

CVR-27

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Islamabad  
Pakistan  
June 4, 1992

**PROGRESS AND CULTURE**  
**The Kalash Struggle to Survive**

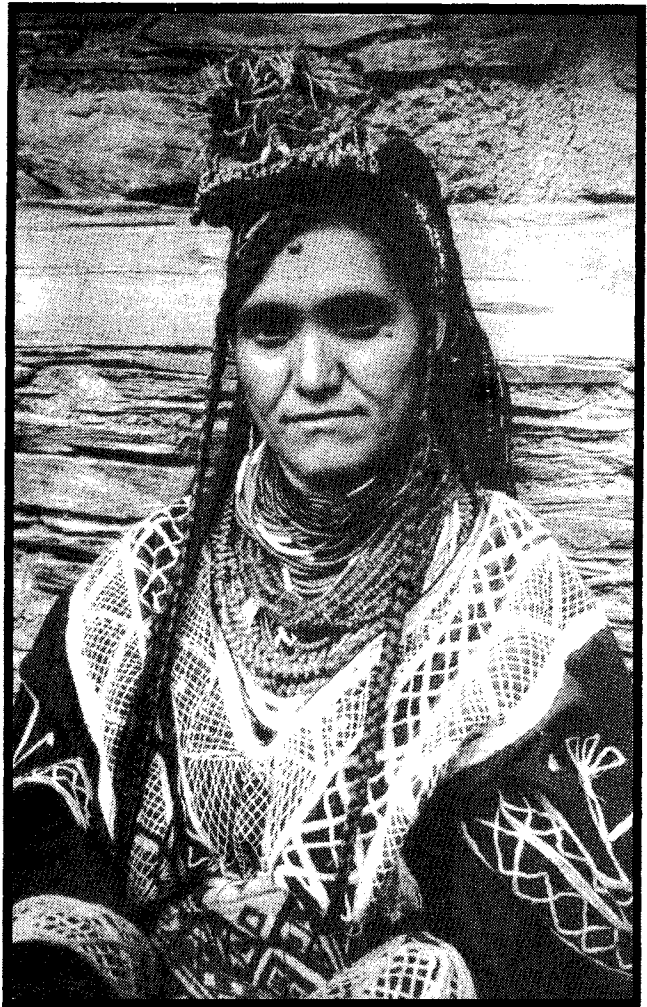
by Carol Rose

Ten years ago the government of Pakistan tried to help the Kalash people by replacing their open-air dancing grounds with a cement floor and tin roof. The idea was to keep rain off of the dancers. Many Kalash were appalled; the new structure closed off the sky. But when a group of Kalash men tried to tear down the roof they were arrested for tampering with government property.

The incident illustrates the problem with outside assistance, says Saifullah Jan, the elected leader of the Kalash people: "The government builds something and then it doesn't belong to the Kalash anymore."

As the last 4,000 pagans in the Hindu Kush, the Kalash are besieged by people and organizations trying to modernize them. Balancing this pressure for "progress" against the need for cultural preservation is perhaps the greatest challenge facing the Kalash.

"We don't need money or technology from the outside," says Saifullah. "We need legal protection."



A Kalash woman from the Rumbur Valley.

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The Rumbur Valley

#### FIGHTING FOR THE FOREST

Protecting Kalash rights to the land is the impetus behind a 10-year court case fought by Saifullah and his lawyers on behalf of the Rumbur Valley, one of the three Kalash valleys in northern Pakistan.

The case started when the Government of Pakistan authorized private companies to log the rich forests of Rumbur. By law, owners of forest land are paid 60 percent of the royalties on the lumber, the government takes the other 40 percent. But soon after the logging started, the nearby Muslim city of Ayun -- located at the entrance to the three Kalash valleys -- filed a case in the district court demanding half of the royalties as part-owners of the three valleys.

The amount of money is \$400,000. But much more is at stake than cash.

