

KALASH – THE VALLEY OF KAFIRS

Minority: **Kalash**
Country: **Pakistan**
Author: **Rabia Shahid**

How would it feel to be part of a culture that is practiced by just 3000 people in a global population of billions? The Kalash culture is indeed unique. Situated in the midst of a Muslim majority population, the three little villages of Kalash are an excellent example of the preservation of a community which is distinct in its ethnicity, language, religion and culture.

The Kalasha community is the smallest minority in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. The 1973 Constitution of Pakistan under Article 260 only recognizes religious minorities, ignoring the existence of other types of minorities. Kalash is located at a height of 1900 to 2200 meters in the Hindu Kush mountain range between the Afghan border and Chitral valley in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province¹, Pakistan. It primarily consists of the three villages of Birir, Bumburet and Rumbur, locally known as “Kafiristan” (land of the infidels, coming from the word Kafir which is an Islamic term for an unbeliever). The valleys are situated to the southwest of the town Chitral at a distance of 40, 43 and 36 kilometers respectively.

Historically, Kafiristan included the region of present day Nuristan in Afghanistan and the three Kalash valleys. It is believed that in 1320 the population of the Kafirs was 200,000. This has now reduced to a mere three to four thousand. In 1895, Amir Abdul Rahman, the King of Afghanistan, conquered the Afghan region of Kafiristan and forced the Kafirs to convert to Islam. It was at that time that the Afghan Kafirs migrated to the Chitral valley to avoid threats of conversion. The people of Chitral gave them a warm welcome, allowing the community to exist and practice their religion and culture without any restraint. According to Israr-ud-Din (1969), the Kalash ruled Southern Chitral for around three hundred years, until they were overtaken by the Khowar speakers. Thereafter, some Kalash retreated to the valleys they occupy today and some became Khowar speakers and converted to Islam. The cordial relationship between the Chitralis and the Kalash people who refused to come under the religious and political influence of the Khowars exist today, even though radical Islamization of the country has posed some challenges for them. As per Kalash custom, once a person converts to Islam he or she is banished from the community and cannot revert. Today the number of Kalasha speaking converts living in the vicinity of the valleys exceeds the number of the original polytheistic Kalasha.

Origin of the Kalash community in Pak-Afghan region

The historic origins of this community are shrouded in mystery and controversy. Different theories exist as to the origin of the Kalash people, the most popular and grand being that they are descendants of Alexander the Great. The other two theories propose that they are an indigenous population of South Asia, or as suggested in Kalash folk

¹ Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was previously known as the North West Frontier Province.

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songs and epics that their ancestors migrated to Afghanistan from “Tsiyam”, which is identified by some anthropologists as the area of Tibet and Ladakh.

There are many pieces of evidence presented by all schools of thought in this matter, making it difficult to trace the true origin of this minority. The Greek influence is found in the architecture, music, games, food, wine, and even in the blond hair and blue eyes of the Kalash. Yet at the same time certain genetic studies, like the study by Rosenberg, have come to the conclusion that this race is a separate aboriginal population with little influence from outsiders. Another genetic study “Worldwide Human Relationships Inferred from Genome-Wide Patterns of Variation (2008)” also came to a similar conclusion and categorized the Kalasha population as a separate group of people.

The Kalash Language - no written documentation

Kalash is a Dardic language which belongs to the Indo Aryan Group of the Indo-Iranian group of languages, which is itself a sub group of the larger Indo-European Group. Kalash is further categorized into the Chitral sub-group of languages, next to only one other language, Khowar. Though the two languages are different, they nonetheless share some similarities, and due to the increased interaction between the native speakers of these two languages there are now more bilingual people speaking both Khowar and Kalash as there were in the past.

The most distinct characteristic of the Kalash language, along with some other local languages of the Chitral District, is that it is purely oral and has no written manuscript. Thus all the folklore, customs and traditions have been handed down from generation to generation through word of mouth without any written documentation. Absence of a written manuscript, coupled with the fact that around four thousand people speak this language, has placed it on UNESCO’s list of critically endangered languages.

However, the people of Kalash maintain great pride in their language and the usage of this language has not decreased in the Kalash valleys over the passage of time. It is normal to see Kalash people interacting in their language in their homes, streets and markets. The most popular second language with the Kalash people is Khowar, but it is only used by people who go outside the Kalash valley for business or work, thus women and children are in a majority of the cases monolingual.

