

CVR-25

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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KALASH RITES OF SPRING

by Carol Rose

Later, Later
I will steal apples
and be beaten.

Later, later
I will steal apricots
and be beaten.

But beating is nothing
for me,
I love apples!
I love apricots!

And the night sky is filled
with twinkling white
mulberries.

Oh, I am a young man!

-- Kalash song
of Spring



During the night, Kalash girls and boys
decorate a temple with flowering branches.

Village boys pound on my door at one o'clock in the morning.
"Sister, sister!" they call. "Come quickly, Joshi is starting!"

Stumbling in the darkness, I light a kerosene lantern and
venture to the village center. At least 50 boys and girls
between the ages of five and 15 have assembled there, holding

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fresh green leaves and yellow flowers. Three older boys beat drums in triple rhythm -- BAM duh-duh -- calling the inhabitants of the Rumbur Valley to begin *Joshi*, the Kalash festival of Spring.

In three remote Himalayan valleys of northern Pakistan -- Rumbur, Bumburet and Birir -- the next three days will be a time of renewal after an unusually harsh winter. For the last 4,000 pagan worshippers in this mostly Muslim part of the world, the festival is a chance to welcome Spring with singing, dancing and acts of devotion to the Kalash gods and goddesses.

Lighting their way with burning branches, the children march toward the temple of *Jestak*, the goddess of fertility. The temple is a typical Kalash building: constructed of field stones and oak beams stacked alternately to withstand earthquakes. Children swarm around the front of the temple and climb on the flat mud roof, reaching over one another to wedge leaves and flowers in the crevices of the temple's outer wall. Within minutes, the small building is covered with yellow and green foliage. This is the first of many offerings that will be made to the Kalash gods over the next three days.

After the temple is decorated, the children skip back to the center of town, laughing and frolicking in the half-moon light. Girls dance in groups of three, arms linked as they spin first to the left, then to the right, and back again to the left. The

boys stand shoulder-to-shoulder, dancing in a circle around the perimeter of the village square. Every so often, a group of boys rushes up, encircles a cluster of girls, and shouts: "Ha, ha, ha, ha!"



A Kalash boy carries fresh branches to the all-night children's dance that begins the festival.

Then the boys sing a song (shown above) about picking apples, apricots and mulberries before harvest. I gaze at the night sky and notice for the first time that the stars really do resemble white mulberries ready for picking.

FESTIVAL PREPARATIONS

My host in the Rumbur Valley is Saifullah Jan, the elected leader of the Kalash and my dear friend. Saifullah treats me a member of his family. I eat with his relatives around an open fire and spend long hours visiting his relatives and neighbors. Food is scarce after the long winter, so corn-meal chappatis (unleaven bread) and salted tea are standard fare. In this regard, I receive guest treatment: wheat chappatis and sugar in my tea.

Saifullah describes the weeks of preparation that go into the celebration: "Before Joshi one month we sacrifice a cow to the god Sajigor [the protector of all things in the valley]," he says. "Once the sacrifice is made, women are allowed to start work in the fields for the new year."

Already, the winter wheat is a rich green carpet and tiny shoots of corn have broken through the rocky soil. In addition to planting the fields, Kalash women have been stitching new dresses, weaving woolen belts, and decorating head-dresses in anticipation of Joshi.

In the meantime, the shepherds have been collecting milk from the goats for ten days. During the festival, they will distribute it to the women of their clan, apportioning shares based on need. Men who have surplus grain or cheese will share it with their relatives at this time.

The day before the festival, young girls from the village go to the forest to collect edible leaves which they grind with walnuts and flour to make a special Joshi bread. I don't know the name of the leaves, but some taste bitter while others are sweet. The bread will eaten by the children at the crack of dawn



Kalash woman weaves by hand a belt in preparation for the Spring festival.

tomorrow -- after a full night of dancing and decorating the Jestak temple.

DAY ONE

A purification ritual, Fairy stories, God of the Honeybees

The morning after the children's dance, I stroll by the canal that runs through Saifullah's village of Balanguru. Suddenly my Kalash "uncle" -- or Moa -- runs out of the local mill to tell me that I must not touch the grain or go to the mill today. The men of the village are preparing pure bread which they will give to the god Mahandeo -- protector of honeybees -- during the festival tomorrow. The touch of a woman will ruin the ceremony.

Standing at a distance, I watch the men purify the mill: one man burns a juniper branch and stands on the roof, turning round as he says: "Switch, switch, switch" -- which means: "pure, pure, pure." Later in the day, the men cook chappatis on an open hearth in preparation for the offering.