"If we win the case, in the future this will be our territory. The Kalash people can say this is their valley," says Saifullah. "If we lose, it will be the end of Kalash society. We will find no more fields."

It is no exaggeration to say that Saifullah is obsessed by the case: "I am always thinking about this. In all your life you maybe have a chance to do one thing that will make a

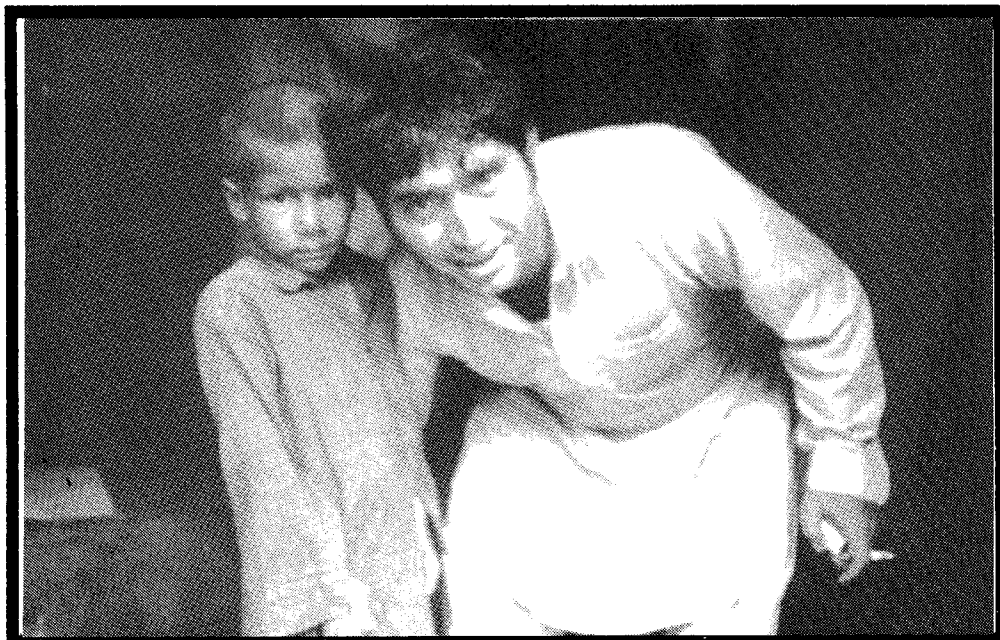
difference in maybe 50 or 100 years. I am 32 years old. In another 30 years I will die. So, for me the case doesn't really matter. I am fighting to make strong roots for my grandsons.

"If we can turn the valleys into a reserve for future people, then the Kalash will survive for another 1,000 years," he says. "If we lose the case, we will be homeless in 100 years.

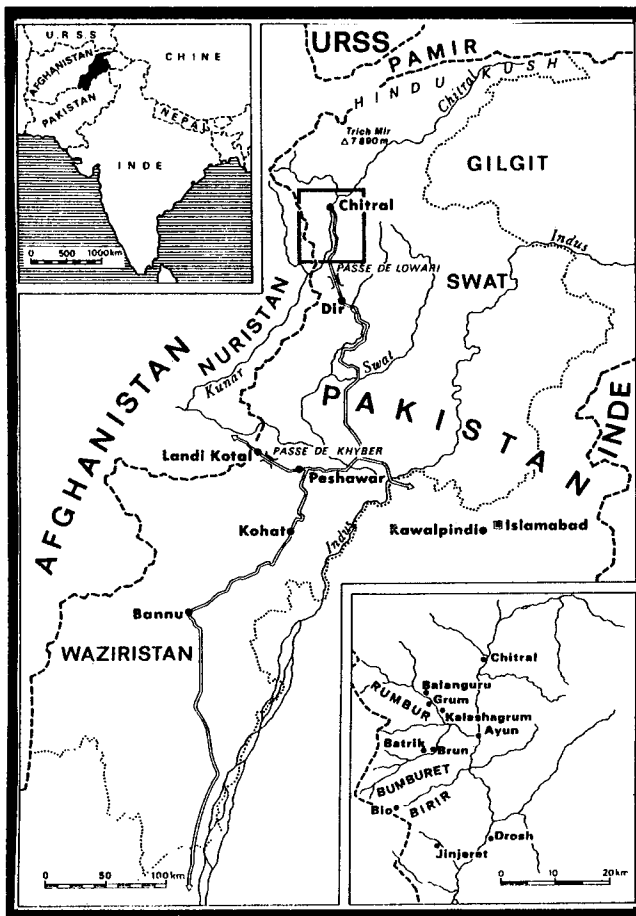
"My main interest is not in the money. I would never sell the forest for money," says Saifullah. "But I want this valley for the Kalash. If we win the case, we have jurisdiction and we can tell the government not to cut any more trees."