Recently many attempts have been made by local Kalash people in cooperation with foreign NGO’s to preserve the Kalash language via its documentation. In 2000, Taj Khan Kalash, a local Kalashi, organized the first Kalash Orthography Conference in Islamabad. Working in collaboration with international linguists and researchers, the first alphabet book of Kalash language in Roman script was published. Efforts are now being made to teach the Kalash people how to adjust to this evolutionary change in their language and learn how to write it. Significant research has taken place in the codification of this language; the dictionary of the codified Kalash language is even available online today, increasing the possibility for linguists and researchers to study this language in more detail.

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Despite efforts to preserve the language, the community faces tough challenges in preserving it for future generations. It was in 1989 that the government allowed the Kalash to use their language as the medium of instruction, despite the uniform syllabus rule in the country. The majority of the teachers are Khowar native speakers, resulting in the instruction language to be Khowar rather than Kalasha. Thus, the major logistic hurdle in the teaching and preservation of the language is a lack of schools teaching the Kalash language and using it as a medium of instruction.

Kalash Culture : Festivals and Purity

The Kalash culture has been the centre of fascination for tourists, the British, and many anthropologists for years. Compared to the conservative Islamic majority, the Kalash valley, which is well protected within the mountains of Hindu Kush, is the home of polytheists for whom dance, wine and mingling between the sexes is not a taboo.

Nature plays a spiritual role in the lives of the Kalash people and this is reflected in the gods they worship and the customary festivals of the community. Among many festivals celebrated, the three main ones are the Joshi festival celebrated in May, the Uchau festival celebrated in autumn, and the most important Chaumos festival celebrated for two weeks at the winter solstice. Festivals are a way to offer thanks to the gods for the abundant natural resources gifted to the people of the valley. The Kalash people like to celebrate, and a typical festival involves singing, dancing, offering bread, cheese, meat or wine, and at times a sacrifice. The women of the community take active part in the singing and dancing at the festivals. Unlike Muslim societies, there is no concept of segregation in the Kalash society. Men and women freely interact with each other. Women are free to choose their husbands, while sex and love affairs are a common occurrence.

Kalash women are easily distinguishable due to their unique dress. They always wear a long black gown stretching on until their ankles. The gown is adorned with colorful beads and cowrie shells and accessorized by bead necklaces coiled around the neck, accompanied by an ornamental headdress. Men wear the traditional national dress of Pakistan with a woolen waistcoat.

The Kalash culture is very particular about the pure and impure. A particularly intriguing tradition is the tradition of Bashli. Bashli is the tradition of sending menstruating women and the ones giving birth to a special home. They can only come out of the home after the menstrual or child birth period is over. During such a state a woman is considered impure. Gods are considered pure, and between impure women and pure gods there are degrees of pure entities. A man is considered more pure than a woman, and an innocent boy would be more pure than an adult. There are also designated pure areas inside houses where women cannot go because they are considered impure.

Discrimination and attempts to convert to Islam

Kalash is a pastoral community which is heavily dependent upon agriculture and livestock. Over the years tourism has also become a major source of income for the Kalash people. However, generally the area remains underdeveloped due to its remote

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location and also because of the apathy of the authorities. The Kalash people are poor and face discrimination when it comes to jobs. Money that comes in from tourism seldom comes in the hands of Kalash people as majority of the hotels in the vicinity are owned by non-Kalash.

Availability of cheaper alternatives, coupled with poverty, is endangering the use and production of rich Kalash gowns worn by women, and of certain foods and drinks, especially the production of wine, which is often expensive. Infrastructure is weak as there are not enough roads, hospitals, high schools and universities for the Kalash. This forces many families to convert to Islam; a trend which is detrimental to the existence of the Kalash. The religious sites of worship are also in danger due to attacks by Islamic fundamentalists and a lack of funds for maintenance.

