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Two Kalash elders at the solstice celebration

A WINTER SOLSTICE

by Carol Rose

As dawn steals over the steep mountains of the Rumbur valley, the stillness of morning is broken by the chanting of an old woman. "Balumain is coming," she sings in a low voice from a rooftop in Balanguru village. "He is here..."

It is solstice, a time of celebration, prayers and religious purification in the three Kalash valleys in northern Pakistan. For the 4,000 Kalash people, the sole remaining polytheists in the Hindu Kush, winter solstice is the most important festival of the year. It is a time when prayers from throughout the year are collected and presented to the highest god in the Kalash religious pantheon: God the Creator.

Carrying these prayers is God's messenger, Balumain, who visits the Kalash valleys only during the winter solstice. Roaming the valley on his invisible horse, Balumain also counts

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the Kalash people on Earth and reports their numbers to God. As part of this census, the Kalash renew their membership in society by carrying out purification rituals and closing the valley to anyone who is not a Kalash.

I was invited this year with my husband, Tom Harrington, to attend the two-week winter solstice festival, known as Chaumos, where we were formally initiated into the society of the Kalash people. It was a great honor for us to be welcomed into the Kalash community and a unique opportunity to learn more about an ancient and rich culture.

December 10: Sarazari -- Bringing of the Juniper

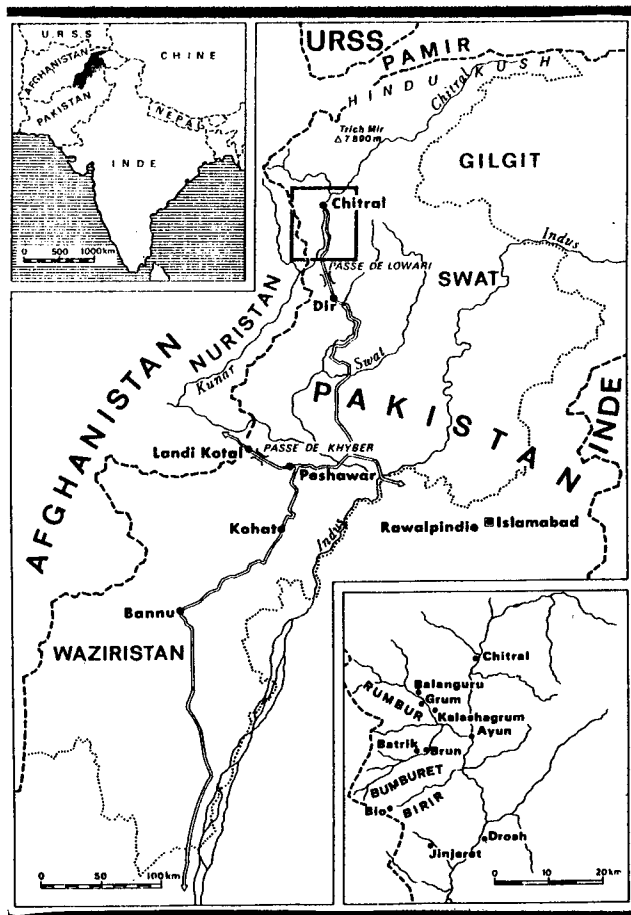
It has taken nearly a week to get to the Kalash valleys. The hour-long flight from Peshawar to nearby Chitral was canceled five days straight because of bad weather in the mountains. Road

travel was impossible because the mountain passes are blocked by snow.

Finally, today, the plane took off, skimming the tree tops as it skirted two enormous mountain ranges before touching down in Chitral.

