified it as the "nationalisation of commons", and about 10% of the respondents knew or had some information about this notification due to their personal interests or any conflict that might have arisen in the region. This shows that the state of Pakistan did not take into consideration the prior and informed consent of the Chitrali pastoralist Indigenous population before nationalising the common land (Barelli, 2012). One reason for this unawareness is undoubtedly that the government has not yet strictly implemented the notification in these regions, but the community lacks a strategy or preparedness to deal with its implementation if the government begins executing it, given their limited awareness of the political issue at hand. The majority of the local population depends on common land for their livelihood, and they will no longer be able to continue their traditional pastoralist way of life. Rural pastoralist areas are thus not considered active spaces for political engagement; instead, they are kept on the receiving end of policies, notifications, and legal orders. This is particularly important for the political ecology of Chitral because the common land on which the local people rely for their

pastoralist livelihoods, identities, emotions, economies, and spiritual practices is now under threat (Khan, 2025). The potential consequences of the Chitrali people's apoliticisation are profound, notably when they are excluded from engaging in issues of significant importance to them, in addition to facing other political challenges. A notable aspect of apoliticisation is the perception of pastoralist communities as uneducated and illiterate, leading to their marginalisation by the formally educated individuals in Chitral (Khan, 2025). This division is evident in political engagement, as illiterate pastoralists are often considered unsuitable for political participation and excluded from local decision-making (see also Khan, 2025). However, despite lacking formal education, pastoralist communities possess critical insights into local land, commons, and traditions (Khan, 2025b), yet they remain excluded from broader political discourse. This factor exerts a more pronounced influence on women, as educational opportunities for women in Chitral are only now beginning to improve, and they remain largely excluded from the decision-making processes.

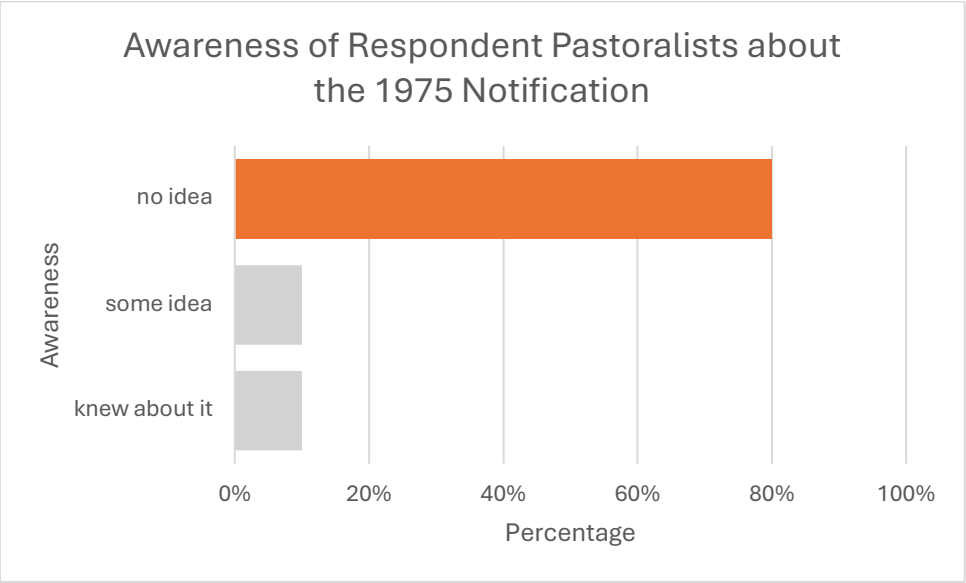


Fig 02: The awareness of pastoralists about the 1975 notification in Chitral

Gendered Apoliticisation on Commons in Chitral: Double Apoliticisation

Employing a feminist political ecology (FPE) perspective illuminates the profoundly gendered dynamics of apoliticisation within the governance of Chitral's commons. In this patriarchal society, women are predominantly excluded from public affairs and political discourse. This exclusion is actively perpetuated by both state and local actors, who systematically marginalise women from participating in resource-related decision-making and the formal politics of the commons (Rocheleau et al., 1996; Nightingale, 2011). In the last general election, a female Member of the Provincial Assembly (MPA) was elected in Upper Chitral. However, this victory can be attributed to the stronghold of the PTI party and does not accurately reflect the political engagement of the women I interviewed and am acquainted with in Chitral. Pastoralist women are entirely excluded from political and decision-making processes at the local level through intertwined institutional and everyday practices. None of the Pastoralist women I interviewed during my fieldwork in Meragram No. 2, Khot, and Rech were aware of the 1975 notification and its implications for their livelihoods. In the Rech Valley, an active conflict over the use of the commons existed among local clans, yet the women were unaware of the conflict or the court proceedings. When I enquired about the conflict, a woman in her 40s from Rech responded as follows:

> What would I know about it (the conflict), my dear? Males have an idea about such things. I am a woman and I stay home most of the time, so I do not really know anything about the dispute. My husband used to get involved, but nothing was shared with me (Personal Communication, 21 Nov 2022)

These were common responses from female participants, and at some point, I had to skip many questions about the political nature of the commons in Chitral because the women had no information or interest in those matters. This is the result of the inherent apoliticisation of women, both by the local community and the government. There were many sexist comments from the male pastoralists as well when I asked them whether

women are engaged in decision-making processes in pastoralist activities. I spent a few days with a pastoralist family in the Yarkhoon Valley, and the male pastoralist, whose wife and daughters spend most of their time looking after the livestock, responded this way: "No, no one asks women; they are only good at arguing with the hired shepherd (gujjur)…hahahah. The male decides things (Personal Communication, 01 November 2022). Similarly, we sat in a small shop in the Khot Valley for a focus group. A man in his 50s responded to the question of women's participation by saying, "Women are not engaged in significant decision-making; they forget what they eat for breakfast, so how will they make decisions, haha" (personal communication, 28 October 2022). Such remarks echo what FPE scholars have identified globally: the apoliticisation of women in pastoralist matters is a classic example of patriarchal systems that enable men to hold both social and economic dominance (Hodgson, 1999).

Significantly, this apoliticisation of women in Chitral is not static; rather, pastoralist women have historically had more influence in decision-making. The women stayed in the high pastures during the summer, and the men occasionally visited them. One of the younger pastoralists explained this in further detail:

Women are not involved in decision-making, as they are not involved in going to the pastures as much as men. Previously, our mothers (their generation) would usually guide us about when to go, as they had experienced it. Now, we have *gujjurs* who do not have any value for the local traditions anyway (Personal Communication, 20 October 2022).

Changes in the pastoralist system and livelihoods are keeping women away from general decision-making, although women are still responsible for livestock matters during winters when the hired herder (*gujjur)* leaves the village, as they are only hired for summers in the high pastures. The transition of women from participating in pastoralist activities to predominantly remaining within the domestic sphere has significant implications for their

capacity to engage in political activities and erase everyday forms of environmental knowledge (Hovorka, 2022). These changes, whether brought about by neoliberal reforms, internal dynamics, or state projects (Khan, 2025), have led to the historical exclusion of women through new forms of apoliticisation. Ultimately, women in Chitral are now "double apoliticised" as their experience and voices are marginalised by the state and local male-dominated dynamics. As the FPE scholarship highlights, understanding common access and resource politics must consider these intersecting exclusions, while also foregrounding how women's knowledge, informal politics, and agency persist at the margins (Rocheleau et al., 1996). While Chitrali pastoralists are overall apoliticised, women pastoralists are "kept out" systematically in matters of commons management by the state and the local patriarchal system.

Commoning, Enclosure, and the Loss of Women's Freedoms

The empirical findings presented in this paper, particularly concerning the role of high pasture ghari as a domain of women's freedom and collective life, and its contemporary foreclosure through sedentarisation and the employment of gujjur shepherds, necessitate engagement with feminist commoning literature. Federici's (2004, 2018) feminist analysis of primitive accumulation and enclosure posits that the enclosure of commons specifically dismantled spaces of women's collective life and autonomous subsistence. Common lands served as both a material resource and a social territory for women, where they congregated, worked collectively, shared knowledge, and maintained networks of mutual aid beyond the domestic household. In "Re-enchanting the World," Federici (2018) extends this analysis to contemporary enclosures, asserting that commons politics must be feminist, as women's social reproduction work sustains commons, while women disproportionately suffer dispossession by enclosure. This framework is applicable to the Chitrali ghari. The high pasture functioned as women's social territory, a space of

collective life, female companionship, autonomy from patriarchal households, and authority over dairy production. Women managed pastoral life, engaged in music forbidden in villages, and formed solidarity bonds unavailable domestically.

The enclosure through nationalisation and the hiring of gujjur shepherds exemplifies Federici's simultaneous dispossession of material commons and female social territory. Nightingale's (2019) concept of "exclusionary commoning" posits that commoning creates community while reproducing social exclusions along gender, class, and caste lines. This applies to the Chitrali case, where muzhayo governance through clan meetings and legal challenges has been male-coded. While women participated in pastoral life through dairy labour and seasonal migration, they were excluded from formal governance. Gender exclusion is not antithetical to commoning but is produced through it, with women's domain of reproductive commoning now being enclosed. Clement et al. (2019) argue that feminist political ecology must examine how gender relations are co-constitutive of commoning itself, focusing on how commoning produces gendered subjectivities and how its erosion restructures gender relations. They emphasise that women's embodied labour and spatial practices are constitutive of commons governance. In Chitral, women's presence in high pastures performing dairy labour was integral to how muzhayo was governed and reproduced.

Before the widespread adoption of Gujjur herding, which was accelerated by the nationalisation in 1975 (Khan 2025), women traditionally spent summers in high pastures while men managed the village fields. In these pastures, women were the primary agents of pastoral life, overseeing livestock and dairy production with collective authority. The ghari served as a female social territory where women exercised relative freedom, collective power, and practical sovereignty over a crucial domain of the pastoral economy. The employment of Gujjur shepherds, clients from lower Chitral specifically brought in to

perform the labour previously undertaken by women in high pastures, disrupted this arrangement. The decision to hire Gujjur shepherds was made by men in male-dominated village meetings, often without meaningful consultation with women, as evidenced by testimony from Article 01: "the decision to bring in the Gujjur has been made by the men of the villages." The immediate and formally stated rationale was economic efficiency and the inconvenience of seasonal migration for a younger generation with diversified livelihoods. However, the structural consequence was the removal of women from the one domain of pastoral life where they had exercised relative autonomy and collective agency. Similar dynamics have been documented in Himalayan pastoral communities more broadly. Murali et al. (2021) demonstrate in their study of trans-Himalayan Spiti that when external labour replaces women's traditional roles in commons governance, women's formal decision-making power over natural resources declines, even where their informal ecological knowledge remains significant. The pattern observed in Chitral is not unique but represents a broader gendered consequence of pastoral modernisation and enclosure across High Asia.

The testimonies collected in this paper provide a precise account of this loss. Bibi, in her sixties, reminisced about the ghari as "my favourite because it let me roam freely and talk to girls my age", a freedom not available in the village where "girls were not permitted to leave their houses." CB described the ghari as a space of collective female life: "We would gossip, share jokes, laugh, and live happily." MB expressed not only economic loss but also existential grief: "I long for ghari now... We had plenty when we used to go to ghari, and I still yearn for that place." These testimonies are not merely expressions of nostalgia; within the feminist commoning framework developed above, they articulate the felt experience of enclosure as the specific loss of a female social territory. The dual apoliticisation of Chitrali women, first by state nationalisation and

second by the patriarchal restructuring of pastoral labour, is thus most accurately understood as a double enclosure: the state enclosed the physical commons, and the subsequent social restructuring enclosed the female social territory that the commons had historically sustained.

The Existing Local Resistance against and the Political Challenges

Despite the historic apoliticisation of Chitral, which continues to date, waves of resistance to the nationalisation of the commons are emerging in Chitral. Nevertheless, as Critical Agrarian Studies and Marxist political economy show, such struggles are deeply impacted by the broader dynamics of state-led enclosures, class and clan differentiation, and capital accumulation (Borras et al., 2011; Bernstein, 2010). There are problems associated with such resistance in Chitral, including the local elite's capture of court cases, the inaccessibility of bureaucratic and knowledge spaces for local pastoralists, and ambiguity about how to move forward, even if the local community wins the case and the 1975 notification is abandoned. At the heart of these issues is the lack of political awareness and leadership, and rural marginalisation, which denote the capitalist administration's appropriation of communal resources for state or elite projects (Li, 2014), as discussed below.

Pastoralists and the Challenge of Bureaucracy

As previously discussed, the primary issue is the disconnection of pastoralist locals from political processes; they lack familiarity with political and legal terminology and do not understand how bureaucratic systems function or the appropriate channels to assert their rights. Government offices are typically located outside the villages, necessitating that residents spend considerable time travelling to towns and cities, where they are often redirected between offices without their issues being resolved. A community leader from

Meragram No. 2 recounted his experience of opposing the government's nationalisation of pastureland, which involved the introduction of government-appointed "watchers" without community consultation, thereby restricting the community's access to the pastures for grazing and other uses.

> The process was challenging, involving language barriers, extensive travel, and navigation of bureaucratic offices. I was informed that X would be the watcher for our pasture while I was away from the village. Upon returning, I was forced to sign an agreement by the elders, which sparked a struggle to reclaim our rights. At the wildlife department in Chitral, they showed us a map marking our land as government property, prohibiting its use for cattle, firewood, or grazing. In the village, I convened a meeting where the elders agreed to fight back despite some resistance. With no funds, we drafted a memorandum signed by 75 families and took it from Mastuj to Booni, then to Chitral, where officials dismissed our concerns and offered me a job, which I rejected. In Swat, the officer spoke to me in Pashtu, which I could not speak, and I explained our case in Urdu, but the director declared the decision final and denied our application. In Chitral, I confronted an official from my clan who had secretly negotiated with an unrelated group of people. After a village-wide meeting, we compromised by designating an inaccessible mountain for conservation while retaining our pasture rights. Despite attempts to enforce restrictions, community resistance led to the program's failure, and despite their watchers, wildlife is now scarce because they failed (Personal Communication, 20 October 2022).

This narrative highlights the difficulties faced when trying to access government and political offices, which are often situated in remote locations such as Chitral Town, Swat, or Peshawar. Officials are usually unresponsive, and local residents lack the financial means to travel and cover related costs. Consequently, political and governmental spaces remain inaccessible primarily to local pastoralists. I personally experienced these challenges while attempting to meet officials and access archived materials. The observation that local individuals infrequently engage in resistance measures against the state, whether successful or not, exemplifies Scott's (1985) concept of "weapons of the weak" and indicates that apoliticisation is increasingly becoming a relational process. During my research, I travelled to Swat, Peshawar, and Islamabad, but only a few interviews were conducted after being redirected several times. Initial attempts to access archival materials at a government library failed; access was granted only on the third visit,

following social media advocacy and my affiliation with Oxford University. Archives about Chitral are not made available to its residents because they are not transferred to Chitral. In such inaccessible environments, local pastoralists face many difficulties, often lacking language skills, technological familiarity, and financial resources to navigate bureaucratic spaces. When asked about their demands of the government if the 1975 notification were fully implemented, many pastoralists expressed a willingness to give up land in exchange for essential infrastructure such as roads, water, and schools. This situation underscores the fundamental rights that the government should provide; however, the state has created a politics of scarcity that apoliticises citizens to the point that they are prepared to trade land for basic services. In the course of my interviews, the majority of participants expressed a sense of powerlessness regarding the state and had already embraced the belief that responsible citizens should abstain from protesting the government, reflecting Foucault's (1991) concept of governmentality. This apolitical form of citizenship is particularly characteristic of Chitral, in contrast to the adjacent region of Gilgit-Baltistan, where there is a comparatively higher frequency of mass protests against the government, especially regarding land rights (Ali, 2025; Shanti, 2024). From a Marxist and PE perspective, urban-centric bureaucracy and legal discourse function not only as hurdles but also as active instruments of class and state power. These mechanisms withstand the social distance necessary to alienate commoners from their means of subsistence and reduce rural producers to subjects of the market and state (Li, 2014; Peluso & Lund, 2011). In Chitral, the process of apoliticisation is manifested through complicated socio-political frameworks that systematically produce and perpetuate the marginalisation of pastoralists. This occurs not only through discursive representation but also through systemic exclusion and the gradual corrosion of political consciousness and agency. These narratives demonstrate how civility functions as a form of antipolitics:

what seemingly recognises local wisdom simultaneously limits the scope of legitimate dissent, thereby exemplifying Balibar's (2009) assertion that civility and violence are interconnected rather than oppositional. The political struggle to remove these barriers has not yet succeeded, and issues related to fundamental rights and resistance, such as the nationalisation of commons, cannot be addressed until a system is established that serves the ordinary people of Chitral. Nonetheless, some local elites can access these benefits, although they face additional political complexities.

The Resistance of Local Elites?

During my research in Chitral, I was informed that various lawyers are actively contesting court cases against the government, specifically challenging the 1975 Notification. I travelled to a city in Pakistan to engage with one of the attorneys involved in the case titled People of Chitral vs. the Federation of Pakistan, who has submitted a constitutional writ petition under Article 199 of the Constitution of Pakistan 1973. Although I had access to another similar case handled by a different lawyer, the similarity between the two prompted me to focus on the former. I engaged in extensive discussions with the lawyer, who demonstrated a profound understanding of the issue and explained numerous legal dimensions of the case that extend beyond the scope of this paper. He also addressed the leadership challenges and the 50-year delay in contesting the notification, as previously mentioned earlier. This delay is the principal concern cited by the government in its rejection of the petition. Nevertheless, he is confident that this limitation is inapplicable in this context, as constitutional provisions exempt petitions from temporal restrictions. Below, I summarise the petition's demands as he highlighted them.

> Our demand concerns specific provisions of the notification, not the entire 1975 Notification. We challenge only four lines. We argue that the residuary provision (RP) in Chitral differs from that in the rest of Pakistan. The RP for all of Pakistan states that "any land without a rightful owner belongs to the state." In Baluchistan,

> Swat, and Dir, if you prove your title through documents or possession, your ownership is recognised regardless of the land type. In Chitral, even with title documents or possession proof, the state claims ownership of the mountains or barren land. This treatment differs from that in the rest of the country. Shamilat (commons) belongs to the community or the individual. For example, the land above a village, if considered shamilat and developed, will be distributed among the people. If deemed state land, it will not be distributed. We have traditional land ownership concepts that have been passed down through generations. The government does not recognise the traditional ownership system (personal communication, 31 December 2022).

The petition and the lawyer have effectively highlighted several critical issues related to the notification, particularly the discriminatory treatment of Chitral and the government's failure to acknowledge traditional ownership systems during its implementation. The reference is made to the 1974 notification applicable to Dir and Swat, which does not stipulate that all *chiragah* (grazing areas), *shikargah* (hunting areas), and barren lands are to be considered state property. This provision is uniquely applied to Chitral, even though these regions share similar characteristics, including mountains and pastures. The Pakistani Constitution prohibits such discriminatory practices. This petition addresses all the critical political issues that should have been raised in 1975 when the notification was initially passed, but are only being addressed now. The lawyer involved in the case has indicated that it lacks support from current political leaders and is being pursued pro bono. Nonetheless, there are concerns regarding the interests of local elites, particularly individuals of high social standing, such as those from the royal family or those who stand to gain financially from these resources, who are involved in these legal proceedings. A local informant suggested that these cases primarily benefit the royal family, who are resisting the notification for their own interests (Personal Communication, 09 Nov 2022). Similarly, another respondent expressed the view that the individuals involved are motivated by potential mining and other financial gains, and they will assume control of the resources if the government allocates them to the community (personal

communication, 06 October 2024). The economic focus following a favourable legal outcome is anticipated to be on mining, tourism ventures, trophy hunting, and other capitalistic enterprises, with limited emphasis on pastoralist economies and their livelihoods. CAS frameworks highlight how the availability of legal recourse, predominantly to a select few, often aligned with business interests, reflects broader patterns of agrarian class formation and 'elite capture, as articulated by Bernstein (2010) and Borras and Franco (2012). Consequently, the politics of resistance perpetuates inequalities not only between the community and the state but also within the community itself. I asked the lawyer about these objections, to which he responded as follows:

> I have noticed that many people believe this case primarily benefits the *shahzadagan* (royal family), but I strongly disagree. In reality, most *shahzadagan* already possess legal court decrees for their land, having resolved disputes through various courts over the years. For instance, Shahzada X's case in Ashurat Gole, Shishi, was finally settled in his favour after decades of litigation. In contrast, common people often lack such legal documents and rely on demonstrating possession through use. This issue affects them more significantly, yet our political leaders often misinterpret it as benefiting only the *shahzadagan*…. We engage with the local community through various gatherings in hotels in Chitral, explaining our position and addressing misconceptions. Some individuals, such as Y politician, have expressed opposition and even considered filing a counter-case, but we have made it clear that they are free to do so. Despite these differing views, I firmly believe that this case will ultimately benefit the common people who lack legal documentation (personal communication, 31 December 2022 abridged and summarised by the author).

These discussions about the intentions of the petitions and those fighting for the land rights of Chitral present a complex disagreement at the local level, highlighting the lack of political engagement across the entire community in these matters. Some political leaders oppose this case because they see it as a power game for the royals, who are actively involved in local government politics. Similarly, the gatherings the lawyer mentioned are mostly held in elite hotels and people's houses in the main town, which are accessible only to the elites of Chitral, and the local pastoralists who live in the faraway villages and rely on the commons are not directly included in these discussions or court cases. Furthermore, there appears to be no clear way forward following the successful resolution of these cases.

The responses I received from the lawyer and other involved parties were ambiguous, suggesting that the Chitrali people would independently determine their next steps if the government renounced control. However, no definitive plans have been outlined for the implementation of this approach. A local resident expressed a similar concern, questioning the petitioners about the absence of a concrete plan should the petitioners prevail. He suggested that without a structured plan, the outcome may disproportionately benefit those with power and influence (personal communication, 06 October 2024). Conversely, the lawyer contends that, if the community prevails against the government, the community will be able to manage the commons autonomously, though this remains to be seen. A potential way forward could involve comprehensive political dialogue between political leaders and the pastoralist community; however, there is currently no indication of such discussions taking place. These conflicts and complexities represent rural dynamics that necessitate examination through the PE of the rural framework to comprehend the external political marginalisation of pastoralist communities by the government, as well as the internal exclusion perpetuated by local elites.

The disjointed and volatile nature of local struggles is neither accidental nor merely cultural; it results from processes identified by PE and CAS theories as central to capitalist transition. These practices involve the demobilisation or apoliticisation of rural subjects, attained through enclosure, dispossession, and deliberate discursive and structural exclusion (Bernstein, 2010).

Discussion

This study examines the apoliticisation of rural Chitral, where the political agency of the community is undermined by the state's discursive portrayal of locals as 'peaceful,' 'wise,' and 'educated.' This portrayal serves to delegitimise their political claims and is

compounded by a deeper systemic process of exclusion and marginalisation. This ingrained process, unfolding over time, results in many community members being unaware of their political or legal rights, revealing a deep apoliticisation that renders their political alienation invisible and normalised within the community. Such discourse results in a significant and intentional apoliticisation of both the commons and the populace. Through the conceptual frameworks of political ecology (PE) of rural areas and Critical Agrarian Studies (CAS), this process of apoliticisation reveals deeply unequal power relations in governance. In this context, capitalist and dominant state interests align with local elites to further marginalise pastoralist communities, whose livelihoods depend on the commons. The historical process of political marginalisation in Chitral, characterised by the dissolution of its princely state and its sudden merger into Pakistan, fostered a persistent distrust of government actions, such as the 1975 nationalisation notification. This act of enclosure, grounded in the broader principles of capitalist territorialisation, has resulted in the dispossession of communities, diminished political agency, and reinforced elite control over legal and discursive domains. Structural patriarchies and bureaucratic hurdles further aggravate the suppression of women's voices, leaving them doubly marginalised within an already apoliticised rural society.

Chitrali pastoralist communities remain largely uninformed and disengaged regarding the significant political and legal implications of the 1975 notification, which could profoundly affect their pastoral livelihoods. Over 80% of the pastoralist research participants rely on land resources to some extent, and even those who do not actively utilise the pastures demonstrate a sense of communal ownership through their shared history and identity. However, these communities have historically been marginalised from political discourse and broader decision-making processes, resulting in their current lack of awareness of national and local political dynamics. If the 1975 notification remains

unchallenged and not collectively annulled, more than 97% of Chitral's land is at risk of nationalisation, according to the petition, with the local pastoralist population poised to bear the brunt of the consequences. Pastoralism in Chitral is already undergoing transformation and decline due to livelihood shifts promoted by non-governmental organisations and discrimination rooted in climate change narratives (Khan, 2025). The government's appropriation of common lands threatens to eliminate the remaining land necessary for pastoralism to persist. Neoliberal interventions, such as mining, trophy hunting, and tourism, are transforming the metabolic flows of rural life, increasingly subordinating pastoralist economies and livelihoods to capitalist imperatives. Pastoralists' resistance after implementation may prove insufficient to counter the nationalisation plan, given the challenges posed by limited access, bureaucratic hurdles, and financial constraints.

In contributing to the tradition of radical geography, this paper advances a critical geography of rural enclosure that emphasises the political ecologies of the postcolonial state. Contrary to the neoliberal commodification that predominates in urban commons scholarship (Bollier & Helfrich, 2015; Drobnjaković & Steinführer, 2024), the experience in Chitral illustrates how state nationalisation and bureaucratic distance enact a subtler, yet equally potent, form of dispossession through the apoliticisation of pastoralist communities. This necessitates an expanded understanding of the commons that includes rural, postcolonial, and non-market processes of enclosure. Furthermore, by highlighting women's "double apoliticisation," the analysis aligns with feminist and decolonial calls within critical geography to diversify the meanings of political agency, knowledge, and resistance. Therefore, this study invites readers to consider how the nationalisation, marginalisation, and erasure of pastoralist livelihoods are integral to the broader planetary

politics of the commons. Thus, it positions Chitral not as an exception but as central to rethinking political ecology, rural-urban relations, and postcolonial environmental justice.

Conclusion

The findings suggest that the governance of Chitral's commons involves an ongoing, incomplete process of state-led nationalisation, where apoliticisation functions relationally rather than as a final outcome. The discursive portrayals of Chitralis as peaceful and *samajdar* (wise), combined with distant bureaucracies and elite mediation, serve to limit but not entirely eliminate the agency of pastoralists and women, which persists through informal and everyday acts of resistance. Recognising Chitral as a rural political space requires policies and scholarship that go beyond urban-focused and market-only narratives, engaging with state nationalisation, legal-technical ambiguity, and clan-based access as key mechanisms of dispossession. Improving local commons governance thus calls for context-specific reforms: increasing transparency around the 1975 notification and subsequent land decisions, establishing procedural channels for contestation in Swat, Peshawar, and Islamabad, and formalising co-governance arrangements that recognise customary *muzhayo* tenure rather than treating use as a revocable concession.

A feminist political ecology perspective stresses the importance of explicitly addressing gendered exclusions and double apoliticisation that make women's ecological knowledge invisible within families, village councils, state forums, and elite-led litigation. Institutional arrangements that involve women in commons committees, recognise their pastoral and care work, and support their participation in legal and political processes are crucial for a fair resolution of Chitral's shared lands. More broadly, Chitral's case advances debates on rural commons by demonstrating how apoliticisation, examined through Foucault (1991), Balibar (2009), and CAS, clarifies the joint formation of state

territorialisation and subaltern resistance in postcolonial mountain regions. Studying these micropolitics of enclosure and everyday contestation can help guide critical geography towards recognising rural, Indigenous, and gendered struggles over commons, thereby creating space for political ecologies that connect environmental sustainability with justice in highland pastoral contexts.

Article 02: Land Ontologies, Place Attachment, and Commons in Chitral, Pakistan

Submitted Journal: *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*

Reviews: Received and Incorporated

Abstract:

This ethnographic study examines Indigenous conceptions of commons (*muzhayo*) among pastoralists in Chitral, Pakistan, addressing a gap in commons scholarship that prioritises resource governance over relational meanings. Drawing on 14 months of fieldwork, including interviews, participant observation, and focus groups, the research investigates how communities experience and ascribe significance to commons. It introduces the Chitrali culturalscape, a context-specific analytical framework with broader theoretical relevance, conceptualising *muzhayo* as a relational ontology comprising four dimensions: material utility (seasonal grazing, firewood, and water access), socio-communal relations (clan consultations, gujjur hiring, and *sotsiri* (herding rotations), spiritual connections (rituals honouring spirits and ancestors), and emotional attachments rooted in ancestral belonging and women's memories of high-pasture. Ethnographic accounts, from communal treks to *dokhna* (flour offerings), illustrate how these dimensions constitute one another, linking subsistence practices to collective coordination, spiritual obligation, and place-based identity. The study emphasises the need for governance approaches that recognise Indigenous ontologies and relational worldviews of commons, cautioning that conventional resource-focused frameworks risk erasing local relationships to land and displacing pastoralists. By foregrounding Indigenous relational worldviews, the study challenges resource-centric governance models and contributes to decolonising commons scholarship.

Keywords: Commons, land rights, culturalscape, Spiritual commons, Emotional commons

Introduction:

It was an early June morning in Meragram Yarkhun Valley, Chitral, and the entire village awoke at approximately 4:00 am, an unusual time for most people who would normally sleep until later. When going outside, it was dark, but there was a strong smell of *dokhna* (flour burned on burning coal to emit scent), a ritual of paying homage to the spirits of the dead, and the *nangini*, fairies, to protect the *mal* (livestock) before their departure to the high pastures. This day marked *ghari nisik,* the moving of livestock to the high pasture for four months of summer. Each household was preparing its bread and getting ready for a three-hour trek up the mountains over a glacier to the pasture. This date was chosen as the day of *ghari nisik* after several community meetings, and the villagers had already built roads and bridges for livestock and had hired a *gujjur*, a hired herder from lower Chitral, to oversee the village's livestock for the summer. Then, the whole village set out, as seen by the torches, men, women, and eager children, some visiting the pasture for the first time, accompanied by the sounds of goats and sheep. It looked like a celebration and a communal activity involving every household with livestock. The community climbed to the pasture, with women and children returning earlier after leaving their livestock with the *gujjur*, while the men stayed longer to build a small shelter for the *gujjur*. The villagers have practised pastoralism for generations and look forward to this day all year, when they can send their goats and sheep to the lower pasture and their cows and bullocks to the high pasture. This gives their livestock freedom, green pastures and provide them with free time to focus on their agriculture work and preparation for harsh snowy winters. These pastures are owned and shared as *muzhayo (*commons) by the

villagers and provide fodder for the animals for four months, while the private land of the village is kept for winter, when snow covers the mountains, and the villagers can use these resources. When asked by an 80-year-old pastoralist in Yarkhun about the meaning of this common land, he said:

> The common pasture is more valuable than private cultivated land. We gather firewood from there and graze our cattle. It is also beneficial for our mental well-being. Our minds feel revitalised when we visit. It is the place where I have spent many treasured moments of my life, as I once lived as a shepherd in those pastures. At one point, I kept eight oxen there, which I later sold to fund my sons' weddings (Dust, 2022, personal communication).

In this way, the concept of commons in the remote villages of Chitral is not only of economic value but also demonstrates a deep connection with the place, fosters a sense of community, and incorporates a spiritual link with more-than-human beings in the region (Khan, 2026). Much literature exploring commons, natural resources, and management in environmental sciences, environmental economics, and geography is linked to Hardin's Tragedy of the Commons thesis (1968), which asserts that people are selfish and will exploit and deplete shared natural resources to maximise benefits. Contrasting this general assertion, commons research has developed over the years, and many communities living in remote regions, vulnerable to environmental catastrophes caused by climate change, have successfully managed and governed their lands sustainably and rely on these resources for their livelihoods (Anderson and Hill, 2004; Cai et al., 2020; Ostrom, 1990). In the Himalayas and on the Tibetan Plateau, an expanding body of literature demonstrates the impact of grazing bans, protected areas, and state-led resettlement on pastoral commons, frequently overriding the knowledge and institutions of herders (Luxom et al., 2022; Nyima and Yeh, 2023; Singh et al., 2021, 2022).

This research presents an alternative perspective to the literature that views the commons merely as a "resource," which legitimises the land-grabbing of common lands from local communities through privatisation, enclosure, and nationalisation (Jeffrey et al., 2012), without recognising the meaning and value of these areas or their impact on local livelihoods. This study reflects the viewpoint of locals from Chitral, Pakistan, who emphasise the importance of spiritual and religious beliefs, traditional practices, and environmental values in local engagement and understanding of *muzhayo* in Chitral. Although the commons are usually considered mainly within the field of economics, in Chitral, the *muzhayo* holds broader cultural significance, including engagement with more-than-humans (Khan, 2026). Other anthropologists across Central Asia have recognised landscapes' spiritual significance, including non-human spirit owners and inhabitants (Humphrey, 1995), to which humans pay close attention. Such cultural aspects, relating to how people live and form their worldview, encompass economics but are not always rooted in a capitalist model centred on individual profit. The indigenous concept of *muzhayo* in Chitral also integrates culture and economics as part of a wider phenomenon I call the culturalscape of Chitral. The Chitrali culturalscape, as I define it, refers to the complex fusion of Chitral's geography, cultural practices, and identity. This concept demonstrates how the physical environment, customs, and belief systems are inextricably linked. I see the Chitrali culturalscape as a dynamic, relational ontology that includes not only the physical landscape and cultural practices of Chitral but also the spiritual, emotional, and communal connections that bind people, non-humans, and place. In this paper, ontology relates to the nature of reality, especially the commons within Chitrali worlds, encompassing relationships among humans, more-than-humans, ancestors, and places. Epistemology, on the other hand, refers to the ways of understanding that reality through narratives, rituals, and practices. While the idea of cultural landscapes (Crumley,

1994) emphasises the joint creation of environment and culture, and taskscape (Ingold, 1993) highlights temporal activity, the Chitrali culturalscape specifically incorporates spiritual and emotional dimensions as co-constitutive elements. Inspired by relational ontologies (Escobar, 2020), it operationalises four analytically separate yet interconnected dimensions: material, socio-communal, spiritual, and emotional. The preference for the term "culturalscape" over the broader and more static term "culture" aligns with the critique in human geography of superorganic cultural determinism, exemplified by Sauerian landscapes (Hepach, 2023). This preference favours dynamic and relational concepts that incorporate commons within lived spatial practices without requiring exhaustive cultural analysis (Anderson, 2020). This framework sees high mountain pastures as both spiritual realms and vital sources of livelihood, thus going beyond the traditional split between sacred mountains and practical human spaces (Mu et al., 2019; Reuter, 2017). It shows spirituality as an essential part of everyday pastoral life and the development of collective identity. Within this culturalscape, the commons play a vital role in shaping inhabitants' lifestyles, influencing not only their land use patterns but also their self-perception of the environment, economic activities, and spirituality. The economy within Chitrali pastoralist communities is based on “sufficiency” and how people sustain their lives relying on cattle, fields, and commons. The pastoral communities in Chitral cultivate crops on private fields and raise livestock such as goats, sheep, and cows, which they use for food and clothing from animal products. This lifestyle is regarded by external development agencies, NGOs and the state as “primitive” and “backward” (Khan, 2025), reflecting a post-colonial orientalist discourse (Said, 2003).

