Social relations within and between communities, local populations and larger polities of the northern Mountain Ok region were decisively transformed with the advent of colonialism, after 1945. The Australian administration’s assignment of ethnonyms, their uptake by the administered populations, and the distribution of languages, congealed to produce a picture of the region as a mosaic of related but distinct cultures, one that was perfectly congenial to ethnographic researchers (such as myself) looking for a “people” to study. One notable facet of this picture of cultural “similarity in difference” is the variation in cult practices examined by Fredrik Barth. This paper seeks to constitute that picture as an historical product, by examining the dynamic interaction of populations, contests about diacritical practices and modes of subsistence as they unfolded in the central valleys and northern marches of the cordillera over the decades before colonialism.

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