There is little doubt that the law is on the side of the Kalash: Pakistani law grants ownership of forest land to the people who live upon it. The people of Ayun do not live in the Rumbur valley, the Kalash do. Nonetheless, Pakistan is an Islamic country with Muslim judges -- many of whom have friends in Ayun.

At times, the case has disintegrated into armed conflict between the Kalash and the people of Ayun. Last January, for example, men from Ayun arrived in the Rumbur valley in jeeps and started hauling firewood from the forest. The danger was not in the theft itself, but in the possibility that the Ayun people would claim jurisdiction over the valley by showing that they



"I am fighting to make strong roots for my grandsons." Saifullah Jan and his son Sher White.



**MAP OF THE KALASH VALLEYS**

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

collected firewood from the forest.

The Kalash mobilized immediately. "I gathered the people of Rumbur and explained to them how collecting firewood was tied to the court case," says Saifullah.

The first battle was fought with sticks and stones. Three hundred Kalash men drove away a group of men from Ayun. Within days, an Afghan refugee arrived in the Rumbur valley with a cache of weapons; He had heard rumors of a conflict.

Armed with 30 Kalashnikovs and one rocket launcher, the Kalash established a 100-man patrol at the entrance to the Rumbur valley. The local police abandoned their check-post and rumors went out that the entire valley was full of bombs. After two months and 10 clashes, the people of Ayun stopped stealing the firewood.

Saifullah was charged with interfering with disputed property, but later released due to a lack of evidence. If convicted, he would have gone to jail -- not for the first time. He spent a week in jail for his role in trying to tear down the tin roof over the dancing grounds.

## **MATERIAL CULTURE AND PROGRESS**

Saifullah embodies the tension between the old and young generations of Kalash. He is young, well-educated and familiar with both Pakistani and Western culture. Yet he reflects the older generation of Kalash who reject the rapid introduction of modern technology into Kalash life -- including such basics as plumbing and electricity.

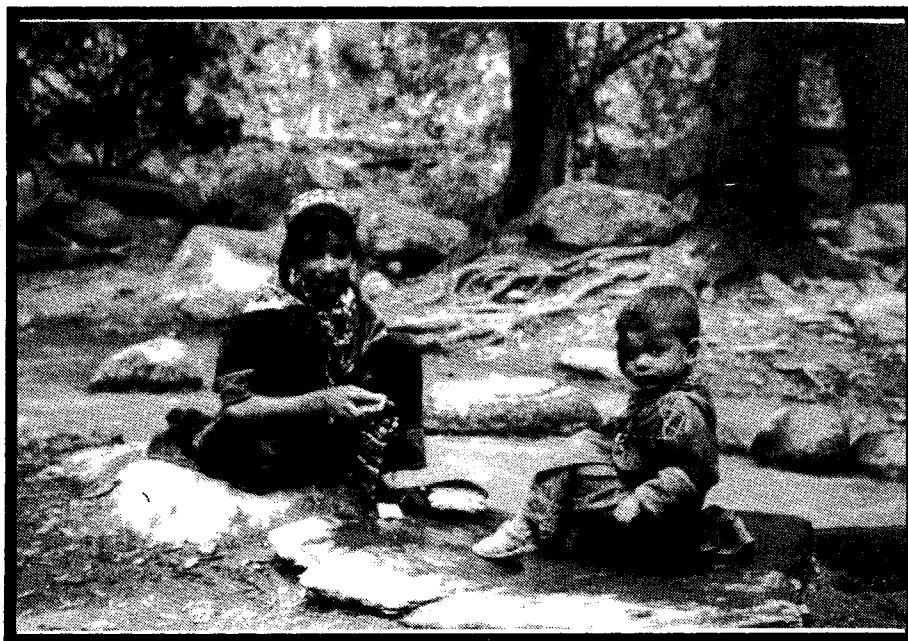
Indeed, first-time visitors to the Kalash valleys often are struck by the lack of material wealth: cooking is done over open fires in the houses, plumbing consists of a canal that runs through the villages, toilets are open-air fields near the river that get "flushed" by annual spring floods.