In the mid-morning I follow a group of Kalash men to the top of a ridge that overlooks the Rumbur valley. At a saddle in the ridge, the Pakistani government has built a cement platform with a tin roof over the traditional Kalash dancing ground. Soon after it was built, the Kalash men tried to restore their open-air dancing by tearing down the structure. They were arrested for tampering with government property. Exactly the problem with outside assistance, says Saifullah: "The government builds something and then it doesn't belong to the Kalash anymore."

A CIRCLE OF WEALTH

Among other things, Kalash religious festivals serve to disperse food from families who have a surplus to those who are in need.

"The festival is a time of wealth distribution," says Saifullah. "The rich man who has wheat, milk or cheese gives it to the poor. Milk is given on the day of the festival, but the grains are distributed privately three or four days before by the head of the family. A Kalash rich man does not consider wealth to be his own. If someone has a lot of goods, he gives a feast for the community to please the gods. He will not keep it for himself. The wealth must flow in a circle.

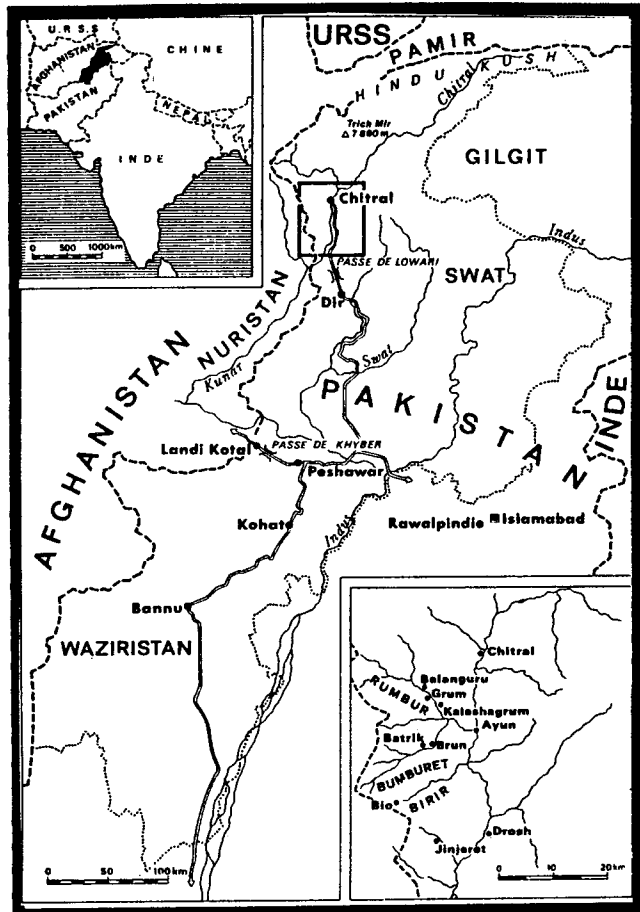
"In Kalash society every man is equal," he adds. "Sometimes I have extra ghee [clarified butter], which I give away, and the next time someone helps me. There is no shame in poverty here, for we are all the same. If you have something and do not share it, the gods will be angry."

Even with a tin roof, the dancing ground provides a wonderful vista of the valley. Sheer cliffs drop on either side, affording views of the upper and lower valley. The white-capped mountains of the high pastures are visible in the upper valley, the Rumbur river cuts through the valley floor. The hillsides are covered with trees: walnut, apricot, apple, pear, mulberry, holly, pine, oak and cedar. This is how I imagine the Garden of Eden.

An open-air temple stands on the ridge 20 feet higher than the dancing platform. It is the Shinmo temple, a 12-foot-long structure made of branches, from where the fairies sit and watch the dancing.¹

Another 20 feet higher is the temple to the god Mahandeo, protector of the honeybees. It is also made of branches, but on the "altar" I can see a carved horse head, representing the horse that the Kalash believe Mahandeo used to ride when he was visible to this world.

Women are not allowed to walk near either of these temples, but I watch from the dancing ground as the men decorate the Shinmo temple with leaves and branches. When the men descend, a few people dance for about two hours, forming separate lines for



MAP OF THE KALASH VALLEYS

(Source: Loude & Lievre, *Kalash Solstice*, p. 9, Lok Virsa, Islamabad)

¹ The Kalash believe the fairies were created when Adam and Bibi Hawa (Eve) first had children. While Adam was away one day, Bibi Hawa gave birth to 74 children. Thinking this number excessive, she hid 60 of them on the roof. Adam was dismayed to find only 14 children when he returned. But when Bibi Hawa went to fetch the other 60, they had become fairies. Some fairies are good. Others are mischievous and take possession of a person's body, requiring an exorcism.