This study investigates the conceptualisation and interaction of the Indigenous population of Chitral with the commons. It scrutinises the ontology of *muzhayo* (commons) in Chitral through the Chitrali culturalscape framework, unveiling a relational

Indigenous ontology that encompasses material, socio-communal, spiritual, and emotional dimensions. This perspective challenges resource-centric models (Hardin, 1968; Ostrom, 1990) and extends global commons theory towards decolonial governance (Bollier and Helfrich, 2019). The research adopts a relational and interpretivist ontology, proposing that reality emerges through dynamic interactions among humans, more-than-humans, ancestors, and places, rather than through discrete objects or rational actors. The study draws on 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork from 2022 to 2025 across three Upper Chitral valleys: Meragram No 2 in Yarkhun, Khot Valley, and Rech Valley in Torkhow (Figure 01), including 70 interviews with community leaders and pastoralists. The findings indicate that commons in Chitral are not merely economic resources but integral components of a multifaceted ontological reality shaping Indigenous identity, spirituality, and cultural practices, necessitating a holistic approach to governance before external policies of nationalisation are introduced (Singh, 2017).

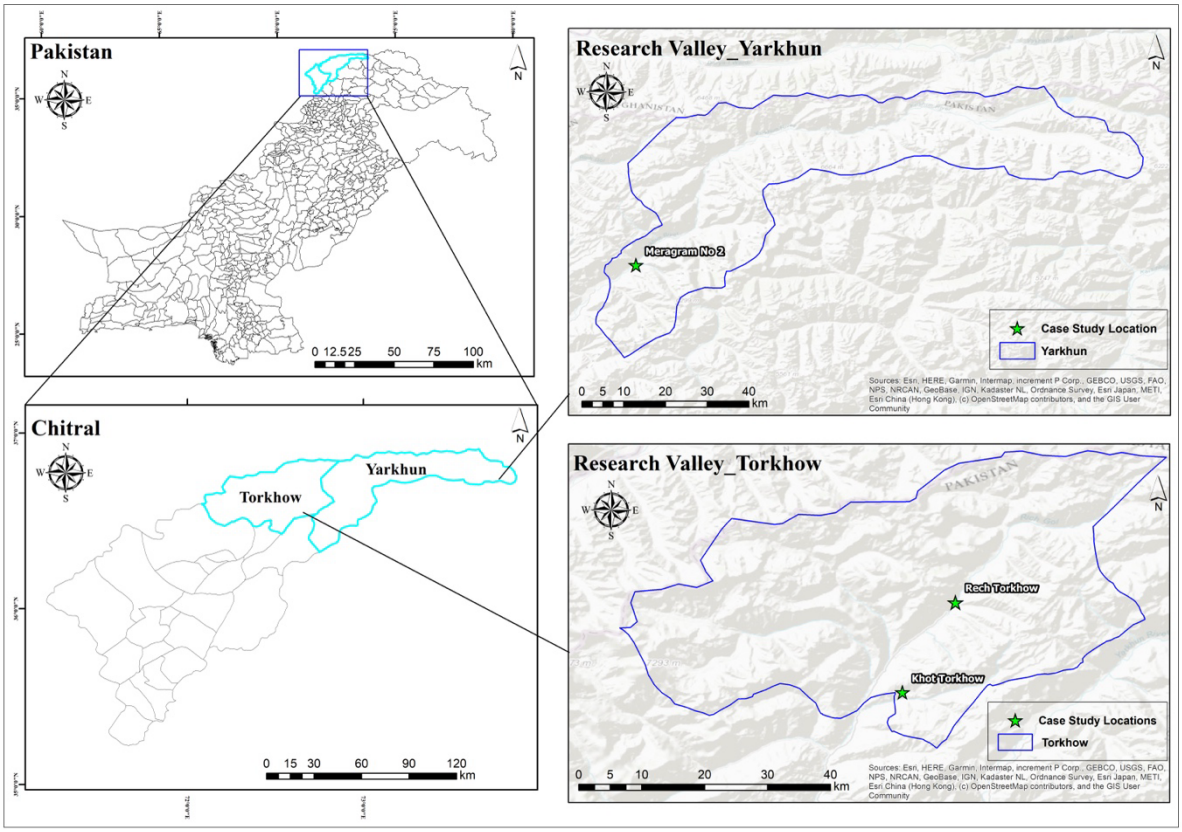


Figure 01: A map of the study areas developed by the author (Special thanks to Aslam)

Literature Review of Commons and Literature Gap:

Commons are a complex idea involving resources managed collectively by communities, including tangible assets such as forests, land, and fisheries, as well as intangible resources like cultural heritage and knowledge (Wall, 2014). These resources are shaped by cultural norms, social practices, and political conditions, balancing cooperation with individual autonomy (Dagan and Heller, 2001). The concept of the commons originated in medieval Europe, where common lands were used for grazing and communal activities. The term gained importance in the 20th century with Garrett Hardin's influential essay "The Tragedy of the Commons" in 1968. Hardin argued that shared resources would be overused by individuals acting in self-interest, leading to environmental and social disaster (Boyd et al., 2018; Linebaugh, 2008). This perspective suggested that the tragedy could only be avoided through privatisation or government control (Sarker and Blomquist, 2019). The understanding of commons has evolved considerably since Hardin's article (Boyd et al., 2018). Elinor Ostrom's 1990 publication, "Governing the Commons," challenged Hardin's assumptions and introduced the idea of user self-governance (Sarker and Blomquist, 2019), demonstrating that local communities could effectively manage shared resources through collaborative efforts and institutional frameworks. While her work critiqued Hardin's assumptions, Ostrom's approach was not entirely opposed to state involvement or privatisation (Sarker and Blomquist, 2019), and neither she nor Hardin provided ethnographic accounts of lived realities. Research has progressed from Ostrom's work towards "commoning," reconceiving commons as collective ways of caring and organising social life rather than managing shared resources (Albareda and Sison, 2020; Bollier and Helfrich, 2019; Fournier, 2013).

The Chitrali culturalscape fills this gap by acting as a context-specific analytical framework for Chitral, developed inductively from ethnography. It presents a generalised theoretical proposition, common ontologies must incorporate four interrelated dimensions: material, socio-communal, spiritual, and emotional, rather than prioritising institutions (Ostrom, 1990) or tasks (Ingold, 1993). While Ostrom models collective action as rule-following among rational users, Chitrali *Muzhayo* shows action as inseparable from *nangini* (spirit guardians), ancestral obligations, and gendered nostalgia, relations that precede and underpin governance. This extends Escobar's (2020) relational ontologies by breaking down spiritual and emotional elements into analytically distinct yet interconnected categories.

The discourse surrounding degradation remains widespread when it comes to land and forest commons, with local communities and Malthusian population growth often seen as primary causes (McPeak, 2003). Research conducted in various contexts, such as the Eastern Hindu Kush, shows that local populations adapt their resource management strategies to demographic changes, demonstrating resilience (Fazlur-Rahman, 2007). Studies on pastoralist commons have progressed, challenging assumptions about overgrazing and the tragedy of the commons and suggesting that open-access systems can be managed sustainably through adaptive strategies (Moritz et al., 2013). Scoones et al. (2020) have criticised the traditional commons model, highlighting pastoralists' adaptive tactics in managing commons amid uncertainty, mobility, and Indigenous knowledge. Evidence suggests that successful management often results from long-standing traditions and institutions rather than external pressures alone (Bromley, 1991; Runge, 1986). Despite this critical literature, in regions like Chitral, state and international organisations promote perspectives favouring resource nationalisation, assuming local communities would deplete these resources (Lana and Iriarte-Goñi, 2015; Randhir, 2016). The impacts

of forest nationalisation have been studied in Cameroon (Mvondo, 2009), Nepal (Arnold and Campbell, 1986), and India (Gadgil and Iyer, 1989). Elsewhere in the Himalayas, the implementation of a grazing ban in 1998 within Sikkim's Khangchendzonga National Park, along with subsequent evictions, terminated pastoral activities within the park and exacerbated poverty among economically disadvantaged herders, with minimal evidence of ecological improvement (Singh et al., 2021, 2022). In Tibet, Nyima and Yeh (2023) demonstrate that herders' 'voluntary' agreement to resettlement at high altitudes was achieved through orchestrated persuasion and coercion. These studies reveal that nationalisation undermined community management, as government foresters were underpaid, fostering a culture of bribery that enabled elites to exploit resources. Such misconceptions about commons governance often arise from neglecting the ontological and epistemological bases of external interventions. Scholars specialising in pastoralism, many with pastoralist backgrounds, have highlighted land conflicts, such as sedentarisation and land loss, and challenged the Tragedy of the Commons (Dell'Angelo et al., 2017; Galaty, 2016; Lesorogol, 2008; McCabe, 1990). Economic theories related to the commons are inadequate to explain pastoralist commons, prompting researchers to focus on pastoralist commoning and alternative perspectives (Fratkin, 1997; German et al., 2017; Makki, 2014; Scoones, 2023; Tsering and Unks, 2024). This paper uses case studies from Chitral, Pakistan, to provide an ontological perspective on the commons via pastoral community relationships, addressing a theoretical gap that can inform understanding of global governance. Protecting Indigenous knowledge about the commons through academic research remains essential, especially as climate change, changing land use patterns and the loss of commons for mountain communities in Chitral threaten their survival.

A Short History of Governance of Commons in Chitral

Chitral was governed for centuries under successive dynastic systems, most recently by the Katoor dynasty, which ruled for four centuries and utilised land ownership to consolidate political power (IUCN Pakistan, 2004). Under the rule of the *mehtar* (king), forests and mountains were formally considered state property, yet communities retained customary use rights. A local scholar encapsulates this arrangement: “There is a proverb, *'zameeno cho roi mitaro'*, which means, the land and people belong to the king. But people had the use rights and weren't harassed by the king” (Rehman, 2022, personal communication). This system of communal use with minimal conflict persisted through successive dynasties, facilitated by local officials who recognised qabila (clan)-based arrangements over shared resources (Ullah, 2024, personal communication). Following the 1947 partition, Chitral joined Pakistan and was fully integrated into the North-West Frontier Province in 1969 (Marsden, 2007), transferring the *mehtar*'s custodial authority to the Pakistani state. A provincial and federal land commission notification approved in 1975 formalised the nationalisation of Chitrali commons, and locals contend that its full implementation would strip them of over 95% of the common land their communities have used for generations.

The 1975 notification dispute illustrates the intersection of a resource-centric perspective of the commons with the relational perspective discussed in this paper. For most herders, nationalisation manifests indirectly through mechanisms such as state-employed watchers enforcing hunting prohibitions, officials conducting land mapping, and the issuance of trophy-hunting leases, afforestation initiatives, and mining activities that reclassify pastures as government property (Khan, 2025b). Decisions are made in remote offices, leaving many herders unaware, while women, whose expertise in dairying and transhumance supports *muzhayo*, are excluded from both village councils and state forums. Nationalisation does not substitute customary governance with a neutral alternative; rather,

it shifts control towards state agencies and already dominant lineages (see also Khan, 2025b, 2025d). What this governance approach overlooks is the focus of this paper. A state that regards *muzhayo* as a revocable concession for grazing and firewood acknowledges only its material aspect. It fails to recognise the clan consultations that determine the date of *ghari nisik*, the *dokhna* offered to the *nangini*, the ibex hunted solely with their consent, or the women whose memories connect them to the high pastures. The subsequent sections explain these relationships.

The Ontology of Land and Commons

Before turning to the *muzhayo* itself, I set out what an ontology of land means here. An ontology of land includes the elements that shape an individual's understanding of land's reality and how their perception of land informs their overall reality (Li, 2014; Rathbone and Verhoef, 2015). While participants' descriptions of spiritual connections may reflect epistemological frameworks (ways of knowing), their ritual practices represent ontological enactments that sustain relationships with non-human entities. The current land debate is hindered by a modernist ontology that reduces land to functional and cultural concepts. Contemporary academic research explores diverse conceptualisations of land and commons, challenging traditional Western notions of private property ownership. Indigenous perspectives emphasise the interconnectedness and reciprocal obligations between humans and the environment, contrasting with settler colonial views that regard land as a commodity (Burow et al., 2018). Indigenous scholars have cautioned that the "ontological turn" may appropriate Indigenous thought without acknowledging its original holders (Todd, 2016). This warning is pertinent to any discussion of Indigenous ontologies, including this one. This interconnected approach to commons transcends resource-centric and anthropocentric interpretations, framing them instead as "life made in

common" (Micarelli, 2021). A new exploration of ontology is necessary in academia to reflect the complexity and historical significance of land, resisting the reductionism present in colonial strategies. This alternative perspective can better address practical issues related to land worldwide (Verhoef and Rathbone, 2015). Therefore, this study focuses on examining the ontology of commons in Chitral to present an Indigenous pastoralist perspective that has historically been marginalised in politics and decision-making locally and has not been sufficiently represented in academic discourses globally.

> Nothing is more important than land. Even after I die, my bones will rest in this land. While I am alive, living in Meragram (the village) feels like ruling the entire world. I will repeat these words until my last breath, my beloved son (KW, 2022, personal communication).

For several elders, land grounds identity in life and after death. Khonza Wawi, a woman in her late 90s from the village of Meragram No 2, became emotional when I asked her about her perception of land. Land is certainly a resource for the people of Chitral, but it represents more than just utility; it embodies a sense of geographic and emotional belonging, identity, and affiliation that persists during their lifetime and even after death. This profound connection with the soil and land may be uniquely rural, especially in contrast to urban areas where residents often lack a permanent relationship with their place of residence. Many in cities do not own houses, let alone land. This inherent bond is rural in nature and reflects a different relational understanding, which those who have never lived in such rural areas and experienced such closeness will never fully grasp. This sense of interconnectedness between people and land can also be observed in other valleys of Chitral.

> In Khot, people originally settled on lands near streams and rivers. The earliest inhabitants were known as Bomki or Bomogogh, which means 'the first to live here and irrigate the land (indigenous).' Some political figures sometimes misuse the term Bomogogh to label people of a lower social class, but this is incorrect. These were the pioneers who first established their survival on this land and made it fertile through irrigation. It is an honour to be associated with such a legacy, as the fertility of the land elevates the individual who cultivates it (HM, 2022, personal communication)

This illustrates the indigenous connection to land, whether private land in the village or communal land, showing how people see themselves as part of the land and take pride in passing it down through generations. Being part of that lineage and viewing land as a link to ancestors is a unique ontological reference common among Indigenous communities (Coulthard, 2014). Coulthard (2014) refers to this concept as grounded normativity, which encompasses ethics derived from the land, perceived as a system of reciprocal relations and obligations. While these scholars write within settler-colonial contexts, the commons in Chitral are subject to enclosure by a postcolonial state. I incorporate their concepts, taking this distinction into account. SN, a resident of Rech, states, "We have been living here for quite a long period now, and so far around 36 known pusht (generations) of our clan (Syed) have lived here. It is said that our clan was the first one to come and live in this place" (2022, personal communication). The longstanding connection to land influences the ontology and identity of individuals and their clans. This relationship is often described as reciprocal, in which Indigenous communities see themselves as integral to the land as kin, rather than claiming ownership through financial means (Kimmerer, 2013; Larsen and Johnson, 2017).

The ontology of commons, known locally as *muzhayo* or *muzhayo zemeen* (common land) in the Khowar language, is complex, reflecting the multifaceted nature of private land as discussed earlier. Hussain, a local researcher from Chitral, illustrated this difference in the ontology of the commons in Chitral by comparing it to the ideas of commons among the neighbouring Pashtun communities in districts such as Dir, Swat, and Waziristan.

> Chitral is different because the people of Chitral have been living here since known history, and it has not been invaded by outsiders. There was a *riyasat* (state) system in Chitral that governed this area for a long time (2024, personal communication).

This fundamental difference between Chitral and surrounding districts makes the commons part of the shared history and identity of its people, as much as any other tangible or intangible heritage that reflects Chitral's historical perception. Traditional Chitrali homes often feature a food store called *gonj*, which is a private space not accessed by guests or outsiders who are not family. People store all their meat, dairy products, and other food items in this room. When I asked locals about the significance of the commons, many, including NK, WK, and others in Yarkhun Valley, said that the commons are like their *gonj* and that they depend on them just as a family relies on their *gonj* daily (2023, personal communication). The commons are not “out there” but integral to the daily lives of local pastoralists, fostering a relationship of ownership, respect, and everyday reality for the villagers. Therefore, commons possess material utility, socio-communal value, and spiritual and emotional significance, which must be explored to understand the ontology of commons in Chitral.

The Material and Utility Ontology of Commons

Materially, *muzhayo* is undivided land that a community shares and uses jointly. The material reality of the commons varies slightly across the valleys of Chitral. Lower Chitral, which was not the focus of my research, tends to have more forests, whereas Upper Chitral features more mountains and barren land. A key characteristic of the commons is that they are not privately owned but are shared by a community. Abdul, a resident of Yarkhun who grew up as a pastoralist and is now in his 60s, described the essence of commons as follows:

> Common land is undivided land, shared jointly by people. It is a mutual property between you and your brother. One part is your private land, inherited from your father. The other part is undivided land, such as our pastures, which are not divided. Pastures are considered shared land, and you must use them collaboratively with others (2022, personal communication).

What counts as *muzhayo*, and when it can be used, depends on altitude, season and the different valleys. Each village has different definitions of what it considers common land, but the main commons in Upper Chitral include high pastures located hours away in the mountains, lower pastures, barren mountains above village channels, and riverbeds. This contrasts with lower areas of the country, where regular rainfall and irrigation, such as in Dir, Swat, and Kashmir, produce green mountains with less obvious distinctions between private and common land. The use of the commons depends on weather conditions, as Upper Chitral's high pastures are inaccessible in winter, while people take their mal (livestock) there in summer. In winter, locals use lower pastures and riverbeds for grazing, returning cattle to warm shelters daily. In some villages, such as Khot, clans maintain summer houses where people stay with their livestock. A Khot Valley respondent considers the pasture his home, stating, "I have a house here, and I have a home in Gari,

which is equally important" (2022, personal communication). While this practice existed in Yarkhun Valley forty years ago, the *ghari-duri* (summer dwellings in the high pasture) are no longer used as they hire *gujjurs* to manage cattle in summer (Khan, 2025). Commons are thus essential to pastoralist communities' survival, providing sustenance in winter and allowing cattle to be moved to high pastures in summer, reducing pressure on lower areas.

The utility of the commons is multifaceted, as locals depend on them for grazing their livestock, collecting firewood and herbs, obtaining water for themselves and their livestock, and hunting. In a focus group interview, sitting in a shop during a winter evening, the villagers of Khot Valley spoke about the different ways they use the commons, especially the high pastures:

> The *ghari* or *aan* holds great importance for us. It covers most of our land and serves as a crucial resource for grazing our livestock, gathering wood and herbs, and obtaining fertiliser. While our home has limited land for specific purposes, our *ghari*, especially the area known as Darban, provides flexible land resources. Our survival relies on the health of our *ghari* (2022, personal communication).

The commons are essential in the rural pastoralist way of life in these villages, where humans and more-than-humans rely on shared lands (Khan, 2026). Removing commons from villagers' daily routines would severely disrupt the pastoralist system in these areas. Wor Mast, an elderly pastoralist who has spent his life in Khot Valley, considers the commons as the roots of life: "For me, these mountains, these hills, these pastures are the roots of living here. We take our yaks there in March, and we have ibex, francolin, and partridge in these mountains" (2022, personal communication). This physical presence and necessity of the commons demonstrate that in the ontology of Chitral, people are as much

a part of the commons as the commons are part of their lives. It is an intertwined reality where the people view the commons as vital to living in these Hindu Kush Mountain villages. The ontology of the commons is closely linked to the ontology of humans and more-than-humans, in which the boundaries among land, people, and other-than-human entities become blurred, forming a complex web of interdependence in mountain communities (Blau, 2020).

Socio-communal Ontology of Commons

Commons play an important role in the social and communal life of the local pastoralists. They act as a main factor in uniting the community through consultation processes to decide on key dates for going to high pastures (*ghari nisik*) and bringing livestock back. When I arrived in Meragram No. 2 in May 2022, villagers' discussions shifted towards setting a date for ghari nisik, with people sharing views on weather conditions and pasture fodder. After initial discussions, the men who use the commons were invited to a *gujjuro* meeting (a village meeting to contract the new gujjur) to manage village livestock for the year. In the meetings, there were disagreements between the gujjur and locals, but elders intervened to resolve issues, as they are respected by the younger ones. Some matters, such as compensation for goat deaths, required multiple meetings. Conversations continued outside these meetings throughout the week, with both men and women discussing these issues at home, bringing locals together despite their busy schedules. In line with Ostrom's (1990) principle 6, which requires accessible conflict resolution mechanisms, and the Peer Monitor/Honour Transparency and Trust pattern within Bollier and Helfrich's framework (2019), these problem-solving processes strengthen trust and social cohesion through open discussion and dialogue. A community that solves problems together stays united.

Seasonal rituals turn this coordination into shared celebrations. Most of the local indigenous rituals are also closely connected to the commons, as people perform these traditions as a community, which helps strengthen bonds when they travel together and work as a team. An essential practice among pastoralists in Chitral is known as *sotsiri* (herding rotations), involving communal care of livestock by taking them to common grazing areas in turns. This practice encourages daily engagement among community members and shares the responsibility of livestock care, with each family taking on this duty once a month. Some of the elderly people I interviewed nostalgically recalled these rituals, like MA, a 70-year-old pastoralist in Khanjarandeh Yarkhun, who remembered the rituals of *ghari nisik* and *ghari khamek* (Taking the livestock to high pastures and bringing them back to the village) with a smile on his face and eyes closed.

> *Ghari nisik* was an important and enjoyable event. We would start our journey in the second week of June. The night before, special dishes like *Sanabachi* and *Cheera Shapik* (dairy dishes) were prepared, and people would invite each other to dinner. As a gesture of goodwill, we would oil the animals' horns (*Charu korik*) and put a few drops of milk on the goats and sheep. We would then set off as a group with our belongings and livestock. We would stay at the pasture for three months, returning by September, welcomed back with dinners and gifts of dairy. Those were beautiful times (MA, 2022, personal communication).

These rituals carry the culturalscape across generations. Commons play a crucial role in maintaining the traditions and rituals unique to Chitral. These events form a vital part of the culture and worldview of local communities. They serve as important channels for transmitting cultural norms, preserving customs across generations, and strengthening community bonds (Fiese and Tomcho, 2001). When people see themselves as a

community or even identify individually, they connect with these festivals and rituals, which help sustain the culturalscape of these villages. Therefore, the social and communal nature of the commons reflects a distinct ontology for both individuals and the community. This is evident through the ritualisation of togetherness, shared practices, and collective activities that boost group identity and cohesion, illustrating the social aspect of commoning within Bollier and Helfrich's (2019) framework: social life, peer governance, and provisioning (Sandström et al., 2017). The relational ontology of commons is vital because it goes beyond the material view often seen in policy discussions, portraying commons as a holistic link between land, people, more-than-humans, and culture. The idea of "being" in these villages cannot be separated from their broader involvement with pastoral practices and commons. It reinforces the complex ontological relationship among commons, humans, and MTHs, where removing any element would disrupt the understanding of "being" within this worldview.

The Spiritual Ontology of Land and Commons.

The spiritual ontology of land is not sufficiently recognised in current debates on land ontology, as these discussions tend to be modern, secular, and reductionist (Rathbone and Verhoef, 2015). In the context of Chitral, a spiritual and theological understanding of land clearly emerges when speaking with locals about their ideas and land ownership. SNS, a resident of Rech Valley, explained that humans have a profound connection to the land or soil, based on the belief that humans are made of soil themselves and that their bodies will ultimately return to it (2022, personal communication). This close bond with the land is widely used to demonstrate humility before God and as a reminder that humans must return to Him sooner or later, according to Muslim belief. This reference is directly

from the Holy Qur'an, in multiple verses, such as, "God created you from the soil like a vegetable growth; He will then return you to it, and bring you out again" (Quran, Surah Nuh 17-18). "It is the land of the Lord, and it will stay here. Our ancestors have come before us, they utilised it, and they are gone now. One day, we will also leave this black soil behind. It is the land of the Lord; it will remain here forever" (Abdullah, 2022, personal communication). Another individual states that the land and everything on earth belong to God. The three-foot land (grave) after our death is ours to keep when we die (GH, 2022, personal communication). There is a subtle link between the temporality of the world, a common theological theme among the people of Chitral, and its appearance in poetry and other forms of literature. For instance, a couplet by a contemporary poet, Shahan, on the transient nature of life states:

"You keep talking about yourself. Where does your pride come from?

The existence of humans originates from the soil, and to the soil they shall return".

This theological understanding shifts the idea of land from relations of possession to trust. Land and place are not only the property of God but also bestowed upon humans for their lives, allowing them to thank God for their use and to leave it for future generations after they pass away. Many people regard land as a gift from God and consider their relationship with Him to be blessed because of this gift, expressing their gratitude to God. An ontological view of land links people to their creator and keeps them humble and respectful towards the land and other beings dependent on it, those who have gone before and those who will come after. Like many Indigenous communities around the world, Chitralis also see themselves as one with the land and as a source of life granted by the creator of the universe, fostering a spiritual bond that promotes positive values in how land is regarded and used in such cultures (Lockhart et al., 2019). This perspective highlights

the importance of valuing local knowledge and strengthening a connection with nature, as spiritual and cultural practices nurture a respectful and reciprocal relationship with the land (Bollier and Helfrich, 2019).

Like the spiritual connection with soil and private land, the locals in Chitral also demonstrated a spiritual bond with the commons. I sat for *Mashqulgi* (discussion) with FK, one of the pastoralist leaders and a hunter of his time, and he explained this relationship to me over afternoon tea:

> Dua (saying prayers) is very important before heading to the mountain pastures, but it ultimately depends on whether you value these customs or not. Our parents have told us that there are many things we must consider. During our pastoralist days, we were told of "*nanginian shinjik*" (a ritual of recognising and seeking help from spiritual beings, akin to fairies). God knows what these *nangini* look like and who they are, but we were told about them so that our *mal* (livestock) return safely from the pastures. Later, when I started hunting, my father advised me, "When you leave the house (for the high pastures), pray (dua) for your ancestors, and when you enter the high pastures, there is a huge *khangi* (a spiritual figure, sometimes in the shape of a snake, that is the guardian of this mountainous pasture) and you must take its name, pay your tributes to it, make dua and pray for your ancestors." This is how it used to be, and we would remember them at every step. Certainly, we benefited from this, and things were in our favour (2022, personal communication).

Commons in other parts of the world might be pieces of land, mountains, or other resources, but for the villagers of Chitral, they are also sacred sites, as in other indigenous cultures (Kandari et al., 2014). As FK describes the importance of a spiritual relationship with the mountains and high pastures, the commons do not simply become places of

exploitation; instead, the people regard them as holy sites, cared for by spiritual figures or mountain spirits (whom they imagine as fairies), and their permission is sought through various rituals to enter these spaces (York, 2023). Similar relationships with an animate landscape are evident throughout the Himalaya. In Sikkim, ritual and textual traditions maintain a reciprocal relationship with Kanchendzonga, the mountain venerated as the land's protector deity (Bhutia, 2021). Gergan (2017) shows how Indigenous residents perceived an earthquake and opposed dam construction in connection with a sacred, animate landscape. On the Tibetan Plateau, herders associate the pika, which the state targets as a pest, with the earth's fertility and territorial deities, partially drawing on the Gesar epic (Yeh and Gaerrang, 2021). In each instance, a relational ontology confronts a state classification of land and animals. Many people spoke about the purity of these places and that everyone should ensure they enter the pasture clean and tidy. This respect for the commons is almost like going to a prayer room. JK, known for his proficiency in hunting and pastoral activities, asserts that “Fairies are living there. One should go there while maintaining a state of cleanliness. One should pray and call the forefathers’ spirits who went there before us” (2022, personal communication). Communication happens in the commons with the ancestors who have passed away and with unseen spiritual entities that protect not only the “place” but also the humans and more-than-humans in that terrain. Watts (2013) identifies this type of relationship as Indigenous Place-Thought, wherein place and thought are inseparable, and the land itself possesses agency. It is important to note that I am not deliberately using the word “religious” because most of these spiritual connections do not necessarily stem from contemporary religious beliefs, such as those in Islam, which are currently practised in that region (Cacopardo and Cacopardo, 2001). Rather, these spiritual worldviews are indigenous to these regions of Chitral. This belief system remains under-explored and has its roots in the pastoralist practices of the area

(Jettmar, 1975). In some of these villages, the adoption of Islam is a relatively recent development, only three to four generations old, and older generations continue with the indigenous spiritual practices. JK illustrates this transformation and blending of spiritual practices well: “Each person has their own approach. For instance, while stepping out for hunting, one says “Bismillah” (start in the name of Allah) and also calls the fairies and the spirits of deceased hunters. However, the one who provides *rizq* (sustenance/food) is Allah Almighty” (2022, personal communication). Islamic spirituality is now clearly visible in these practices, but the traditional indigenous belief system is also woven into these spiritual rituals. These practices are undoubtedly evolving; nonetheless, the spiritual connection with the commons remains inevitable.

The ontology of the commons in Chitral is rooted in the spiritual belief system that transcends physicality, creating a reality that encompasses both the seen and unseen. It becomes a performative ontology in which parents instruct children to maintain spiritual relationships with pastures and to honour these spaces as sacred. The belief in nangini (fairies) within these commons reflects the Indigenous cosmology, in which the realities of places, humans, and more-than-humans are interconnected (see also Khan, 2026). Pastoralists seek protection from *nangini* when entering the commons through the *dokhna* ritual of burning aromatic flour. Hunters must obtain permission from *nangini*, as ibexes are regarded as daughters of the *nangini*, and hunting is permitted only with their consent. This fosters coexistence, unlike trophy hunting elsewhere, which objectifies MTH. Humans respect the land, viewing hunted animals as *rizq:* a blessing and source of sustenance. The pastures are sacred, and their purity can be tainted if outsiders, who do not belong, come without paying tribute to nangini, called "*chetu bik*" (becoming impure). People believe that when pastures become chetu (impure), it leads to the death of livestock and visitors because spiritual deities are displeased. For centuries, this has been the

worldview of local communities, and understanding the ontology of the commons requires recognising this spiritual dimension. Beyond material and social aspects, spirituality plays a central role in the ontological interconnection. The rituals and relationships with the commons foster an emotional ontology that is fundamental to understanding this ontological nexus.

Emotional Ontology of Commons

Commons in Chitral have a deeply emotional significance. They evoke a sense of identity, a feeling of freedom, especially for females, and a strong sense of nostalgia. This includes maintaining an ancestral connection to the commons and forming one's identity in relation to them (Sandström et al., 2017). FK, one of the current village leaders, when asked about what the commons mean to him, described his involvement as a sign of respect for his deceased ancestors. He also recalled his memories of going into the high pastures as a hunter, which he can hardly do now because of government restrictions and his age.

> Firstly, we must remember the spirits of our deceased ancestors and follow in their footsteps. Whatever benefits we had there, from hunting to the freedom to use the resources, we took care of them until the government intervened. *Aan* (high pasture) holds enormous importance. Only those who understand will appreciate the great significance of the commons (FK, 2022, personal communication).

These attachments are widely shared and are not always comfortable. Several other people expressed similar personal emotional connections with the commons through their experiences, including involvement in hunting practices and pastoral activities. Some referred to the pastures as their home and spoke in detail about how they looked forward to (or used to look forward to) visiting the high pastures every summer. A local from Khot

Valley, SWK, shares his love for the commons: “I love the mountain pastures as much as I love the fields in the villages. These mountains are also very dear to me. I can even give my life and blood for them. As much as my private land is dear to me, so are these mountains.” It is noteworthy that many individuals did not distinguish between the concepts of private land and commons, assigning equal importance to both. This highlights the fact that it challenges the assumption that individuals would feel more invested in their private land compared to the commons. The emotional attachment also serves as a testament to the ownership of the commons that is always evident in these regions. Many people mentioned how connected they feel to the pastures with their deceased parents and grandparents, who would take them there, celebrating shared history and ancestry. However, the emotions people show towards the commons vary with age and gender. These feelings are not always positive, as some individuals also feel a burden of responsibility towards the commons. There is a well-known proverb in the region, “*muzhayo nano sar bezar*”, meaning “I am even sick of the mother that kids have to share”, which illustrates that sharing resources can be difficult and requires consideration for others who share these resources. Many acknowledged the difficulty but also indicated that despite the challenges, they have been utilising these resources as a community for centuries. Females have a more complex relationship with the commons than men, owing to how they used to travel to the pastures and how this access has become increasingly restricted over time due to the evolving dynamics of pastoralist livelihoods in Chitral.

> Going to the *ghari* (high pasture) was my favourite because it allowed me to roam freely and talk to girls my age. Besides *ghari nisik*, the girls were not permitted to leave their houses, and their parents did not allow them either (Bibi, 2022, personal communication).

For women, attachment to the high pastures is bound up with the freedom those spaces once gave them. Bibi, who is currently in her sixties, recalled her experience of going to the *ghari* as a freeing activity that allowed them to socialise and have a female-exclusive interaction, which may not have been feasible in the village because everyone was limited to their house, busy with their daily chores. It is because of this opportunity to be with other female friends that Bibi showed a deep emotional connection to the commons. Girls today do not go and live in the high pastures like in Bibi's time, and they may not relate to her experience, but many of the women I interviewed over the age of forty had a strong emotional attachment to the high pastures, riverbeds, and low pastures. Another woman, CB, displayed her emotions towards the commons.

> I love *Ghari* very much because life was extremely easy there and we had less work to do. As a woman, I only had to manage the livestock and extract butter from the milk. My heart still burns for *Ghari*, as the *gujjur* is unable to take care of our animals. We women had a lot of fun there: we would gossip, share jokes, laugh, and live happily (CB, 2022, personal communication).

That freedom has narrowed as men made decisions that took women out of the pastures. CB was among the pastoralist women who would spend three months in the high pastures, but this tradition has now changed, and the hired herder, *gujjur*, now does this work. Many women still wish to remain there, but the decision to bring in the gujjur has been made by the men of the villages. The women express their emotional pain due to this change, as

they miss the place and the enjoyment they used to experience in the pastures. The agency of pastoralist women in the governance of the commons has decreased significantly, as they no longer reside in the high pastures during summer, and the practice of sotsiri (herding rotations) during spring and summer is mainly conducted by men. MB, another pastoralist woman, echoed this longing directly, contrasting the plenty of the pasture with her family's single field in the village, and saying she still yearns for *ghari* (2022, personal communication). These sentiments were common among most women who had strong emotional ties to the commons, as these spaces represented not just material resources but also sources of freedom, friendship, wealth, and happiness. Many participants recalled women playing music on flutes made from local tree bark while caring for livestock in the pastures. This is notable because women are usually not permitted to participate in musical activities; however, the pastoralist work and the vastness of the commons allowed them to break established norms (Dyson, 2008). The presence of women in the high pastures for prolonged periods has diminished due to declines in pastoral livelihoods, the employment of a *gujjur* during summer, and a shift towards a more sedentary lifestyle (Khan, 2025). In such a context, it would be unjust to ignore the emotional ontology of the commons, which forms the reality and lived experiences of the villagers, who see themselves as deeply connected not only physically and spiritually but also emotionally to these spaces. The emotional ontology of the commons shapes their identity, helps them connect to their ancestors' essence, enables traditions to be passed down, and serves as a vital link for the women of Chitral.