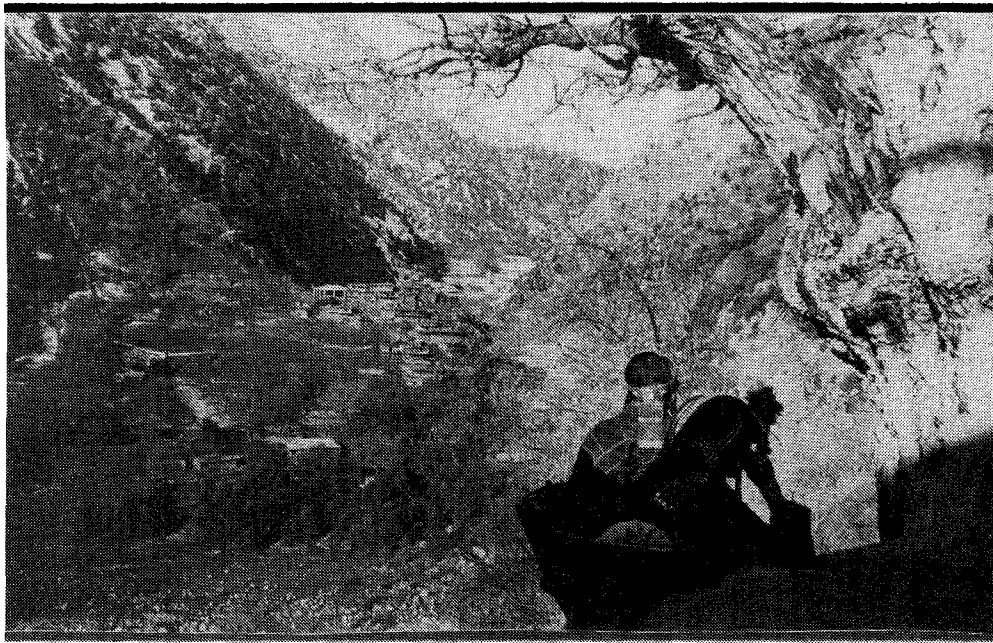
A two-hour jeep-ride into the heart of the mountains has brought us to the Kalash valley of Bumburet, where we will spend one day with our friend and Kalash language teacher, Faizi Khan. The solstice festival formally started three days earlier. But the purification period does not start for some days, so we are allowed to enter the valley.

Bumburet is quite different from the Rumbur valley, where normally I stay. Here, the Kalash are greatly outnumbered by local Muslims. As a result, the Kalash have been pushed to the steep hillsides, while



MAP OF THE KALASH VALLEYS

[Source: Loude & L  uvre]



Two Kalash women stop to gaze at the Rumbur valley.

the Muslims own the shops next to the road and the fertile fields on the valley floor. Bumburet also is the center of tourism in the Kalash valleys, evidenced by a dozen hotels and trinket shops along the road.

But tourists rarely visit in winter and the hotels are closed. Today, everyone is focused on the festival. The boys and girls of all five Kalash villages in Bumburet valley have built an enormous bonfire on a distant hillside and are dancing. Smoke rises over the dense pine forest. We meet the singers as they descend toward the first Kalash village. Many carry sprigs of juniper, which, when burned, give off a sweet smell that is pleasing to the gods. Juniper is considered pure and flaming juniper branches are used to purify both houses and people. Thus, the name of this day, "Saras-arik," meaning, "bring the juniper."

As the singers approach a Kalash house, they stop to pound on the door and sing: "Give me dried mulberries, grapes, and walnuts!" The ritual reminds me of a cross between trick-or-treat and Christmas caroling. The singers also say prayers for the inhabitants: "May your son find a good wife!", "May you have many grapes." In exchange for their prayers, the singers collect nuts and fruit, which they carry in their shawls. Then they move on to the next house, their cowrie shell-covered headdresses gleaming in the moonlight as they cross unplowed fields.

The singing and dancing goes on until every Kalash house in the valley has been visited -- about 200 in total. The night air is filled with the sounds of singing, clapping and chanting. Around 10 PM, the house in which we are staying suddenly begins to shake and dozens of people stomp on the flat mud roof. The dancers have arrived. Moreover, the songs have become insulting, with vicious chants being hurled back and forth between groups of boys and girls, amid much giggling and laughter.

Standing shoulder to shoulder in a circle, the girls sing to the boys: "If you sit down, I will kick your chair out from under you!", "If you come over hear, my grandmother will beat you!" The boys get even smuttier: "If this man dances, he must come over and clean out your insides [have sex]." A few songs are more sweet: "Your body is a beautiful flower; when I smell it I go into a dream."

According to Jean-Yves Loude and Viviane Lievre, two French anthropologists who lived among the Kalash in the early 1980s, this mix of sacred and profane songs is allowed only during the Chaumos festival because Balumain himself started the practice:

"At the time of the contest between Balumain and [god of honeybees, Mahandeol], Balumain retired defeated to Tsyam. He announced that when he came back to inaugurate the first Chaumos, the following year, one of his servants would precede him by 20 days: this was the desharum dewa, 'the divinity without scruples', who would teach the population the salacious songs..."¹

It seems to me that the singing of insulting songs also allows people to let off steam and cast off pent-up emotions in a torrent of words and joking. It also prepares everyone for the imminent separation of the sexes and sexual abstinence that will be enforced later in the festival.