Kalash girls: A Kupas headdress on the far left, a shushoot headband in the middle. Small girls have their heads shaved, except for a single braid off the forehead.

men and women. The dancers stand arm-in-arm and chant songs. Some women invite me to join them, but I feel shy to dance in western dress. Anyway, everyone tells me that tomorrow is the beginning of the big celebration.

DAY TWO

A new dress, Dancing begins, A message in a dream

This morning Saifullah's wife, Weshlam Gul, is filling chappatis with aged goat cheese that she has been storing for two years wrapped in willow bark tied shut with juniper string and submerged in a secret place in the canal. She tells her sons to carry the cheese and fresh milk to her husband's sisters -- the clan sisters -- as required for the Joshi festival. Then she offers me a bowl of fresh goat milk and cheese. Curds float in the sour milk and the cheese is extremely pungent. I gulp them greedily and feel my blood-sugar level soar.

Weshlam Gul then opens a wall cupboard and pulls out a Kalash dress she has sewn for me. It is stunning: about nine meters of black cloth with a V-shaped neck in front and back. There is pink, green and orange stitching on the collar, the sleeves and the hem. The dress is about two feet longer than my

height, but is hoisted up by an 8-inch-wide woven wool belt. The excess material hangs over the belt, creating a wonderful storage area in the bodice of the dress. (Women often pull their arms inside their baggy sleeves, shuffling around in the bodice of their dresses for various belongings, which they then dump out through the sleeve.)

Next Weshlam Gul braids my hair in traditional Kalash fashion. She divides it into five plaits -- two on the left side of my head, two on the right, and one in the center of my forehead. She braids each section, looping the center braid over my right temple and holding it in place with a woven head-band. This band is decorated with cowrie-shells, bells and buttons and extends in a six-inch-wide strip down my back. Kalash women wear this headband every day.

On top of the head-band, Weshlam Gul places the formal Kalash festival headdress: a Kupas. This is a saddle-shaped woven headdress, about eight inches wide and two feet in length. Like the headband, it is covered with cowrie shells and buttons, sewn in special patterns that vary from woman to woman. Women can recognize one another's Kupas, although all Kupas (except those sold to tourists, which the women say are intentionally made "ugly") have a circular medallion in the center, which represents female power.²

On the top of the headdress, Weshlam Gul has sewn a large red pom-pom and attached blue feathers, a sign that the wearer of the hat is someone of great honor. I feel unworthy to wear such an elaborate Kupas. But when I realize that people will recognize it as Weshlam Gul's pattern, I decide to wear it with as much dignity as I can muster.

Finally, Weshlam Gul hangs two dozen plastic- and glass-bead necklaces around my neck. Most Kalash women wear at least thirty necklaces on an typical day and even more for festivals. But Saifullah tells Weshlam Gul that I won't be comfortable with too much jewelry. He is right. Adorned in a new dress, five braids, two head-dresses and at least five pounds of necklaces, my initial challenge is simple to hold my head upright under the

² The medallion on the Kalash headdress represents the story of a Kalash woman named Shuragali. In the olden days, an evil spirit roamed the Kalash valleys, eating any woman who gave birth. Frightened of the evil spirit, the women stopped having babies and the Kalash were threatened with extinction. But one woman, Shuragali, was not afraid and she got pregnant. When she went to the birthing house, she dug a hole in front of the door and filled it with hot cinders. When the evil spirit came to eat her, it fell into the hole and died. The medallion on the Kupas represents both this hole and a fighting shield.

strain. But there isn't much time to practice. The festival has started.

I share the anticipation of the villagers as we climb the steep slope to the dancing grounds. When I reach the top of the hill I barely have time to catch my breath before someone pulls me into a circle dance. The women and men form separate lines, standing shoulder to shoulder with their arms wrapped around one another's waists. As the drummers beat a rapid rhythm, the women move in unison to the right -- stepping with their right foot in front, left foot in back. If you think it sounds easy, try doing it with your arms outstretched for 15 minutes, which is the typical length for a single dance.

As we move in a circle around the dance floor, the women and men chant words that I don't understand, but the tones are A-flat and G, over and over again. This minor melody rings in my ears for many days after the festival.

Saifullah says this echo is the voices of fairies in the forest.