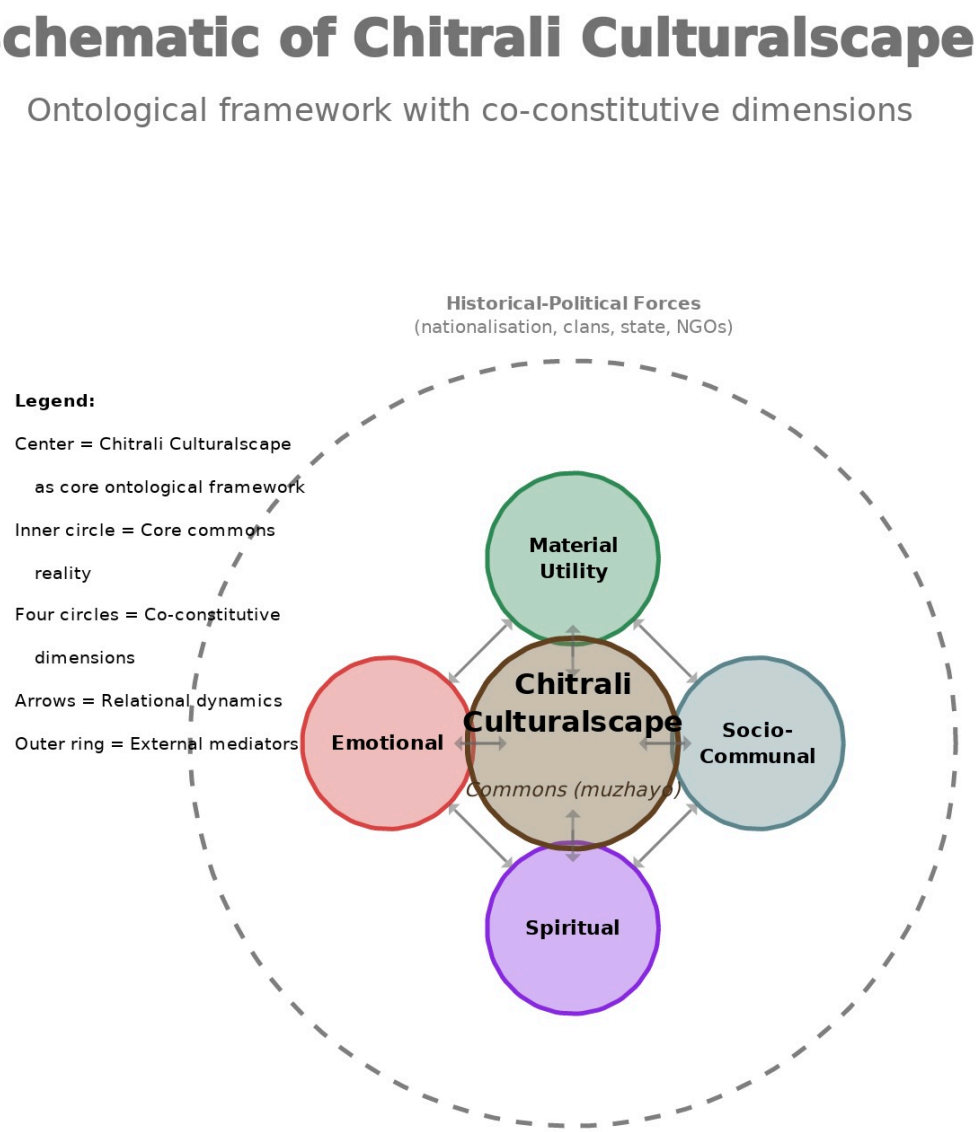


Figure 02: Schematic of the Chitrali Culturalscape. The central framework consists of commons (*muzhayo*) through four overlapping dimensions; the outer ring depicts historical-political mediators. Bidirectional arrows signify mutual constitution.

The ontological connection of commons in Chitral thus embodies a complex interaction of the material, spiritual, communal, and emotional aspects of the local inhabitants' lives (see Fig 02), such that the people, land, more-than-humans, and spiritual entities are inherently woven into this multifaceted ontological discourse.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study of commons (*muzhayo*) in Chitral demonstrates that these shared lands are deeply embedded in the material, socio-communal, spiritual, and emotional lives of local pastoralists. The research challenges Hardin's "Tragedy of the Commons" theory and supports critiques of resource-centric approaches, showing how they are integrated into local identity, spirituality, and social relations- the "culturalscape" of Chitral. This aligns with anthropological studies that view land as kin and a spiritual entity, not merely as property. The ontology and epistemology of the commons encompass multiple dimensions within the Chitrali culturalscape, as summarised in Table 01. In this study, ontological status was attributed to practices involving recurrent, community-wide rituals, material transformations of the landscape, or explicit narratives of reciprocal relationships with non-human entities. Emotional attachments, often regarded as epistemic phenomena, were ritualised and thus enacted as essential components of communal ontology. Commons provide vital resources such as grazing land, firewood, and medicinal plants for pastoralist subsistence, with seasonal migration highlighting their practical significance. As centres of community cohesion, practices like *sotsiri* (herding rotation) reinforce social bonds. The spiritual aspect involves rituals invoking ancestral spirits and local deities (nangini/fairies) to protect livestock, blending indigenous spirituality with Islamic practices. Emotional attachments influence identity and the sense of freedom, especially for women who find agency in high pastures, making the loss of access a significant cultural impact. The findings expose the limitations of external interventions that ignore local knowledge systems and governance. Changes in land management history have disrupted communal arrangements, caused conflicts, and decreased local agency. The study underlines the overlooked role of women in pastoral migration and their emotional bonds to the commons. The shift to external herders and the declining presence of women in high

pastures reflect socio-economic changes that have diminished women's communal roles. Intergenerational narratives illustrate how identity connects to ancestral lands, underlining the importance of the commons beyond mere utility.

Ontological Dimension	Definition	Empirical Indicators	Distinction from Other Dimensions
Material	The tangible, physical aspects of the commons and their utilitarian use.	Grazing livestock, collecting firewood, water sources, gathering medicinal plants.	Focuses on physical resources and practical subsistence activities.
Socio-communal	The collective practices, social structures, and community organization.	Rotational grazing (Sotsiri), communal decision-making, shared labor, local governance.	Centers on social relations, cooperation, and communal organization.
Spiritual	Beliefs, rituals, and practices involving sacred or supernatural elements.	Rituals invoking ancestors or fairies (nangini), prayers for protection, sacred sites.	Involves cosmological beliefs and sacred practices, not just emotion.
Emotional	Personal and collective affective bonds, nostalgia, and sense of belonging.	Expressions of longing for past traditions, attachment to land, stories of identity.	Centers on feelings, memories, and identity, not ritual or material use.

Table 01: The four ontological dimensions of commons within the Chitrali culturalscape

Displacing locals from the commons would deprive them of their livelihoods, identities, freedoms, and social-spiritual practices. As a local researcher from Chitral, prior knowledge of these worlds enabled these fundamental questions that outside researchers might overlook.

Relational ontologies do not inherently promote liberation. Bhan and Govindrajan (2024) demonstrate that more-than-human relations can be utilised to legitimise exclusion. *Muzhayo* exhibits its own hierarchies, as evidenced by men's decision to employ the *gujjur*, which resulted in the exclusion of women from the high pastures. These hierarchies require the same level of scrutiny as state-led resource governance. It is crucial to distinguish between romanticising Indigenous practices and explaining the current reality

shaped by capitalism and modernity. Ontological considerations must reflect evolving understandings of the commons and land. Pastoralist livelihoods are shifting, with some engaging less with the commons due to lifestyle changes (Khan, 2025). These shifts arise from capitalism and modernity entering Chitral through education, NGOs, and media influence. As local scholar Aziz Ali Dad notes: "It is modernity that has caused a rupture of the human world with the natural world.... Before this change in cultural mindset, a person tended to see beautiful fairies adoring each juniper tree. With the disintegration of traditional worldviews, instead of fairies, the same person now sees money dangling from the same trees" (2024: 30). As livelihoods, education, and digital technology evolve, people's reality and epistemology are transforming. Before formal schooling, traditions and worldviews were transmitted orally through stories. Now, younger generations understand the world through textbooks and social media, often disconnected from local ecology. Consequently, they may lack the respect for the commons their ancestors held. While previous generations believed in fairies, many youth have never experienced a close connection with nature. As reality shifts, the sacredness and utility of the commons also change. Nonetheless, ancestral ontologies remain deeply rooted in local ecology. The question remains whether to accept this transformation or to draw from previous generations' culturalscape to enable future generations to connect with local worldviews through aligned education. This broader issue warrants thoughtful engagement and further research. However, this study offers a narrative of transition that engages with existing worldviews and realities while illustrating the evolving epistemological atmosphere in Chitral. Modernisation, urban migration, formal education, and conservation policies are transforming pastoralist life in Chitral, threatening the sustainability of the commons (Khan, 2025). External management models and climate change have rendered the future of pastoralism uncertain, and policies should recognise and build upon indigenous

governance systems instead of undermining them. By foregrounding Chitrali ontologies of the commons, this study contributes to decolonising commons scholarship in two ways: first, it provincialises Hardin and Ostrom by revealing their modernist ontologies (land-as-resource, users-as-individuals) as culturally specific rather than universal, and they fail to capture Indigenous realities where land is kin, sacred, and emotionally constitutive of personhood (Jeffrey et al., 2012). Second, it positions Indigenous pastoralists not as mere empirical 'cases' to test external theories but as theorists of the commons, whose concepts, such as *muzhayo* and *nangini* can reshape global debates on land governance.

In conclusion, commons are seen as a vital resource for Indigenous communities worldwide. This study enhances the understanding of land and commons' ontology and epistemology in Chitral, Pakistan, by illustrating the importance of spiritual and religious beliefs, traditional practices, and environmental values in local engagement and perceptions of the *muzhayo*. The paper explores the intricate relationality of Chitrali pastoral culture and these lands, presenting a holistic ontological framework that connects human beings, more-than-human entities, and spiritual beings (*nangini*). It further adds to broader socio-nature discussions within human geography. The research reveals the varied significance of land in Chitrali pastoral culture, which goes beyond economic value to include a unified ontological view of interconnected human, more-than-human, and spiritual entities. This approach challenges mainstream Western academic discourses by demonstrating that the epistemic and ontological aspects of the pastoral commons in Chitral are distinct and deeply embedded in local worldviews and traditions.

Article 03: More than Human Rights to Commons: A Poetic Resistance in Chitral, Pakistan

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Abstract

This study investigates the governance of commons (*muzhayo*) in Chitral, Pakistan, by critiquing anthropocentric frameworks and distinctly differentiating "more-than-human rights" from universalist "rights of nature" approaches. The concept of *muzhayo* is introduced as a shared space for humans and more-than-human (MTH) entities, including livestock, wildlife, plants, birds, and spiritual beings. This research employs poetry as a primary methodological tool, gathering 27 poems from Khowar-speaking poets, supplemented by ethnographic interviews and observations conducted over four years in the mountainous region of Upper Chitral. The research emphasises Indigenous cosmologies and multispecies interdependence, illustrating how livestock exhibit agency through movement across high pastures and how fairies (*shawanan*) act as traditional custodians of resource management. Conventional commons theory often overlooks these entanglements. This paper directly engages with recent animal turn and ontological turn scholarship and addresses nationalisation and extractive policies that perpetuate the colonial logics of objectification. The findings reveal the agency distributed among human and nonhuman participants, challenging Western nature-culture dichotomies. Livestock, wildlife, birds, plants, and fairies (*nangini*) are integral to the complex ecological networks that sustain pastoralist livelihoods and collective survival. The study outlines the practical legal implications of conferring MTH rights, including specific rights to movement, access, and protection, with representation by pastoralists or spiritual custodians and

governance rooted in Indigenous practice. This study integrates perspectives from environmental law, political ecology, and Indigenous studies, proposing policy frameworks for environmental governance in similar pastoralist contexts. Recognising MTH rights and Indigenous ontologies is presented as a viable alternative to conventional nature rights and commons management, advancing scholarship in decolonial ecology and more-than-human geography.

Keywords: more-than-human rights, nature rights, Chitral, commons, multispecies justice, decolonial ecology, Pakistan.

Introduction

But creatures are not only the people you see
There are fairies and spirits, snakes and djinns that be,
And the mighty mountains they call their home,
Birds, monkeys, and insects in forests they roam.
Some part of this earth belongs to them, too,
To all living beings beneath the sky's endless blue.
For they too are God's creation, not just us alone,
Their right to the land should also be known[i].

(Taseer, Submitted Poem, Chitral Poet, 2024)

In discussions concerning the commons, an anthropocentric perspective often dominates, where economic evaluations have become implicit (Hardin, 1968) and occasionally consider the social and communal dimensions of resource sharing (Boyd et al., 2018). During my fieldwork and doctoral research in the high-altitude mountainous region of Chitral, KPK, Pakistan, which is also my homeland, over the past four years, I have observed that our commons in Chitral are not merely resources for the local pastoralist population; the mountain commons constitute a living space for more-than-human entities. The poem above, by a young poet, composed in response to my call for poetry for my research, illustrates the diverse life forms that are reliant on the commons in Chitral. The analysis of such poetic expressions, alongside interviews from Chitral, prompted me to reconceptualise the commons beyond a human-centric resource framework and emphasise the more-than-human entities often overlooked in commons studies (Er, 2023; Bresnihan, 2015). This understanding of the commons is not novel to Indigenous communities

globally, who respectfully share their spaces with more-than-human entities; however, this perspective is insufficiently highlighted in academic discourse (Bawaka Country et al., 2016). The case of Chitral exemplifies such a pastoralist Indigenous community, possessing a more-than-human inclusive cosmology of the commons, locally known as *muzhayo*. This term, derived from Khowar, the predominant language in Chitral, translates to 'one that is shared.' This cosmological perspective challenges anthropocentric political frameworks and the traditional notions of the commons. This issue has gained increased urgency in contemporary times as governmental and capitalist strategies, which perpetuate colonial logics of domination and objectification, seek to transform spaces such as *muzhayo* or Indigenous commons into anthropocentric entities primarily defined by economic or environmental resources. This is a subtle but powerful shift that smuggles in ideas of the ‘tragedy of the commons’ (Hardin, 1968) to question, dismiss, and invalidate Indigenous Chitrali ways of maintaining, relating to, and reproducing the commons. I argue that the tensions between these two versions of the commons have created real tensions within Chitrali society and have consequences for the future of the *muzhayo*. These pressures perpetuate continuing colonial frameworks of domination, extraction, and enclosure (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Sundberg, 2014). Consequently, the Chitrali commons must be analysed within both historical and contemporary contexts (see also Khan, 2025a) of resource appropriation, conservation-related violence, and the regulation of Indigenous ecological practices.

Recent discourse within environmental scholarship has highlighted the distinction between "rights of nature" and "more-than-human rights." Rodríguez-Garavito (2024) contends that "more-than-human rights" diverge from traditional universalist "rights of nature" frameworks, which often reinforce a binary between humans and nature by conferring personhood upon distinct ecological units (Pelizzon, 2025). These rights

address relational, situated, and culturally diverse forms of recognition. This paper explicitly explains and expands upon these distinctions, situating Chitral's *muzhayo* as a context in which more-than-human entities, including fairies, livestock, wildlife, birds, and plants, are not merely passive recipients of protection but are active participants endowed with agency and subjectivity. This study advocates for MTH rights to *muzhayo* (pastoralist commons) to be grounded in Indigenous ethics of reciprocity and care (Blau, 2021), rather than relying on a universalist rights discourse. The *muzhayo* case serves as an illustrative example of the necessity for the concurrent advocacy of human and MTH rights to ensure their collective survival (Tsing, 2015). This case also presents an Indigenous critique, emphasising that MTH rights are rooted in millennia of human and non-human co-existence in the Majority World, rather than being grounded exclusively in a Western theoretical framework (Kavesh, 2021, 2023; Tsing, 2020; Taneja, 2018). Using the term "more-than-human" in this context is intended to reclaim what has belonged to Indigenous communities and was later adopted by Western academics. I will enhance the discussion to clarify how *muzhayo* cosmology, in which agency is distributed across humans and nonhumans, inherently challenges the bifurcated human-centric foundations of law that the "rights of nature" often struggle to overcome.

In Chitral, *muzhayo* encompasses mountain pastures, riverbeds, and unirrigated rocky lands that serve as lower pastures. The inhabitants of Chitral have traditionally utilised *muzhayo*, following customary ownership practices and regulations, to practise pastoralism as a grazing space for sheep, goats, bulls, and cows. However, there is increasing pressure from the Pakistani state to nationalise these common lands (see also Khan, 2025a). Following a 1975 notification issued by the Home and Tribal Affairs Department of the Provincial Government of North-West Frontier Province (NWFP, now known as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) that mandated the nationalisation of all non-private land

in Chitral, the Pakistani government has been progressively intervening in these lands, utilising them or planning to utilise them for tourism, national parks, mining sites and climate projects. Local Chitrali elites are litigating against nationalism in the courts, reflecting a growing conflict between the local population and the government (see also Khan, 2025b). The Pakistani government's initiative to appropriate *muzhayo* poses a threat to the local populace and to the more-than-human entities of the Chitrali commons. This initiative would deprive both the people and the MTHs of ownership and the freedom to utilise *muzhayo* for profit. A Khowar poet, Chitrali[5] (2024), explains this local resistance, which I have translated into English:

You want to take away the land of my kin,
But Chitralis will resist; we will never give in.
If my land is lost, my honour and pride will fall too,
My river, mountains, and pastures will vanish from view.
Outsiders will come to claim the hidden gold,
My shepherd and the pasture's memory gone and untold[ii].

Poetic expressions such as these are not merely artistic but also serve as a means to illustrate political resistance that foregrounds more-than-human agency, with humans integrally embedded within it. This paper presents a decolonial political ontology characterised by a collective struggle in which humans, mountains, livestock, and spirits collaboratively resist dispossession. Drawing upon critical decolonial and postcolonial literature (Kavesh, 2023; Sundberg, 2014; Tuck & Yang, 2012), this paper positions local Chitrali elites, state policy (tourism, national parks, climate projects), and extractive industries (such as mining) as perpetuating the logics of domination and objectification of land, animals, people, and spiritual entities. Local elites are inclined to exploit common

[5] Rehmat Chitrali

resources for tourism and mining, aligning with their capitalist objectives of accumulation (see also Khan, 2026). The state engages in the objectification of animals through practices such as trophy hunting and conservation regimes (Hussain, 2019). Similarly, it subjugates individuals, particularly those from mountainous and marginalised communities, through legal and social mechanisms (Ali, 2019). Additionally, land governance often marginalises spiritual entities, such as fairies, by reducing them to superstition rather than acknowledging their governance agency. In this context, poetry and Chitrali cosmology function not only as cultural expressions but also as political methodologies for more-than-human world-making (Chao et al., 2022; Kavesh, 2021).

The concept of the "more-than-human" (MTH) world, introduced to Western academia by cultural ecologist David Abram in his 1996 work, "The Spell of the Sensuous", describes a network of life that encompasses not only humans but also extends beyond them. This notion includes animals, plants, ecosystems, spirits, and geological forces, considering them sentient and active participants in a shared existence. It challenges anthropocentric dichotomies such as nature/human and environment/culture, emphasising the significance of relationships, interdependence, and mutual exchange among all entities (Abram, 2024). It is noteworthy that such a worldview has long existed within Indigenous communities, such as the Chitralis, where humans are not placed at the centre of the world, and more circular and hierarchical ontologies of various entities are recognised (Todd, 2016). In Chitral, humans are part of a broader, more-than-human world and share the commons with other entities that exert equal or even greater agency than humans in their relationships with *muzhayo*. Among these entities are fairies, which have not traditionally been recognised as part of the more-than-human category, perhaps because this field does not sufficiently engage with the centrality of the sacred, spiritual, and religious practices that are evident in Indigenous ontologies and cosmologies, where

non-human agents are powerful political actors, ancestors, or even kin. This paper seeks to expand the boundaries of the more-than-human concept to include such spiritual beings with spiritual and material agency. By doing so, it situates Chitral's spirit ecologies within the context of global multispecies scholarship (Taneja, 2018; Chao et al., 2022), illustrating how spiritual entities can and do operate as political actors, custodians, and rights-bearing entities. This research can further contribute to and push the boundaries of the expanding academic discourse on MTH by drawing on millennia-old MTH relations in Chitral, including *mal* (livestock), wildlife, birds, plants, and fairies as members of the commons.

Attention to the Chitrali notion of *muzhayo* as the commons shared by MTH is crucial for examining political agency beyond the human and advocating for MTH rights, as suggested by Chitrali poetry. There are instances of nature rights, such as Ecuador's Los Cedros case and New Zealand's Te Awa Tupua Settlement (2017), where courts have recognised forests and rivers as entities with rights (Rodríguez-Garavito, 2024). However, there are concerns that nature rights may reinforce the Western human/nature dichotomy, necessitating a shift towards MTH rights that are inclusive of humans and MTHs in their mutual interdependence. This distinction is crucial because nature-rights frameworks typically treat "nature" as an independent legal entity. In contrast, MTH rights acknowledge the interdependent relationships among humans, spirits, animals, and landforms, relationships that are fundamental to Chitrali cosmology. This is significant in Chitral, where human and MTH worlds are intertwined, with narratives of individuals tracing their ancestry to MTH fairies and livestock, as explored later in this paper. As Abram suggests, the human world is embedded within the more-than-human world, linking human rights to nonhuman rights (Rodríguez-Garavito, 2024). For political action, an entity must possess agency, as noted by Lorimer and Hodgetts (2024), and if humans

are part of the MTH world, their agency extends to other actors. In the Chitrali worldview, MTHs possess significant agency, with fairies considered the proprietors of mountains and ibexes (Faizi, 2023). This study thus examines Chitral as a context for MTH rights concerning the commons. The increase in mining, tourism and national festivals, like the Shandur festival, in Chitral's pastoralist commons has caused mortality among more-than-humans due to environmental degradation from such events (Baig et al., 2021), and there is fear of further degradation with the nationalisation of commons. The nationalisation of the commons also involves government initiatives to terminate pastoralism and establish a *muzhayo* devoid of livestock or state-regulated pastoralism, which poses a threat to the livelihoods of the populace and the existence of MTHs. In light of the ethical considerations inherent in MTH studies, particularly regarding the potential benefits for MTHs participating in research (Bastian, 2017), this study advocates for MTH rights. It conceptualises livestock, fairies, plants, birds, and wildlife as active stakeholders, emphasising the protection of their territories from nationalistic capitalist ventures and facilitating the shared use of commons by pastoralists and MTHs for mutual survival.

This paper reconceptualises the challenges of governance, access, and rights in Chitral's *muzhayo* by centring on a more-than-human (MTH) perspective, grounded in the Indigenous cosmologies and lived pastoralist realities and knowledge systems of Chitral. Rather than viewing MTH as a recent intellectual development originating in the West, I demonstrate that Chitrali worldviews have long acknowledged wildlife, livestock, plants, birds, humans, and fairies (*shawanan*) as ontologically agential and active participants in *Muzhayo*. This approach does not exclude humans from the discourse; rather, it decentres humans within the MTH alongside other beings, such as livestock, fairies, wolves, and ibex, which play fundamental roles in shaping and sustaining the *Muzhayo*. Drawing on extensive fieldwork, *mashqulgi* (interviews), and poetic expressions, I illustrate that the

narratives and practices from Chitral articulate a shared, distributed agency of an MTH world that challenges and resists Western-centric academic trends and human-centric state policies. I politicise the place of MTHs by advocating for their moral and legal rights to the pastoralist commons, rooted in locally embedded affiliations of reciprocity, care, and risk, rather than a universalist animal or nature rights discourse. This approach is necessary to resist the flattening effects of nationalisation and capitalist ventures, which exploit MTH communities with humans embedded in them. The rights I propose for MTHs are tied to the Indigenous stewardship system rather than abstract liberal frameworks, offering protection against dispossession by nationalistic and capitalistic external interests. Importantly, I do not romanticise stasis; instead, I argue that MTH rights can serve as a living, adaptive framework responsive to both external threats and internal transformations within Chitrali society. Ultimately, by thinking with *muzhayo*, this paper calls for a more just, inclusive, and ecologically grounded understanding of commons governance and MTHs, one that honours the agency and rights of all participants and is accountable to Indigenous knowledge and evolving realities.

Poetry and *Mashqulgi* as Research Methods for More-than-Humans

This research was conducted in Chitral, Pakistan, in the Torkhow and Yarkhoon valleys over four years (2021-2025), with 14 months of fieldwork. Upper and Lower Chitral districts are located in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, northern Pakistan. Chitral's elevation ranges from 1,094 m at Arandu to 7,726 m at Tirich Mir, with over 40 peaks above 6,100 m. The region borders Afghanistan, the Swat and Dir districts, and the provisional province of Gilgit Baltistan (Nüsser, Holdschlag and Rahman, 2012). The study included 70 interviews using the local *mashqulgi* method and two focus groups with pastoralists, community leaders, poets, and government officials, conducted via snowball and random

sampling. Locals found interviews alienating, so I used "*mashqulgi*" (culturally based candid discussion) to facilitate comfortable information sharing.

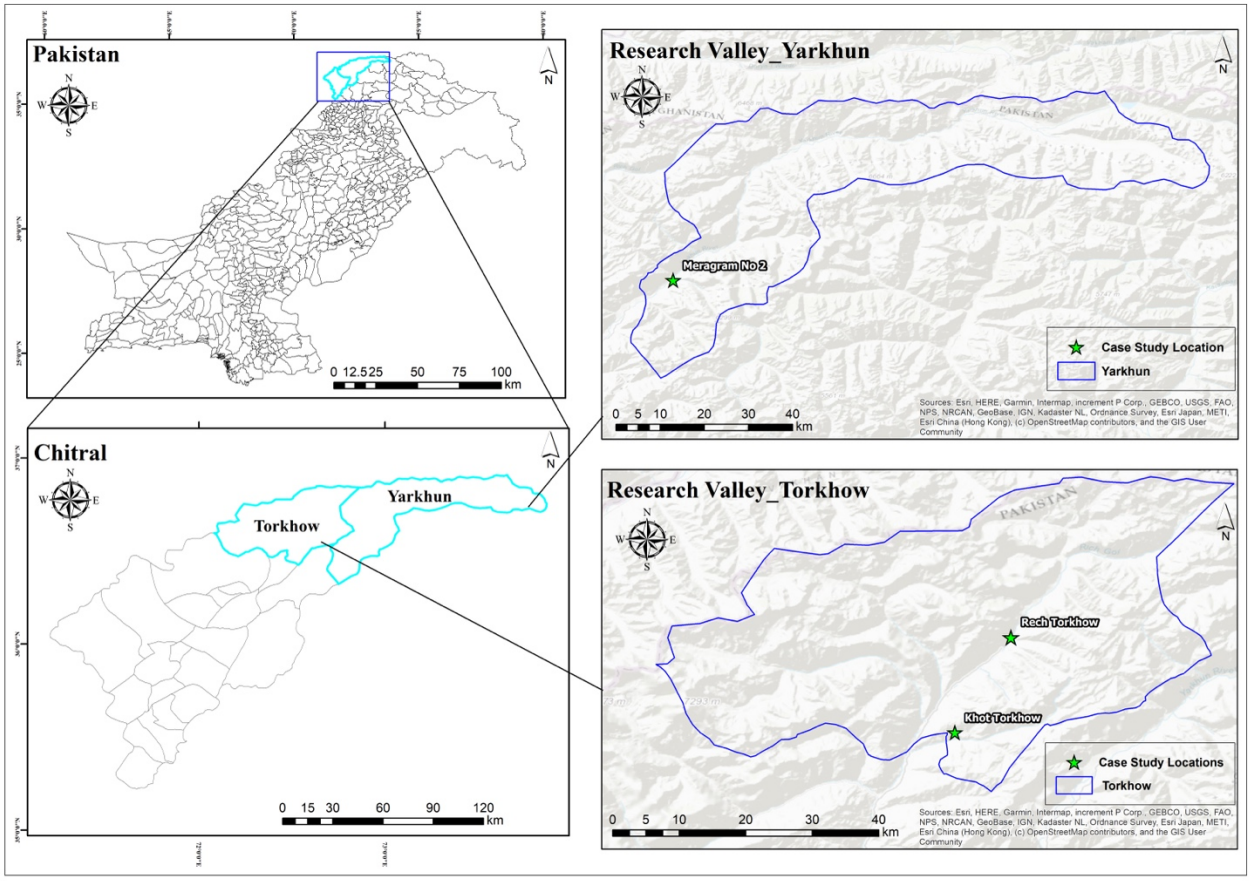


Figure 01: A map of the study areas developed by the author (Special thanks to Aslam)

Furthermore, this research uses poetic expressions to explore the relationships between local communities, commons, and more-than-human entities in their resistance against commons nationalisation. Recent work by Segura and Sekulova (2024) shows that Mongolian poetry serves as a form of non-violent resistance to cultural assimilation in Inner Mongolia. Poetry functions as a decolonial method (Wright, 2022) rooted in Chitral's epistemological practices (Fernández-Giménez, Jennings, & Wilmer, 2018). A Chitrali poet, Ayoubi (2024), expressed this relation:

"We have settled among the mountains, for we cherish nature

We have settled among the mountains, for we are poets and writers[iii]"

The poetry approach reveals Indigenous resistance to the commons' nationalisation through metaphors of more-than-human entities. I collaborated with Mother-tongue Initiatives for Education and Research (MIER), a local organisation that preserves regional languages in Chitral. Through MIER, I distributed a call for poetry about commons and MTH entities via Facebook and WhatsApp groups of regional literary figures. As a MIER member, the initiative received positive responses despite initial scepticism. A historian questioned the poets' insights on common nationalisation, but subsequent dialogue demonstrated their valuable contributions.

During the period from 2022 to 2025, I collected 12 poems from local Khowar poets and 15 from *mushaira* (poetry recitals). I ceased data collection when thematic repetition became apparent, focusing on both common and more-than-human perspectives. All the poets granted permission for translation and academic use. As a native speaker with vast experience in poetic translation, I translated these poems into English. Seven Khowar academics and poets verified the quality of the poems and their translations. Specific words without English equivalents were translated through consultation with a 300-member Khowar WhatsApp group, retaining the original Khowar terms where no alternative words were found. Original poems for Khowar readers are included in the footnotes. The data, including poems, interviews, and field notes, were analysed using NVivo software through abductive coding (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012) to identify significant themes. Poetry connects local epistemologies and a common understanding of global rights discourses, calling for policy changes in Chitral's context.

Chitral's rich poetic tradition is integral to daily life (Marsden, 2005), making it ideal for poetry-based research. Poetry is effective because locals regularly sing and recite. Poets have revealed that early Chitral poetry was pastoralist, featuring *muzhayo* life forms

such as *lowah, baseer, barwazi, ghoru, northerk*, and *phastek*, passed down through oral traditions (Wali, *mashqulgi* 2025). For instance, an ancient hunting folk song, *ghoru*, portrays a dialogue between a kid and an ibex facing an approaching hunter, creating an anti-hunting sentiment:

> Mother, dear mother, who is coming from down there?
>
> Oh, mother's darling, he is only the shepherd of the pastures
>
> Mother, dear mother, isn't that the gun shimmering?
>
> Oh, mother's darling, it is only the rays of the sun[iv]

The close association between humans and more-than-human entities has led poets to incorporate animals, flowers, plants, and fairies into poetry. I turned to poetry to understand how communities view their relationships with shared spaces and to demonstrate how poetry can serve as a political tool for social justice. As Justice (2018) explains:

> Poetry makes intelligible the emotions and embodied understandings that we struggle to articulate; sacred ceremony and song connect us, and with the other-than-human world, reminding us that we matter but are not the centre of that world (Page 66).

In Chitral, poets represent more-than-human entities as political entities through poetic expression. Indigenous communities worldwide use poetry to challenge colonisation and injustices (Justice, 2018). Chitral's tradition of using poetry to resist political situations and social problems often led to poets' imprisonment or exile. Gul Azam and Zeerak were exiled for religious and rebellious reasons when Chitral was a princely state (Parvaz, Mashuqlgi 2022). During this era, poets vocalised their compositions for audiences to memorise.

After Chitral joined Pakistan, poets wrote about neglect and socio-political issues, targeting negligent national leaders. Two senior poets, Faizi and Haider, described "*tarhi mushaira*" - poetry based on a specific *tarah* (theme or verse) from famous poems relating to current situations. This form originated in 1978 through Anjuman-Taraqi-e-Khowar's poetic gatherings and was explicitly used to write resistance poetry. *Tarhi mushaira*, from Indo-Persian traditions, enables political expression through satire in the Chitral region. For this study, poetry addresses the political dimensions of Chitrali society, forming the basis for examining the rights of more-than-human entities within Chitral's commons. While my background helped me connect with poets, I obtained only one female poet's work despite multiple attempts, as poetry emerges spontaneously rather than through direct enquiry. Furthermore, poetry is not invariably positive; there are occasions when it may perpetuate patriarchy and other social biases. Despite these limitations, poetry provides nuanced insights into the relationship between more-than-human entities and the commons.

Rethinking More-than-humans in the Commons Studies

Recent scholarship in Western academia has shown significant interest in re-evaluating human-nature relationships, challenging anthropocentric ontologies that have historically dominated the field (Ergene & Calás, 2023). Two central discussions are the renewed focus on the "commons" (Bollier, 2014) and more-than-human geography (Souza Júnior, 2021). Few studies have integrated these currents (Er, 2023; Bresnihan, 2015). This paper positions Chitrali *muzhayo* at the intersection of these debates, engaging with posthumanism, nature rights, commons management, and Indigenous perspectives. It demonstrates the shared coexistence of humans and more-than-humans (MTHs) (Tsing, 2015) in *muzhayo*, advocating for MTH rights to *muzhayo*, where both can flourish.

Commons, known as shared collective resources, have evolved from the exploitative space of tragedy (Hardin, 1968) to communal management based on trust and local governance (Ostrom, 1990). Commons are now considered spaces for nonhumans as makers and co-governors (Er, 2023). This "commons beyond humans" draws from post-humanist ideologies and Indigenous philosophies, recognising non-human agency and rights (Bresnihan, 2015). MTH discussions emerged in Euro-American scholarship in 1996 (Abram, 1996) and later spread to geography and social sciences through nonrepresentational theory (NRT) (Simpson, 2020), vitalism (Whatmore, 2006) and actor-network theory (ANT) (Murdoch, 2005). MTH geography adds to three theoretical understandings (Choi, 2016): the nature-society dualism, the social construction of nature, and the social production of nature (Braun, 2007). Marxist geographers have shown that society and nature are metabolically linked, in which social relations produce nature as a commodity (Smith, 2007). Social construction theory, drawing from Derrida and Foucault, argues that concepts of nature are culturally constructed (Demeritt, 2002).