Whatever the explanation, the dancing and singing continues until dawn, when another large bonfire is set alight, a sign to welcome Balumain to the valley. Loude and Lievre write: "Sarazari exalts the light, casting off the grip of darkness, heralding a new era...[the] passage from one year to the next, of the regeneration of time."²

When the fires are lit, all the fruit and nuts that have been collected are evenly distributed among the people. As with other Kalash festivals, there is a distribution of wealth from

¹ Jean-Yves Loude & Viviane Lievre, Kalash Solstice, Lok Virsa, Islamabad, Pakistan, 1985. p. 203.

² Ibid. p. 199.

those who have a surplus to those who are in need. Thus, a rich family contributes more to the festival than a poor one. But everyone goes home with an equal share.

Dec. 11: Ishnyari: The Day of Nothing

Today is a rest day, which Tom and I use to walk to the Rumbur Valley, where we will spend the rest of the festival. As in the past, we will stay at the home of Saifullah Jan, the elected representative of the Kalash people.

Rumbur is the most isolated of the three Kalash valleys, in part because the road washed away four years ago and has not yet been rebuilt. As a result of this relative seclusion, practice of the Chaumos festival in Rumbur is considered to be the most traditional of the three valleys.

Because of our delayed arrival, the festival has been underway in Rumbur for four days already. Despite their proximity, about 20 kilometers apart, each Kalash valley has slight variations on festival dates and customs. The festival in Rumbur started on December 7, the day when the elders determined that the sun had reached a solitary fir tree, which they call the "high pomegranate tree."



Kalash girls wear dozens of necklaces and saddle-shaped hats covered with cowrie-shells, beads and bells.

In Rumbur, this first day was celebrated with the Sarazari bonfire and night of songs. In contrast to Bumburet, the singers in Rumbur did not go house to house, but instead gathered in Balanguru village to sing flirting and insulting songs. December 8 was a day when the upper and lower portions of Rumbur Valley resumed their age-old rivalry. The young girls gathered at the river that divides the valley, shouting insults and songs at one another over the roar of the icy water. The young boys stood guard to ensure that the girls do not come to blows over their insults. Most likely, the boys also used the opportunity to see the girls from other parts of the valley -- for they must marry a girl from a different clan lineage going back at least eight generations.

The night of December 8th marked the first religious offering of the winter solstice festival. The men gathered in the goat house, a place off-limits to women, for a ritual known as "Gosari." Men who were purified through ritual washing of their hands and faces made a pure bread gelatte, which they put on the fire as an offering to the spirit Surizan. Surizan is one of two gods who protects the goat herds. The other god, Goshidoi, tends to the goats from the time of the spring "Joshi" festival in May until the winter solstice. But during Chaumos, it is the turn of Surizan to watch over the herds. To ensure that this exchange of gods takes place smoothly, the bread was offered to Surizan at this time.

December 9 and 10 were the days called "Dowpachen" -- meaning, "the beans are cooking." On these days, the villages of the upper and lower valley made peace once again by the cooking and sharing of beans. The Kalash consider beans to be a sign of fertility, because they grow intertwined with the maize stalks as if in the act of sexual coupling. Seeds and beans also are associated with birth and growth.³

Each year, the cooking of the beans is the responsibility of those families who have a son or daughter who will be initiated into the Kalash later in the festival. On the first day of Dowpachen, families of the upper valley cooked beans from dawn until dusk, carrying them in enormous pots to the temple of Jestak -- the goddess of fertility and children -- where they were distributed to all families in the valley. The next day, families from the lower valley cooked the beans for distribution. This was yet another example of the wealth redistribution aspect of Kalash religious festivals.

These activities are completed by the time we arrive in Rumbur on December 11. As we walk the last few miles up the valley, a heavy snow turns Rumbur into a winter fairyland. The

trees and fields are sculpted in white. The mountains are hidden by a veil of snowflakes. Approaching the five villages of Rumbur, we seem to be leaving modern civilization behind and entering a place of peace and magic.

When we reach the village of Balanguru, where we will stay, Saifullah welcomes us to his anguti, or guest house, where we sit before a blazing fire, sipping Kalash wine and eating special solstice bread -- a thick gelatte [flat bread] stuffed with crushed walnuts. The nut-flavored bread is warm and salty, delicious with the wine after a long walk through the snow.