Not surprisingly, the population suffers from eye infections and bronchial ailments caused by wood smoke and from diarrheal diseases stemming from poor sanitation.

These problems don't have an easy technical fix. During a recent meeting I attended with Saifullah, officials from Pakistan's sanitation department suggested the Kalash build themselves latrines (the government would provide cement for this, but no labor or maintenance). The official plan included a flush toilet in each house -- an idea reflecting profound ignorance of Kalash architecture. Kalash houses are built beehive fashion, one atop another; pity the poor chap living at the base of a village full of flush toilets! I asked the official if he had been to the Kalash valleys.

"Oh, I'd never go there," the official said. "It's too dirty."

Saifullah described another misguided attempt to "help" the Kalash. Last year, a western aid agency wanted to build a handicraft center where Kalash women would sew traditional hats



Who needs plumbing? Kalash girls wash clothes in the canal that runs through the village of Balanguru.

and dresses which the agency would sell to foreigners in its shops in Europe and America. Saifullah rejected the offer, saying, "Our women are already overworked in the fields and in their homes. They don't have time to go to work in a craft shop on top of everything else they already do."

Such a factory also would shift the Kalash away from their existing barter economy toward a money-based market. "I was afraid the women who worked in the craft center would become dependent on the money," says Saifullah. "Sooner or later, the foreign agency would get tired of the project here and would go home. Then what would the women do?"

But Saifullah's biggest complaint was the proposed financial arrangement. "The agency wanted the Kalash women to do the work for very little money," he says. "They would sell these crafts and keep the profits for themselves. When I suggested a profit-sharing scheme, they backed out."

Electricity is another dilemma for the Kalash. While it would improve the quality of life in many respects, it carries hidden dangers. In Nepal, for example, a recent study showed that people use more firewood when they have electricity because they stay awake after dark and burn wood to stay warm.

"This community is not ready for electricity," says Saifullah. "They are not rich enough. It would just put another expense on top of the people."



