

The Kalasha Woman Today

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Abstract

This article is about the role of the Kalasha woman as a vital member of the family and the community she is living in. I will show that it is not only the Kalasha dresses and headdresses that distinguish all the female population from girlhood up to old age, but mostly and particularly their cheerful faces and freedom in making major decisions about their own lives and the welfare of their people. Therefore, an attempt will be made to document their appearance, their attitude and their way of living, as accurately as possible based on a fieldwork¹ study I conducted in April – June 2007 and August – September 2009 in the valleys of Bumburet, Rumbur and Birir, on the northwest border of Pakistan, where these wonderful people live.

1. The Kalasha woman's appearance

The first thing one can notice about these people is their friendliness and their cheerful disposition shown especially on female faces. No matter in what situation they are they will greet each other with a friendly smile and kiss on each other's hands, the Kalasha way.

Despite the harsh environment and rather primitive way of living –their only fuel being the wood they have to cut and carry on their back- their life is a constant festival. Apart from the religious celebrations held in all four seasons of the year, there is always a social event for them to celebrate and have a good time: whether there is a celebration for the new-born baby, or the six-year-old children entering the Kalasha society (**Butt sanbiyek**) or a wedding or even a funeral; whatever the event, they share the ceremony by dancing and singing or by playing the drum or drinking wine. In short, they enjoy life. And the primary role in the social and cultural life is played by the Kalasha woman.

First, what distinguishes her from the male members of the community is her headdress and her costume, both of which she wears no matter where she is: in the field, doing the hard work such as digging or irrigating the fields, in the cow stable, in the house, at the celebration. She will always look stylish and clean and extremely meticulous with her appearance. On special occasions such as the Spring festival (the Zhoshi), for example, she would paint her face with a cream made from burnt goat horn and butter. She would also make up her face and eyes with different color paints. The goat horn cream also has healing effects.

Let me now describe briefly their complete attire:

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¹ I came to know the Kalasha people in 2007 and 2009 when, during my sabbatical, I went to the Hindu Kush valleys, Himalayas, on a fieldwork programme regarding morphophonological research on the Kalasha language, sponsored by the Ministry of Education in Greece. So apart from my linguistic research on their language based on authentic dialogues between the Kalasha people, I had the chance to get to know them as I was actually living with them in their houses. To them all I am deeply grateful.

a) the Kalasha woman's dress (the **cew** = woven woolen dress; the **piran** = machine made cotton dress). For hundreds of years the Kalasha women had been wearing a black woolen garment, all woven by hand: fine dark woolen yarn: this required the spinning of six huge woolen balls: a hard and time-consuming work that needed at least two or three months to prepare but it was worth the effort as the cew lasted two or more years of hard daily use. The first cotton dress came into use only very recently, around the nineties (Sperber 1996: 384). The fabric is black, all machine and worn both summer and winter. So the all hand-woven woolen dress worn up until 1983 (Sperber 1996: 384) only by old women and very few young ones, has completely disappeared from daily use. It can be found, however, only in little shops for tourists. The new dress is now the **piran**. It is black –though very rarely I spotted some dark blue **pirans** worn by young women; and it is decorated with thin machine borders in age-old designs: the goat's horn (zigzag) and **mishari** (checked). Nowadays the thick soft thread in vivid colors (usually bright orange, green or purple and yellow) sewn on the top, the loose sleeves and the bottom of the **piran** in either checked or zigzag designs, sometimes in flower designs, makes the Kalasha dress indeed the most conspicuous part of their culture and identity. Sadly enough, however, during the Zhoshi festival last spring I noticed in some young women's **pirans** that instead of the threads, ready-made ribbons (usually with white color) were used. This innovation of course has saved time but it has eliminated the originality and uniqueness of the threads stitched closely together to form patterns of triangles and squares or other designs all inspired by the Kalasha women. Also, it is quite fashionable, as you can see in the photos, for some young women to cover their heads and part of their faces with a white shawl. When asked, my consultant told me that young girls do this out of shyness, especially when they come from another village. However, in the past, the **carushdi** (a shawl made of white wool) was worn around the body covering the left shoulder and attached with a pin. Nowadays, usually in the winter time the Kalasha women do wear a brown woolen shawl, the **tsaddar**, round the body tied on the left shoulder without covering the face. Another innovation is the **bhut**, a kind of shalvar worn under their dresses. Ten years ago this was unknown to the Kalasha women.