Throughout the day, village elders gather in the center of the dance ground, singing songs that tell the history of the Kalash, relay recent events or air grievances [see CVR-26]. Soon after my arrival, the people gather around an old woman who sings in a rasping but strong voice about her recent dream. She says



Kalash women dance in groups of three. The medallion of female power is visible on the back of their headdresses.

she was given a message by a woman who died last January in childbirth. Saifullah paraphrases the dream-inspired song for me: The dead woman sends greetings to her father-in-law, admonishes her husband not to be sad, and promises to give the 30 years of life she lost to her surviving daughter. As the old woman sings, the women of the village begin to weep. The men then form a circle around us, locking arms and moving slowly around the perimeter of the dance floor while they chant in a minor key.

AN APOLOGY TO THE DEAD

At dusk on the second day of *Joshi*, I am sitting in my room writing in my journal when a Kalash man appears and motions for me to follow him. We walk through the village of Balanguru as the sun begins to drop behind the ridge. We cross the raging river on a slippery log, scramble up the river bank and pass through a wheat field. I have no idea where we are going, but I am curious rather than afraid. I know instinctively that a Kalash man will not harm me.

After 20 minutes, we reach a gathering of people on a mud rooftop of a house. The men sit on one side, the women on the other. I join the women. Then I see the body of a dead woman laid out on a woven rope-bed. Her face is uncovered, but a *Kupas* is on her head and a shiny blue-and-gold cloth shrouds her body. A village man is standing at the foot of her bed, gesturing and yelling something at the dead woman.

After a few minutes, Saifullah joins me to explain what is going on. The woman died today after a long illness. However, because she died on the day of a festival it is impossible to have the normal 3-day funeral ceremony before burial. The man is shouting at the dead woman that while all human beings have to die, she died on the first day of a festival so it is forbidden to have a funeral for her. Instead, the village will bury her right away and get on with the celebration. He says she must try to understand and forgive them.

"This is a rule," says Saifullah. "There can be no funeral ceremony during a festival."

After the man asks for an apology from the dead woman, the other women gather around the body and chant for about five minutes. Then the men carry the body and the bed to the burial grounds, where the bed is placed upside-down over the grave. The Kalash believe that the soul of a dead person goes to the Palar mountain, a snow-covered peak in the upper valley.

"A few days before someone dies, the people who live near the mountain can hear the noise of the door to the mountain opening," says Saifullah.

After the men carry away the body, the women walk silently to the river where we dip our hands into the water three times. As we amble down the hillside, I see dozens of cowrie-shell-covered headdresses stretching before and behind me. My friend, a young woman named Jilin-bibi, takes my hand as we walk and I feel as though I belong.



Kalash men and women hold hands in a snake dance.

Meanwhile, it begins to rain and a fierce wind blows from the upper valley across the high ridge where we stand. To my amazement, when the song ends after about 20 minutes, the rain stops, the clouds melt away, and the sun begins to shine. It seems the gods are listening to our songs.

After the dream-song, the drummers immediately beat a wild cadence. The women shout and laugh, running to form groups of three or four. Two young girls grab me for a dance I call "Lei la lo." As the drums pound furiously, we spin first to the left, then to the right, then back again to the left, and so on, singing: "Lei la lo!" The men and boys attempt to break up the dancing of the women by forming their own lines and charging at us -- shouting: "Ha, ha, ha, ha!" It is wonderfully playful and flirtatious dancing, although we women retain our dignity and refuse even to acknowledge the boisterous men and boys who attempt to disrupt our steps. As the drums beat faster and faster, more and more people join the dance, so that it becomes nearly impossible to spin around without clobbering someone or losing my kupas. Still, the dance goes on, the dust is kicked higher and higher, the din becomes deafening, and the dancing ground is transformed into a blur of movement and color.

After a couple of hours of this, Saifullah asks if I would like some tea. I soon discover that having tea is a polite way of asking someone if they want to drink local wine. In any case, I do. It is a fairly dry white cider, with a bit of

grape remnants floating in it -- what the Kalash praise highly as the "flower of the grape."

After drinking the wine, I return to sit with some of the women from Saifullah's village of Balanguru. "Where have you been?" asks a woman named Sybor-bibi.

"Drinking wine," I reply, knowing that virtually all Kalash men and women partake.

"Oh sister, that is very, very bad for a woman to do," says Sybor-bibi, shaking her head.

Embarrassed, I say: "Well, I didn't have much. And anyway, it was very good."

The women laugh loudly and I realize that they are teasing me.

Then they offer me some snuff -- a mixture of tobacco and juniper ash that they place between their teeth and gums. I decline, saying it is "too strong" for me.

Sybor-bibi slaps me on the back and says: "Okay, sister, you drink your wine and I will take my snuff."