**At risk: the next generation of Kalash.**

## MODERNIZING MISSIONARIES

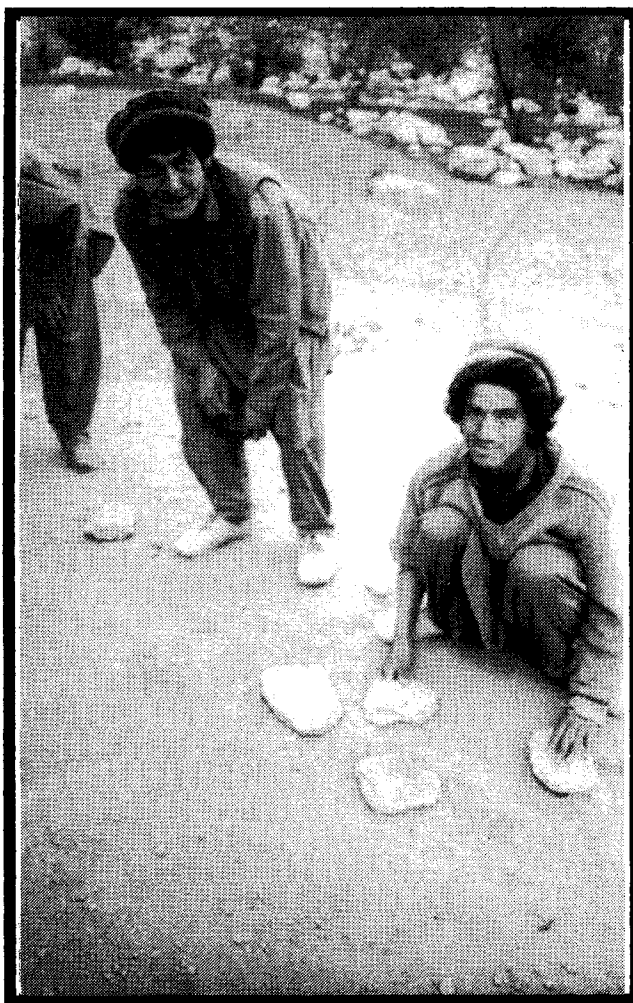
The danger of creating a financial burden on the Kalash has implications beyond their pocket-books. Local Muslims often attempt to force individual Kalash to convert to Islam in exchange for wiping out their debt. In other instances, Kalash are pressured to mortgage or sell their land to Muslims in exchange for debt forgiveness.

Christian missionaries in the three Kalash valleys also have attempted to exploit the absence of electricity in their efforts to win converts. In the Kalash valley of Bumburet -- the most "modernized" of the three valleys -- missionaries have imported a diesel-powered electricity generator, providing electricity only to families who convert to Christianity.

In other instances, Christian missionaries offer up to \$1,000 a month to Kalash boys who are willing to live among the Christian communities of Lahore or Islamabad, learning English and tutoring missionaries in the Kalasha language. The salary is inordinately high compared to Pakistan's per capita annual income of \$480 or the barter-based economy of the Kalash.

One Christian group recently came out with an English-Kalasha dictionary. Their next project: a Kalasha Bible.

It is difficult to discover which church is behind these efforts to convert the Kalash. Missionizing is illegal in Pakistan so Christians in the three Kalash valleys often pose as artists or linguists, refusing to reveal their source of income. One man from New Zealand, who the local people told me was a missionary, took affront at my questions regarding his



Ancient games: Men play a Kalash version of horse-shoe, using rocks.



church affiliations: "I happen to be a very strong Christian," he said. "But I don't like the label missionary." He then refused to tell me who was financing his "artistic" endeavors and avoided me for the rest of my stay in the valleys.

My association with Saifullah probably didn't help. Eight years ago he threw out a group of Christian missionaries after they tried to establish a Bible school in the Kalash valleys. "They have been warned about me," he says, laughing.

Unfortunately, many of the younger Kalash boys seem to be vulnerable to the financial rewards of working with the Christians. Converted Kalash are easy to spot: their homes have cement floors, rather than the traditional pounded mud. There are carpets on the floor and curtains on the windows. They wear fashionable denim jackets and sneakers. And they watch rather than dance during festivals. During the last festival, for example, a group of Christian boys stood aloof from the community, playing a loud cassette tape recording of a Punjabi movie sound-track that nearly drowned out the traditional singing of the Kalash elders.