b) The headdresses: these are the **shushut** and the **kupas**. The **shushut** is a ring around the head from which a 'tail' hangs down the back. It is less formal than the **kupas** and is worn every day all day long and it is taken off only when the woman goes to bed or when in mourning. A rough description of the **shushut**: A ring made of woven cloth, decorated with three rows of cowrie shells with thin chains or bright color beads along and between them. The **shushut** and the tail hanging from it are firmly woven. In the past, I was told, they were made from fringes stitched together. The **shushut** differs from place to place. For example, in Bumburet and Rumbur valleys, the row of cowrie shell crosses is surrounded by bright color beads and placed at the top of the tail. Then on the tail there are rows of buttons, bells and beads and a shield design. Now in these valleys the shield is disappearing. In Birir valley (the remotest one), the tail is decorated with a long row of cowrie shell crosses and two shield designs and rows of beads and bells above the fringes.

The **kupas**, the major headdress, is always worn with the **shushut** underneath. It is a woolen cap hanging down the back. It is extremely heavy as it is all covered by cowrie shells and other decorations. The **kupas** has a solemn, a ceremonial character. The Kalasha woman will always wear it in all festivals as well as other ceremonial events, while dancing. During a funeral and also in mourning all the women of the same clan, apart from wearing their dress loose, also take off their **shushut** (as I have mentioned) and wear only the **kupas** until the end of the mourning period and two days before the following festival.

The **pat'i**, that is the woman's belt, is a long woven woolen or cotton belt with borders and long fringes wound around the hips, letting the **piran** hang loose and baggy. The **pat'i** is about 3,50 m. long and 13-15 cm wide and it ends in about 1 m. long fringes. The woman takes it off only before going to sleep. The small Kalasha girls start learning how to weave it on the loom at the age of six or even five. The loom consists of two long posts with holes punched out at regular spaces for the various warp lengths. The warp is divided by a stick which is taken out after weaving and then the remaining loops can be twisted into fringes. I noticed that the loom is placed outside the house leaning on a wall as it is considered as **pragata** (= impure). This cultural inequality has originated from the pretext of a woman's natural biological idiosyncrasy, i.e. the blood of menstruation and parturition which are considered rather dangerous and polluting. For this reason, all Kalasha females from puberty up to the end of menstruation are considered impure, especially during their menstruation period and at childbirth. Then they must go and stay in the **bashali**, an isolated house usually outside the village and in some villages near the cemeteries. This seclusion results in many restrictions in their daily life and participation in religious rites and festivals.

Women stay in the bashali during their menstruation and for twenty one days after giving birth (in Birir three months!). During their stay there they look very happy doing hand-crafts like the shuman as they do not have to do any household chores! Food is actually brought to them and left outside the bashali. So for them, as I saw them with their cheerful faces, the bashali period is like a holiday as they do not have to work (not even to cook, for example!).

The **shuman**: These are woolen ribbons finger-woven without a loom. They are used as a woman's or a girl's present in order to honor a guest or an honorable or beloved person.

The Kalasha woman's **jewelry**. It is called **ma'ik** and consists of numerous colorful necklaces made from bright color beads and strong threads all hand-made by the Kalasha women. They are worn by all females of any age. The older the woman the more the ma'ik. They are worn around their bare neck and may weigh from one to four kilos! The ma'ik are an integral part of their every day costume whether in the fields working or in the ceremonies and festivals. Some girls and older women may also wear bracelets made from the same material as their necklaces and fastened with small buttons.

The Kalasha woman's **hairstyle**. They are extremely meticulous about their hair-style. They wash their long hair in the Kunar river and then after combing it thoroughly they make five plaits, the **cu'i**: one hanging down sideways on the forehead; two on top of the head hanging on the sides behind the ears and two starting from the back of the head just above the neck and hanging down the back. During the Zhoshi festivals in May I noticed some young women, students at Chitral College or other already educated Kalasha women, wearing their hair only in three plaits instead of five. Does this mean one more loss of Kalasha culture because of education? I can hardly believe that!

II. The Kalasha woman as an integral part of the family and the community.

After the initiation day, the **goshnik**, when the four year old girl officially puts on adult clothing, that is the piran and the shushut (not the kupas as yet!), the Kalasha girl is trained to face her responsibilities in the family she is raised by. Her first task will be to bring water from the stream for cooking or to take the metal cups to the stream or to the nearby tap (if it is working) for washing. Gradually heavier chores enter her life: Taking her clothes down to the river and washing them; or collecting firewood and then carrying it on her back in a goat hair basket to her house; or cutting grass for the cow or baking the Kalasha bread, the **tasili**; or getting involved in farming. Whatever the task she is always cheerful and happy with what she is doing.