MTH geographers address the nonhuman agency in world construction. In the Western context, MTH geography aligns with post-humanistic (Lorimer, 2009), hybrid (Whatmore, 2006), multilateral (Lorimer, 2012), and vitalist (Greenhough, 2010) geographies, defined as "an approach that is open to the agency of nonhumans and recognises the material and affective interlinkages that cross between humans and nonhumans" (Lorimer, 2009, 344). Decolonial scholars note that this ontological multiplicity and nonhuman acknowledgement have been fundamental to Indigenous ways of living (Todd, 2016). The concept of MTH transcends the dichotomy between humanist and post-humanist perspectives, which challenge the binary distinctions between humans and non-humans (Lorimer & Hodgetts, 2024). For Indigenous communities in Chitral, these boundaries have been blurred since time immemorial, as shown by *muzhayo*, a

shared space for humans and non-humans. For example, this tradition is evident in *muzhayo* names preserved over millennia, reflecting the existence and agency of both humans and MTHs alike. In Meragram No. 2, common *ghari* (pasture), names such as *nan noghor* (the castle of fairies), *ishparili* (the place of Rhu herbs), and *purdimili* (the place of a leopard) illustrate this (Saleem Khan, Mashqulgi, 18 May 2025). Similar names for different parts of the *muzhayo* exist throughout Chitral. The concept of the more-than-human has evolved significantly beyond Abram's foundational work, particularly through multispecies and ontological turns. The contributions of Tsing (2013), Tsing et al. (2020), and Chao, Bolender, and Kirksey (2022) introduce notions of multispecies sociality, interdependence, and justice, while Kavesh (2021) and Taneja (2018) demonstrate how South Asian, Islamic and animist cosmologies inherently embed humans within multispecies and spiritual worlds. Incorporating these frameworks underscores that Chitral's more-than-human relationships, especially with livestock, wildlife, and fairies, cannot be comprehended solely through Euro-American posthumanism and must be situated within broader Indigenous and relational ontologies. MTH has been integral to Chitral's cultural landscape for millennia. This case study supports Todd's (2016) assertion that ontological turns perpetuate Western colonial knowledge extraction, emphasising the need to engage with non-Western epistemologies on their own terms.

A notable advancement in commons discourse is the advent of "rights of nature" laws and the legal personhood of nonhumans (Pelizzon, 2025). These innovations are inspired by Indigenous ontologies, which perceive the world as sentient and spiritually interconnected (Kimmerer, 2013), challenging the anthropocentric foundations of conventional legal thought. Ecuador's 2008 constitutional recognition of Pachamama granted nature legal personhood, emphasising Indigenous cosmologies that see humans as interconnected with ecological systems (Rodríguez-Garavito, 2024). New Zealand's 2017

Te Awa Tupua Act legally acknowledged the Whanganui River as an indivisible living entity, reflecting the spiritual connections of the Whanganui iwi (Lorimer & Hodgetts, 2024). Scholars have called for biocultural rights for Indigenous and local communities to protect the link between nature, traditional knowledge, and culture (Bavikatte & Bennett, 2015). These new frameworks are being introduced because Indigenous people lack self-determination rights, and their lands face colonial takeovers or destruction from state development. Given the absence of laws protecting Indigenous customary tenure and commons from privatisation, these frameworks serve as a form of rights protection. Girard et al.'s (2022) examination of Biocultural Community Protocol tools to safeguard traditional knowledge and ecosystems extends these protections to nonhumans as rights holders. However, in Chitral, the legal and political ramifications extend beyond mere symbolic acknowledgement. By highlighting pastoralists and spiritual custodians as representatives of more-than-human entities, this study offers practical models of multispecies guardianship and co-governance that transcend the binary created by nature rights discourse. These models embody not only poetic and cosmological insights, but also local strategies for legal resistance and pluralistic land management. Consequently, they engage with interdisciplinary literature at the intersection of environmental law, political ecology and Indigenous studies (Gilbert, 2014; Kimmerer, 2013; Todd, 2016).

While this paper engages with cultural-natural interaction, Chitral's culture is transforming due to school education, where the curriculum shows bias against livestock as the cause of flooding and pastoralism as a backward way of life that needs to be changed to align better with capitalism and neoliberal systems (see also Khan, 2025). This evolution complicates biocultural rights and supports the implementation of MTH rights. These cases show a shift toward "more-than-human rights", incorporating Indigenous ontologies and posthumanist critiques. Legal systems often remain anthropocentric,

marginalising non-human agency (Rodríguez-Garavito, 2024). This legislation also remains very unfavourable to pastoralists and nomadic peoples, whose lives are closely tied to MTHs (Gilbert, 2014). Researchers emphasise the decentralisation of human authority and the adoption of pluralistic governance that respects multispecies relationality (Bawaka Country et al., 2016). The practical implementation of recognising more-than-human rights in Chitral prompts significant enquiries regarding the entities entitled to such rights, the nature of these rights, and the identification of their legal and political representatives. For instance, drawing parallels with cases such as Ecuador's Pachamama and New Zealand's Te Awa Tupua, local Chitrali customs indicate that pastoralists and spiritual entities (*shawanan*) can serve as custodians not only for legal adherence but also for ethical stewardship. This involves negotiating access, protection, and resource distribution among human and nonhuman participants, continuing millennia-old practices that have been effectively implemented in Chitral. This study reimagines rights frameworks for human-MTH coexistence in *Muzhayo* by elevating and recognising Indigenous epistemologies. The acknowledgement of more-than-human rights has material and political consequences, enabling novel forms of stewardship that incorporate nonhuman perspectives (Pelizzon, 2025). This Chitral case study exemplifies Rodríguez-Garavito's (2024, 27) explanation that human rights are intertwined with nonhuman rights and are embedded within nature's rights. From the moral and legal perspectives of reciprocity and interdependence, human rights involve responsibilities toward the more-than-human world that sustains us.

In Pakistan, the Islamabad High Court's decision in Islamabad Wildlife Management Board v. The Metropolitan Corporation Islamabad (2020) acknowledged the legal rights of animals as sentient beings deserving of constitutional protection. Chief Justice Athar Minallah linked animal welfare to Islamic teachings and human rights,

noting that animal cruelty violates the constitutional right to life by harming the ecosystem (Islamabad Wildlife Management Board, 2020; Pallotta, 2020). A follow-up ruling required sanctuaries for zoo animals, comparing captivity to concentration camps. In D.G. Khan Cement Company Ltd. v. Government of Punjab (2021), the Supreme Court prohibited new cement plants in sensitive areas, recognising environmental entities' legal rights and invoking precautionary and intergenerational justice principles (D.G. Khan Cement Company Ltd v. Government of Punjab, 2021; Islam 2021). These cases demonstrate Pakistan's evolving legal framework for the recognition of more-than-human (MTH) rights grounded in Islamic principles and ecological interdependence. The Chitral case examines pastoralists and more-than-human entanglements to expand this legal precedent by incorporating MTH rights into communal governance as a form of resistance to *muzhayo* nationalisation. While MTH geographers often fail to consider nonhumans' political roles (Lorimer, 2012), this study views MTHs as political entities advocating for their spatial rights alongside marginalised Indigenous pastoralists. In doing so, it addresses a significant gap in the more-than-human literature by integrating it with political ecology through a case study of *muzhayo* in Chitral (see also Donfrancesco, 2025). *Muzhayo*, in Chitral, Pakistan, integrates discussions of more-than-human commons, offering a decolonial perspective that includes humans, wildlife, livestock, plants, birds, and spiritual entities, which are explored in detail below.

MTH Commons (*Muzhayo*) Participants and Their Rights

The commons in Chitral are shared by humans and more-than-human entities (MTHs) in various ways, characterised by a distributed agency among all participants. The term "makhlūqāt," derived from Arabic and now used locally, and "*paidaish*" in the local Khowar language, best encapsulate this concept, referring to all these entities as "creation."

In this context, these entities are ontologically equal and engage in complex interrelations and the shared use of the commons. This interconnected more-than-human commons is conceptualised as "*muzhayo*", a shared space for all entities that inhabit or rely on it. Historically, Chitral has been a pastoralist community (Khan, 2025), with over 80% of families in the case study areas still engaged in pastoralism in some capacity. Pastoralism supports over 40 million people globally and is intrinsically linked to various commons worldwide (Blau, 2021). Similarly, in Chitral, commons are central to pastoralist livelihoods and cosmologies, including the collection of firewood, the provision of space for livestock grazing, and the use of medicinal herbs. This intricate social, emotional, economic, and spiritual relationship between humans and the commons is examined in a separate study (Khan, 2025a). This paper specifically investigates the relationships between MTHs, the commons, and humans, advocating for their rights to continue thriving as active participants in *muzhayo*. In the subsequent section, I explore the relationships between livestock, wildlife, birds, plants, and spiritual beings with *muzhayo* and what rights to *muzhayo* entail for them. These relationships are complex and intersect with each other and the commons in diverse ways. Drawing upon recent scholarship in animal studies and relational ontology (Chao et al., 2022; Tsing et al., 2013, 2020; Kavesh, 2021; Taneja, 2018), I examine the multispecies, spiritual, and material interconnections in Chitral as a context in which customary law and lived cosmologies may serve as foundational elements for recognising rights and governance. *Muzhayo*, which encompasses mountains, pastures, riverbeds, and uncultivated common land, can also be studied as MTHs themselves. However, this paper focuses on the aforementioned MTHs because of their significant reliance on *muzhayo* for survival. Other entities, such as insects, water, stones, soil, and various non-living and living things, could be examined as MTHs in separate studies but are excluded from this paper due to space limitations.

Mal Hal (Livestock) in Muzhayo

Through meadows green, my nanny goat will prance,

Come, join the merriment, wallowing in a trance.

Under the willow's shade, she finds her repose,

Come, join the revelry, wallowing as it goes. [v]

(Translated by Zahoor Ul Haq, 2024)

This excerpt is derived from an old folksong titled "*lowah*", which serves as a pastoral ode and is widely sung in Chitral by pastoralist men and women. It is traditionally performed when they gather their livestock (*mal*) in the evening after returning from communal grazing (*sotsiri*) in the pastures. The poem illustrates the baby goat's immediate reliance on the *muzhayo*. Pastoralism (*maldarai*) has historically been the predominant means of sustenance in Chitral (Khan, 2025). The livestock in Chitral primarily consists of goats, sheep, cows, bullocks, and, to a lesser extent, yaks, donkeys, and horses. When I enquired about entities beyond humans that depend on *muzhayo* and might be affected by nationalisation, most pastoralist respondents discussed wildlife, birds, etc., but did not consider mal as such entities, given the profound interconnection between humans and mal. This entanglement warrants a separate study. Some households traditionally had the mal shelter (*shal* or *phesti*) directly attached to the main house, an evolving practice, although these structures remained close. There are interesting ancestral and familial bonds

between humans and mal. These stories came up multiple times in the area of Meragram No. 2 when they were speaking about the history of the *Zondrae* clan in that region. One elder, Khan, summarised the story of this ancestral bond as we were engaging in *mashqulgi*, sitting outside his house, facing the sun (*pakhturi):*

> The history of this region and our ancestors, as we have heard from our elders, is as follows. We had a bap (great-grandfather) who struggled with the loss of his sons shortly after birth. Desperate for a solution, he consulted a *buzurg* (spiritual elder or pious person). The *buzurg* advised him to follow a specific ritual tied to animal milk for each child: the firstborn should be fed the milk (*ishpae korik*) of a ghot female (a mute female person). We belong to the *ghot* lineage; hence, we are called *ghot katarae* (descendants of the mute). The second child should receive milk from a *laagh pai* (a goat with no horns), and the third should be nourished with donkey milk. The descendants of these two sons are called *laagh katar* (descendants of the goat without horns) and *kharbat* (descendants of the donkey) (*Mashqulgi*, Khan, 07 November 2022).

He proceeded to discuss the current habitation of the three villages of Babalandeh, Urkhan, and Muldeh in Meragram No. 2 by these three familial groups. This instance exemplifies the profound connections that exist, whether classified as factual or mythical, as these beliefs are held by the local populace. A significant bond is evident between the pastoralists, their livestock, and *muzhayo*. These ancestral narratives exemplify a relational, non-anthropocentric epistemology that forms the foundation of more-than-human rights, emphasising agency, kinship, and mutual responsibility as integral to everyday practice, rather than merely symbolic legal constructs. This bond is articulated by a young female poet, Jahan, in her poetry, which she composed in response to my request for poetic contributions:

We wait for the good day to lead our cattle to the high pastures,

We scatter scented flour on the fire to honour the ancestors' souls.

All night we stay awake, excitement holding back the dawn,

We rub oil on our cattle's horns before the early journey begins.

See how they want me to forget my old rituals and ways

Yet look at the governments: they are ready to take even this from my hold[vi]

(Jahan, 2024)

This complex relationship is rooted in the care for both the mal and the *muzhayo*, reflecting a long-standing tradition of interdependence through spiritual practices such as the application of ointments and respect for ancestral spirits to ensure the well-being of the mal in the pastures. This poem by a poetess also adds to the gendered freedom and feelings of joy and companionship that taking the mal to high pasture and living there brought to many women in Yarkhoon and Torkhow, Chitral. On the day preceding the movement of the mal to the high pastures for summer grazing, the community members of Meragram No. 2 convened to inspect the route that the mal would traverse early the following day. They constructed pathways in the mountains where passage was difficult and erected bridges over the river to facilitate the crossing of young goats and calves, which would otherwise be unable to traverse the water. Bovine animals (*lot pongi*), including bullocks, cows, yaks, donkeys, and horses, are released into the higher pastures, where they reside independently for three to four summer months (June-September), free to roam as they please. The owners take turns visiting to ensure their well-being and to notify others if any cow or bull becomes trapped in the mountains or is threatened by wolves or other wild animals. Caprines (*krizi pongi*) are typically managed in the lower pastures, either by community shepherds or, more recently, by hired shepherds from the Gujjur community who migrate from the lower regions of Chitral. These animals are allowed to roam freely during the day, but all the *mal* of the whole village are gathered into a shelter at night, constructed by the local community on the first day, to protect them from wolves and other predators. The mal inhabit the communal pastures, which have been traditionally utilised by the communities for centuries each summer. They are either retrieved by the people

when the weather turns cold, or they begin migrating back to the village on their own when fodder becomes scarce, or temperatures drop. Remarkably, the mal navigate their return home independently after three months. This transhumant lifestyle illustrates the agency of the mal as MTHs in *Muzhayo* and underscores their dependence on the commons for survival. The villagers conserve the nearby commons for themselves during the summer in preparation for the harsh winters ahead.

In light of the threats posed by nationalisation and capitalist ventures in Chitral (Khan, 2025a), there is an urgent need to establish MTH rights for livestock, recognising their role as active participants in the *Muzhayo*. As previously discussed, the mal in Chitral are not merely passive beneficiaries; rather, they actively influence the management of *Muzhayo* by navigating the high pastures for two to three months and returning at their discretion, thereby demonstrating a distributed agency (Lorimer & Hodgetts, 2024). Granting rights to livestock could promote a mutual survival strategy between local pastoralists and livestock in *muzhayo*. These rights are threatened by the process of nationalisation of the *muzhayo*, which would entail prohibiting livestock in these pastures or terminating pastoralism, as previously unsuccessfully advocated by NGOs and government officials in numerous villages in Chitral (Khan, 2025). This demand for mal rights is echoed by local poets who urge the government and fellow Chitralis to take action and resist:

Do not frighten my livestock; let them freely roam,
Do not drive off my shepherd from his mountain home.
They seek to seize the land our ancestors once knew
O Chitrali, awaken- do not let this happen to you[vii].

(Chitrali, 2024)

This call for resistance can be furthered by extending sentient recognition and rights to livestock within Pakistani law, drawing on the precedent set by Islamabad Wildlife Management Board v. Metropolitan Corporation Islamabad (2020) case, which recognised animals as sentient beings deserving of constitutional protection, as explained above. Given the historically apolitical nature of the Chitral people (Khan, 2025a), their kin and closely affiliated *mal* can provide the necessary protection for the *Muzhayo* of Chitral, and it will help bring the MTH to the core of this political issue. Moreover, local elites, NGOs, and government institutions in Chitral exhibit systemic bias against goats, blaming them for floods (Khan, 2025). This bias is reflected in the words of a local poet, Amir, who addresses the MTH issue during a mushaira at the Qaqlasht festival, situated in one of the *Muzhayo*:

Floods are caused by global warming, yet goats are blamed for every tide.
To hell with the goats, we are weary of those who cannot see where the fault lies!
Whenever there is a meeting, the main agenda is always the goats' fate.
The water from the glacier is white as milk, but it grows dirty upon reaching the plain[viii].
(Is this also caused by goats? he adds)
(Amir, 2025)

For these local reasons, extending rights to livestock would not only aid their survival but also ensure the continuation of pastoralist life in Chitral, which has sustained traditional livelihoods, the commons, and the MTH for centuries. These poems illustrate the intricate relationships and mutual dependence among humans, MTHs, and *Muzhayo*, as well as the elliptical resistance that surpasses conventional opposition (Maynard, 2008). There are a few court cases challenging the nationalisation of the commons in Chitral, which are

considered to be led by the local elites (Khan, 2025a). I asked one of the lawyers whether MTHs were part of their justification for the government to back off from the nationalisation of the *muzhayo*, but he said it was all human-centric. He said that although the government has not banned pastoralism yet, there is a catch:

> "If the government nationalises it, the use of the land will be a concession granted to you, and it is not a right. The state can take it back at any time. They can tell you tomorrow not to use the land, and you will have to stop using it. The only way you have the right to do so is if you own the land" (Interview, Lawyer 1, 31 December 2022).

When I asked a government official in Swat whether livestock would be allowed to access the *muzhayo* if the nationalisation project is implemented, they said, "the commons would be considered as protected areas. No, it is not possible to keep livestock in these areas. The law does not allow that because the livestock damages everything" (Interview, anonymous officer, 17 August 2023). This exclusionary legalisation, biases, and human-centric resistance against nationalisation by local elites make it more urgent to include livestock and pastoralists as primary participants in the *muzhayo*, who should have the right to thrive in the commons. These rights should be based on pastoralist ethics that grant livestock freedom and agency. In the absence of commons, animal welfare is also deeply affected.

The significance of this issue lies in the concern that a complete government takeover may impede individuals' ability to engage in pastoralism and maintain livestock. "We would not be able to keep *mal hal* (livestock) anymore, and we would not be able to survive here," said most people in the Torkhow and Yarkhun valleys when asked how nationalisation would affect their pastoralist livelihoods. The implications of this are profound, as it would lead to the centuries-old Indigenous way of life, identity, and livelihood being made illegal by the state. This reflects similar forms of state territorialisation against the pastoralist commons in places such as Inner Mongolia, China. Similar patterns of livestock loss and threats to pastoralism can be seen in Uganda's Karamoja region (Filipová & Johanisova, 2017), Ethiopia (IUCN, 2011), Kenya (Hassan,

Nathan, & Kanyinga, 2022), Gilgit Baltistan (Ali, 2019), and several other places where the pastoralists' commons are nationalised, turned into national parks, or enclosed for conservation. The right of livestock to access commons can be extended to analogous contexts, such as those observed in Mongolia (Fernández-Giménez, 2002) and Kenya (Said et al., 2025), and several other situations where both livestock and pastoralists face challenges in securing rights to pastoralist commons. This issue warrants global attention and can be raised globally now, particularly as the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP2026) approaches. This paper examines the legal and practical implications of recognising livestock as entities with rights, proposing three key considerations: (1) the right to movement and grazing, which aligns with traditional transhumance practices; (2) the right to protection from displacement, particularly in the context of nationalisation and enclosure; and (3) the right to well-being, which includes access to safe pastures and protection from detrimental development projects. In the Chitrali context, these rights would likely be represented and safeguarded by pastoralist elders, who currently manage similar pastoralist concerns, such as *sotsiri* (collective grazing practices) and organising local pastoralists for animal welfare during agro-pastoralist movements between villages and high mountains, including infrastructure development, such as road construction. Integrating these rights into Chitral's customary governance systems ensures that the recognition of MTH strengthens rather than displaces existing pastoralist institutions. Mal, as the primary and significant MTH participant in the *muzhayo*, plays a crucial role in the discussion of wildlife, birds, and plants within the *Muzhayo* system, which will be further examined in the subsequent discussion.

Wildlife (*berio zhandar*), Birds (*boikra*) and Plants (*kaan lawash*) in Muzhayo

Ibex and deer will flee when mining monsters appear,

We will be robbed of nature's beauty and everything we hold dear.

Partridges and francolins gone, the green spaces destroyed,

Our gardens will be in ruin, all joy and hope void[ix].

(Danish, 2024)

Wildlife, birds, and plants are significant participants in *muzhayo* as they maintain the complex web of life in the pastoralist commons. The wildlife present in my research areas encompasses a diverse range of species, including ibex, tiger, wolf, fox, *bishind* (a type of mole), and snow leopard, among others. The avian species in the *Muzhayo* region include partridges, francolins, magpies, starlings, choughs, and numerous other species. The flora includes juniper, willow, *bulli* (birch trees), and various smaller plants and shrubs. During my time in Chitral, people would share the news that someone's sheep or goat had been eaten by wolves, and each year, there were multiple such cases. One day, Khan, an older pastoralist and shopkeeper in the village, told me that he had just returned from the pasture because he had been informed that two sheep had been killed by wolves resembling his sheep. He confirmed that they were indeed his sheep. When I asked him how he felt about it, he said that there was nothing that could have been done. The sheep were born to be the "*rizq*" (the concept that food source comes from God and is predestined) of the wolves, and they were not meant for the wolves. Similarly, Wali, another pastoralist young man whom I had interviewed a day before, returned to my house, saying he had been thinking about my question about how MTHs depend on common land. He said,

> We have much wildlife in our high pastures, including snow leopards, wolves, ibex, partridges, and francolins. You should also write about the fact that there is a web of life, as the wolves feed on our livestock (*Mashqulgi*, 20 October 2022).

These were interesting instances of the acceptance of the MTH agencies that are at play in the pastoralist commons. Although there are hired herders (*gujjurs*) whose duty is to look after the livestock, sometimes the sheep or goats wander far away or do not return to the shelter (*shal*) until late at night and are killed and eaten by wolves or tigers. Similarly, the local people sign a memorandum of understanding with the gujjur, under which they ensure that the hired herder is responsible for their livestock unless the sheep or goat is killed by wildlife, and there is a sign to prove it. This again shows that the *muzhayo* is considered a space where the agency of the livestock, wildlife, plants, shrubs, and birds is seen, as they have the independence to navigate the space and even live off one another. This is what local poets like Danish fear when they think of nationalised commons that intrude on the freedom of MTHs and humans, displacing them from their habitat and web of life. Another young poet, Tasir says,

So, I ask the state, what law have you made,
That has never before in our history been laid?
If you cut down the trees, where will the birds fly?
If you blast the mountains, how will the creatures survive?
You seize our pastures, you take what you please,
What will become of the wildlife, the birds, the trees?[x]

The locals clearly show their concern for the MTHs in their poetry and life, but the government claims that the wildlife and trees need protection from the locals. The government has tried to employ guards for the commons as a strategy to control the pastures. However, these instances have created conflicts within the community over who is employed as a forest guard. I spoke to some of these guards, and they said that the

government paid them 15000 PKR (53$) per month, but they had not been paid for more than thirty months. When I asked them what their job was, one of them said,

> We were protecting all the wild creatures, including foxes, wolves, and snow leopards. All birds and wild animals were protected. We did not allow the local people to hunt…. They had instructed us that if we saw any aged ibex with more than 16 crosses on its horns, we must inform the department that they were ready for hunting. When we used to inform the department, they used to contact foreign hunters from America, New Zealand, or Switzerland. They would come to hunt and pay money to the government (*Mashqulgi*, anonymous, 15 December 2022).

This is the new direction that the government wants to take with the nationalisation and neoliberal logics of trophy hunting and control over the MTHs in the *muzhayo* of Chitral. Trophy hunting and extractive state conservation regimes in Chitral manifest colonial and neoliberal ideologies that objectify land and wildlife. These practices illustrate the neoliberal commodification of wildlife and neocolonial green extractivism, which primarily benefits elites while leading to the dispossession of Indigenous communities (Hussain, 2019; Ali, 2019). Locals have historically engaged in hunting, but it has been based on respect for the mountains and wildlife. Ibex hunting used to be common, and there are several poems, such as *ghoru*, mentioned above, that created a sense of care for the hunted animal. Hunting was mainly accessible only to people of high clans and classes, and in specific *muzhayo* that were traditionally given to specific clans who lived near those commons. If a person from another clan hunted outside their assigned hunting area, they were fined bulls, and such events were narrated by many locals in Yarkhun. The hunter would leave early in the morning and ask the permission of the *shawanan*, *nangini,* or fairies of their mountains (*aan*) before entering the pasture, since the ibexes are considered the ownership and children of the *shawanan*. These dynamics further align with Nadasdy's (2007) argument that hunting in many Indigenous contexts transcends the mere act of taking life, constituting a reciprocal, relational exchange wherein animals offer themselves under specific moral conditions. In a manner akin to Nadasdy's account, Chitrali hunting

traditions underscore respect, seeking permission from fairies, and obligations toward the hunted animal, thereby revealing a local ontology of hunting rooted in reciprocity rather than domination. There was a song to be sung while on the way to hunting, which not many people remember now, and, after asking a few people, I gathered this one verse:

O “goyatoon” (beloved) ibex, I will get up early in the morning and prepare myself to meet you, and I will call you.
You are a property of “shawanan” (fairies/spirits); I will bow with respect when I see you, and I will be grateful when I hunt you.

These kinds of practices, poetry, and songs gave the ibexes and the fairies the main agency, as if the hunt was to come from them, and showed the MTH ancestry and ownership. Things are changing for hunting in Chitral now, and even the locals are engaged in excessive hunting using advanced guns, either on their own or “legally” by paying the government to hunt. The hunting of partridges, migratory ducks, and other birds is now legalised for locals (mostly elites) through shooter licensing, which has significantly reduced their numbers in Chitral. These licences are predominantly acquired by local elites who are employed and do not depend on pastoralism for their livelihood, allowing them the leisure to hunt as a form of recreation. Nevertheless, the poets of Chitral are still very much embedded in the MTH world of the birds, as explained by a young poet, Ayoubi, in a poem he submitted:

> We have settled among the mountains, for we echo the kirrut with partridges
> We have settled among the mountains, for we sing the katetear with francolins
> We have settled among the mountains, for we speak with the starlings
> We have settled among the mountains, for we whirl with the chough[xi]

(Ayoubi, 2024)

This coexistence with birds and caring for them is being reduced because of easy access to guns for all ages, which leads to all sorts of legal or illegal hunting. The locals have also cut down the trees in the most common areas for firewood, now that local conservation systems have almost vanished, with state-led conservation strategies creeping in. One of the community leaders in Yarkhun told me of the clear guidance given by elders on not cutting down green trees or smaller plants, as it was considered unkind (*huwal*), and they were only allowed to bring home trees that had matured or were already dry (*Mashqulgi,* Khan, 9 November 2022). I met with one of the traditional conservation leaders in the Khot Valley, and he told me that there was a traditional conservation method called *saq* in which the community would choose a specific part of the *muzhayo* and let it grow for a few years, and nobody would cut trees in that particular part while the rest of the pasture would be open. Everyone respected them, and severe fines, such as confiscating bulls or goats, were imposed on those who did not comply. However, people now talk about the government as if the whole commons is open to everyone, and they cut even more trees because the local Indigenous governance and accountability systems are no longer in place within modern nation-states (*Mashqulgi*, Din, 17 November 2022).

Upon enquiring with a provincial government official in Swat regarding this issue, the response indicated an inability to take any action. Although legislation exists to prevent deforestation, its enforcement is lacking. Consequently, trophy hunting, legal hunting, and state-led conservation efforts exemplify neoliberal wildlife commodification, which facilitates access for elites through market mechanisms while dispossessing local communities and posing a threat to MTHs under the guise of conservation (Ali, 2019; Sullivan, 2023). The practice of trophy hunting in Chitral remains contentious, with ambiguity surrounding the beneficiaries of these activities, necessitating further

independent research. This underscores the imperative to advocate for the MTH rights of wildlife, birds, and plants to *muzhayo*, liberating them from eco-fetishisation, neoliberal control and commodification. This advocacy can be most effectively achieved by drawing upon Chitral's traditional practices, songs, and customs of coexistence and care for wildlife, plants, and birds in *muzhayo*, which are regrettably diminishing due to modernity and neoliberal educational systems (Khan, 2025). Thus, establishing MTH rights to the commons could ensure the survival of wildlife while reconnecting the Chitral community with the rapidly vanishing ethos of care for MTHs. From a legal perspective, these rights encompass protection against habitat destruction, the right to maintain ecological continuity, and the right to be safeguarded from detrimental extractive activities. Local pastoralist institutions or community elders who possess knowledge of Indigenous stewardship practices can advocate for these rights. These rights should be conferred upon these entities in their own right, ensuring respect from locals, the government, and foreigners alike. The interdependence of MTHs, with their agency intertwined with the *shawanan* (fairies) who own the pastures and humans seeking their permission, embodies a humbling *muzhayo* ontology that necessitates restoration and legalisation of the pastures. This interdependence reflects the principles of multispecies justice frameworks (Chao et al., 2022), which highlight the importance of shared survival (Tsing, 2015) and relational accountability among different species lineages.

Shawanan*/Nagini (Fairies or Spirits) as MTH Custodians of the *Muzhayo

I set out to wander my mountains high,

To greet my *shawanan* under the open sky.

My yaks and horses roam the summer land free,

When the season is over, they'll return home with me[xii].

(Chitrali, 2024)

The concept of fairies, locally referred to as *nangini* (literally "mothers"), *pariyan* (Persian for "fairies"), or *shawanan* (spirits), terms used interchangeably in everyday discourse, is prevalent in Chitral. It is widely believed that each mountain is inhabited by fairies who oversee the area, known locally as *aan khachhum,* or the owners of the high mountain pastures, and all entities within it, including ibex, livestock, wildlife, and even the local populace. These fairies are of significant importance to this research, as pre-Islamic Chitral had a complex, fairy-based resource management system characterised by a hierarchical structure led by the *shwanan* fairies, and these traditions persist to the present day (Faizi, 2023), which will be explored in detail in the latter part of the paper. Tirich Mir, standing at 7690 meters, is the highest peak in the Hindukush range and is situated in Chitral. Locally, it is referred to as "peristan," or the "place of the fairies." This cultural significance is reflected in the work of Cacopardo and Cacopardo (2001), who titled their book on Chitral and its surrounding regions "Gates of Peristan", extending the concept from modern Nuristan to Kashmir to highlight this essential regional entity. Nevertheless, the question comes naturally to a modern mind: do fairies exist, and are they real? When I asked this question to one of the local literary figures and writers, Parvaz, he said the following:

> Indeed, fairies are real in this world. There is much more beyond our intellectual capacity. Our mind has a limit. You could get a really good education and go to space at most, but there is a whole world beyond that. We have seen them (fairies) enter people's bodies, take people away, and return them after days. Science is limited, whereas the universe is vast. Science has not yet reached this point. Has a human even reached himself? I do not think so. How can they claim that there are no other creatures? There are many other creatures. However, science has a different perspective. It only looks at the matter. This is good for them, but there is so much more that is not just a matter (having mass). For instance, we have dreams. Is that a matter? There are spiritual dimensions to human development. Is

> that a matter? There is a clash between these things and science. Research is absolutely important, and humans may reach there one day, as I say in my poetry:
> "Beyond the confines of intellect, humans remain constrained
> Here exists no distinction between the sage and the foolish
> Every longing remains unfulfilled in this realm
> No distinction exists between monarch, pauper, and the destitute[xiii]
> (*Mashqulgi*, 14 Dec 2022).

This is an interesting take on the question of whether it is worth considering *nangini* as MTHs, given that there has been no such engagement with fairies in MTH studies. Since this epistemology is present within the Indigenous understanding of the people of Chitral, in which they have agency and power that extends the power of humans, I argue that we can push the boundaries of MTHs to include *nangini* as an MTH and engage with the issue of their rights to *muzhayo* in a political way. The critical point is that this form of local ontology should not be viewed through the Western lens of scientific reality; instead, I urge my readers to be open to new experiences and ways of being that are real for the Chitrali people. Indeed, post-structuralists (Hall, 1996) and others have long pointed out that concepts which lack a scientific basis (i.e. biological race) are nonetheless productive of real effects in the world. Likewise, it is important to consider the limits of science and find new ways to pierce through its epistemic baggage born from imperialist scientific pursuits. Since the Western MTH geography claims to be "an alternative, modest, and embodied epistemology based on open learning to be affected by the world in a partial and situated context" (Lorimer, 2009, 350), I hope that the MTH geographers will be open to the discourse on Nagini as MTH coming from Chitral. This approach aligns with Taneja's (2018) research, which demonstrates how entities such as jinn influence moral, spatial, and ecological relationships in South Asia.

Many people I discussed the idea of *nangini* with had stories, both from the past and from more personal encounters in the present as well. There are also stories of people marrying fairies, and certain families are believed to be their descendants. Parvaz also told me about a well-known local ruler in Chitral named Sumalek, who is said to understand

the language of all creatures, including animals, birds, and insects, and who is said to have married a fairy. This MTH entanglement story underscores the close affiliation among all creatures and their embeddedness in one another's lives. Similar stories were found in Yarkhun and Torkhow, where people recounted their great-grandparents' encounters with fairies. One such story that came up many times in Yarkhun was this:

> One of the great-grandparents of the Zondrae clan was a *pari khan*, a person known for dealing with fairies, who used to hunt alongside them in the mountain pasture but was warned never to taste certain foods during his expeditions; when he ignored this warning and approached fairies milking goats, they fled and told him he would soon die, instructing him to make his grave where a deer would stand with his burial cloth between its horns and ghee in its ears. That very night, he died after conveying the fairies' message to his family. When people found the deer exactly as predicted, they used the cloth for his burial shroud and the ghee for his charity meal, then slaughtered the deer to complete the funeral feast and buried him there. (Mashqulgi, Meragram No. 2, 2022).

I went to visit the grave that overlooks the valley and is certainly in an unusual place for a person to be buried, considering the troubles of getting up there to make a grave and bury someone (Picture 01). This place is believed to have been suggested by fairies, and the story is told to each generation, and it continues to date. Similarly, many people told me that they hear weeping sounds when they are in the pastures and someone passes away in the village or they hear music sounds when a baby is born in the village. One of the female pastoralists, Maryam, recalls her childhood experience of living in the high pastures and listening to the sounds of fairies:

> The *nangini* would celebrate when we reached *ghari* (high pastures) with drumming sounds, like duku duku, and we would hear these sounds until dawn. Similarly, when we were about to leave the ghari after summer ended, we would hear crying sounds, like a baby weeping, until dawn. Our grandma would tell us that the nangini are sad that we are leaving. People would see fairies in white, red, blue, and other dresses as well. (*Mashqulgi*, 06 Nov 2022).

There are dozens of such stories of encounters with *the nangini*. There can be questions about the validity of these stories, but that is not the point of this paper. What matters is that for most locals, these beings exist and actively engage with them. There are instances of fairies entering human bodies and conversing with people. There is a big trend in

Chitral and other parts of North Pakistan of people going to such a pari khan (people whose bodies have fairies entered) to ask them for medical, social, and other worldly help and to save themselves from *bad-dua* (evil prayers) as the fairies help them in abolishing (*chetu korik*) such bad-dua (Ahmad, Nawab & Ali 2023). It is again a different story whether the medical recommendations actually work or whether their dismantling of the bad prayers is actually useful, but the local people participate in this activity in the vast majority and believe it works for them. These stories and rituals show that the fairies not only exist for local communities but also have direct, influential agency. One of the most significant roles of these agencies is their stewardship of the high mountain *muzhayo*.