#### AN OLD MAN'S STORY

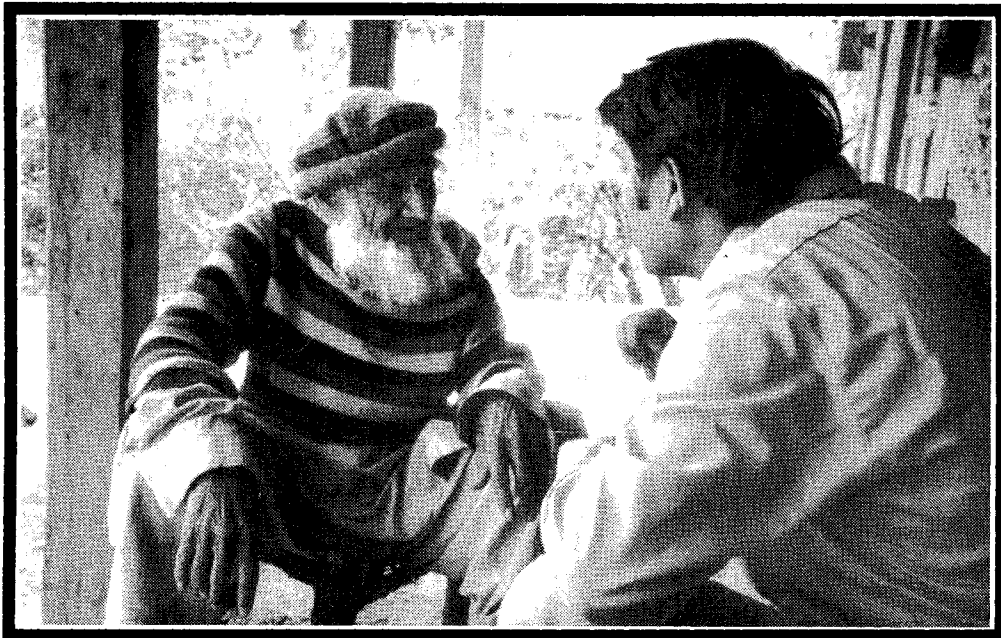
Pressure on the Kalash to convert has existed for centuries. In the last century, the land of the infidels -- "Kaffiristan" -- extended across northern Pakistan to Afghanistan. In 1896, however, the Afghan government forcibly converted its Kaffir population to Islam. Fifty years later, two Kalash valleys were forced to adopt Islam. The three remaining Kaffir Kalash valleys were saved only because the Prince of Chitral wanted to use the Kalash as slaves.

Mashar is an old Kalash man who remembers the days when the Kalash were still enslaved: "I was the wise man of my time, doing actions on behalf of the Kalash," he says. "In those days we had to do slavery work for the ruler of Chitral. Each family had to send sons to work for the prince and had to pay taxes in land and goats. We also were forbidden to wear clean clothes."

"At that time, too, the Muslims wanted to take over our land," says Mashar. "A court in Chitral of eight men would make a quick decision about ownership. Now it takes years in a court for such a decision.

"One day there was a dispute over goats. The people of Ayun said that they had loaned the Kalash 60 goats for a year and now wanted them back. This wasn't true. I went to the ruler of the court. I asked, why did you loan those goats to the Kalash?," says Mashar. "The people of Ayun said the goats had been sent to the ruler of Chitral from the people of Nooristan [Afghanistan.]





Tales of past and present: Mashar and Saifullah exchange stories.

So, I said, 'You have stolen 60 goats from the ruler to give to the Kalash?' They denied this, of course, so we won the case."