When reaching puberty, unless she decides to leave her village and go to college in Chitral town, the Kalasha girl will get married at the age of 16 or 17 (sometimes at 14!) with the young man she chooses. Occasionally, marriages can be done by arrangement. The newly married young woman will not immediately move into her husband's family home. She may go back to her father's home for some time and then come back to her husband's family home where she normally settles down after the birth of her first born.

The Kalasha female's life -from early childhood up to very old age- is intertwined with hard labor. The six-year-old girl (also the boy) will wake up at 5:00 in the morning to fetch water from the nearby stream for washing or small twigs for the fire so that her mother can cook the tasili (bread) and the tea or milk for her and her brothers or sisters. Then the young female pupil will have to struggle to school either downhill or uphill, walking on narrow uneven and precipitous paths or cliffs for one mile or five depending on the distance-sometimes she will have to walk to the next village! Around early afternoon she will repeat the morning chores plus helping her mother with hand-crafts, for example, knitting the shuman (=ribbon). Or she will go to the field of corn or maize and work by her mother's side, digging under the hot afternoon sun or changing the flow of water in the channels in the field – an irrigation task performed daily exclusively by females. Even during this time she will be wearing the black piran (her dress) and the heavy headdress (the shushut only) and jewelry (the ma'ik) around her naked neck.

There is hardly any time for play. Her toys are usually small rounded stones to play a game of jacks or bigger stones wrapped with old cloth. Later on in the evening all the family gather together to eat the meal that her mother has made – usually beans with rice and the tasili, the typical Kalasha bread – just maize flour in water, baked on a heated stove by bare hands (tasili made of wheat flour or walnut tasili, cheese, butter and meat are eaten only with guests or on special occasions, such as wedding or funeral ceremonies). After that, the little girl with her elder sisters will take the pots and the cups to the nearby streams and wash them all in plain water.

This is a routine chore together with the washing of her own clothes. She takes them down to the stream or river and washes them thoroughly with a bar of soap by beating them hard on a piece of wood or stone and then she hangs them on a fence or trees. Sometimes for heavy washing a large pot with boiling water is put next to the stream. The extra task of the little girl is to keep the fire going.

One may wonder what is it that keeps the Kalasha girl or woman of any age always lively and with such a cheerful face! Quite often I was amazed to see them enjoying themselves in sewing their own clothes on the sewing-machine or weaving the *pati* (belt) outside the house, on the fresh grass of their yard next to the cow and at the same time breastfeeding a toddler! Well, the answer is obvious! It is their own temperament, their character and personality, their rigor and disposition. All this high spirit is reflected in their unique dancing during the festivals for which they prepare their looks and appearance a bit ahead of time.

In the Kalasha language there are no names for the days of the week, nor for the months of the year. The main festivals (Lievre & Loude 1980) take place according to natural events of the season. In spring the **Zhoshi** festival (May 12-), in summer the **Uc'aw** (August) and in winter the **Chawmos** (December) which is the largest and most religious one. Although the Kalasha woman is excluded and actually banned from the sanctuaries and religious (Lievre 1996) or shamanistic practices due to the notion of impurity associated with the woman, none of these festivals can be enjoyed without the presence of the Kalasha female. It is the conspicuous attire and her vitality, the clapping, the songs and the dancing that keep the festivals alive.

I would like to close this paper with the issue of freedom (Maggi 2004) with which the Kalasha woman is identified. The fourteen or seventeen year-old married girl is free to decide to leave her husband's house if she is not happy or if she is not treated well or even if she falls in love with another man. In the latter case she may do **alash'ing** i.e. elope with another man who is going to be her second husband, who will have to donate the double amount of items such as pots, garments (bright clothes) and even guns to her first husband. Is this ability of the Kalasha woman to dissolve her marriage – for all the reasons I mentioned - is it a kind of female power over the male authority in a community surrounded by an environment of strict religious laws and subordination to the dominant male?

I can hardly assume this. My personal view while living with them in their villages is that the Kalasha woman is born free to choose to marry at 16 or to carry on with her studies and finish higher education. Her tradition simply supports this freedom of mind and thought, freedom of major decisions, whereby she does not have to cover her face with the *purdah*. I believe that freedom stems from her own will and character and it does not matter if she wears the Kalasha costume or not.

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Appendix

The following photos (taken in 2009) indicate the Kalasha woman's dress and head dress as well as their domestic and outdoor activities. They belong to the archive of my fieldwork study in Documentary Linguistics regarding the Kalasha language.