DAY THREE

A call to the gods, Selecting the Roi, Kalash humor

The men and children arrive at the dancing grounds early on the third and final day of Joshi. By mid-morning, the celebration is in full swing. Once again, the village elders gather to sing in the center of the dance floor while the young people dance around the perimeter.

Today the mood is more wild than yesterday. This is the most important day of Joshi. Everyone is wearing new clothes. The men wear new pajama-style shalwar kameez and woolen hats with a rolled brim, in which they stick flowers, branches or feathers. The women have new dresses, feathers in their Kupas and many have painted dots on their foreheads and around their eyes, often in spirals or geometric patterns. The older women paint their faces with charcoal made from powdered goat horn. Young girls use brightly colored paints purchased from the local store.

Today I dance with the older women, many of whom were absent yesterday. In contrast to the girls, these matrons dance with a quiet grace and dignity that the young men dare not disturb. Still, the women cannot resist teasing me. When I ask one woman her name, she replies that her name is "Clumsy."

"No, sister," I reply. "Your dancing is beautiful. I am just learning how to dance. My name should be Clumsy."

"Yes, you are right, sister," she says, laughing. "But you are very tall and beautiful. So, your name will be Clumsy [Dapadoli] and my name will be Short and Fat [Dapdapana]. If we dance together, we will be short, fat and clumsy."

In the mid-afternoon, the men climb the ridge to the Mahandeo temple while the women continue dancing below. Saifullah earlier described to me what goes on at the all-male prayer ritual: "We take the pure bread made by the men along with some cheese and give it to Mahandeo," he says. "The boys wash their hands to make themselves pure, then put three pieces of the bread on the altar and three pieces on a fire of burning juniper. One boy from each family -- usually the youngest boy who is able -- is chosen to deliver the bread. Then we pray: 'Oh Master Mahandeo, bring honeybees to our valley'."



A Kalash woman holds her walnut branch in preparation for the prayer to the god Mahandeo.

After two hours of praying, the men select the Roi for the year: young men who will volunteer to guard the grapes, apricots, apples and walnuts from anyone who would eat them before they are ready for harvest. If a Roi finds anyone stealing the fruits, he can impose any fine he desires upon the family -- which the Roi keeps for himself as payment.

"I was a Roi for four years," says Saifullah. "I made a lot of fines because I love to roam the valley. Oh, people were fed up with me! I used to take as payment the big pots and pans that are given in marriage so that I had a whole house full of such pots which I could give to people for their marriage. People were so angry with me, but what could they do? I usually caught the young people stealing and the parents had to pay."



Kalash men hold branches in preparation for the prayer to the god Mahandeo.

The Roi also are responsible for killing the goats during the ten religious sacrifices held each year. The Roi then are allowed to keep the skins of the sacrificial goats for use in their houses.

When the men descend from praying at the Mahandeo temple, they gather on one side of the dancing platform facing the upper valley. The women stand behind them. Everyone holds a walnut branch in their hands, shaking it toward the upper valley. One man, whose lineage knows a secret song of prayer to the gods, silently sings as he shakes an enormous branch at the front of the crowd. Everyone else chants. After about 10 minutes of chanting, everyone throws their branch into the air.

Immediately, the drumming begins. Weshlam Gul grabs my arm and pulls me onto the dance floor. A group of other women from Saifullah's village protest, pulling me in the other direction. I have no idea what is going on, but decide to stay with Weshlam Gul insofar as she is my host. Soon the women form two lines. We hold hands and snake around the dance floor. The men count which line has more women.

I later discover that the two lines represent a competition between the upper and lower portions of the valley. As a "resident" of Balanguru village, I should join with Saifullah's

family in the upper valley. But Weshlam Gul, playing a prank on her husband, has taken me with her to rejoin her father's family from the lower valley. My joining with the lower valley elicits a lot of teasing from the villagers of Balanguru, but I reply that it doesn't matter since the upper valley has won the contest anyway. At least I didn't let go of the hand of the women on either side of me, which would have meant death for one of us this year.

Soon after the snake dance, the sun slips behind the mountains and the people reluctantly turn toward home. The men stop by to visit the family of the woman who died yesterday. The women return to the villages to light the home fires. In a few days, the shepherds will leave the villages to take their goats to the high pastures for the summer. The women will move to their summer homes in the upper valley.

I sit on the rooftop and watch as the stars appear, like mulberries, overhead. Although the singing has stopped, I hear the echo of drums and voices in the surrounding forest. Perhaps the fairies are still dancing.