Pic 1: The burial place of the Zondrae ancestor suggested by a fairy in Urkhan Gole, Yarkhun

There has been little academic work on the relationship between fairies and *muzhayo*. Faizi (2023) draws on Baig's (1997) work to identify 14 fairies that have powerful agency in the Chitrali cosmology, including Shawan, Merzhuri, Khangi, Jashtan, Shiri, Goar, Halmusti, Murghrathepi, Pherotis, Dov, Barzangi, Challgazi, Nahan and Khaphesi. Among these, two fairies are specifically important for muzhayo and livestock management, namely, shawan and shiri. Shawan, a female fairy, is considered to be the supervisor of all natural resources, soil, water, and vegetation, and lives in the high mountain pastures. She has subordinates who carry out her orders, and she owns the fauna and flora of the *muzhayo*. These conceptions and her authority are still very much practised by the local people, as they believe that shawan has set a code of conduct for humans to

enter the *muzhayo* high pastures and behave there. Some of the principles the locals identified include entering the mountains cleanly through ablution, not cutting down green trees, and not washing dirty clothes in the water, etc. Everyone must obey this code of conduct; otherwise, the *shawanan* get angry and could harm people or their livestock. There are rituals of *shinzik* (seeking permission) and *ishtarek* (offerings) when anyone enters the pastures in order to please the *shawanan*. One of the old pastoralist ladies in Yarkhun read out the way she used to call out to the *shawanan* before sending off her livestock to the pasture:

"*Ma sorum shawan naan ta kach awano mulli, ta kach bazurio mulli, malan ahye lakitam, ta pezhemitam*" (My dear (gold) shawan mother (fairy), I am sending off my livestock to the pasture, and I give them in your care. May they stay safe under your secure dress" (*Mashqulgi*, 06 November 2022). These prayers were well-known to older people in both valleys, and the process of seeking permission was also shared.

> We have a special juniper tree in our pasture (in Rech) called *shinzini Saruz* that is important for everyone. When we reach there on our way to the pasture, we call the fairies "anno nigehban" (protector of the pastureland) and request them to keep us and our livestock safe (Group *Mashqulgi*, Rech, 21 November 2022).

This act of seeking permission is followed by the offering of a special bread that people take with them to offer to the *nangini*. One of the local historians, Hussain, explains, "The local hunters and herders take special bread with them when going to the high pastures. To make the *nangini* happy, they throw pieces of bread above their shoulders backwards three times. This ritual is called *ishtarek* in the local language (*Mashqulgi*, 15 November 2022). These are some of the ways in which *shawanan* are acknowledged in the Yarkhun and Torkhow valleys, as discussed by multiple people during our *Mashqulgi*.



Picture 02: *Qalamdar saruz* in the Yarkhun Valley. With thanks to Samsaam & Shakir for the picture

The second fairy is shiri, another female nan, who looks after the well-being of cattle. "Her favour is sought on different occasions, such as the slaughtering of an animal, the birth of a kid or lamb in the animal pen, the departure of animals for the upland pastures, and the return of the herds from the high pastures to the animal shelter. On such occasions, sweet mush and pure oil are offered to Shiri by pasting them on the pillars of the animal shelter. Wheat or barley ears are burnt on the fire along with melted butter to offer their smoke to Shiri" (Faizi, 2023, p. 7-8). If the people do anything wrong, an outsider enters the pasture without permission, or they displease the shiri, she can harm the livestock. "When Naangini do not like someone, they kill animals; they spoil the milk. For example, the animals will not allow milking, or the cow will drink her own milk. There will be more damage" (Khonza, *Mashqulgi*, 06 November 2022). Several people discussed

stories of their successful hunts when they pleased the *nangini*, and there were also stories of both people and livestock being killed because of the fairies' wrath. An interesting story is from Yarkhun, where there is a juniper tree called “qalamdar saruz” which is believed to be home to fairies. Once, someone tried to cut that tree, and it bled milk and blood from both sides, and the person died. Similarly, a fascinating discourse was that the *nangini* do not like people who come from outside and do not respect local rituals. One of the community leaders in Rech, Yunus, narrated the following story:

> A person from another village came here for hunting with someone from this village to a place called Rarozun. At night, while sleeping, a woman placed a piece of wood on the guest. The host threw it away, but she returned twice to replace it. The third time, she warned, "If you remove this again, I will harm the outsiders and insiders." Sensing danger, they left for home, but on the way back, the guest died suddenly from a stomachache (*Mashqulgi*, 19 Nov 2022).

There are dozens of such stories in which people talk about fairies, which gives the *nangini* so much agency as MTH. This narrative is dominant in reflecting on the introduction of hired herders (gujjurs) into communities in Chitral starting in the early 2000s, as locals view gujjurs as external to the *gole* (mountain pastures). Several people used phrases like “*Golo fazel baghai*” or “*aan chetu hoi*”, meaning that the pastures have become impure, and were upset with the people because they brought these outsiders who do not respect the existing cosmological understandings of living in the pastures, as the gujjurs usually do not believe in the fairies. These stories and codes of conduct show that these fairies are considered to be the custodians of the high pastures and mountains, and it makes an interesting MTH case where humans are not the centre anymore, instead the fairies are the owners of the *muzhayo* and humans, like other MTHs, live in harmony and with humility to please the *nangini*; otherwise, they will be punished. Whether one believes in this worldview or not, it certainly shifts the anthropocentric views of human dominance on the commons and sees them as resources to be exploited. These narratives further explain how contemporary state practices, such as nationalisation, trophy hunting

policies, and scientific conservation, marginalise Indigenous spirit ecologies, thereby reflecting the broader colonial logics of erasure discussed by Sundberg (2014) and Kavesh (2023). In Chitral, the dismissal of *shawanan* as mere superstition perpetuates these epistemic hierarchies by denying their political authority over land and nonhuman entities. However, this worldview is changing, even among locals and younger generations who do not actively practice pastoralism. They do not experience these sensations or believe in fairies because of modern education and the mythification of these cosmologies. This is why some locals are even more concerned about nationalisation, which would destroy this Indigenous worldview of Chitral, as expressed by Chitrali in a poem submitted:

If your machines intrude, the mountain fairies will flee,

If the *shawanans* are lost, the mountains cease to be[xiv].

(Chitrali, 2024)

In these changing conditions, where the livelihoods and changes in Chitral (Khan, 2025b) already threaten the existence of MTHs, including fairies, the nationalisation of the commons further exacerbates the issue. Parvaz, one of the local scholars, and many others believe that fairies are being pushed away by modern technologies and disbelief, and that the sacred relationship is on the verge of extinction. This is why MTH rights for fairies in Chitral entail acknowledging the local cosmological agential authority given to fairies in the management and utilisation of *Muzhayo*. Such rights to the commons must ensure that the commons are not heavily disturbed by capitalist ventures in tourism, mining, and other activities that may displease the *nangini,* and that they leave the place in anger or harm people coming from outside, as believed by the locals. In terms of legal implications, recognising fairies as custodians of the MTH would necessitate protecting sacred sites, enforcing seasonal access protocols such as *shinzik* and *ishtarek*, and acknowledging

fairies as representatives of ecological well-being. These forms of relational guardianship are more closely aligned with relational MTH rights than with the frameworks of nature-rights personhood. The issue of intergenerational transmission of knowledge and practices concerning fairies is also relevant. If the commons were not threatened by nationalisation, more families might feel assured of engaging in traditional pastoralism and sustaining positive relations with the fairies. Giving rights to fairies means security for them in their own rights, but also a harmonious relationship between humans, livestock, plants, and all other MTHs by de-centring humans and keeping the stewardship of the *muzhayo* with the fairies. This relational model aligns with the concept of multispecies justice (Chao et al., 2022), wherein rights are derived from obligations, reciprocity, and collective survival rather than from individualised legal subjecthood. This can make an excellent case for more-than-human conception implemented in a real scenario where agency is distributed, and humans are not at the top of the hierarchy. Theoretically and practically, such rights can help a thriving pastoralist community and reconnect with traditional ecological knowledge in Chitral that challenges the modern Western anthropocentric conceptions of humans and commons.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper fundamentally reinterprets the concept of the commons in Chitral by positing that *muzhayo*, the shared pastoralist commons, should not be viewed solely as a human resource. Instead, it is a dynamic, co-governed, and co-inhabited space that includes a diverse array of more-than-human (MTH) entities, such as livestock, wildlife, plants, birds, and even fairies (*shawanan*). This perspective challenges the prevailing anthropocentric framing of commons in both academic discourse and state governance, which typically reduces commons to economic assets for human exploitation (Boyd et al.,

2018; Hardin, 1968). In contrast, *muzhayo* embodies an Indigenous ontology in which agency is distributed among humans and nonhumans, thereby affirming a relational and pluralistic understanding of commons management and stewardship. Given that *muzhayo* are threatened by the Pakistani state's nationalisation policies, it is crucial to recenter MTHs, given their significant role in pastoralist systems, and to advocate for the rights of MTHs to *muzhayo* alongside their human pastoralist co-participants. This argument aligns with the distinction between the universalist rights of nature and context-specific, relational more-than-human rights, anchoring the discussion in contemporary theoretical developments and local practices (Rodríguez-Garavito, 2024). By integrating works such as Pelizzon (2025), Bavikatte and Bennett (2015), and Lorimer and Hodgetts (2024), the analysis emphasises the necessity for legal recognition and guardianship to address not only the abstract nature, but also specific actors, agencies, and relational modes of stewardship present in Chitral's *muzhayo*.

In the context of the government's imposition of nationalisation on the common lands of the pastoralist communities in Chitral, the politicisation, political significance, and political agency of MTH rights are of considerable importance. This issue transcends a mere land tenure dispute; it represents a contestation over the survival rights of the deeply interdependent yet distributed agency of the MTH and human participants of *muzhayo*. The state's ambition to appropriate these commons for tourism, mining, and conservation projects poses a threat to the reciprocal relationships between humans and MTHs, which have sustained this pastoralist knowledge system and worldview for generations now. Poetic expressions, lived pastoralist practices, and oral narratives manifest a strong resistance to this change, with poets and pastoralists emphasising the agency of MTHs, from livestock autonomously navigating the high pastures and the integral ecological networks of wildlife to the recognition of fairies as custodians of the mountain commons.

These poetic expressions and remaining pastoralist practices function as both political activism and cultural memory, challenging top-down, extractive governance with a decolonial call to recognise MTH rights.

The pluralistic ontology of Chitral, as presented in this paper, challenges Western dichotomies such as nature/culture and human/nonhuman by decentring humans, thereby aligning with Indigenous cosmologies that have long embraced multi-species coexistence (Todd, 2016). *Muzhayo* exemplifies this intricate web of interdependence, which is constituted by both humans and more-than-humans (MTHs). Mal are not passive entities; instead, their active agency, characterised by their free movement and the care they receive, when necessary, influences the well-being of the animals, the management of commons, and the practices of human pastoralists. A distinctive contribution of this paper is the inclusion of fairies as MTHs, which extends the boundaries of MTH studies by incorporating spiritual entities that possess both material and moral agency within the *muzhayo* of Chitral. The narrative from Chitral invites MTH scholars to transcend the scientific and "rationalistic" approach to more-than-humans and engage with all beings that possess agency and constitute a lived reality for a community. Thus, this study theoretically challenges the entrenched anthropocentrism in commons governance and environmental law by advocating a pluralistic, decolonial framework that integrates Indigenous cosmologies and multispecies relationality. This paper engages with critical postcolonial and decolonial scholarship (Kavesh, 2023; Sundberg, 2014; Tuck & Yang, 2012) to demonstrate how state, elite, and extractive interventions sustain the colonial logics of domination by objectifying land, wildlife, people, and spiritual entities. This expansion also aligns with the multispecies justice literature (Chao, Bolender & Kirksey, 2022) and hunting ontologies that emphasise reciprocal obligation, such as Nadasdy's (2007) concept of the "gift in the animal." The intricate relationships among pastoralists,

mal, wildlife, and *shawanan* are examined in the context of these forces, highlighting Indigenous epistemologies and resistance as sources of justice and resilience.

However, significant challenges persist in the clear codification and implementation of the rights of More-Than-Human (MTH) entities. The rights advocated in this paper concerning MTHs are not merely symbolic. They serve to actively counteract the homogenising effects of nationalisation and capitalist enterprises, which expose the commons to external influences and pose a threat to the entities, including livestock, fairies, plants, and wildlife, that sustain it. Within the framework of universalist animal or nature rights, a dichotomy between humans and nature persists, often resulting in the exclusion of humans from the rights attributed to these entities. Even within the Western conceptualisation of MTHs, the agency of an individual is frequently isolated from the collective agency of other MTHs and humans, with insufficient recognition of their interconnectedness. This situation poses a risk of fetishising and potentially weaponising nature or MTHs for nationalistic or capitalistic objectives, as evidenced in Gilgit-Baltistan (Ali, 2019). Consequently, the rights of MTHs in *Muzhayo*, Chitral, should be grounded in Indigenous pastoralist ethics and knowledge systems that have been practised for centuries. The agency of each participant in *muzhayo* is intricately interwoven, and humans do not necessarily occupy a central or hierarchical position of power. Thus, the *muzhayo* case in Chitral exemplifies a scenario in which the pursuit of rights for humans and MTHs cannot occur in isolation; instead, they must be jointly advocated to achieve genuine MTH rights in Chitral. Practically, the poetic expressions, oral traditions, and lived experiences examined in this study politicise MTHs as entities possessing rights, advocating for a moral and legal framework rooted in the existing Indigenous ethics of care, reciprocity, and shared values of survival. Articulating specific rights, such as those

related to habitat continuity, protection from harmful extraction, and cultural-spiritual integrity, facilitates a clearer understanding of their legal implications.

Nevertheless, this research acknowledges the internal transformations occurring within the community, particularly the decline of pastoralist practices due to the epistemicide of Indigenous knowledge systems (Moradi, 2025) by modern educational frameworks, shifting livelihood patterns, and interventions by NGOs and government initiatives that displace individuals from traditional pastoralist livelihoods (see Khan, 2025). Local cosmologies and livelihoods are undergoing transformation as younger generations increasingly distance themselves from pastoralism, belief in fairies diminishes, and the commodification of wildlife and plants intensifies. This raises a vital question: can MTH rights serve as a call to the local community, not merely to preserve the past but to re-evaluate the present and reclaim Indigenous ontologies of care in new ways? In this context, granting rights to MTHs is essential to ensure that external observers and the younger local population respect traditional practices. MTH rights can and should be a living, adaptive charter responsive to both internal transformations and external threats. Thus, recognising MTH's rights to *muzhayo* is not only an ethical imperative but also a practical necessity for sustaining pastoralist livelihoods, biodiversity, and cultural heritage. Establishing such a precedent may prompt the nationally implemented education system to become more attuned to local realities and needs. This issue is complex and warrants a separate study to investigate the mechanisms for translating these rights into enforceable policies and community-led stewardship models while addressing the erosion of traditional knowledge under modern pressures. Notwithstanding these challenges, this research makes a significant contribution to the fields of human geography and commons studies by presenting a grounded, Indigenous-led case that extends the theoretical boundaries of the MTH scholarship. Ultimately, this study advocates pluralistic, decolonial, and locally

grounded models of guardianship and representation that incorporate pastoralists, spiritual custodians, and multispecies assemblies. These models are proposed as alternatives to purely anthropocentric or neoliberal conservation approaches, enhancing practical and legal engagement, and emphasising the importance of centring Indigenous perspectives in MTH scholarship and policy development (Sundberg, 2014; Kavesh, 2023).

In conclusion, the *muzhayo* of Chitral represents a common where the interconnection between the flourishing of the commons, more-than-human entities (MTHs), and humans is evident, necessitating the acknowledgement and respect for the agency and rights of all *muzhayo* participants. The findings underscore the need for urgent policy reforms in Pakistan and similar global contexts, where pastoralist commons, MTH, and human participants face threats from top-down national policies. The legal recognition of pastoralist commons should extend beyond human tenure to encompass livestock, plants, birds, and wildlife as rights-bearing participants, ensuring their freedom to roam and thrive. Furthermore, safeguarding the spiritual dimensions of *muzhayo* by recognising the agency and custodianship of fairies can promote harmonious coexistence and enhance community resilience. Indigenous knowledge systems and customary practices should be integrated into governance and education systems to protect *muzhayo* from enclosure, mining, tourism, and other capitalistic ventures that disrupt the ecological balance and cultural continuity. Upholding these rights is crucial not only for the survival of Chitral's pastoralist communities and their more-than-human kin but also for advancing global discussions on environmental justice and multispecies coexistence. This case, therefore, presents a relational, decolonial alternative to prevailing environmental and commons governance paradigms and contributes to ongoing global discussions regarding the future of more-than-human rights.

Article 04: Kings have Armies, Pastoralists have Land: The Question of Ownership of the Pastoralist Indigenous Commons in Chitral, Pakistan

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Abstract

This study examines the contested ownership of pastoral commons in Chitral, Pakistan, between Indigenous pastoralist communities and the state. It focuses on the Chitrali *boomki* (aboriginal) people, who assert ancestral rights to communal lands against state nationalisation policies, following the 1975 notification declaring common lands as state property**.** Using ethnographic fieldwork conducted over three years (2022-2025) in the Chitral region of northern Pakistan, this study employs a narrative enquiry methodology grounded in lived experiences and oral histories. The findings suggest that customary clan-based and proximity-based ownership systems have historically governed the commons through adaptive, negotiated institutions, such as rotational grazing and community monitoring. In contrast, state-led conservation efforts show uneven implementation, political contradictions, and the reactivation of historical policies for climate agendas. Nationalisation and "green grabbing" threaten pastoralist livelihoods and the epistemological relationships with land that shape *boomki* identity. This study contributes to the commons governance literature by documenting how Indigenous management systems mobilise political identities and negotiate recognition within legal frameworks, adapting to changing demographics and state relations. It contributes to agrarian and Indigenous studies by conceptualising ownership as a bundle of rights and addressing

Indigenous land rights and sovereignty issues. These insights have implications for rethinking legal pluralism and governance in post-colonial states.

Keywords: Indigenous land rights, Chitral, narrative inquiry, commons, pastoralist land, Pakistani land policy, green grabbing, indigeneity

Introduction

During my fieldwork in Chitral, Pakistan in 2022, I interviewed a lawyer who was actively involved in the People of Chitral versus the Pakistani state court case. According to the lawyer, this case seeks to annul the 1975 notification that designated all common land in Chitral as government property. During our conversation, which took place over tea at his residence, I mentioned that I had interviewed numerous individuals in Chitral who expressed that, provided the local population retains usage rights, it is acceptable for the government to own common land. I enquired why he remained concerned about the ownership of the commons by local communities, to which he responded as follows:

> Indigenously, we have had distinct traditional concepts of land ownership that have been passed down through generations. However, the government does not acknowledge traditional ownership or systems. We established that people have long used the commons for pastoralist purposes. The government's stance is that it has not prohibited people from using the land for pastoral purposes. They want to own the commons and allow people to use them. However, this presents a problem. If the government owns the land, its use becomes a concession rather than an inherent right. The state can reclaim it at any moment, potentially instructing you to cease using the land for pastoralism at any time. The only way to secure the right to use the land is through communal ownership (personal communication, 2022).

The concept of commons ownership in Chitral, as mentioned by the lawyer, engages with the ongoing global discussions concerning commons, ownership, and the politics of state-led nationalisation by shifting the analytical focus beyond the simplistic dichotomies of customary rights and state dispossession (Fairhead, Leach, & Scoones, 2012; Wolford et al., 2024; Robinson and Flintan, 2022*)*. This paper examines the issue of commons ownership in Chitral, conceptualising it as an actively produced and contested framework of possession. It explores the administrative, legal, and vernacular repertoires through which various actors claim the same land as either communal pastoral commons or state property (Lund, 2024; Stock and Birkenholtz, 2024). The case of Chitral's pastoralist indigenous commons illustrates how a 1975 governmental notification issued under Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's agrarian agenda was reactivated as the legal foundation for

contemporary conservation, mapping, and litigation efforts (Mulk, 2019). This situation results in the territory being subject to both top-down nationalisation and a vernacular repertoire of *boomki* (Aboriginal) claims. By shifting the focus from a simplistic "state versus commons" binary to a struggle over competing codes of possession, this paper contributes to debates on property regimes, legal pluralism, and state-grabbing.

The concept of ownership necessitates thorough scrutiny. According to the Oxford English Dictionary and Black's Law Dictionary, ownership is defined as the legal right of possession that permits an individual to use and enjoy property, including the right to transfer it to others (Ulfstein, 2004). However, legal theory and contemporary scholarship highlight its characterisation as a "bundle of rights", encompassing use, access, alienation, exclusion, and transfer, which can be fragmented and reconfigured across various legal and customary frameworks (Barry & Augustinus, 2015; Lund, 2024). Pakistani state law, like that of many nation-states, frequently equates ownership with the state title (Li et al., 1998). In contrast, Chitrali customary law encodes communal and proximity-based tenure, distributing local common land through complex clan, village, and valley-based systems (Khan & Haque, 2021). These arrangements underscore the fluid yet competing nature of ownership (Lund, 2024), the rivalry between formal and informal norms, and the continual redefinition of rights through contestation and fear of loss. Recent scholarly investigations have highlighted that conflicts over common resources, particularly in the aftermath of nationalisation initiatives since the 1940s, have emerged as a significant issue for pastoralist and Indigenous communities globally (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2018; Bollig & Lesorogol, 2016; Asaaga & Hirons, 2019; Wolford et al., 2024). For instance, in Laos, rural communities are challenging post-socialist government plans for the nationalisation of their lands and forests (Kenney-Lazar, 2017). Similarly, Nigerian communities are striving to defend their commons from the federal military government (Francis, 1984). On

the Paraguay-Brazil borderlands, Indigenous groups such as the Kue Tuvy Aché have successfully obtained collective land titles (Correia, 2019). Such control over rural resources often results in the dispossession and displacement of Indigenous pastoralist communities (Filipová & Johanisova, 2017; Ulfstein, 2004) in the name of conservation projects (Chen, 2013), green grabbing (Kolas, 2014; Yeh, 2005), and state control (Habeck, 2013; Theriault, 2017). The Chitrali case adds nuance to these discussions by presenting an understudied configuration: postcolonial nationalisation, justified by conservation and legal mechanisms of the 1975 notification, intertwined with a unique clan, proximity, and indigeneity-based forms of commons governance. Chitrali pastoralists are worried about the potential loss of their livelihoods and the epistemological and ontological losses associated with land, the environment, and more-than-human entities (Khan, 2025a) as they navigate ownership rights amid the impending nationalisation. This ownership analysis seeks to identify strategies to protect the environment and preserve cultural traditions, thereby reinforcing the ethical principles passed down through generations (Humtsoe, 2023).

Pakistan's land nationalisation initiatives illustrate the state's conflicting objectives of balancing social justice commitments with the interests of the elite, as evidenced by Ayub Khan's Green Revolution through subsequent administrations (Herring, 1979; Raza, 2022). Bhutto's 1970s campaign to “eradicate feudalism,” although ostensibly aimed at dismantling landed power, involved alliances with landlords and resulted in limited redistribution, thereby preserving elite dominance while facilitating state intervention in rural land matters (Herring, 1979). As Raza (2022) explains, these reforms failed to establish a stable property rights regime; instead, land ownership and authority remained contested between landlords and state officials, leading to dynamic property politics. According to Afzal and Khan (2021), British colonial land policies that persisted in newly

formed Pakistan entrenched concentrated landownership and dismantled protective customs for agrarian classes in the province of Sindh. The ongoing conflict in Baluchistan arises from long-standing grievances over natural resource exploitation and economic marginalisation, exacerbated by the federal government's management of the Gwadar project, which epitomises decades of state-led expropriation. When viewed from this perspective, the 1975 Chitral Notification represents a local manifestation of broader national dynamics, shaped by its unique geographic and historical challenges. Chitral, a princely state governed by the *mehtar* of the Katur dynasty from 1571 to 1969, was influenced by British colonial forces until Pakistan's independence in 1947 (Cacopardo and Cacopardo, 2001). In 1947, *Mehtar* Muzaffar ul-Mulk opted to accede to Pakistan, although it was not formally integrated into Pakistan until 1969 (Wadood and Islam, 2023). Chitral was integrated into Pakistan between 1969 and 1972 after the local princely state and leadership were weakened and abolished by the federal government. As part of resource management in this newly joined administrative district of the KPK province (formerly known as Sarhad), Articles 14, 16, and 18 of the 1975 notification vested "forests, grazing lands, hunting grounds, wastelands, mines, minerals, rivers, riverbeds, rivulets and mountains" in the Government of Pakistan (Government of NWFP, 1976). This effectively rendered about ninety-seven per cent of Chitral's territory state property, without defining categories or acknowledging communal tenure systems, exemplifying Lund's (2024) "coding regime of possession": a process through which the state transforms customary claims into administratively legible property. This assertion of sovereignty occurred following the dismantling of princely institutions without organised local representation. The Commission consulted only *mehtar*'s officials and a few landed families, without conducting a survey of the communal ownership of the broader

population (Mulk, 2019). The nationalisation aligned bureaucratic and elite interests, which Raza (2022) describes as the “co-production of landlord authority and state rule.”

Locals perceive nationalisation as a disruption of historical rights and proximity-based ownership. Given that over 80% of the Chitrali population is engaged in agro-pastoral activities and the commons are primarily utilised as pastoralist resources, this notification has significantly impacted the majority of Chitral's population (Khan, 2025). Historically, the implementation of the Notification was inconsistent; state neglect and the region's challenging terrain resulted in sporadic enforcement, allowing local communal management to persist. Recently, however, increased state interest in tourism, conservation, and climate initiatives has led to renewed efforts to enforce the Notification, reclassifying traditional commons as government property for purposes of “green grabbing” and neoliberal development (Fairhead et al., 2012; Khan, 2025b). Consequently, for local communities, land traditionally managed through the *boomki* (Aboriginal) system has been redefined as *sarkari* (government property). There is increasing resistance from local communities, manifested through legal actions, poetic expressions, and the continued utilisation of resources for pastoralist purposes as everyday resistance (Khan, 2026; Scott, 1998), despite governmental directives to cease such activities in some areas of Chitral (See also Khan, 2025a, b). The local Indigenous communities of Chitral have utilised these resources in accordance with their millennia-old use and traditional community ownership of common land. This traditional ownership is not formally recognised by the government; however, these people are Indigenous to the region and identify themselves as "*boomki*" or Aboriginal people. This paper examines and problematises the concept of indigeneity not as a fixed identity but as a dynamic political strategy opposing nationalisation and land appropriation. The term *boomki* literally translates to "from the land”, and the locals assert that *boomki* people have emerged from the land, as there is no known history of their

migration from other regions to the area. Many participants I interviewed expressed that they were born before the state of Pakistan (1947), highlighting the nation-state's recency and the surprise it provoked among the local populace at the state's ability to appropriate their land[6]. This indigeneity forms the basis of their claim to the commons, as they have resided there, maintained the land, utilised it, and established their systems of ownership as small communities within each valley. The commons in Upper Chitral predominantly consist of high pastures (*ghari/aan/adrakh*), riverbeds, unirrigated hilly areas, and other lands that have been used communally by the communities for centuries. Their claim to the land is based on proximity to a community group, typically organised as a village, or on a clan-based ownership system. This system allocates local common resources among inhabitants for purposes such as pastoral activities, hunting, and wood gathering, thereby distributing the pressure of resource utilisation across common resources. This dynamic highlights a fundamental insight of agrarian studies: commons serve as the focal point for continuous negotiation, redefinition, and occasionally resistance, involving evolving coalitions of state agents, local elites, Indigenous communities, and external interests (Raza, 2022; Benjaminsen & Ba, 2018; Wolford et al., 2024). The 1975 Notification, along with its gradual implementation, thus offers a perspective on how state nationalisation, conservation, and community claims interact to generate new forms of contestation and potential dispossession in Chitral.

This paper addresses the conceptualisation and understanding of ownership of the commons, highlighting the challenges related to the preservation of traditional customary laws within contemporary nation-states, which often prioritise either privatisation or state-ownership models (Gilbert, 2014). By engaging with the ownership claims of the state and

[6] Chitral was a princely state independently governed for centuries, and more closely connected to the wider Pamirs than down country of what is now Pakistan.

the pastoralist Indigenous people of Chitral, Pakistan, it addresses the complex challenge of ownership and the utility of commons (*muzhayo*) in Chitral amidst the government's nationalisation. This study seeks to amplify the often-overlooked voices and strategies of Chitrali pastoralists by emphasising their oral histories and narratives through narrative enquiry (Clandinin, 2006). It foregrounds how the lived experiences of ownership, stewardship, and resistance are influenced by evolving legal, customary and policy frameworks. Drawing from 70 interviews, including those with local residents and government officials, as well as focus group interviews and participatory observation conducted over three years (2022-2025) in Chitral, Pakistan, I investigate not only how nationalisation threatens livelihoods and cultural knowledge but also how communities contest, adapt, and reimagine their relationships with land, commons, and state property regimes. I examine the complexities of the right to commons for pastoralist communities by considering commons as sites of contestation, internal challenges, and locals' feelings and demands regarding the nationalisation of pastoralist commons.

Research Methodology

This research is based on an extensive, long-term field study conducted in the Chitral region of northern Pakistan, specifically focusing on the Yarkhun and Torkhow valleys in Upper Chitral (Figure 01). The methodology is informed by the researcher's positionality as a native of Chitral and fluent Khowar speaker, which facilitated access, communication, and contextual understanding throughout the research process. This study employs a multiple-method approach to capture the complexity and richness of local knowledge, practices, and social dynamics. Qualitative techniques employed include individual interviews and in-depth conversations with community members, particularly elders, to gather personal narratives and oral histories, as well as focus group discussions,

known locally as *mashqulgi*. These communal discussions promote open dialogue and mutual learning, aligning with the notion that research communities should serve as sites of conversation rather than mere discovery. Participatory observation enabled immersive engagement with daily life and community interactions, whereas bureaucratic interviews examined local administrative processes and their effects on resource management. Archival research was also conducted to contextualise contemporary practices and beliefs within their historical evolution.

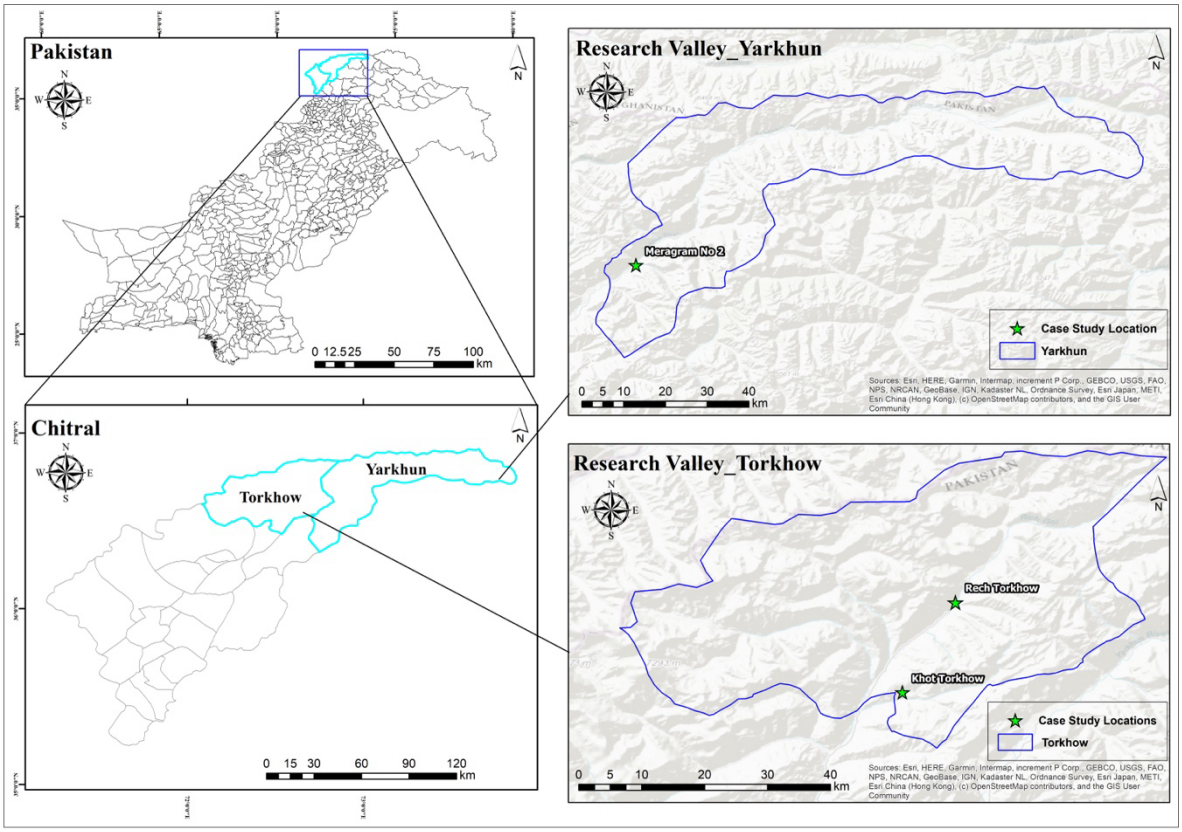


Figure 01: A map of the study areas developed by the author (Special thanks to Aslam)

Fieldwork was conducted over 14 months, with data collected at different intervals between 2022 and 2025, encompassing various seasons and community activities. This duration allowed the researcher to observe temporal variations and establish trust with participants. The research concentrated on case studies from the villages of Meragram No.

2 in Yarkhun and Khot and Rech in Torkhow, selected for their representativeness and unique local practices concerning commons management and community organisation (Fig. 01). I conducted 70 interviews and participant observations with local residents, including pastoralist communities, individuals with a familial history of local leadership in resolving disputes over shared land (*aan waal*), local forest guards employed by the government to prevent local hunting and grazing practices, and local resistance leaders opposing the *muzhayo* nationalisation project. Furthermore, I travelled to the cities of Swat, Peshawar, Chitral Town, and Islamabad to engage in discussions with government officials, review archival materials, and consult poets, historians, and Chitrali intellectuals, as most officials are based in these urban centres. The analysis was iterative and reflexive, with ongoing interpretation informed by field observations, participant feedback, and the researcher's dual identity as an insider and an academic. As a member of a higher-ranking clan with greater access to communal resources, I have been acutely aware of and have reflected on this positionality in my research project. I have publicly addressed clan-based discrimination in local newspapers and on social media platforms, which has facilitated a degree of trust among participants from other clans in sharing information with me. Nonetheless, I remain cognizant that my positionality may have influenced both the information shared with me by the participants from different clans and my subsequent analysis. To mitigate potential bias and prevent my research from being used as evidence of communal ownership that could incite conflict, I have anonymised the names of the clans in my analysis, recognising that communal resources are subject to continual evolution. Ethical considerations were prioritised throughout the study, with informed consent obtained from all participants, confidentiality maintained, and respect for local customs guiding the research process. This methodology, grounded in multiple methods and long-term engagement, provides a robust framework for exploring the social,

historical, and institutional dimensions of the commons in Chitral, while centring local voices and knowledge systems.