Lack of media causes discrimination

The discrimination is allowed to continue due to the absence of any medium of communication that would connect the Kalash communities with the outside world. There are no Kalash newspapers, radio or TV stations. Other than a few websites personally made by some Kalash individuals, there is no official presence of the Kalash community in the media in the form of a group or organization. Any development in the area of preservation of the valley and its culture has primarily come from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and international aid groups interested in the region. Major aid and development is devoted to improving and facilitating cultural festivals, tourist information and environmental protection measures. According to Saifullah Jan, an activist who has represented the Kalash people at many forums, more resources need to be devoted to basic infrastructure like schools, roads, and health facilities to ensure the survival of these indigenous people. Also, less interference should be made into matters of farming and irrigation techniques, which according to him are something that the people are already well versed in.

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Pictures:



Girls dancing at the Joshi Spring festival by John Moore. Getty Images

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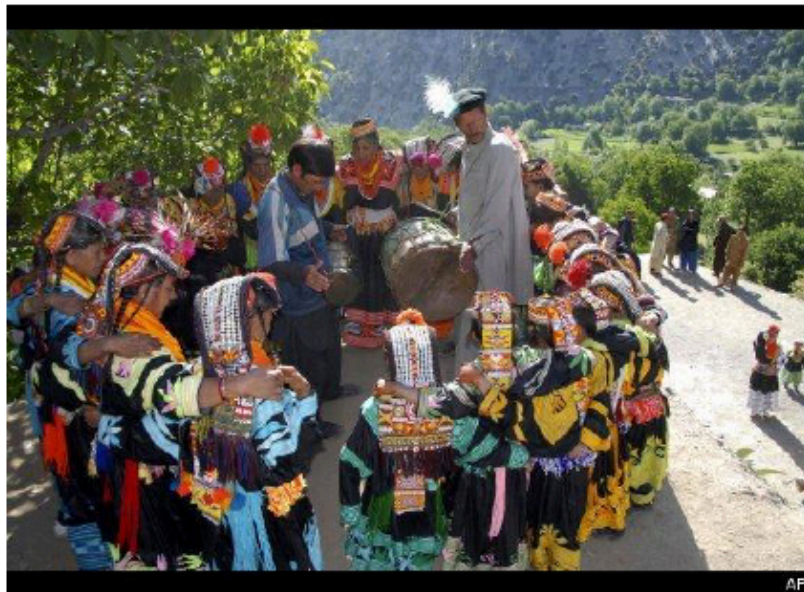
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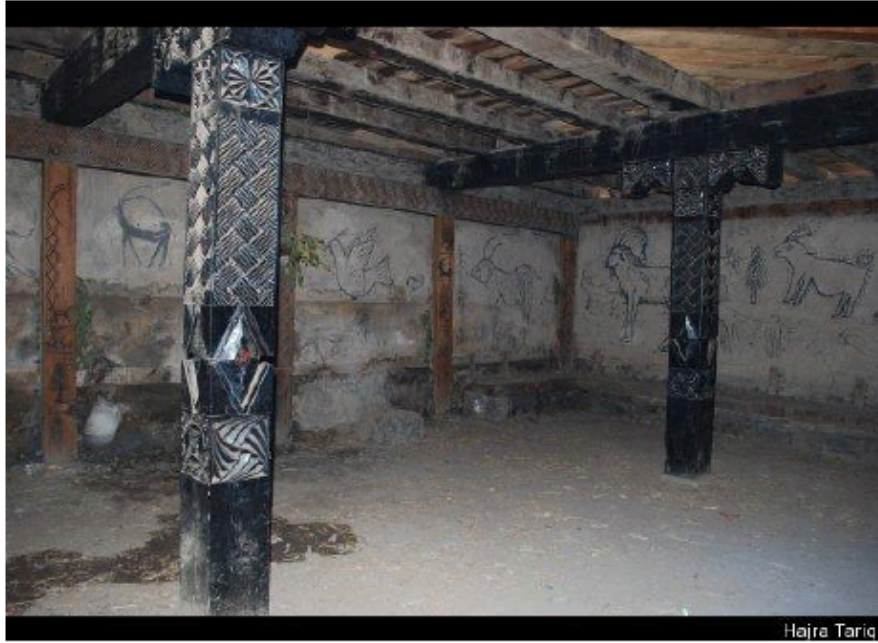
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AP

Traditional Kalasha dance by Gulhamad Farooqi. AP Photo

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A Kalasha Temple by Hajra Tariq

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