



Kicking up dust on the Altit polo ground, young riders sans horses slice at a ball. Though many fields have been converted to other uses, polo remains a popular sport.

In class, pupils tackle English at a Gulmit school. English and science, says the Aga Khan, are "global intellectual currencies." Hunzakuts esteem learning; many are high school graduates.

musician. "He's playing a *tutek*, a flute you hold vertically from your lips," he says. "If he were the real thing, the musician would be playing a *gabi*, which is a flute you play horizontally from your lips and which is the only flute fairies can hear."

THEN THERE ARE THE POETS, OR rather the poet: Allamah Nasir al-Din Nasir Hunzai. He describes himself as "the first poet of the Burushaski language and also a religious scholar." He is escorted by two young men who bow whenever he speaks to them.

Allamah Nasir Hunzai tells me in grave English that he has spent 62 years researching the Burushaski language. It has been difficult because "Burushaski is not a recorded language, so there is no written history. And now, because of the KKH especially, the language is coming very much under the influence of English and Urdu. So my role, I feel, is to preserve the language, and this I can do through poetry, by writing it down."

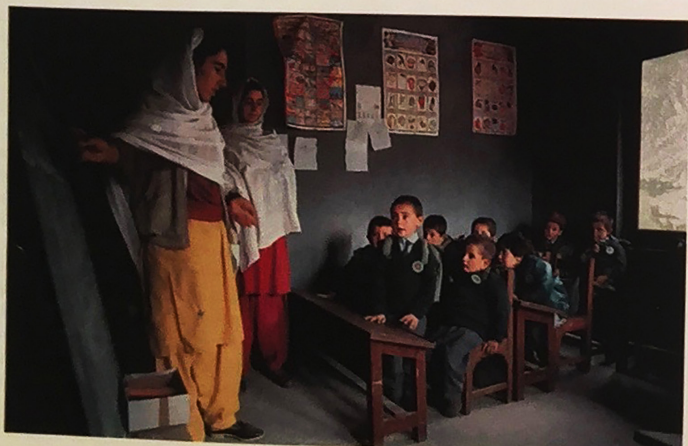
Allamah Nasir Hunzai's face lights up with pleasure as he talks about his poetry, as do those of most other Hunzakuts, who all seem to possess at least one cassette of him reciting his verse. "Burushaski is a language wonderfully suited to poetry," he says. "There are so many teasing words, so many sweet words, so many mysterious words. For example, the word *tal* can mean so many things: a kind of bird, the roof of your mouth, a grass in the fields, a birch tree, the ceiling of a room, motionless water. How beautifully a word such as *tal* suits itself to poetry, especially poetry devoted to God."

Also at risk are some of the more beneficial old ways. Under the mir minor disputes within a village were settled by an elder called an *uyum* or by the mir's appointee, the *trangfa*. Abdul Bari, the proprietor of the Gulmit Tourist Cottage, claims to have been the principal *trangfa* for all of upper Hunza.

goat's dripping head to his mouth to drink the blood. He stops for a moment to inhale the fumes of burning *gal*, or juniper, which grows only on those mountaintops where fairies dwell, and begins to sing in a whining, high-pitched voice.

The old man sitting next to me interprets: "This bitan says that the people of Hunza are blessed because the Aga Khan will come soon to see them, and when he does, he will build them a hospital." The bitan inhales more *gal* and makes more predictions, but the old man beside me advises me not to believe him.

"This bitan is a fake," he says. "He is making these things up as he goes along so the tourists will give him big tips." How can you tell? I ask him. He points to one



BRONWYN COOKE (ABOVE)