Narrative enquiry serves as the central methodological approach in this paper, providing a framework for exploring lived experiences and meaning-making processes within the Chitrali community. Narrative enquiry, as articulated by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), is a way of understanding experiences that situates researchers and participants in a collaborative process of meaning construction through stories. This methodology is grounded in the interpretivist paradigm and emphasises temporality, sociality, and place as dimensions that shape human experience (Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin and Caine, 2013). By focusing on the stories individuals tell about their lives and communal living, narrative enquiry captures what happened and the significance participants attribute to their experiences, offering a nuanced understanding of personal and collective identity (Josselson, 2022; Clandinin, 2006). Narrative enquiry aligns with centring local voices and knowledge systems, especially where conventional research methods may overlook marginalised perspectives. This is important for this research, as the narrative enquiry method assigns political weightage to the stories and narratives of the local Chitrali pastoralists in discussions of land ownership and nature-human relations by highlighting their understanding, relationships, and demands regarding the commons (Harris, 2022). Its relational and participatory ethos facilitates knowledge co-construction, respects participant agency, and recognises the researcher's positionality within the research process (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Harris, 2022). This methodology allows research questions to evolve with unfolding narratives and privileges contextualised descriptions over reductive generalisations (Josselson, 2022). This approach enriches the study's empirical depth while addressing ethical considerations through negotiation, respect and mutuality (Harris, 2022). Narrative enquiry effectively illuminates the

interplay among individual, social, and environmental factors shaping the community's understanding of common ownership, making it well-suited to the project's objectives.

Commons, Nation-States and Indigenous Pastoralist Communities

The governance and ownership of commons among Indigenous pastoralist communities have been central to academic discussions, particularly regarding how these groups conceptualise, manage, and protect shared resources amid state nationalisation policies and external pressures (Hassan, Nathan & Kanyinga, 2022). Early theoretical models, such as Hardin's "tragedy of the commons", propose that common property regimes inescapably result in resource exhaustion unless substituted with private or state ownership. However, extensive empirical research has shown that this model overgeneralises the realities of Indigenous peoples' and pastoralist societies, in which communal resource management is often highly sustainable, context-specific, and adaptive (Scoones, 2020; Robinson, 2019; Behnke, 2018; Rights and Resources Initiative, 2015).

Indigenous pastoralist communities across Africa, Asia, and other regions have developed intricate systems of customary rules, traditions, and institutions that govern access to and the utilisation of common resources. These systems are defined by flexibility, negotiated access, and interconnected rights, which are crucial for managing environmental variability and supporting livelihoods contingent on mobility and collective stewardship (Robinson, 2019; Galaty, 2016). In places such as Chitral, these arrangements manifest seasonal migration patterns and communal decision-making processes that organise access to grazing lands and water sources (Nüsser, Holdschlag & Fazlur-Rahman, 2012). Contrary to unregulated "open access" systems, these commons are actively managed through oral histories, local institutions, and collective deliberation rooted in profound social and spiritual bonds (Khan, 2025a). A prominent theme in the literature is

the divergent perspectives between Indigenous communities and nation-states or modern organisations such as NGOs and development organisations. While Indigenous groups respect commons as vital for their livelihoods, identity, and cultural continuity, states often recognise these lands as "no-man's land" or empty spaces, available for appropriation, conservation initiatives, or development (Alden Wily, 2011; Eppinger, 2018; Ali, 2019; Yenneti & Day, 2016). These policies and legal frameworks are commonly grounded in the colonial doctrine of "terra nullius" (nobody's land), which obliterates Indigenous presence and legitimises state or private claims to communal territories (Borch, 2001). In practice, this has led to widespread marginalisation, as state-driven land reforms, commercial interests, and conservation policies frequently disregard or undercut established communal management systems (Alden Wily, 2011). Researchers have investigated the legal foundations and international frameworks underpinning Indigenous peoples' land rights, contending that these rights are crucial for safeguarding their culture, ensuring self-determination, and facilitating their participation in decisions impacting their traditional territories (Ulfstein, 2004).

The paradox of the formalisation of land and commons has been extensively debated in the literature. Efforts to legally recognise communal tenure, such as Ethiopia's constitutional provisions or Kenya's Community Land Act, are envisioned to protect Indigenous and pastoralist access to land (Robinson & Flintan, 2022). However, these reforms often establish inflexible boundaries and static categories that inadequately capture the dynamic and adaptive nature of pastoralist resource utilisation and can at times expedite privatisation and undermine traditional institutions (Hassan et al., 2022; Flintan et al., 2021). Similar patterns are evident in Pakistan, where government-led conservation efforts and the establishment of protected areas have disrupted traditional management systems and limited pastoral communities' access to essential resources (Ali, 2019; Khan

& Rahman, 2010). Recent theoretical developments highlight the notion of "complex mosaics" as a framework for understanding commons ownership within Indigenous pastoralist settings (Robinson, 2019). The tenure regimes in question do not align neatly with the conventional categories of private, communal, or state property. Instead, they represent dynamic assemblages characterised by overlapping rights, responsibilities and claims, which are negotiated through local institutions and situated within broader political and ecological contexts (Robinson, 2019; Behnke, 2018). The political ecology perspective further explains how power dynamics, state policies, and external influences, such as green grabbing, infrastructure development, and conservation discourses, transform access to and control over the commons (Blau, 2020; Galaty, 2016).

Empirical research conducted in regions such as East and West Africa, Central Asia, and South Asia underscores the resilience and adaptability inherent in the management of Indigenous pastoralist commons (Simpson and Waweru, 2021; Kreutzmann, 2016; Fratkin, 2001). Studies focusing on Uganda, Karamoja, and the Borana community in Ethiopia demonstrate that traditional institutions, grounded in community-driven management, local dispute resolution, and collective stewardship, continue to provide robust tenure security and promote sustainable resource utilisation, even in the face of external pressures (Filipová & Johanisova, 2017). These systems frequently operate informally, relying on local recognition, social bonds, customary laws, and prolonged habitation rather than formal legal documentation. Nevertheless, they are increasingly threatened by land appropriation, conservation enclosures, and climate change, which intensify competition for resources and exacerbate marginalisation (Alden Wily, 2011; Rights and Resources Initiative, 2015). Numerous scholars currently advocate for policy interventions that are adaptable, multi-layered, and considerate of the lived experiences and knowledge systems of Indigenous pastoralist communities (Ahearn and Chatty, 2020;

Khan, 2025). Effective governance of the commons in these regions requires an acknowledgement of the diversity, complexity, and dynamism inherent in local tenure systems rather than the imposition of rigid legal frameworks or the privileging of state-centric models (Robinson & Flintan, 2022; Robinson, 2019). Collectively, contemporary scholarship offers a robust theoretical foundation for research rooted in the lived experiences and traditional ownership of Indigenous pastoralist communities, challenging reductionist models and underscoring the necessity of context-sensitive, adaptive approaches to commons ownership and resource governance. This approach aligns with empirical observations from Chitral and other regions, where the agency of local actors, oral histories, and participatory decision-making are essential for sustainable management of shared resources. This study contributes to the existing literature advocating for the retention of traditional land ownership by Indigenous pastoralist communities, grounded in customary regulations within the nation-state system.

Pastoralist Indigenous Claims to Commons

> After the establishment of Pakistan (in 1947), pasture management was inadequate. The Wildlife Department assumed control but failed to care for the land, instead exploiting it for its own benefit. Once nationalised, the forests suffered from smuggling, flooding, and theft by forest departments, all of which harmed the forests and the land. The situation is similar in Upper Chitral, where the state of affairs is unclear as well. It belongs neither to the government nor to the public; it is simply chaotic and unregulated. There is a lack of vision or ideas on how to manage it effectively in the future. In Islamabad, if someone owns a small property or water mill, they also own the land (non-private) above their property. The same principle should apply here, where the land belongs to the *boomki*, the Indigenous people of the Chitral region. Your pasture should be treated as your own land (as a community). That is the rule. (For instance) I own private land here, but the *patwar* (the government record-keeper of land) has not legally identified the pastures as belonging to me (personal communication, 2022).

This reflection by an intellectual and pastoralist writer from Upper Chitral effectively explains the current ambiguous status of commons in Chitral. Historically, local inhabitants have not needed to consider the ownership of pastures and other commons, as

these resources have been utilised in accordance with customary laws and traditional ownership for millennia. However, the government's recent initiative to deploy *patwar* officials to formally delineate private land from non-private commons, thereby asserting state ownership over these commons, has prompted local residents to assert their identity as the "*boomki*" or aboriginal people of the region, claiming primary ownership of the commons upon which they have depended for generations. As noted by a local scholar, Faizi (2025), who references one of the oldest texts on Chitral, Mirza Muhammad Ghufran's "New History of Chitral", the primary divisions between valleys and villages concerning pastures and water sources were established during the rule of the Chinese Cathy Dynasty in Chitral (56 BC-2nd AD), and these resources have been utilised since that time (25-26). The majority of individuals I interviewed emphasised their status as the "*boomki*" to substantiate their strong claim to ownership of the commons.

> This is our ancestral home, and we are its residents here. We have not come from elsewhere; instead, we have always lived here. We are the original ancestors of this place and the boomki here (personal communication, 2022).

When asked about the duration of their residence in the village of Urkhan in the Yarkhoon Valley, this 70-year-old pastoralist stated that there was no recorded history of migration from other locations to the Yarkhun Valley. It is crucial to recognise that pastoralists and Indigenous groups in various contexts may not always identify as a single entity. Nevertheless, the Indigenous peoples of Chitral have historically utilised the commons for pastoralism. Over the years of my research in Chitral, the Khowar proverb "*metar bolo sora, roi malo sora*" was frequently cited, meaning that a king can remain a king only if he has an army, and the people of Chitral can survive only if they have livestock. An elderly pastoralist woman, who spent her youth in the pastures, extended this proverb by stating, "Kings have armies and pastoralists have land. Without ownership of our pastures, how can we continue pastoralism or survive in this village?" (Personal Communication, 2022).

Consequently, I employ the terms pastoralists and Indigenous collectively when discussing the commons, as the *boomki* who utilise them are pastoralists. When I asked experts in the Khowar language regarding the definition of "*boomki*", I received responses consistent with the pastoralist's account. The essence of their definition is that "*boomki*" refers to people, tribes, or clans without a traceable migration history and who are Indigenous to a particular village. The term "*boom*" signifies land in both Khowar and Farsi languages, and "*boomki*" individuals are described as having emerged from the land, symbolised by the saying that they have come out of the land with a bread maker (*bitholu*) on their heads, indicating their status as the first beneficiaries of a place. It is also observed that each village comprises multiple clans considered "*boomki*", who are respected in various ways. For instance, the "*boomki*" of a village are invited to inaugurate new houses or consulted for local land issues and are held in high esteem (personal communication, 2025). Predominantly, the Chitrali people are "*boomki*" to the region, with internal migration occurring within Chitral, and only minor migration from outside, such as from Central Asia, in recent times. Through this connection to the land, the Chitrali Indigenous people assert their ownership of the communal land.

It is important to note that Indigeneity in Chitral should not be perceived as a primordial identity but rather as a historically and politically constructed position. The local term *boomki* serves as an idiom of belonging and moral authority over land, but they never needed to amplify this identity to claim rights before. Its articulation has evolved in response to changing forms of state power and conservation governance. As Li (2014) suggests in her study of Sulawesi, indigenous identity emerges not from timeless customs but from strategic encounters with external regimes of rule, development, and legality. Similarly, Chitrali *boomki* communities invoke indigeneity to secure visibility and legitimacy in state and global discourses on rights, conservation, and minority protection.

This use of indigeneity as political language, rather than as an essence, helps explain its increased prominence during litigation over the 1975 notification and recent conservation projects. Such an understanding also aligns with scholarship that views Indigenous identity as an instrument of political negotiation within the broader transformations of agrarian governance (Hale, 2002; Niezen, 2003). In Chitral, therefore, indigeneity is not merely inherited; it is performed and produced through contestation with the Pakistani state, NGOs, and legal regimes, rendering it both a language of resistance and a means of incorporation into bureaucratic systems of recognition.

Unfortunately, the Pakistani government does not formally recognise Indigenous peoples, instead categorising them as ethnic or religious minorities, such as the Kalash community in Chitral (Cultural Survival, 2017). This lack of recognition has significant implications, extending beyond land rights to encompass political, cultural, and developmental opportunities at the national level. Reforms and land policies have frequently targeted diverse groups across regions, leading to uneven outcomes in resource access, citizenship, and representation. Interviews with local experts reveal that this marginalisation is particularly pronounced in Chitral, where community identity and land claims are closely intertwined with historical processes of exclusion and state categorisation (see also Khan, 2025b). Mamdani's (1996) notion of bifurcated citizenship illustrates how postcolonial states govern frontier populations through exceptional arrangements rather than standard juridical norms. Pakistan's designation of frontier groups as minorities, rather than Indigenous nations, maintains the fiction of homogeneous citizenship while denying territorial rights. Liberal recognition reinforces state sovereignty, as rights granted "from above" perpetuate dependency on marginalising structures (Coulthard, 2014). Moreover, the IWGIA Indigenous World 2023 publication does not reference the Indigenous communities of Pakistan, highlighting the lack of state

recognition for these communities, who must be acknowledged as Indigenous peoples (Mamo, 2023). In contrast, the "*boomki*" of Chitral, who identify as aboriginal inhabitants with no traceable history of migration and a profound cultural and spiritual connection to their ancestral lands, exemplifies the global definition of Indigenous peoples as recognised by international law. In 1996, the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations outlined Indigenous status as characterised by precedence in time concerning occupation, the voluntary maintenance of cultural distinctiveness, self-identification by Indigenous groups and recognition by other groups, and experiences of subjugation, exclusion, or discrimination (Colchester, 2003, 40). All these elements are represented in the identity of the "*boomki*" and their relationship with their land in Chitral. International legal frameworks, such as Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and Article 14 of the ILO Convention No. 169, obligate states to acknowledge and protect Indigenous peoples' rights to own, use, and control the lands they have traditionally occupied (Ulfstein, 2004). Furthermore, these frameworks require states to implement affirmative measures to safeguard such rights (Colchester, 2003). Although Pakistan has yet to ratify ILO Convention No. 169, there is optimism that it will do so in the future (Centre for Labour Research, 2025). This study echoes the Centre for Labour Research's study (2025) to advocate for the state's ratification of this convention, as it would serve the best interests of Pakistan's tribal and Indigenous populations. Therefore, the Chitrali "*boomki*" claims to communal land ownership are not only aligned with, but also directly supported by these international legal standards. This alignment underscores states' obligation to respect and protect Indigenous pastoralist communities' ancestral land rights, thereby reinforcing the argument that these communities should maintain sovereign ownership of their commons.

In the villages and valleys of Chitral, traditional systems of ownership and management of common lands show considerable diversity, influenced by factors such as proximity to pastures, clan affiliations, and the *gram* (communal group) system of ownership. In Torkhow, pastoralists stated that the two main pastures, Sha Junali in the Rech Valley and Shiaq Lasht in the Khot Valley, were accessible to all residents of these valleys. Historically, different clans maintained *shal* (animal shelters and summer residences for herders) in various sections of the pasture, yet large common pastures were used collectively (personal communication, 2022). When asked about clan-based access restrictions in Khot, a 50-year-old male pastoralist explained,

> Overall, every clan residing in Khot Valley had their *shal* in the high pastures. My clan had a separate *shal*, and similarly, all other clans had theirs as well. Even today, they exist, but the *Gujjur* (hired herder from Lower Chitral) has made it open for grazing livestock" (personal communication, 2022).

The existence of a separate *shal* for each clan helped local shepherds manage livestock at the end of each day, while the pastures remained a shared resource. However, this arrangement did not mean unrestricted access, as a pastoralist from the Rech Valley clarified, "people from other valleys can't just come in and use the resources of this land; this Shaa Junali (pasture) is available only for the people who live near the pasture in Rech Valley" (personal communication, 2022). Various control mechanisms are used to enforce traditional and Indigenous ownership rules and to regulate pasture use. Participants from Khot discussed the ritual of *sotkorik* (possibly meaning "feeding seven people"), which involved visits by local elders to the high pasture a few days after *ghari nisik* (the movement of livestock to the high pasture) to ensure that no livestock from outside the Khot Valley were present there. If livestock belonging to outsiders was found, fines in the form of food items were imposed, and community members ate a goat or sheep, a practice known as *ispru pai* (goat as a fine). Two elders from Khot recalled in a focus group,

> We traditionally anticipated the arrival of *ghari nisik* throughout the year. Subsequently, we would proceed to the *sotkorik.* By *sotkorik*, we refer to monitoring individuals who do not have a share of our communal lands but have livestock there; we would either collect monetary compensation from them or eat their goats or sheep, called *ispru pai*. Currently, these rituals are no longer practised, and individuals now entrust their animals to *gujjur* (personal communication, 2022).

Analysing the stories from these rituals and customary Indigenous rules reveals that they were vital in maintaining the sustainability of the commons, clearly marking boundaries between local users and outsiders, and fostering accountability and community organisation. As numerous pastoralist participants have articulated, these rituals and Indigenous customary laws are transforming primarily because of the evolving internal dynamics of pastoralism associated with the external client herder. Additionally, they are influenced by the external pressures of nationalisation, which effectively displace such local institutions from Indigenous pastoralist communities and promote the concept of neoliberal national priorities, climate change, and conservation laws and regulations (Khan, 2025).

Other forms of commons ownership, mostly observed in the Yarkhun Valley, are grounded in clan affiliation and gram (communal group) systems, with the latter trend and proximity-based ownership gaining significance recently. These management and ownership systems are typical in areas with more than one pasture and multiple clans residing in the villages, and these systems of ownership and use have also changed over time due to administrative and other developments in the region. The clan system (*qawmiat*) has historically played a major role in the traditional social structure of the Chitrali community, influencing aspects such as marriage, administrative roles, social status, and access to resources. Traditionally, the clan system was characterised by hierarchical discrimination, with higher clans regarded as *adamzad* (noblemen) and lower castes considered inferior (Marsden, 2011). Over time, this discriminatory viewpoint has

evolved, with newer generations distancing themselves from such social stigmas, although remnants of the older social structure persist to some extent. Similarly, the ownership of communal resources has changed in response to these social shifts. For example, village 1 in Yarkhun comprises several clans, and the various common pastures in the mountains and riverbeds are allocated to each clan or group of clans according to traditional customary ownership. Currently, the abc Gole (high pasture) is owned by the X clan, while the def Gole and ghe Gole are owned and managed by the Y and Z clans, respectively[7]. Many members of the X clan told me that they previously owned the commons in other villages, such as villages 2 and 3, but this has changed over time, and ownership is now limited to the abc pasture, which also hosts the most significant number of clan households. A 70-year-old hunter and pastoralist explained these changes as follows:

> ijk pasture was owned by the Z clan and the X clan owned the rest of the land. When Bhutto (then prime minister of Pakistan) came to power, he enquired about the land and decided that the natives who lived near it should own it. After this, those lands were seized, and the pasture of village 2 was grabbed, and we (X) were not allowed to go there. The Y clan took the Lmn pasture, def was grabbed by the people of that village, and the ijk pasture, which also consisted of our farmland, was taken by other people. Now everything is based on that law (Personal Communication, 2022).

Many people have traced some of these changes to the time when Chitral was a princely state, when each king would grant the pastures to the clan he liked best. There are no clear reasons why and how certain clans came to own the pastures, but many people attributed it to having served the kings, having received them as a sign of bravery in local wars, or even having bought them from the king. Many stories that people tell attribute ownership of the commons to their great-grandparents. For instance, the story about X's great-grandfather killing a monster in the high pastures is known to every single person in the village, and

[7] To prevent potential disputes over local ownership that may arise from this study, the names of clans and villages have been anonymised. This precaution is taken due to concerns that the research might be interpreted as evidence of ownership, while acknowledging that the commons are continually evolving.

everyone has narrated it at some point. One of the pastoralist leaders of Clan X presented the story as follows:

> In the high pasture of abc pasture, there was a nahang (a monster resembling a dinosaur) that would emerge at a particular time to devour animals and humans in its path. One of our great-grandfathers warned that if we did not stop it, it would bring an end to civilisation. Determined to eliminate this threat, they devised a plan. One of our grandfathers (bup), known as Babur, took it upon himself to kill the monster. He began ploughing a field with bullocks, wrapping the bullocks and himself in sharp woody shrubs like sholl (a pointy shrub). Babur, our bup, had a close friend from the Y clan, who said to him, "I will be swallowed by the monster, but you must retrieve me before it digests me." As anticipated, the monster descends and swallows Babur whole. Armed with a large knife, Mehmoudi Kutaer, Babur, began attacking the monster from within, causing it to bleed as it reached Kochan Nas, a place in the pasture. The bup of the Y clan, along with others, followed the monster. Upon reaching Kochan Nas, they saw blood and reassured themselves that Babur was still alive and fighting the monster from inside. The monster eventually died near what is now known as Babur Marini (the place where Babur killed it). At that time, it was a vast cave that was later destroyed by flood. When they confirmed the monster's death, the people used axes and knives to cut open our *bup*. Although he was digested and burned, he still had some life left when they extracted him. His brother, Kaar Pishar, then told the Y clan bup that since he had fought for his brother and rescued him from the monster's belly, he granted them the area of mno pastures in return for their gratitude. This marked the moment the land was given to clan Y. With the nahang gone, the abc gole (pasture) was free, allowing people to roam the area without fear. Babur's brothers began visiting the high pastures with their livestock, where they could also hunt (Oral History, Personal Communication 2022).

This story is well-known among both the young and elderly inhabitants of the village, and it is through such tales of sacrifice that they assert their claim to the pastures. Although the legitimacy of these stories cannot be substantiated, numerous individuals have reported that they or their parents witnessed the skeleton of the monster. A local hunter remarked, "Yes, I have seen the bones of the monster. Our elders used to say that once a goat had given birth to its baby between the hip bones (*mujusti*) of the *nahang's* skeleton. The skeleton was that massive. Ansar, Aslam's father, also used to tell us this story" (Personal Communication, 2022). Similarly, individuals recounted stories of their kin defending the pastures from outsiders using local warfare techniques in the past, while others spoke of their great-grandfather assisting a king of Chitral in hunting a white deer, for which he was awarded a specific pasture in the Yarkhun Valley. As Iseke (2013) points out, Indigenous

stories function as oral history, identity, and legitimacy. The Chitrali community employs narratives such as Babur's to explicate land ownership and assert ancestral legitimacy. Both serve as potent forms of social authority that transmit cultural knowledge. It is also important to note that the names of the different places in the common pastures are associated with these hundred-year-old stories, such as *Babur marini*, which shape the worldview and identity of the people and the commons.

Some aspects of these local discourses on ownership were also addressed by the local historians I interviewed and are mentioned in several available texts on Chitral, including the IUCN's publication (2004), which states that the land in Chitral was given in return for the services people offered to the emperor. A prevalent narrative concerning clan ownership suggests that certain clans were historically considered the village's *boomki* and possessed more common land. However, pasture utilisation has varied throughout history. For example, members of clans Y and Z reported that there was a time when they would utilise the pastures of clan X and vice versa. This practice changed as pressure on the pastures increased, leading to the division of the pastures into clans. A 90-year-old pastoralist woman from the Y clan, which no longer uses the abc pasture, recounted, "When the population grew, they (X) did not allow us to visit the abc gole. The father of my kids brought wood from abc pasture to construct our house before that" (Personal Communication, 2022). Over time, with shifts in population, governance, and local dynamics, the use and ownership of common lands have evolved. The process of these changes is complex, making it challenging to categorise and encapsulate current ownership structures. Nonetheless, the villagers were familiar with the system, and these issues were resolved locally. A significant finding of this study was that, although systems of exclusive clan-based ownership of high pasture commons existed, they were primarily limited to hunting. Livestock grazing was generally open to all until the late 1980s, when a clear

demarcation of use and ownership was established to distribute resource pressure and grazing areas among the clans and villages. Several individuals reported that heavy fines were imposed on outsiders who hunted in other clans' high pastures. Permission from the head of a clan (*aan waal*) was required before hunting in their pastures; otherwise, a bullock was confiscated as a fine, along with the hunted ibex, if an outsider was found hunting in their high pastures. An elderly pastoralist from village 01 expressed the following observations:

> The pastures in abc, ghi, and similar areas were traditionally owned by the X clan. When individuals from other communities attempted to hunt there, members of the X clan would confiscate their weapons or the hunted animal as a penalty, as access was restricted to those outside the clan (Hunting Law). In contemporary times, the advent of nationalisation has diminished ownership rights over *muzahyo* (shared land) (Personal communication, 2022).

These local systems of checks and balances were effective until the government began employing guards (locally called "watchers") in the villages post-1980s, who were remunerated by the state to prevent hunting in villages. However, it is commonly asserted that this new system is less effective than its predecessor because individuals can easily bribe the guards with meat or money. The state system has not only undermined the traditional stewardship of communal resources but has also exacerbated corruption issues in the region.

The internal dynamics of common ownership and management have evolved, resulting in a hybrid system that combines traditional ownership structures with changing dynamics, wherein multiple clans coexist within each village and share access to communal resources. For instance, in the Yarkhun Valley, more than four clans utilise the abc pasture, which was historically owned by Clan X. This arrangement is facilitated by the local communal system known as *the gram*. A *gram* is a collective of households comprising either the same or different clans residing in close proximity within a village.

Within the gram, individuals participate in communal activities, such as assisting with food and other necessities at events like funerals or weddings and collectively engaging in *sotisiri* (rotational grazing of livestock). The other three clans, typically in the minority, have migrated from different areas in Chitral and settled on private land owned by Clan X, either through purchase, service exchange, familial connections, or inclusion in the gram system because of the proximity of their residences. An elder pastoralist from Clan X commented on the inclusion of other clans in this system:

> Clans X and Y allowed Clan C to settle on their land, integrating them into the 'gram,' as there were no Clan C members in the village before. Clan D received some land as '*khesmatana*,' meaning that it was given in exchange for their services. I recall that Jon used to irrigate the land, shear sheep, and provide other services for our house. Our grandmother was from Clan C, and a woman from our family married into that clan, receiving a large area of land from her father, thus becoming part of our family. Anyone who joins the *gram* can access the common pastures of the village. Ansar, originally from the Torkhow Valley, resides on Ghulam's land and regularly uses the high pastures for cattle and firewood. If someone purchases land from Clan X, they can also utilise their pastures and commons (Personal Communication, 2022).

There is no written code of conduct or laws for the Indigenous utilisation and ownership of the commons in Chitral, but the local pastoralist system has the potential to adapt to changing circumstances. Some locals and government officials advocate the nationalisation of Chitral, citing the exclusionary ownership practices of a particular clan as a reason. However, these case studies demonstrate that the management of commons is neither static nor a simplistic exclusionary system based solely on clan affiliation. Instead, local systems have evolved to incorporate additional clans that have settled in the area, transitioning towards a gram- or proximity-based model of ownership and utility. There are clan and class issues within the *boomki* organisation of commons, and this stratification shows that Indigenous commons claims are sites of accumulation and intra-community power (see also Khan 2025b). As Li (2014) demonstrates, commodification often occurs within Indigenous movements, creating capitalist relations on Indigenous frontiers. These

practices show how commoning politics coexist with private property and class formation, revealing the *boomki* struggle as both a defence of livelihoods and a negotiation over commons control. Although conflicts have arisen within the community at various times and locations, local institutions have generally been effective in resolving these problems. It is important to note that the system is not always ideal for all the parties involved. Power dynamics persist across different clans, and these common management systems may have helped maintain the status quo and reinforce local clan structures. For example, disputes over the Sha Junali commons in the Rech Valley of Torkhow were litigated in Pakistan's High Court and Supreme Court for over two decades, beginning in the 1980s and concluding in the 2000s. These conflicts have emerged from the region's evolving governance system. Some decisions have been praised by the local community for granting public access to common land. In contrast, others view them as steps towards nationalisation that could enable government exploitation of mineral resources without benefiting the local populace. Despite the exclusivity and inherent challenges of the traditional system, mechanisms for inclusion exist, making the Indigenous system a resilient institution. In Chitral, perceptions of clan systems have undergone a significant transformation. The societal prestige traditionally associated with certain clans is now being questioned by younger generations, who advocate for a more equitable social structure. Historically, when Chitral functioned as a princely state, the clan system was a source of considerable discrimination. However, the current situation has markedly evolved, driven by the Indigenous community's internal efforts to eliminate practices and beliefs that negatively affect society. Similarly, the management of commons based on the clan system is changing as individuals increasingly distance themselves from the power dynamics inherent in traditional structures. Hence, if allowed to develop and formalise in response to contemporary demands and challenges, these local ownership and management

systems could offer more effective place-based solutions that are attentive to their shortcomings. However, government-led nationalisation efforts risk undermining local knowledge and systems, potentially leading to a comprehensive state appropriation of the pastoralist community's resources in Chitral.

Nationalisation Claims and Manifestations in the Commons by the Pakistani State

The management of resources by the Pakistani state, particularly regarding commons, is consistent with efforts to validate and perpetuate state control over resources and populations (Peluso, 1995). The state's principal claims over the commons are rooted in the nationalisation notification enacted in 1975 at both the provincial and national levels in Pakistan (Khan, 2025b). This notification presents significant issues, as it fails to adhere to the principles of 'Free, Prior and Informed Consent', as outlined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the International Labour Organisation Convention 169 (Hanna & Vanclay, 2013). Consequently, it has further apoliticised the Chitrali Indigenous pastoralist community (see also Khan, 2025a). Utilising this claim as the foundational basis for nationalisation, the Pakistani state employs conservation and climate initiatives as a rationalisation for "protecting" the land from degradation and climate change, while simultaneously dispossessing local communities in Chitral (Khan, 2025). The government employs official mapping through the *patwar* system (the government mapping department) and through established government institutions, such as the police department and judiciary, to determine land ownership and implement the nationalisation of the commons (Scott, 1998). Additionally, the state propagates the narrative that the clan-based system was inequitable and that nationalisation would foster opportunities for equality, as articulated by one of the local officials:

> Some argue that certain clans that were not part of the privileged class and were fewer in number or weaker lacked influence. They claimed that the major tribes or

> ruling families seized most of the land, leaving the rest of the people without land. Based on this assertion, the government issued a notification declaring that the land should become "sarkari" (nationalised), meaning no one should own it (*na hetante bar na hetane*). This was the prevailing thought process. Even today, those who support the idea of the land being Sarkari think along these lines (personal communication, 2022)

As previously discussed, these dialogues are indeed present within the community; however, change is also observed to originate internally, with young people challenging discriminatory aspects of traditional worldviews. Nonetheless, as indicated in the preceding passage, the assertion that only the high clans possess and utilise the pastures and other commons is not entirely accurate, given that the management systems are complicated and subject to continuous evolution. More significantly, the question of whether the state can establish a more equitable system of commons governance to supplant the problematic clan-based system in some areas of Chitral warrants consideration. When asked about clan-based conflicts, one of the lawyers fighting the Chitral vs. state case on the commons said,

> We are not concerned about it now. It is between the state and the people. If the state is not present, it will be between individuals or groups to show their claims. This is not specific to the Chitral region. Such internal tribal land-ownership issues are also found in other parts of Pakistan. They come to the court of law or other legal ways to decide (Personal Communication, 2022).

Many residents perceive nationalisation as a more detrimental control mechanism that would exclude the entire community and seize resources. A contemporary local poet has addressed this issue through poetic contributions.

> We'll lose our land to the envy that keeps us apart,
>
> No laal or yuft (name of clans) will remain; we will be homeless at heart.
>
> For a hunting pond of the *shahzada* (prince), some would lose all of Chitral,
>
> When time awakens us, regret will cover all.
>
> No land will be left for building, nor stone for our need,
>
> We will buy rocks from the mountain above, paying a heavy fee indeed.

(Danish, 2024).

Similar to the poet's expression of sentiment, numerous research participants articulated concerns that the purported "openness and equality" promoted by the state may ultimately result in the dispossession of local inhabitants from their land. This fear underscores the potential for internal inclusion through Indigenous dialogue and conflict resolution systems. While some locals I interviewed supported the nationalisation of land, a discernible pattern emerged among them, many of whom had either held government positions or served in the military. These individuals appear to have been persuaded that the government is the ultimate solution to all the challenges. Ali (2019, 9) observes similar trends in the neighbouring Gilgit districts, stating,

> My key argument is that the employment of Gilgit-Baltistani men in the military creates loyal subjects who have come to revere the military and the military-state, hence producing the conditions of possibility for continued military authoritarianism in the region.

This observation is mirrored in Chitral, where state authority over resources is similarly evident in the eyes of people who are or have been part of the state's mechanism. The current transition from traditionally owned and managed commons to state-owned and managed commons in Chitral is characterised by arguments supporting both systems. However, most pastoralists I interviewed expressed a preference for maintaining their traditional use of and ownership of the commons. As articulated by a pastoralist in the Khot Valley when queried about opening the commons to all as Sarkari (state-owned), "I disagree because if the land becomes open to all, people will use it excessively and be destroyed" (personal communication, 2022). Numerous similar responses highlighted the environmental costs of opening the commons by designating them as *sarkari*, thereby effectively erasing community ownership. Furthermore, the government's system is perceived as inadequate for effectively managing resources throughout Chitral. The current

distributed Indigenous ownership and management of the commons already protects the pastures, a fact overlooked by the Pakistani state, which is advancing an agenda for further protected areas.

During my fieldwork in Pakistan, I visited various government offices to engage with officials regarding their interpretation of the 1975 notification and its potential impact on Chitral. I had a particularly insightful discussion with an official in one of the larger cities after considerable effort was directed from one office to another to find someone willing to speak with me. The official's primary justification for the nationalisation of the commons in Chitral was the government's intention to safeguard natural resources. He stated,

> See, Protected is a word that was introduced later. These people say that the land belongs to their forefathers, and you would not even find a tree there (due to government mismanagement). I will briefly explain this to you. This is my head. It is mine. I do not have enough hair in it now, but I used to have hair in it before. Nevertheless, it is still mine. So, these people say that since there are no trees now, it is not protected or owned by the government, but it is. We will manage it, and it is the state's land. You cannot say this head is not mine if I do not have hair on it, right? (Personal communication, 2023)

While his explanation of the situation was delivered humorously, it underscores that the state's primary concern is ownership of the pastures rather than management of the commons or maintenance of a healthy environment. The officer is saying that whether there are trees or the pastures are sustainably preserved, there should be no questions about the state's ownership of the commons. This new system of national intervention in the traditional management of commons is implemented by appointing forest guards or watchers, who are selected from within the community. One young pastoralist recounted that when he opposed these nationalisation measures, government officials offered him monetary compensation and a position as a watcher, which he declined, stating the following:

> For me, I could not get this job at 15000 Pakistani rupees (around $50 per month); I wanted the whole village to benefit from the commons. If they are talking about conservation in this region, it must benefit the community as a whole. There are no roads or proper systems in place. If you do not have an appropriate system and if you cannot benefit the community, I would not get such employment" (personal communication, 2022).

Notably, the government engaged young leaders in these roles, compensating them minimally to ensure their silence on these issues. The local populace expressed dissatisfaction with this mechanism because it did not significantly benefit the community or the general public. During my interactions, I encountered several individuals serving as watchers in the government's wildlife department who had not received payments for years. They lacked adequate training for their responsibilities, leading to widespread confusion regarding the practicality of such positions in the villages. Notably, these watchers belonged to the clan with traditional ownership of the pastures, further complicating the argument that nationalisation constitutes a just, anti-clan-based system of ownership management. The implementation of the watcher system was poorly planned, and the watchers did not receive compensation for over 30 months, after which their employment was terminated. This decision was met with considerable frustration, as they perceived it as a fraudulent act by the government. One individual elaborated on this issue,

> The Wildlife and Forest Department has provided us with walnuts and other seeds to prevent floods and save our village, as those trees will help stop soil erosion. They instructed us to graze the animals on one side of the pasture for three years and save the other side for future use. Protection of wildlife, including snow leopards, ibex, rabbits, wolves, and foxes, was also included there. After three years, they terminated our positions. In lower Chitral, they are still working, but a government official, XYZ, betrayed us. He demanded fodder for his horse and other items from the watchers here. When they refused, he told the department to end the tenure of the current watchers because they were of no use after three years of service. He claimed that the government had nothing to lose in this area. They also collected registration fees from us until 2023, and we lost that money as well. This man ended by saying that there was no benefit in keeping them. We are still waiting for someone to go to (Personal Communication, 2022).

