V. AGRICULTURE
LAND USE, LAND ADMINISTRATION AND LAND RIGHTS IN SHIGAR, BALTISTAN

Matthias Schmidt

Shigar, located in the central Karakorum, is one of the main valleys in Baltistan. Traditionally, mixed mountain agriculture—a combination of animal husbandry and crop farming based on canal irrigation—forms the main element of the subsistence economy of almost all households in Shigar. Apart from water, which is essential in this arid region, land can be seen as the fundamental resource for economic activities. Consequently, the entitlement to dispose of land has always been linked with social status and political influence. It will be shown how land administration, revenue systems and property rights have changed over the past two centuries. An understanding of land use and property rights also offers a deep insight into the socio-political and economic system of Shigar.

Introduction

High peaks, masses of rocks and extensive glaciers on the one hand, and densely populated valleys with flourishing village oases on the other, are probably the most striking physical characteristics of Baltistan in the Central Karakorum. There is a stark contrast between irrigated agricultural land in the valleys—intense green spots in summer—which accounts for not more than 5% of the land cover, and the vast unpopulated and hostile high mountain terrain. The visitor wonders how people can sustain a living in such a desert-like environment, and is impressed by the achievements of the local population who have created village oases with elaborate forms of land and water utilisation. One goal of my research in Shigar is to gain an understanding of indigenous concepts of land use and land management, and how these concepts have been transformed over time by outside influences. Land resources with limited agricultural potential, such as semi-deserts and high mountain areas—in Shigar we find a combination of both—are often defined as ‘commons’ or ‘common property’ resources on which specified user groups hold usufruct rights (Hardin 1968; Berkes 1989;