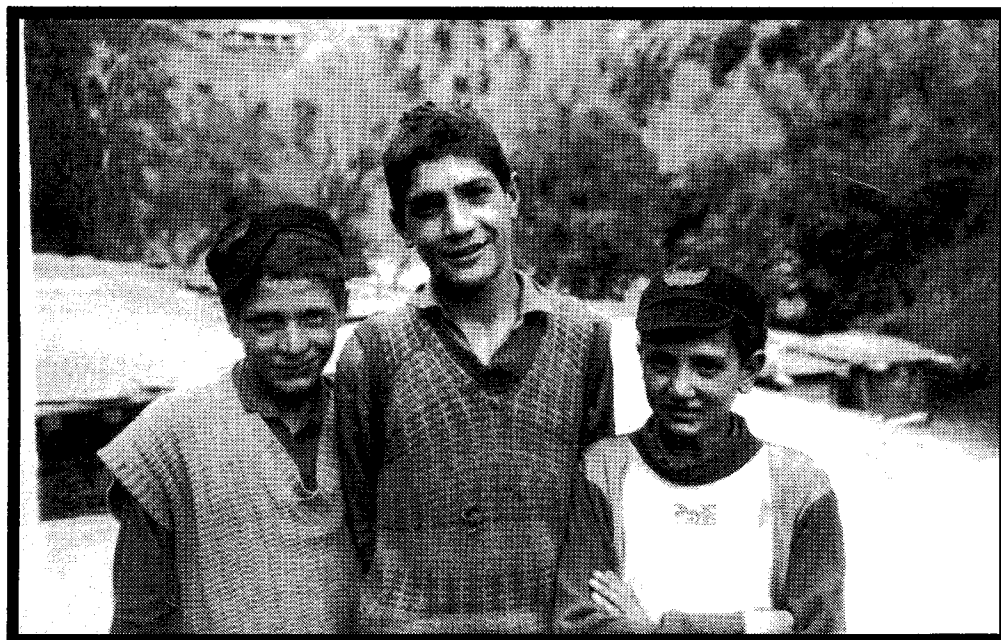
Mashar became friendly with the eight judges of the ruler's court and often represented the Kalash people in court cases. He also befriended the British political agent in Chitral.

"The British agent was so pleased when I convinced the Prince to lighten the tax on the Kalash that he gave me a prize of 100 rupees [US \$4.00]," says Mashar. Then grinning through his bushy white beard, he adds: "I called 20 Kalash men and 15 Kalash women to Chitral, where I spent the 100 rupees to house and feed them all for seven days!"

Yet, Mashar paid a heavy price for his ties to the outside world. "One day the rulers from the court came to see me. They said they had helped me so now I must convert to Islam. I didn't feel it deeply, but they were my friends. I converted."

Mashar's name became Abdul Latif. But his family remained Kalash. And, say local Kalash, so did Mashar -- at least in his heart. "I still live like a Kalash," he says. "I go to the festivals and take part.

"Our culture hasn't really changed much in my life, but economically we are stronger now," he adds. "And the British don't come here for hunting anymore. Now we get researchers, like you."



Endangered or enlightened? Kalash school boys.

#### EDUCATION FOR ENLIGHTENMENT

Sitting on a mud rooftop overlooking the Rumbur Valley, Saifullah tells me how a local district official recently called him "a wall between the Kalash and progress."

"He was angry because I stopped a Member of the National Assembly from putting tin roofs on all of our temples and altars," says Saifullah. "I tried to explain that a temple with a tin roof is not progress. I suggested they build an irrigation channel for us instead."

Saifullah was the first boy from the Kalash valleys to be educated in public schools. In his youth, he walked six hours each day to and from the government school in Ayun, where he learned English as well as other topics that have helped him as leader of the Kalash.

One of his first acts as representative of the three valleys was to put a government primary school in each valley and a high school in Bumburet. Last year he opened a Kalasha -speaking school aimed particularly at educating girls. Nonetheless, he is ambivalent about the impact of education on Kalash society.

"One reason I don't like education is that it can change people into bad people," he says. "If they are educated by the Christians they come back and they are worried all the time about their hygiene, they feel they are better than the others and they

don't take part in our festivals. The younger generations see them and they are affected by it."

At least part of the problem with public education stems from the Kalash reliance on government-appointed Muslim teachers and Islamic textbooks. One night a group of Kalash school boys translate for me from their Arabic textbook; Arabic is a required language for school children in Pakistan because it is the language of the Koran.

"Thanks be to Allah, we have a telephone and a television," reads one Kalash boy. We are sitting on a mud floor of a Kalash house miles from either a telephone or a television. No one else seems to notice the irony.

"It is bad if education leads people to another religion, but how do you stop it?" Saifullah asks the next day. "I want to have improvement and progress for the Kalash, but not if it means losing our culture. Progress will come anyway with time. But progress and culture must go hand-in-hand, not damaging each other."