The evidence indicates that the government's initiatives have been unsuccessful, not only because of inappropriate conservation policies but also because of ineffective

implementation strategies and financial constraints. The recruitment and subsequent termination of local employees without a structured system further eroded the trust that the local population might have had in the state. Additionally, even the appointed watchers are now protesting the government regarding remuneration issues. The entire process of introducing these measures appears to be a performance act of control. Numerous individuals have reported that government *patwar* officials visited their villages, demarcating pastures by applying lime water in various locations to assert state ownership without any logical measurement, and that they seldom returned to these sites to follow up on these activities. When enquiring about the government's influence, a pastoralist in the Yarkhun Valley explained the following:

> During Imran Khan's tenure as the Prime Minister of Pakistan, watchers were assigned to our high pastures to demarcate the boundaries using lime. However, when their salaries were halted, they abandoned their tasks. Their objective was to prevent us from keeping livestock to mitigate flooding. We confronted them about their activities in the pastures, specifically regarding lime demarcation. Eventually, their salaries were discontinued. They wanted us to inform them about the ibex, promising to arrange for a hunter and, in return, receive money. This arrangement was supposed to benefit both the valley and the country, but none of it ever materialised (Personal Communication, 2022).

These incomplete conservation initiatives by the state have disrupted the ongoing livelihoods of Indigenous pastoralists and precipitated internal conflicts in Chitral (Khan, 2025). Khan and Haque (2021) illustrate similar adverse outcomes of state-controlled resources in North Pakistan, where state control has resulted in occupation by non-locals, illegal timber harvesting, and environmental degradation. Conflicts have emerged between communities and governments over resource-use rights in pastures. In Chitral, many riverbeds, traditionally utilised for pastoralism, were converted into the government's Ten Billion Tree Tsunami projects (Nazir et al., 2019); however, with the change in government, these projects were abandoned. A village in Yarkhun faces a comparable situation, where intra-clan conflict has arisen over the management of common resources

following the government's withdrawal. A local leader articulated the complexity of this situation as follows:

> After 3.5 years, the project's stakeholders gathered at my house once again. It was the 15th of August, and the officials had informed us that they would hand over the riverbed to us by the end of the month. They would withdraw their guard, and it would become our responsibility to care for the plants. If we fail to maintain the land, the government may take action against us. Later, we convened at the Jamatkhana, a place of worship, where I addressed the elders and asked everyone to share their opinions, which I would then analyse. I proposed two options: First, the guard who had been watering the plants was paid 5000 in the final stages, and anyone willing to water the plants for that amount would be hired, with payment being a collective effort. Alternatively, we can take turns watering the plants regularly. Unfortunately, both options were rejected, and I was unable to persuade them (personal communication, 2022).

The issue remains unresolved, as I have attended several meetings in the village, where there is a growing inclination towards privatising the riverbed, thereby further diminishing the village's commons. The introduction of trees in the pasture has disrupted traditional grazing patterns, as this land was historically used for winter grazing. However, the community is reluctant to maintain trees that do not directly contribute to their livelihood. Numerous meetings have been convened to address these issues; however, they have only exacerbated conflicts, as the community has not reached a consensus on how to allocate the land, which is no longer a common grazing area and requires maintenance. In contrast, pastoralist commons management has historically incorporated the Indigenous conservation institution known as *saq*. This practice, similar to rotational grazing, is rarely observed in Chitral today, despite its widespread use as a conservation strategy in the region in the past. Historically, the *Asaqal* or *saqdar* (pasture leader) was responsible for determining when specific sections of the pasture were available for grazing and gathering firewood. "Overall, the senior citizens of the area gathered together to decide by consultation with the public of the area. The final decision will be of the public, and all the *saqdars* will act as representatives" (Personal Communication, 2022). During my

fieldwork, I engaged with individuals who had served as *saqdar* in the Khot Valley, and they conveyed that this system was effective and commanded respect within the community. However, it is now diminishing due to state-led conservation measures overshadowing these Indigenous institutions, coupled with rapid internal changes (Khan, 2025). The state's claims to the commons are predicated on the official narratives of the 1975 notification, which purportedly aimed to establish a superior management system and conservation measures. However, as demonstrated, these claims lack substantial grounding in reality. The Indigenous pastoralist communities of Chitral should possess the primary right to own and utilise their local resources, including the commons. Persistent state interference, without the thorough implementation of projects, has disrupted pastoralist livelihoods and instilled fear among the local population regarding the future of their commons. There is concern that similar unsuccessful state projects may extend to mining and other detrimental activities, potentially displacing pastoralists from their livelihoods and pastures and threatening their survival.

Discussion: Fears and Demands of the Indigenous Chitrali Pastoralists

> Our identity is deeply rooted in the pastures, and we would have lost it if the government had taken control of it. For example, there is a staff (*wethuk*) belonging to our grandfather in the mountain pastures. I am uncertain; the government might remove and discard it. There could be valuable minerals, and if the government takes over, would they offer them to me? The government claims that it belongs to the "sarkar" (state), but I am the one who has benefited from these places. Our great-grandfathers made sacrifices for this, and no one else has done so yet. There used to be a *nahang* in our high pasture that our great-grandfather had killed. This is part of my identity and a testament to the sacrifices our grandfather made for us, our region, and our village. That spot in *Baburmarani* holds great significance for me, especially for future generations. Our history and identity are embedded in these *muzhayo* (commons) (Personal Communication, 2022).

Commons represent more than a mere resource for the Indigenous communities in Chitral; they embody a historical and cultural identity that these communities fear losing to the

government's appropriation of their land, as a young pastoralist expressed above. Community members frequently recounted narratives of their visits to the pastures, emphasising a connection they wish to preserve not only for themselves but also for future generations (See also Khan, 2025a). Furthermore, the already diminishing pastoralist livelihoods face significant threats amid the nationalisation of pastoralist commons in Chitral. During a focus group discussion in the Khot Valley, several elderly individuals gathered in a village shop to discuss the topic. When I inquired about their sentiments regarding the ongoing and potentially accelerating nationalisation, they expressed their concerns, stating,

> It would be challenging if the government were to take over the common land. We would not be able to use meadows for wood collection or animal grazing. We also transport stones and sand from common land for construction, and we will not be able to do that either. It would disrupt our entire life because we rely heavily on the commons for our livestock's survival (personal communication, 2022).

The predominant concern among pastoralist communities in Chitral is the potential loss of their traditional livelihoods, often accompanied by a sense of helplessness among them. Many community members find it inconceivable that the state might impose restrictions on the use of common land for pastoral purposes. As one individual from Meragram expressed, "It cannot happen. First, the government will have to vacate the entire area to take over the pastures. For example, I live in Meragram. If I don’t go to Urkhanan Gole pasture, where will I go?" (Personal communication, 2022). This sentiment underscores a legitimate demand and highlights broader concerns regarding the displacement of Indigenous communities from their land for conservation purposes. As Forest et al. (2025, 1) rightly note about a similar situation involving the Ogiek community, "Removing an Ogiek from the Forest is like removing a fish from water." When I enquired with a state official in the cities about the Chitrali community’s concerns and their desire for unconditional land ownership for pastoralism, the response was,

> No, grazing is not possible in these state-owned protected areas. The law does not permit this. Here, we observe natural regeneration as seeds are spread by the wind. This is very noble and helps to plant many trees. If you allow nomads (*khanabadosh*) or pastoralists (*charwahon*) there, then everything is damaged" (personal communication 2023).

This response reflects a clear state bias and misrepresents pastoralist livelihoods, despite numerous studies demonstrating that grazing and pastoralist use of pastures can benefit rangelands (Briske et al., 2024; Elias and Tischew, 2016)**.** The pastoralists' fears and feelings of loss are justified, yet they may not fully comprehend the extent to which nationalisation could alter their livelihoods in the coming years. Some pastoralists articulated straightforward demands based on their livelihood needs and the state's responsibilities. A 70-year-old pastoralist articulated an apparent demand, stating,

> If they (the state) want to own the land, the government should take responsibility for our livestock. The relationship between the government and citizens is similar to that between the sun and the moon. If they go against each other, no one gets a benefit (Personal Communication, 2022).

These are sincere demands from local pastoralists; however, the state's response, as indicated by interviews and general policies, has been discouraging to date. The state is obligated to protect its citizens and their right to exist, which is precisely what the Indigenous pastoralist communities of Chitral expect and demand from the Pakistani state. The local population is concerned, and many are prepared to address this issue through a civil society pastoralist initiative advocating for the right to land and commons for Chitrali pastoralists.

> We all, Chitralis, should work on this as a united group. If the 1975 notification is fully implemented, managing the area would be extremely difficult. Therefore, all Chitralis, including civil society members, politicians, and religious figures, should sit together, think about it seriously, and make a plan for this issue. This agenda is more important than anything else, including roads and electricity. Many areas became government property under the aforementioned notification, as with the Kalash community. The head of the land settlement, Sheikh Rashid, took the Urdu book History of Chitral by Ghulam Murtaza (1962) as a basic source. This book is written in Urdu and is highly controversial, as one date contradicts another. It is

> neither a research work nor an academic book, and the court has ruled against it. We need to address this issue. The District Commissioner (from outside Chitral) recently stated that the 1975 notification is proper, although he is neither a lawyer nor a politician. He made this statement unnecessarily (Personal Communication, 2023).

One of the local historians expressed significant concerns about the historical context and current implications of this notification, advocating collective resistance to prevent the state's appropriation of community land and to restrict the local government's authority over the management of the commons in Chitral. In my interviews and discussions, I observed an interesting trend: Chitrali government officials, lawyers, and other officers who are part of the state apparatus but comprehend the implications of the nationalisation process exhibit sympathy towards the cause of Indigenous ownership of the commons. One officer from Chitral remarked,

> The implementation has been particularly poor in Chitral. It has designated all barren land, small hilly areas (thing), unirrigated land (*prash*), etc., as state property, despite the notification specifying only mountains as state property. There are hills, and if the notification does not include the term 'hill,' then the hills should not be considered government property. This type of land should not be *sarkari* (government-owned). While there may be justification for mountains, there is no justification for other land types not included in the notification. The locals argue that each village possesses small hilly areas (*thing*) and unirrigated land (*prash*), and if these are made *sarkari*, what will become of the people?" (Personal Communication, 2023).

Some officers have also exploited these deficiencies in the state mechanism to assist local Indigenous people in obtaining ownership of the commons. Recently, Larsen et al. (2025) conducted research across four continents to examine the role of bureaucratic agencies in the interaction between the state and Indigenous communities. The study reveals that while government bodies generally uphold a colonial agenda, some officials within these organisations can promote decolonising or supportive measures. They introduced the concept of institutional braiding to explain the agency exercised by state officials working alongside Indigenous representatives as they navigate overlapping normative frameworks

(Larsen et al., 2025, 10). Similar patterns were discussed by locals and officials from Chitral. However, it is not always the case that the officers serving in Chitral are native to the region, as the historian has noted above. The influence and potential agency of local Chitrali government officials, legal practitioners, military personnel, and judges, who occupy positions of authority, warrant further scholarly investigation. These individuals may play a significant role in exploiting weaknesses within the state system to codify the common rights and needs of Indigenous pastoralists in the region.

There are precedents of community organisations and unions that have successfully defended the rights of the populace. Notably, the *Muttahida Qaumi Committee* in the Rech Valley has been instrumental in addressing ongoing disputes over the commons in Rech and other areas. I engaged with a leader of this civil society organisation to enquire about the feasibility of initiating a similar effort at the Chitral level and whether their organisation would consider joining such a pastoralist union. He responded:

> Yes, we will definitely support this cause. When everyone unites for the benefit of the entire area, it improves the lives of all, and we are always ready to lend our support. For instance, our organisation was involved in resolving disputes concerning the Shiaq Lasht commons in Rech. It is indeed a civil society initiative, and the clan system plays no role in it. It was established to improve the entire region. In this valley, there are different unions for each clan, but ours is not limited to a single clan; it is for the whole of the Rech community (personal communication, 2022).

The formation of such an Indigenous pastoralist coalition represents a significant step forward, offering the government an opportunity to collaborate with civil society initiatives. Such collaboration could facilitate the community's inclusion in decision-making processes and help develop solutions that preserve the ancestral and Indigenous communal lands of the local population within the modern nation-state system. Recent global examples of such ownership systems include the establishment of the first inclusive rights-based framework for land governance by the 2025 Land-Use Planning Law of the

Democratic Republic of the Congo (Rights and Resources Initiative, 2025). This legislation formally recognises the customary land rights of Indigenous Peoples and local communities, ensuring their right to free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) for land-related projects. Consequently, affected communities are empowered to accept or reject development, resource extraction, and land allocation in their territories. Within a nation-state system, this serves as a robust example of how national legislation can operationalise community land rights and participatory governance. Locals who are prepared to engage in this form of resistance have a limited window of opportunity, given the prevailing confusion and uncertainty surrounding the 1975 notification before its full implementation in Chitral. This situation also presents a valuable opportunity to reassess the limitations of traditional ownership and management systems, particularly those based on clan structures, and to create space for more inclusive, community-led Indigenous approaches to the management and ownership of the commons in the Chitral region.

Conclusion

This study critically examines the contested ownership and management of commons in Chitral, Pakistan, focusing on the intersecting claims of Indigenous pastoralist communities (*boomki*) and the Pakistani state. The findings indicate that, although the state claims legal ownership through the 1975 Notification, recently reactivated via conservation and climate initiatives, it neglects the enduring Indigenous systems of communal land use and stewardship that have governed the pastures, riverbeds, and forests for centuries. These local tenure systems, organised through clan affiliations and geographic proximity, have historically sustained employment, governance, and ecological balance. The Indigenous term "*boomki* encapsulates a holistic and relational understanding

of land that the nation-state's top-down, technocratic policies fail to acknowledge or respect.

Furthermore, the government's implementation of forest watchers and protected area regimes has proven ineffective and exacerbated existing issues. The watchers, often local young leaders, were inadequately compensated, poorly trained, and unsupported, leading to community distrust and disengagement. Such programs have disrupted traditional management without providing viable alternatives, thereby diminishing conservation efforts and increasing community dissatisfaction. These findings align with broader critiques of state conservation initiatives that overlook Indigenous knowledge and rights, thereby endangering the ecological and social systems they aim to protect.

This study underscores the necessity of Pakistan's legal framework recognising the Chitrali community's Indigenous communal land rights to safeguard the livelihoods, cultural identity, and sustainable resource management of pastoralists. The Chitrali *boomki* do not aim to dismantle or secede from the Pakistani state; instead, they seek acknowledgement of their Indigenous rights within it. Their objective is to inhabit the state as legitimate custodians of their ancestral commons, rather than as mere subjects of conservation policies. Communities do not demand the nullification of state sovereignty but its reorientation towards the protection of local tenure systems. This would enable *boomki* to exercise stewardship, governance, and sustainable land use in accordance with their customary norms (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Coulthard, 2014). To promote co-management and legal pluralism, enabling Indigenous communities to spearhead conservation efforts, future policies must transcend barriers of nationalisation and exclusion. Further empirical and participatory research is required to deepen our understanding of local practices and aid in the development of adaptive governance models that integrate traditional norms with contemporary conservation science.

In short, the case of Chitral exemplifies the global challenge of reconciling national sovereignty with Indigenous land tenure and ecological stewardship systems. Genuine environmental stewardship necessitates recognising Indigenous ownership and knowledge, rather than imposing rigid state-centred claims. Supporting Indigenous stewardship on a global scale not only contributes to the preservation of environmental health but also promotes social equity and cultural preservation for pastoralist communities navigating the complexities of contemporary nation-states.

Conclusion

Revisiting the Research Aims and Arguments

This DPhil project explores the ontologies, politics, and meanings of *muzhayo* (commons) in Chitral, Pakistan, employing a comprehensive decolonial ethnographic approach and relational perspective. This thesis enhances scholarly debates in the fields of commons studies, political ecology, more-than-human geography, and Indigenous geography. This research critically examines the worldviews and daily experiences of Chitrali pastoralist communities in northern Pakistan, engaging with existing theories of commons governance and resource management. It contributes to the broader critical discourse on commoning, including recent scholarship on co-becoming, decommonisation, and the limitations of commoning theory in Global South contexts (García-López et al., 2021; Agrawal et al., 2023; Partelow & Manlosa, 2023), which aims to critique and expand mainstream theories of commons. This is one of the few empirical studies on the commons in Chitral, Pakistan, conducted over the past four years (2021-2025). The research involved 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork in the Yarkhun and Torkhow valleys, complemented by poetic methodologies and extensive interviews throughout Pakistan. The findings suggest that pastoralist identities, livelihoods, and cosmologies are deeply interconnected with the commons. The core argument, developed throughout the introduction, analytical articles, and methodologies, is that the *muzhayo* in Chitral transcends being merely a resource for management and exploitation, as portrayed by government policies and dominant theories such as the Tragedy of the Commons (Hardin, 1968). Instead, the commons are regarded as blessings by the Chitrali community (see article 02), embodying a relational, context-specific ontological understanding rooted in Indigenous collective governance, material livelihoods, spiritual relationships, and more-

than-human kinship. This framework creates locally meaningful worlds and worldviews of the commons characterised by belonging, interaction, and existence, contributing to the broader scholarship on commoning and mobile pastoralism. The research meets its scholarly aim by offering alternatives to the dominant Western discourse on the commons, thereby expanding the scope of investigation, theorisation, and representation from the Majority World.

The main contribution of this DPhil thesis is to decolonise commons scholarship by redefining *muzhayo* in Chitral through its political apoliticisation, exploring the complex Indigenous ontology of the Chitrali culturalscape, advocating for an Indigenous understanding of more-than-human rights (focusing specifically on fairies), and supporting Chitrali ancestral *boomki* (aboriginal) ownership in opposition to the nationalist threat posed by the 1975 notification from the Pakistani state. The thesis addresses three fundamental structural deficiencies in the decolonisation of pastoralist research: the geography of knowledge production, which predominantly generates theory in the Global North for application in the Global South; the marginalisation of pastoral ontologies and cosmologies, which are often relegated to mere cultural background rather than recognised as epistemological substance; and the significant lack of research conducted by insider-researchers from the pastoralist communities themselves (Radcliffe, 2017; Smith, 1999; Scoones, 2023). This thesis directly engages with all three issues. This concluding chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the research, synthesising the key findings from the four analytical articles into a cohesive discussion. It presents the theoretical and methodological contributions, discusses the study's limitations, and highlights important implications for future research and policy related to commons, pastoralist land rights, environmental justice, and fair rural futures in mountainous regions.

Synthesis of Key Arguments Across Analytical Articles

This DPhil research project examines the following key question: How do Indigenous pastoralist communities in Chitral, Pakistan, conceptualise, manage, and resist threats of nationalisation to their *muzhayo* (commons), with particular implications for local livelihoods, cultural identity (culturalscape), and more-than-human relationships?

This central question was explored through four interconnected subsidiary questions, each of which led to an analytical article. The analysis was guided by the political ecology of rural areas and Indigenous more-than-human theoretical frameworks. These frameworks were not always explicitly applied in some articles and were complemented by other subsidiary theories, such as critical agrarian theory, feminist political ecology, and Indigenous geographies, depending on the requirements of the targeted journals or suggestions made during peer review. Instead of summarising each article, I discuss the broader, overlapping, and significant arguments presented across these four articles in response to my main research question.

Commons as the Ontological Nexus: Presenting *Muzhayo* Beyond Resource

At its core, this research shows that the Chitrali pastoralist commons, locally called *muzhayo*, cannot be understood solely through the narrow economic or utilitarian lens often seen in Pakistani environmental governance policies and commons theory. Indigenous *boomki* (Aboriginal) pastoralists view m*uzhayo* as an ontological connection that shapes their identity, existence, and relationship with their environment. This understanding acknowledges the local complexities of youth migration to urban areas, which creates a disconnect from these ontologies. It also considers how local elites might have internalised specific mainstream government ideas that see the commons as resources to be commodified. This thesis uses the concept of culturalscape as its main framework, defining it as a multidimensional and co-formed domain that includes Chitral's physical

environment, cultural practices, spiritual beliefs, and collective identity. This term is crucial because it challenges solely resource-based or economic views on the commons, thus emphasising the material, social, spiritual, and emotional importance of *muzhayo* within rural Chitrali communities. As a result, culturalscape unites the four empirical articles, highlights the deep impacts of nationalisation, development, and political change on ways of relating to the environment, and links political ecology with more-than-human geography to promote pluriversal governance. The idea of *muzhayo* as part of the culturalscape rests on four interconnected dimensions that challenge objectified and resource-focused frameworks like the “tragedy of the commons,' and add to the literature on commoning. In doing so, it directly addresses the empirical and geographic deficiencies in commoning scholarship, which has been slow to engage with mobile pastoralists in highland Asia and has infrequently produced studies from within the communities it examines (Caffentzis & Federici, 2014; Nightingale, 2019; Euler, 2018). The thesis prefers to use the concept of culturalscape over commoning as the organising principle represents a deliberate analytical decision. While commoning refers to the practices through which muzhayo is produced and reproduced, the actions, culturalscape denotes the ontological realm that these practices sustain, the essence. These two frameworks are complementary rather than oppositional: commoning theory encapsulates the relational, activity-centered aspects of pastoral life, whereas culturalscape, drawing on Hirsch's (1995) foreground/background dialectic of landscape, Ingold's (1993) taskscape, and Bourdieu's (1977) habitus, encompasses the spiritual, ancestral, and emotional dimensions that commoning frameworks are not designed to theorise.

Material Utility: *Muzhayo* functions as an essential resource for sustaining livelihoods, offering grazing for livestock (*mal*), fuelwood, and medicinal herbs, all vital to the

seasonal transhumance system. Moving livestock to high-altitude pastures (*heti*) during summer enables local residents to focus on farming and prepare for the harsh winter months by collecting animal fodder, firewood, and other necessities. Without *muzhayo*, the fundamental aspects of these communities' existence would collapse.

Socio-Communal Dimension: Commons serve as spaces for collective action and social cohesion in the community. Rituals such as *ghari nezik* (relocating livestock to high pastures) and *sotsiri* (communal rotation of grazing) strengthen community bonds, trust, and shared responsibility, acting as mechanisms for resolving conflicts.

Spiritual Dimension: The land holds deep spiritual significance, closely linked to ancestral belief systems and the religious idea that humans return to the soil after death. Notably, the mountain pastures are seen as sacred sites protected by unseen spiritual beings, especially fairies (*nangini* or *shawanan*). Rituals, such as offering dokhna (flour scent), are performed to seek permission from the *nangini* before entering the pastures.

Emotional Dimension: *Muzhayo* is essential for identity formation through the ancestral bond with the community, nurturing an emotional connection and a sense of freedom. This freedom is significant for women, who have historically had more social interaction and autonomy in the high pastures (*ghari*), away from the restrictions of village life.

Within the culturalscape, practices such as *heti* (seasonal migration to high pastures) and *saq* (rotational use), and rituals such as *ghari nezik* (collective departure to pastures) function not only as economic strategies but also as moral performances that strengthen interdependence among beings. Therefore, commons should be understood as an ethical

relationship rather than simply a managerial category. The existential implications of nationalisation are significant: the state's utilitarian approach risks making the culturalscape and its complex meanings obsolete, replacing Indigenous pastoral stewardship, based on reciprocity and spiritual obligation, with commodification and extraction.

External Challenges: From State's Rights of Use to *Boomki* Rights of Ownership

The central political conflict stems from the state's claim to sovereignty over communal lands, chiefly through the contentious 1975 Notification. This notification designated large categories of land, including mountains, forests, riverbeds, and grazing lands (*chiragah*), as state property, effectively nationalising over 97% of Chitral's territory. The nationalisation of Chitral's commons via the 1975 notification cemented a deep epistemic conflict between state enclosure and Indigenous pastoralist cosmology. By legally declaring all non-private land as state property, the Pakistani government transformed centuries-old communal ownership into uncertain rights of use for the local population. This shift from owning land to merely using it exemplifies the colonial logic underpinning many post-colonial conservation and governance regimes: communal custodianship is permitted only if it conforms to the state's bureaucratic oversight, which can be revoked at any time.

The pastoralists assert their traditional land claims based on their identity as the *boomki*, or aboriginal people, meaning "from the land." This claim is recognised not through documentation or legislation but through oral histories of ancestral sacrifice and lineage, such as the well-known stories of fighting in wars for the king or, for example, of the grandfather Babur killing the *nahang* monster to free the high pastures. Oral histories serve as valid historical accounts that support traditional land ownership. By ignoring these

modes of belonging, the state imposed a single, extractive view in which land is seen merely as a resource waiting to be regulated or exploited for purposes such as enclosures, tourism, mining, and other capitalistic ventures (see Article 03). This has caused a significant mismatch between legal frameworks and lived realities. To claim ownership in the Chitrali way is to defend a way of life, an intergenerational covenant that links human survival to the health of mountains, pastures, and spirits. The call to restore communal pastoral ownership is thus a demand for epistemic justice: the recognition that Indigenous methods of property, governance, and spirituality are legitimate and sophisticated systems of law. This discourse contributes to the scholarly literature on enclosure, commoning, and mobile pastoralism by presenting an analytical and ethnographic perspective from the Hindukush region. It demonstrates that muzhayo fulfils and surpasses the criteria for a commons across various frameworks, including Ostrom's institutional governance, De Angelis's (2017) three-element social system of commonwealth, commoners, and commoning, as well as García-López et al.'s (2021) concept of co-becoming.

This study introduces the concept of apoliticisation, previously discussed, as a relational mechanism of dispossession where state nationalisation undermines political agency through discursive and structural processes rather than direct coercion alone. This concept underpins the structural foundation for subsequent thesis analyses of ontology (Article 02), multispecies rights (Article 03), and customary tenure struggles (Article 04). The mechanism operates on two levels. Discursively, state portrayals of Chitralis as "*puraman* (peaceful), *samajdar* (wise), and t*aleemyafta* (educated)" celebrate civility while rendering contestation illegible (Balibar, 2009). Structurally, urban-focused bureaucracies based in Swat, Peshawar, and Islamabad, employing alienating legal languages such as Urdu and Pashto, alongside anti-pastoral biases, such as forest officials' claims that livestock "damages everything", systematically exclude pastoralist commoners

from commons governance. Elite capture further mediates this process. Local lawyers and high-clan actors pursue litigation and royalties that converge with state tourism and mining objectives, sidelining pastoralists (Levien, 2018). The resulting unawareness persists, with over 80% of pastoralist respondents unaware of the 1975 notification's implications, thus institutionalising invisibility despite intervening factors such as youth migration, climate variability, and market shifts. Informal resistance endures through Scott's 'weapons of the weak', clan-based evasion, and the daily use of pastures as a form of resistance, revealing the limits of apoliticisation as a relational struggle (Scott, 1985). This conception positions state-driven enclosure as the primary external threat to pastoral commons. It frames the thesis's broader exploration of Indigenous ontological resilience, more-than-human politics, and decolonial land sovereignty in postcolonial highland contexts.

Internal Challenges: Fissures in Community Governance of Commons

This thesis does not romanticise the Indigenous pastoralist commons as a perfect organisational space with utmost equity, but rather considers the limitations of current local practices, with the hope that this critique from an insider, grounded in analytical research, will help the Chitrali people plan and manage commons in line with the demands of the time. The governance integrity of Chitrali *muzhayo* and the coherence of resistance are significantly challenged by embedded internal problems that frequently intersect with and intensify the external pressures. The primary internal challenges faced by the community, as identified throughout this thesis, encompass the patriarchal double apoliticisation of pastoralist women, elite capture and clan dynamics, and the lack of a just and equitable civil society organisation for pastoralists in Chitral.

Women's historical involvement in pastoralism offers a crucial gendered perspective on governance of the commons. Historically, women accompanied livestock to high pastures for extended periods, where they tended the animals, produced dairy

products, and maintained social networks vital to community cohesion. These environments provided women with autonomy and respite from the village's patriarchal structure. Pastoralist women experience "double apoliticisation": marginalised by both state mechanisms and local patriarchal structures, intensified by changing pastoralism dynamics, such as the hiring of external herders, which limit their participation. Women are systematically excluded from formal decision-making processes regarding *muzhayo*. During fieldwork, women often deferred to men on political matters of nation-states, with men remarking that women "forget what they eat for breakfast, how are they supposed to get involved in decision making" (Personal communication, 2022). This exclusion has significant implications: the decline of women's historical presence in the high pastures, due to factors such as shrinking pastoralism and the employment of external shepherds (*gujjurs*), reduces their agency in resource management and undermines their ecological knowledge, resulting in gendered cognitive enclosure (Watts, 2004). Recognising women's agency requires re-centring care as a political principle, where governance must acknowledge reproductive and affective labour as essential to ecological sustainability (Blau, 2021). This phenomenon of gendered dispossession is most accurately conceptualised through feminist commoning scholarship. Federici (2004, 2018) explains that enclosure specifically dismantles women's social territories, spaces of collective life, autonomous labour, and mutual aid through which women exert power beyond the domestic sphere. The Chitrali ghari (high pasture) exemplified such a territory: a summer domain of collective female life, relative autonomy, and practical authority over dairy production, now obstructed by the employment of external gujjur shepherds, a decision made by men in male-dominated village assemblies, without substantive consultation with women. The state appropriated the physical commons; the ensuing patriarchal restructuring of pastoral labour enclosed the female social territory that the commons had

historically supported. This represents the dual enclosure at the core of the double apoliticization analysed in Article 01 (Nightingale, 2019; Clement et al., 2019).

Another major challenge is that resistance movements are often susceptible to elite capture. Legal challenges to the 1975 notification are mainly led by high-ranking elites, including lawyers, businessmen, and members of the royal family. These individuals are often seen by ordinary pastoralists as motivated by capitalist incentives, such as potential profits from mining, tourism, or trophy hunting, if the state cedes control. This fosters significant internal mistrust, as local communities fear that a favourable court decision will primarily benefit influential families, such as the *shahzadagan* (royal family) in Lower Chitral, who might seize the land for private ventures rather than securing communal rights for livelihoods. Many perceive these internal issues as less critical and prioritise land reclamation instead. This view is shared by local poets who mourn the loss of land, attributing it to internal "envy that keeps us apart". Historically, the management of commons has been linked to traditional systems based on clan and proximity ownership, which are characterised by their dynamism and adaptability. Nevertheless, these systems also show elements of exclusivity, particularly regarding hunting rights. There is a noticeable shift towards a more inclusive proximity-based model to accommodate new residents, especially as younger generations challenge these discriminatory systems. However, internal disputes, such as the ongoing two-decade conflict over the Sha Junali commons in Rech, are sometimes cited by advocates of nationalisation as evidence that state control is necessary to address discriminatory clan-based commons-management systems. Furthermore, the failure of state initiatives actively undermines these traditional institutions. State projects, such as the unsuccessful "Ten Billion Tree Tsunami" (TBTT) afforestation on riverbeds and the inadequately compensated watcher program in Upper Chitral, disrupt Indigenous conservation practices, such as *saq* (rotational grazing). The

abandonment of these state projects often results in community conflicts over the management of newly designated areas, occasionally fostering a tendency towards privatisation, usually decided by the stronger clans, rather than collective management, thus further diminishing the commons. While specific movements and organisations, such as the *Muttahida Qaumi Committee* in Rech, claim to address local challenges related to clan politics and other conflicts, there is currently no Chitral-wide, gender-inclusive *boomki* pastoralist organisation to tackle these internal issues and guide the way forward in managing the commons.

Finally, neoliberal shifts within pastoralist communities present major challenges, including youth migration to urban areas, the lure of cash cropping and off-farm wage employment, market integration through expanded road networks, formal neo-liberal education, and climate change. All these factors have contributed to a generational move away from transhumant pastoralism (Khan, 2025). Younger community members, mostly born after 1975, show less commitment to commons governance, favouring "diversified livelihoods" over the defence of collective land rights (Kreutzmann, 2004). This internal shift worsens external apoliticisation: over 80% remain unaware of the loss of customary rights under the 1975 notification, while neoliberal subjectivities further weaken the social fabric of resistance, fragmenting communal solidarity just as elite capture and state enclosure intensify. These overlapping internal vulnerabilities, along with cultural disinvestment and political invisibility, threaten the sustainability of *muzhayo*, thus supporting the thesis's call for pluriversal governance that integrates Indigenous ontologies to oppose both state territorialisation and market-driven pastoral decline.

Implications for More-than-Human Rights and Resistance

The cosmological framework of the Chitrali community requires political resistance to be inherently multispecies, supporting a more-than-human (MTH) rights

framework. This framework broadens the concept of rights to include entities whose agency and survival are closely linked to pastoralists and *muzhayo*. This research uniquely contributes to the idea of distributed agency within MTH scholarship by incorporating spiritual entities and challenging the recent Western origins of the MTH. It highlights the centuries-old MTH practices in Chitral that emphasise the decentralisation of humans and engagement with the interdependent cosmology of humans and nonhumans. Fairies (*nangini*) are recognised as active spiritual guardians or owners of mountains, possessing both spiritual and material agency. Disrupting the mountains for capitalist purposes, such as mining or tourism, risks angering the *nangini*, who may then leave, leading to the destruction of the culturalscape. Therefore, acknowledging and granting MTH rights to *nangini* based on Indigenous cosmology offers a pragmatic and political means of protecting the commons from external capitalist interests. Similarly, livestock (*mal*), including goats and cows, are seen as active participants, demonstrating distributed agency through their ability to roam freely in the high pastures. Advocating for MTH rights for *mal* (livestock*)* directly challenges the state's bias against pastoralism, which wrongfully blames environmental degradation and floods on goats. Local poets utilise their art to support these rights, advocating for livestock to have the freedom to “freely roam” in opposition to nationalisation. The expression of MTH rights and community resistance unfolds through poetry, especially in forms such as *tarhi mushaira* (themed poetry gatherings). Poetry acts as a decolonial tool and epistemic practice of commoning, transforming emotional and spiritual knowledge into political statements. Local poets fear that if the mountains are blasted or trees are felled, the creatures will not survive, tying the fate of the ibex, plants, and humans to resistance against external control.

Interwoven Politics of Resistance

A common thread of resistance runs through the intersecting realms of ownership, ontology, gender, and MTH relations. In Chitral, alongside court cases, the current resistance often does not align with the overt mobilisation typically associated with social movement theory. Instead, it is diffuse, frequently manifesting in poetic or ritualistic forms and expressed through idioms of care rather than through confrontation. Poems mourning lost pastures, prayers to the *nangini*, and collective refusals to vacate grazing lands, as 'weapons of the weak' (Scott, 1985), serve as everyday acts of defiance that support communal coherence and ecological ethics. Such resistance exemplifies what scholars of subaltern politics refer to as “quiet encroachment”: actions that uphold alternative moral economies in the shadow of the state. This thesis interprets these practices as ontological resistance, not merely opposition to policy, but the defence of a world. To compose poetry of a fairy who guards the mountain is to fundamentally reject the logic of commodification that treats the mountain as inert matter. Through poetry and ritual, Chitrali pastoralists continually reaffirm the moral order that the state aims to erase.