Saifullah has yet to decide how much education he will give his four sons and one daughter: "I fight for my culture not because I was educated. I learned it from my father, who was uneducated. Now I look to my children. Those who have the same idea [of preserving Kalash culture] I will give high education. If I see they are changing in a bad way, I will stop their education. They will become shepherds."

#### EPILOGUE

Two weeks later, the telephone rings at my home in Islamabad. It is Saifullah calling from the court in Chitral.

"We won," he says. "The judge told the people of Ayun: 'You have no rights in the valley'."

"Bo proost, Baya!" I say. That's great, brother!

It has been a decade-long battle for Saifullah. In victory, he sounds both elated and tired. And, as always, he remains an articulate spokesman for his people.

"The first step has been cleared," he says. "We have our rights; the Kalash people can be self-sufficient."

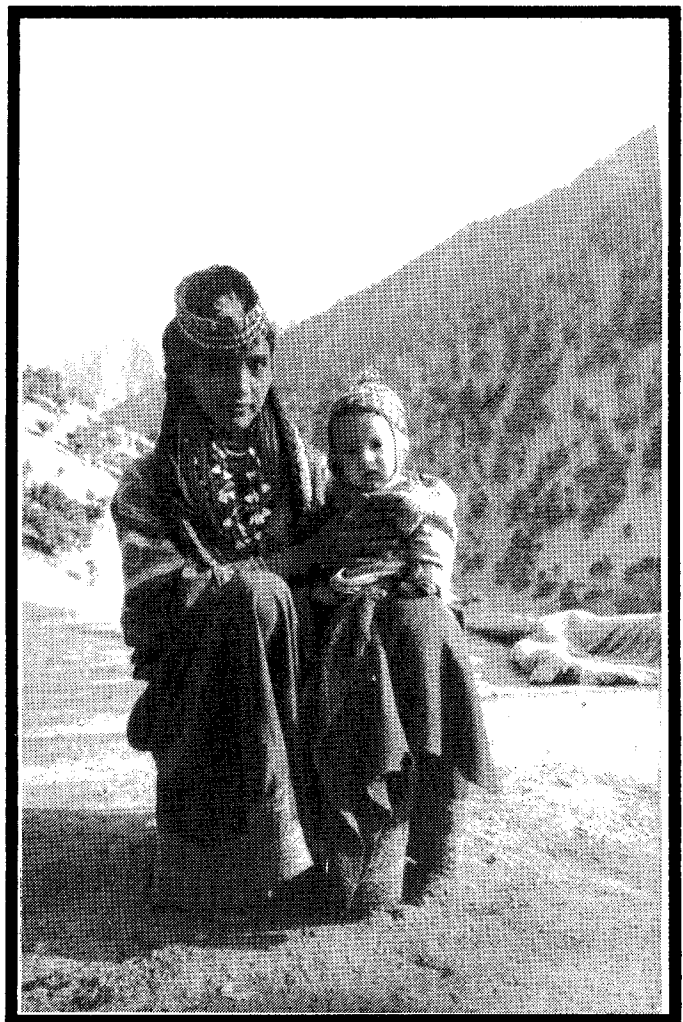
When I ask him how he feels, he says: "It is great. Through knowledge, through your brain, to knock someone down without beating him. Yes, it is a great feeling."

Saifullah says he will distribute the royalties among the Kalash people, but also ask them to spend some of the money on rehabilitating the forest.

"The government has cut 2 percent of the forest, but I will allow them to cut no more than 5 percent of the total," he says. "Then I will explain to the people of the valley that they must use some of the royalty money to recreate the forest that has been lost. But it will be their money, so they must decide.

"I also would like to build irrigation channels in the upper valley, where there are thousands of acres that could be cultivated if we had water," he says. "If our population is to increase we will need those fields.

"I would like to build some latrines for the villages," he adds. "But we will make it a community toilet, built from stones and wood. No cement. And definitely no tin roof."



(photos by C. Rose)

**A bright future: A Kalash woman and child.**