Summary of Implications: Towards a Decolonial Commons

Indigenous pastoralist communities in Chitral perceive commons holistically, embedded in the culturalscape and in ancestral ownership claims (*boomki*), and manage them through adaptive customary systems. The nationalisation of these lands threatens livelihoods and the ontological framework of reciprocal relationships with more-than-human (MTH) entities. Resistance efforts must address systemic external pressures, state apoliticisation, and enclosure while overcoming the internal challenges of patriarchy, elite capture, and institutional erosion. To achieve environmental stewardship and equitable rural futures in Chitral, policy reform must formally recognise Indigenous customary tenure and support local mechanisms for inclusive governance that transcend external and internal

marginalisation of the Chitrali people. In Chitral, access to and ownership of *muzhayo* are crucial for pastoralists' mobility, as they facilitate the seasonal movement of their livestock to high-pasture commons during the summer and their return to the village in winter. The removal of *muzhayo* ownership effectively disenfranchises the pastoralists, thereby disrupting their culturalscape of mobility. In this way, this thesis integrates and contributes to the scholarly discourse on commoning and mobile pastoralism, a field that warrants increased scholarly attention during the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP2026) and in the subsequent years. This thesis advances the concept of a decolonial commons, where decolonisation is understood ontologically, necessitating the unlearning of the epistemic hierarchies that define property, politics, and personhood. The Chitrali case shows that sustainable commons governance cannot be realised through technical solutions or participatory tokenism alone. It requires the structural recognition of Indigenous sovereignty and plural ontologies underpinning local environmental ethics. A decolonial commons would be governed by principles of reciprocity, care, and plural legality, recognising customary tenure as ownership; embedding co-management that integrates MTH and spiritual custodianship; and granting a political voice to those historically excluded from governance. This approach redefines commons from a mechanism of enclosure to one of coexistence, drawing upon the documented patterns in Southwest and Central Asian contexts, such as those of the Basseri, Rwala Bedouin, Qashqa'i, and Himalayan pastoral commons (Barth, 1961; Lancaster, 1981; Salzman, 2004; Ahearn & Chatty, 2020; Chatty, 2003). Furthermore, it shifts the focus from control to relational dynamics (Blau, 2021; Bollier & Helfrich, 2019; Singh, 2017).

Theoretical Contributions

This thesis advances the fields of human geography, specifically political ecology (PE), more-than-human geography (MTH), commons studies, mobile pastoralism, and

decolonial studies by introducing an innovative theoretical framework that combines established scholarly paradigms with Chitrali Indigenous epistemologies. Political ecology has insufficiently theorised non- human agency and has overlooked affective, spiritual, and ontological relationships that influence rural life. By positioning *muzhayo* as a multispecies and spiritual commons, this research broadens PE's scope to include non-human political actors and spiritual ontologies in governance analysis. Conversely, MTH scholarship often ignores the political-economic inequalities underlying human-non-human relations (Lorimer and Hodgetts, 2024). This thesis situates MTH within the context of the 1975 notification, state territorialisation, and elite capture, demonstrating how MTH rights can serve as instruments to resist dispossession. The integration provides a relational perspective on shared lands that remains politically conscious and ontologically expansive. Moreover, this study examines the politicisation of MTHs, identifying a gap in MTH theory concerning the political perception of MTHs. It proposes a framework for MTH rights to the commons, rooted explicitly in Indigenous cosmologies, urging MTH scholars to strengthen MTHs' agency as political entities. Article 1 employs rural political ecology and critical agrarian studies to conceptualise apoliticisation as relational state enclosure. It draws upon Foucault's (1991) concept of governmentality, which involves the creation of samajdar (wise) pastoral subjects who internalise quiescence as dignity. Additionally, it references Scott's (1998) legibility project, exemplified by the 1975 notification that administratively transformed customary tenure into state-legible categories. Furthermore, it incorporates Ferguson's (1990) anti-politics machine, which technically reframes political land conflicts as issues of rangeland management and conservation. These three dimensions of state power do not function independently but rather as a unified political technology. This approach uncovers external threats, such as territorialisation and elite capture, following the 1975 notification,

establishing the political-economic basis for the research. Article 2 applies ontological pluralism and emplaced cultural geography, focusing on muzhayo' s fourfold ontology (material, socio- communal, spiritual, emotional) as a culturalscape. This bridges PE's structural focus with MTH's relationality, revealing commons as identity-rich lifeworlds vulnerable to apoliticisation. Article 3 advances MTH and decolonial theory through Khowar poetry, distinguishing muzhayo rights (livestock movement, fairies as custodians) from universal rights of nature. This extends resistance concepts from Article 1 into multispecies agency while politicising MTH exclusions. Article 4 concludes with an exploration of legal pluralism and Indigenous geographies, reimagining ownership as a *boomki* ancestral/clan/proximity bundle, contrasting with state concession, and synthesising prior insights to promote pluriversal land tenure (see Figure 01). This progressive synthesis offers new insights: PE benefits from MTH ontologies and spiritual politics; MTH benefits from PE and CAS power analysis; and commons scholarship is enriched by pastoral- Indigenous perspectives, effectively bridging disciplinary divides.

Theoretical Synthesis of *Muzhayo* Framework

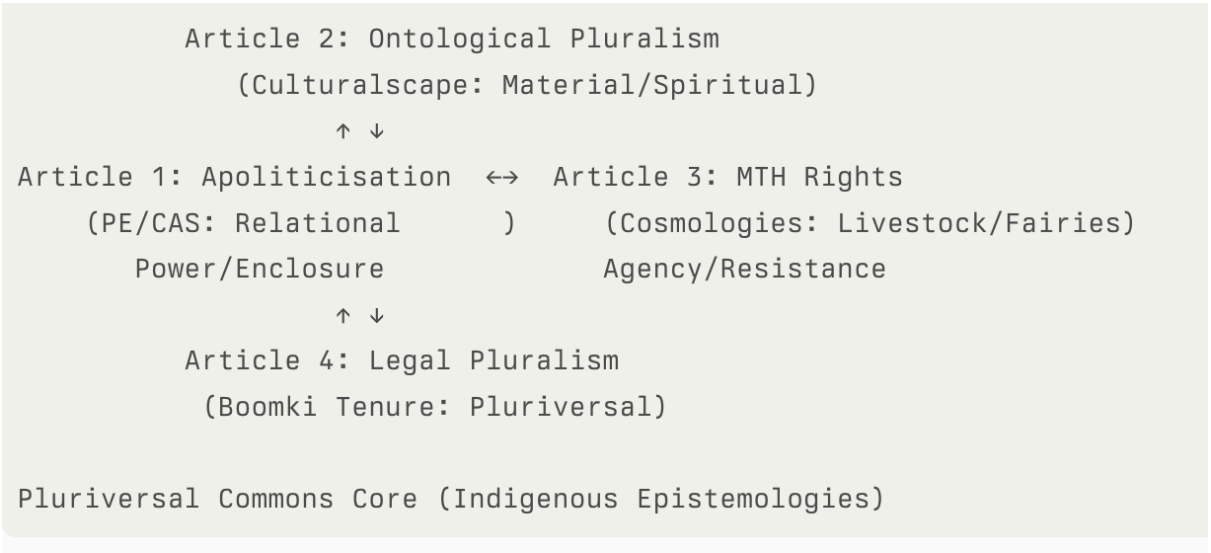


Figure 01: Theoretical synthesis across thesis: Arrows show progressive integration converging on the m*uzhayo* framework at the core, blending academic theories with Chitrali Indigenous epistemologies.

By foregrounding Indigenous and Southern knowledge systems, this thesis advocates for epistemic justice and challenges the universalisation of Western theoretical frameworks on the commons. It explicitly critiques the anthropocentric and economically reductive models exemplified by Hardin's "Tragedy of the Commons" and Ostrom's resource-centric approaches. While Ostrom conceptualises collective action as rule adherence among rational users, Chitrali *muzhayo* illustrates action as inseparable from *nangini* (spirit guardians), communal and emotional relations through ancestral obligations and gendered nostalgia, which precede and underpin governance. This extends Escobar's (2018) relational ontologies by deconstructing spiritual and emotional elements into analytically distinct yet interconnected categories. This thesis adds to the commoning discourse beyond institutional design and economic efficiency, presenting *muzhayo* as an ontological construct that embodies distinct relational worldviews of care, reciprocity, and spirituality through the introduction of the Chitrali culturalscape. This emphasis on

ontological pluralism actively contests the “modernist ontology” of the state and the Western rational actor theory, which reduces humans to “greedy beings” and land to a functional, utilitarian resource.

This study significantly advances global scholarship on pastoralism by rethinking mobile pastoralism and commons. It reinterprets mobile pastoralism not only as an ecological adaptation or economic livelihood but also as a relational and ontological system. Historically, much research on pastoralism has viewed mobility as a rational response to environmental variability, resource scarcity and climatic uncertainty (Behnke & Scoones, 1992; Ellis & Swift, 1988; Niamir-Fuller, 1999; Scoones, 1995). Similarly, scholarship on rangeland commons has often concentrated on institutional design, efficiency and resource optimisation. In contrast, this thesis demonstrates that pastoral mobility in Chitral is deeply rooted in ontological, spiritual, social, and multispecies relationships that extend beyond these traditional frameworks. The culturalscape of Chitral reveals that the commons constitute a complex network of affective, ancestral, and more-than-human relationships. This aligns with emerging relational and multispecies approaches to pastoralism (Ingold, 2000; Beach and Stammler, 2006; Govindrajan, 2018) and is theoretically grounded in Hirsch's (1995) foreground/background dialectic of landscape, Ingold's (1993) concept of taskscape as temporalised pastoral practice, and Bourdieu's (1977) notion of habitus. Together, these frameworks suggest what nationalisation destroys beyond resources and formal rights: the embodied, intergenerationally transmitted practical sense of being a Chitrali pastoralist. Here, mobility is not simply an ecological response, but a moral and cosmological practice maintained by obligations to livestock, wildlife, plants, and spiritual guardians such as *nangini*. By emphasising this plural ontology of the commons, this thesis challenges resource-focused perspectives and encourages scholars of pastoralism to seriously consider

the spiritual, emotional, and relational structures that support commons governance and mobility.

Furthermore, studies on pastoralism have often characterised enclosure and dispossession mainly as results of market-driven privatisation and environmental crises, frequently emphasising degradation or technical failures within common property regimes (Catley et al., 2013). In contrast, this research shows that in postcolonial and mountainous regions like Chitral, state-led nationalisation and bureaucratic apoliticisation act as the main drivers of exclusion and transformation, surpassing market mechanisms and redefining the boundaries of political agency for mobile livestock keepers. This perspective complements and broadens existing research on enclosure, sedentarisation, and conservation-led displacement in pastoral regions across Africa and Asia (Habeck, 2013; Bollig, 2020; Scoones, 2023b). The concept of apoliticisation offers pastoralism scholars a new analytical framework for understanding how states suppress pastoralist political expression through discourses of civility and compliance, bureaucratic distance, and administrative opacity–mechanisms that make pastoralists both governed and politically invisible. The gendered aspects of this process described here as "double apoliticisation," enrich feminist pastoralism scholarship by linking the erosion of women's ecological knowledge (Blau, 2023; Hodgson, 2000) to broader state and patriarchal dynamics that transform commons governance. By documenting how Chitrali pastoralists oppose these pressures through oral histories, ritual practices, and poetic expression, this thesis shows that pastoral political agency often manifests in subtle, ontological ways that are not easily captured by conventional political analysis. Collectively, these insights reposition pastoralism and the commons as multispecies, spiritually and emotionally rooted, and politically charged domains, offering new theoretical and empirical directions for global pastoralism studies.

Methodological Contributions

The methodology used in this project was deliberately designed to be community-based, reflexive, and decolonial, emphasising Indigenous epistemology and lived experiences. Over four years, I conducted a 14-month ethnographic study in Chitral. Proficiency in the local Khowar language was essential for executing this project, enabling the use of unique, locally grounded methodologies. The key innovation is the concept of methodological pluriversality, which navigates the fluid "gradations of endogeny" (insider/outsider status), thereby legitimising the integration of various locally rooted, decolonial approaches as actual epistemic practices rather than as extractive data collection. Although this study employs interviews, focus groups, and other methods, the research techniques of *mashqulgi* and poetic enquiry are distinctive contributions rooted in and guided by the culturalscape of Chitral.

This study introduced an innovative methodology by adopting and formalising *mashqulgi*, an in-depth and candid communal and one-to-one discussion rooted in local Chitrali social practices, as the primary method for engaging with pastoralist communities. This technique surpasses the formal and often alienating concept of the Western "interview" by aligning with local cultural practices of open dialogue. *Mashqulgi* facilitated the inclusion of marginalised voices, promoted mutual learning and yielded rich experiential data. Similarly, a notable methodological innovation was the incorporation of Indigenous poetry and musical expression as both research methods and epistemic practices, particularly in examining affective, spiritual, and MTH relationships. The vibrant poetic tradition of Chitral, encompassing folk songs such as *ghoru* and political forms like *tarhi mushaira*, serves as a political medium for articulating resistance and preserving multispecies memory, which conventional methods frequently overlook. The comprehensive process of translation and verification, conducted in collaboration with

Khowar-speaking poets and academics, ensured the integrity and accuracy of the poetry, even retaining original Khowar terms where English equivalents were insufficient to convey the full nuance of the text. A significant limitation of the poetic methodology must be acknowledged. Despite engaging with multiple women and explicitly soliciting poetic contributions, only one poem was received from a female participant. Women's poetry in Chitral predominantly exists within private, domestic, and informal contexts, which are not readily accessible to a male researcher. The same structures that exclude women from formal commons governance similarly restricted their participation in this research. More broadly, 65% of formal interviews were conducted with men, and many interviews with women occurred in the presence of male family members, thereby limiting disclosure. A female Chitrali researcher conducting a similar study would likely produce a more comprehensive account of women's embodied relationships with the commons, their oral and poetic traditions, and the informal knowledge networks that persist at the periphery of formal governance.

Policy Implications and Equitable Rural Futures

Besides its theoretical and methodological contributions, this research has important implications for policy and governance, as well as for promoting social and environmental justice in Chitral. These implications also apply to similar global settings in which rural, Indigenous, and pastoralist communities face enclosure challenges. Some policy recommendations from this study include the formal recognition of *boomki* (aboriginal) land rights in Pakistan, a reassessment of the 1975 Notification and other state interventions, the ending of apoliticisation, and the full participation of local pastoralist communities in political processes. Additionally, it is strongly recommended that MTH rights and Indigenous conservation practices be incorporated.

The most urgent policy implication requires the Pakistani state to formally recognise customary tenure rights rooted in the *boomki* people's ancestral identity and collective sacrifices. Policy should go beyond viewing traditional use as merely a concession and instead recognise Indigenous ownership as a fundamental right essential for preserving the pastoralist culturalscape. This involves recognising pastoralist and nomadic livelihoods as legitimate traditional life choices, with the state ensuring their protection and facilitating access to vital resources and land. This recognition should also extend to similar contexts within Pakistan and align with international legal frameworks, encouraging Pakistan to ratify treaties such as ILO Convention No. 169 to safeguard the rights of its Indigenous populations.

This DPhil thesis shows that state policies and interventions, such as the 1975 notification, have a significant impact on human, animal, and other more-than-human entities. These policies lead to livelihood challenges, worsen environmental issues, and disrupt the culturalscape of smaller rural communities, whose existence is closely connected to the land. Based on four years of research, it is recommended that the Government of Pakistan reconsiders policies of nationalisation, enclosure, conservation, and the environment that negatively affect its citizens. Local resistance in judicial settings should be recognised, and the marginalised views of pastoralists must be central to decision-making processes regarding land rights in Chitral, Gilgit-Baltistan, and other similar regions across Pakistan.

Policy frameworks must actively confront the politics of invisibility caused by discursive apoliticisation. This requires systemic reform to empower local stakeholders, especially marginalised pastoralists and women, to influence the governance of their ancestral *muzhayo*. The provision of basic necessities, such as transportation infrastructure, educational institutions, and water supply, should not be exploited by government

authorities and local elites as a means of resource extraction and land-grabbing. The state must guarantee free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) before implementing any policy affecting shared lands, a principle that the 1975 notification systematically violated. Policy interventions should be grounded in the local context, respect Indigenous knowledge, address power imbalances (elite capture), and promote genuine co-governance.

The state should cease implementing ineffective, externally driven conservation programmes, such as the abandoned forest watcher system or harmful afforestation projects, such as the Ten Billion Tree Tsunami. Instead, it must recognise the effectiveness and complexity of Indigenous conservation practices. Local institutions, such as rotational grazing (*saq*), should be integrated into formal governance structures. Moreover, policy should incorporate the more-than-human rights framework developed in this thesis, building on some Islamic teachings and court orders mentioned in article three. This involves legally recognising livestock, wildlife, plants, and spiritual custodians (fairies) as rights-bearing participants in the commons, rooted in Indigenous ethics of care and reciprocity. Such an approach prioritises multispecies coexistence and cultural continuity over capitalist commodification (e.g. trophy hunting, mining) and ecological harm.

Implications for the Chitrali Community

In addition to the academic contributions this research aims to achieve, I have consistently reflected on the question, "What does this research offer to Chitral and its people?" This enquiry partly stems from my training as a reflexive human geographer and partly from the local community's expectations that my research would benefit them in some way. While I see this DPhil project as a preliminary step towards both academic and policy interventions, several key aspects of my research have direct implications for Chitral. Primarily, I aim for my research to serve as praxis that challenges the apoliticisation of Chitral, a concept I have theorised. The research process involved open

discussions, *mashqulgi*, community awareness initiatives, poetry calls, meetings with local government officials, and dissemination of my research through social and local media outlets. These activities have initiated dialogues concerning land rights and the consequences of the 1975 notification. I engaged extensively with my research participants, explaining the notification and its implications for Chitral in accessible terms, following my *mashqulgi* interviews. These discussions fostered an initial link between broader academic discourse and practical implications, and I hope that the research has been sufficiently political to begin dismantling the community's apoliticisation.

During the research process, I engaged with community leaders to discuss and emphasise the lack of a civil society Indigenous organisation capable of uniting individuals, particularly those from marginalised groups, to advocate for their interests and effectively plan communal resources and other regional challenges. This engagement will continue throughout the dissemination phase and, upon my return to Chitral in the coming months, through poetry gatherings and the presentation of published papers as short videos and accessible articles in newspapers. Additionally, this study recognises the inevitable transformations occurring in Chitral. While it may seem unavoidable to adapt to the rapid changes brought about by nationalisation, capitalism, privatisation, and neoliberal agendas, the research highlights that genuine survival requires such resistance. Other communities have experienced similar transformations, and many have failed to sufficiently resist these encroachments, such as the Parliamentary Enclosures in Britain in the 18th and 19th centuries (Watts, 2004), green grabbing in Yixing, Jiangsu Province of China (Chen, 2012), and the Soviet sedentarisation schemes in Siberia of the Evenki people (Habeck, 2013); thus, we have the opportunity to oppose them. The community must continue to place faith in *muzhayo* rather than the illusory promises of the American dream and the

deceptive allure of urban-centric, exploitative labour opportunities and neoliberal livelihoods.

The significant contribution of my research to Chitral and similar contexts lies in its potential to influence emerging academics and scholars aspiring to pursue academic careers in the future. As the first individual from Chitral to gain admission to a PhD programme at Oxford University, I aim for my DPhil research to dismantle barriers that have historically prevented students from Chitral and other marginalised areas from engaging in international research. I hope my work inspires younger generations to recognise that the challenges faced in our mountainous region are legitimate issues that can attract international scholarly attention, especially at institutions such as Oxford. The colonisation of epistemology has diminished confidence in presenting our challenges as valid and deserving of research. In the Literature Review chapter, I have critically examined the colonial, Western and elite roots of Chitral Studies and propose this thesis, along with the published articles, as an alternative decolonial discourse on Chitral that warrants further development. Hence, this research on Chitrali *muzhayo*, alongside multiple academic publications in leading journals, aims to restore confidence among young academics from Chitral and similar contexts worldwide to tell their own stories. The local methods and theories I have employed, such as poetic methods and *mashqulgi,* empower younger academics not only to bring forth their localised epistemology but also to challenge the prevailing Western dominance in academia.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this DPhil project offers a detailed and contextual account of the Chitrali commons, certain limitations inherent to doctoral research require further scholarly exploration. This also stems from the limited body of academic work on commons within

human geography in Chitral, and this PhD thesis seeks to lay the groundwork for future research in this field. Although various research avenues may emerge from this project, I highlight a few that warrant immediate attention as extensions of this study.

The Impact of Neoliberal Nationalistic and Privatisation Projects on Commons: Mining, Conservation, Tourism and Trophy Hunting

This research project lays a foundational understanding of the concept of commons, their importance for local pastoralists and MTHs, and the rationale and methods by which Indigenous communities claim ownership over *muzhayo* in Chitral. The study did not explore in depth the effects of nationalisation and privatisation initiatives on the Chitrali community and environment through case studies of such new interventions. Initiated in 2021, it was conducted when some of these projects were not yet fully visible, although people could anticipate their emergence, and their impacts are now becoming increasingly apparent. With the Pakistani military and government focusing on mineral resources in the mountains and a new partnership with the United States signalling a significant shift in mining activities in Chitral (Hussain, 2025), some of which have already begun in locations such as the Arkari Valley, there is a need for longitudinal studies centred on each case. These studies should analyse how mining projects, mountain leasing for such purposes by the government or private entities, tourism, conservation efforts such as national parks, and trophy hunting influence human-nature relationships, environmental impacts, and socio-economic conditions in *muzhayo*, utilising the culturalscape framework in Chitral. Such detailed case studies can offer a closer inspection of the theoretical frameworks developed in this research regarding the political ecology of rural areas, the process of apoliticisation, and the Indigenous geographies of Chitral.

The Epistemological Transformation: From Land Enclosure to Cognitive Enclosure

This research highlights a profound internal shift characterised by the erosion of ancestral ontologies, influenced by modernity, neoliberal forces, and changes in the educational landscape. This shift risks leading to the epistemicide of traditional knowledge systems (Moradi, 2025). The younger generation, increasingly detached from pastoralism and influenced by urban-centric narratives, often shows diminished faith in spiritual custodians (*nangini*) and weaker emotional bonds with the *muzhayo*. This is due to changing pastoralist livelihoods towards neoliberal options supported by government and NGO initiatives (Khan, 2025) and the resulting cognitive enclosure, which gradually diminishes the situated knowledge of the *muzhayo* (Habeck, 2013). It is crucial to critically examine several adverse local trends and issues, including deforestation, overhunting, and the impact of climate change on *muzhayo*. Longitudinal research is essential to uncover the mechanisms underlying this epistemological rupture. Future studies should explore how ancestral ontologies can be incorporated into modern livelihoods and how educational curricula can be adapted to reflect and promote the local culturalscape and Traditional Ecological Knowledge.

Practical Implementation and Nuances of MTH Rights

This study establishes the theoretical and ethical necessity of more-than-human (MTH) rights rooted in Indigenous cosmologies. However, a significant practical challenge remains: translating these rights into enforceable legal and stewardship frameworks within modern nation-states. Future research should focus on participatory methods to create community-led stewardship models that formalise MTH rights. These models must be sufficiently flexible to withstand the external pressures of nationalisation and adapt to internal community dynamics. Additionally, studies should explore the complexities of how MTH rights are interconnected; for example, granting rights to plants and shrubs may

restrict the rights of goats and sheep that feed on them. This research direction requires collaboration between legal and policy experts and local elders to develop justice-oriented pluralistic governance structures.

Changes in Spiritual Affiliation with Muzhayo

While Islam is the predominant religion in Upper Chitral, this study found that the region's long-practiced Indigenous spirituality still significantly influences pastoralist practices and *muzhayo*. These practices stem from Indigenous pastoralist traditions that may not always align with mainstream Islamic teachings, such as the spiritual importance placed on fire or drawing shapes on the doors of animal shelters. This deep spiritual link is changing as younger generations get an education in Madrasahs in urban areas or seek jobs in Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern countries. A socio-theological study of the changing spiritual relationship with *muzhayo*, along with an exploration of the roots and meaning of traditional pastoralist spiritual practices, is essential to help preserve fast-declining Indigenous spirituality.

Institutional Braiding: Impact of State Actors from Chitral

This research highlights the concept of institutional braiding, illustrating the supportive role played by certain Chitrali government and legal personnel (Larsen et al., 2025). However, the scope of this phenomenon was limited by challenges related to bureaucratic access and diverged from the main focus of the academic articles in this thesis. Future research should aim for a more comprehensive examination of the agency, networks, and political motivations of Chitrali legal practitioners, government officials, and military personnel operating within the overlapping normative frameworks. Such an investigation is vital to evaluate their potential to effectively utilise existing gaps in the state apparatus

to protect the land rights and *muzhayo* of the Chitrali people. Conducting such studies presents significant challenges, including gaining access to the bureaucracy and establishing trust and anonymity for officers. Nonetheless, this research could offer valuable insights into how the increasing presence of local officials within state systems uses their authority and local connections to serve the community, in contrast to officials from outside Chitral. This approach may also serve as an alternative means of countering the apoliticisation of Chitral.

Concluding Remarks: Muzhayo Commoning as a Blessing, not as a Tragedy

The core contribution of this DPhil research lies in decolonising commons scholarship by reimagining the contested Chitrali *muzhayo* not only as a resource but also as a complex, relational Chitrali culturalscape. The synthesis across the four articles shows that the struggle against nationalisation, rooted in the ambiguous yet influential 1975 notification from the Pakistani state, is fundamentally ontological, threatening the cultural survival and pastoralist livelihoods of the *boomki* (aboriginal) people by risking over 97% of their land. Achieving an equitable rural future in the mountainous regions of Chitral requires a radical shift in the legal and political discourse. Policies must protect ancestral ownership by advocating for the formal legal recognition of customary tenure rights, thereby changing the community's status from precarious land-use rights to inherent land rights. This approach must also tackle significant internal challenges, including the double apoliticisation of pastoralist women through patriarchy and state exclusion, as well as local elite capture, which distorts resistance efforts. Furthermore, this thesis supports the adoption of a more-than-human (MTH) rights framework, recognising the distributed agency of entities, including livestock (mal) and spiritual custodians (*nangini*/fairies), whose well-being is inherently linked to the governance of the *Muzhayo*. Through rituals,

poetry, and daily practices, Chitrali pastoralists continue to embody care and belonging, engaging in subtle, poetic, and enduring forms of resistance. Consequently, decolonisation is not only a political agenda but also an ontological commitment, embodying a promise of commoning: life with the *muzhayo* that is lived and sustained within the Chitrali culturalscape.

Ultimately, this research project offers an original, empirically grounded, and decolonial intervention that highlights the potential of community-led Indigenous pastoralist commons institutions as a pluralistic, justice-focused alternative to nationalisation. This scholarship advances the discipline of human geography, particularly within political ecology (PE), more-than-human geography (MTH), commons studies, mobile pastoralist research, and decolonial studies, urging the wider academic community to broaden their intellectual and ethical horizons. Studying the commons involves exploring the possibilities of coexistence, recognising Indigenous ontologies as equal and valid, and affirming commoning as a form of relational justice and epistemic pluralism. Commons are not tragic resources but ongoing experiments in political imagination, lived reality and planetary stewardship. The testimony of the Chitrali *muzhayo*, as demonstrated in this DPhil thesis, is characterised by blessings rather than tragedy, embodying hope, resistance, commoning, and shared becoming.

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Appendix

Some of the Pastures and Muzhayo (Commons) from the field sites

I am writing these down to give readers an idea of the pastures and for archival purposes, but these are not an exhaustive list of all the commons. I am grateful to my friends, Shah from Rech and Ajmal from Khot, for providing these names on top of the names I had collected during my fieldwork.

Khot:

Ishkar Gah (hunting commons) – These initially were owned by the Khoshay clan. After the wildlife department came, one person from the Khoshay tribe used to accompany them.

A) Putiyan

1) Jinarap / Chadisht

2) warmin

3) muxh aan

4) Warmin kot

5) jehcho gol

6) Ghochar Gol

7) Ghochar

8) Oghrir

B) Uju

Bodo gol (kolu)

C) Vozk

Shakho gol

Uchano gol

Pastures Charagah (Grazing Land) with the clans who had shal (animal and herders' shelter) there.

A) Putian

1) Junali Shal(Baikay) – Sha Junali

2) Pushet (Khoshay)

3) Xharogh (Khoshay)

4) Gol shal (Dashmany)

5) Kachel Tek (Qobilay)

B) Uju

1) Khanarast (Qobilay + Khoshay)

2) Biar Khanarast (Orwakht)

3) Rungal (Puchung)

4) Dok Shal (Qftary)

5) Junali shal (khoshay- Qoziay)

6) Bakhtaguch (Mehtar)

7) Ga shal (lalikay)

8) Yor shal (Khoshay)

Kuru Charagah (Nirun/Soth siri) – Smaller commons mostly used for soth siri during winters.

1) Phurkhot Nerun

2) Evach Nerun

3) Shekhai NerunTangatiri

4) Kishik Sor Nerun

5) Hon Orwakht

6) Hungut/ Puchung Nerun

7) Rabat Nerun

8) Dok Nerun Andraghach

9) Yakhdiz Nerun

Meragram No 2

Urkhan Gole (Zondray + some Sayed + Some Zilay):

Cheq Ghari (For goats and sheep)

Lot Ghari (For cows, bulls and horses)

Urkhano shotar (Zondray + some Sayed + Some Zilay)– For Sotsiri

Khamo Tek + Chamsiro tek (Zondray + some Sayed + Some Zilay)– For Sotsiri

Shich Gol (Khanjaray + Riza)

Darkhot Gol (Khanjaray + Riza)

Lotdoko tek (Khanjaray + Riza)

Rech

Parech Ghari (Sadaat, Khoshey, Balkey, Qambarey, Bakawley, Garayey)

Youghech Ghari (Sadaat, Rizakhel, Fezey)

Yong Ghari (Sadaat, Rizakhel, Farqey)

Chawoon Ghari (Sadaat, Rizakhel, Sheghney)

Chaksush/Gharichan (Sadaat, Jansuwarey, Baikey, Dashmaney, Khoshey, Rizakhel, Bakawley, Qasamey, Sheghney, Nazarey)

Kahzt (Sadaat, Nezarey, Dashmaney)

Hazg gol (Sadaat, Qambarey, Nazarey)

Shajunali [Mosheno tek, Apin, Singrich, Lasht, Junali, Junali Sor, Bozo Shal, Mamoor Shal, Phero shal, Puluidu, Khurwahtan gol, Koch shaal, der shal,Guwandok, BotraqSha Ghari, Ochili] (All residents of Rech)

End Notes

[i]

مگر تخلیقہ ای انسان تان نیکی

ہیارا تصور پریاں دی شیر
جناتان ذکر وا ائیان دی شیر
ہیتان بسر لوٹ لوٹ زومان پھورینین
ہیارا بوئیکرہ موکوڑ اسونی
ہیتان ٹھکانہ لوٹ کانان پھورینین
ہیارا گوغ چواٹ ، جانور حال بونیان

زمینو پھوک ٹکڑہ ہیتان دی حصہ
کندوری ہا خدایو خور مخلوقان
روئیے زمینہ کی بسر بیرائے تھے

زمینان گنی تو روشٹ مہ گدائے کوریکو چق [ii]
چیقو غون مہ موختو سے ڑائے کوریکو چق
بپ بٹشی زمینان شاپیر غاری کوری
ہِھترا ری نیسے ہائے ہائے کوریکو چق

مہ زمین کی بغائے مہ عزت وا شان دی بیر
مہ بلخ، مہ شُوتار، مہ زوم مہ آن دی بیر
گیتی بیرپو روئے آلونی مہ کھوشت خزانان
مہ پڑالو بچے پھوک شیرو ہے آن دی بیر

فطرتو خوش دارا ک بیکن زومان موژو آباد [iii]

شاعر، نیویشاک بیکن زومان موژو آباد

[iv] A full version of the poem can be found here. Please note that there are several versions of ghoru:

https://www.mahraka.com/ghoru.html?fbclid=IwY2xjawKPavFleHRuA2FlbQIxMABicmlkETFWT3h6b3Jqd09QMWZlbms3AR4bJXe__7mICW7Wl5KtEyigTVglT_X9fIzEsbFNVv_Z_mFpToqfR-OTAsEmfA_aem_ek_MMd9Xd1Grbl6GH8feig

[v] مہ باسیر ٹینز کوری کاسیرو لوواہ
چیلیکیو چھاغہ سے پاریرو لوواہ
لیکو لوواہ، لیکو لوواہ
[vi] جم ساغتوت یغیچ داری گوی واوی غار نیسیکوتے
دیدانگہ دریر ژوژر ویزینین اروواہان شینجیکوتے
درونگ چھیو روشتیو خامیر نوگویئ وا اورارو ہو
مالان سرونگتو چارو کورویئ غار بوغاک روپھیکوتے

قادیمو راسمان ریو اجان، مہ چاکے پیسیکو چق
ہمو حکومت ہانسے مہ سر اویریکو چق

[vii]

مہ مالان تو اوختروواوے مو
مہ پژالو تونون داڑاوے مو
بپ بٹی زمینو ہیس گانیکو چق
اے غافل ہھترای تو اوراوے مو

[viii] ہون گویان گرمیو وجہیں روئے پشینیان پایان سار
اوشتروخ بانی ہے پائے اختی ہو تم می رویان سار

کورا کی پروگرام بویان ہسے پایان ای ایجینڈہ بویان
شایوزار چھیرو چا اوغ یو گویان کورو و گیتی گندہ بویان

(ہو پائے کیانی کوروئے)

شارا ماڑیغ گیرزونی مائننگ رے نہنگ کی خومتائے [x i]
فطرتو انمول حُسنار خیش بیتی ہوست پرویلیسی

کوڑو توتیرو بینی فطرتو چمن دی ڈونڈیر
گرزین کھشکیر بیتی بیر گٹہ اشپا قیٹی پاشیسی

x

یہ کیا تان چیتہ نوغ قانون الاو تو
نو بیرو کورمو کھیوتے نون الاو تو
تو کان لو اشان کی پھیر کی کھو لیتا و
لو دیت کی روم بوئیکرہ کیچہ بونی؟
تو زومان پڑاخے زکھار اد کوروسان
مڑان پیسی مخلوق گدائے کی ہونی؟
تو ادر اخان چونا شروع اروا۔؟
انو ژانوار لو دیت کی۔ بونی کیچہ؟

x i

کوڑو انسُوم ہُو قہک بیکن زومان موژو آباد
توتیر انسوم چُوڑاک بیکن زومان موژو آباد
شاریکا نسوم لُو دیاک بیکن زومان موژو آباد
چاغلیا نسوم غیر داک بیکن زومان موژو آباد

xii

تان زومتو اوا کو سیکو بیمان
شاوانانن اوا پوشیکو بیمان
مہ ذوغ، استور ہیٹ اسونی
یہتان نون اوا انگیکو بیمان

xiii

عقلو حدودار نیشی سف پاماندہ
نادان دانو یا سوالو کیا لو
افس ہر کوس پھتو کی یا جہانہ
شاہ اوچے گدا اوچے کنگالو کیا لو
لہاذی شیر مہ ملکہ جو البقر
اپاکہ خال اوچے ویخالو کیا لو

xiv

تہ مشین کی ہائے زوما تھے نن گینی بیتی
شاوانان کی بانی، پڑاخہ ہے اوندینی بینی