As we warm ourselves by the fire, Saifullah fills us in on news. The court case over the forest rights, which the Kalash won last June, was recently appealed by local Muslims. The case is now before a Chitral district judge. Although the Kalash are bound to win the case eventually, Saifullah says the local Muslims are being financed by a lumber-contractor who wants to deforest the valley. This man is financing the case against the Kalash in an attempt to drag out the fight and thus burden the Kalash with enormous legal fees, in hope of forcing them to quit the case. Already, some Kalash have mortgaged their homes and lands to pay the lawyers. But, says Saifullah, the Kalash had no intention of giving up and will fight all the way to the Supreme Court.

After talking politics, we discuss the festival. Saifullah describes Balumain to us: "He is like a prophet, a spirit close to God. He is very tough, he can go anywhere. In the olden days, we could see him and talk to him, but now only the shamans can see him. He takes many forms, but always rides a horse. He is a happy God.

"Some shamans say that Balumain once came to Bumburet at this time of year, but the people did not respect him. Balumain threw a whip on the people in one house, and they became Muslims. You can still see the footprint of his horse in Bumburet valley. Nowadays, Balumain's job is to take all the prayers from the people to God the Creator. In this way, Balumain is above the other gods, such as Mahandeo, who keeps the honeybees and trees, Jestak, the goddess of fertility, or Sajigor, who protects us from floods, disease and evil forces."

After listening to this explanation, Saifullah takes us to greet his wife, Yassir Ayas, and their five children.⁴ Yassir

⁴ Kalash women are known as "Mother of so-and-so," thus Saifullah's wife, Weshlam Gul, is called "Yassir Ayas," or mother of her eldest son, Yassir. Many Kalash have Muslim-sounding names, such as "Saifullah" or "Yassir." However, the Kalash attach no religious or cultural importance to names. Indeed,



A man twists bread dough to sculpt the horns of an ibex.

Ayas and I exchange a traditional Kalash greeting: kissing first on the cheeks, then on the hands, then on the braids. Everyone is delighted that I've finally brought Tom along. They are even more delighted that I've studied enough Kalash language to communicate without the constant aid of Saifullah. Then I hand out presents for the children. They are thrilled: winter shoes.

But there is little time for small talk. The women are busy grinding wheat at the water-mill. Despite the snow, they will work throughout the night to finish grinding all the wheat for the festival. Tomorrow is an important day and everyone in the valley must be ready at the same time to resume the celebration.

December 12: Katamru: Day of the Lame Animal

Yassir Ayas arrives at the guest house early in the morning to braid my hair into five plaits and to help

me don my black robe, dozens of necklaces and cowrie-covered headdress. Thus transformed into a "proper" Kalash woman, I and Tom set off for a 10-minute walk to visit friends in the nearby village of Grum. We are welcomed with a meal of bread and fresh goat cheese.

In the afternoon, it is time to go to the Temple of Jestak, the goddess of fertility. Most people go to the community temple, but we join some friends in a house that has its own

other Kalash have names have been borrowed from foreigners. In Rumbur valley, some of the names include: "Engineer Engineer," "Lahore Film," "Elections," "Akiko," "Gillian," "Peter," and one baby recently named "Gulabi" -- which means rose.

small Jestak altar, set on the wall just behind the central fire. Men, women and children crowd into the one-room house, squatting on the dirt floor in an effort to crouch beneath the eye-stinging wood smoke of the fire. This house does not yet have a "tim" -- or wood stove -- that would cut down on the smoke and thus prevent infections of the eyes and lungs. Two years ago, almost no houses had a "tim," but now the majority of the women have them.⁵

As the crowd watches, two men begin to paint stick figures on the wall that is the altar to the goddess Jestak. The Kalash believe that anything painted on the wall of a Jestak temple or altar during Chaumos will come true this year. The paintbrush is made from wad of wool tied to the end of a stick. The paint is made from the crushed bark of a walnut tree. One artist slowly draws the curved horns of a ram -- a prayer for good hunting. Another man draws many goats surrounded by dots that represent goat droppings; a prayer for an expanding goat herd and fertile fields. A woman draws a large suchin tree, which will provide the Kalash with delicious orange berries, firewood, and sap that the women use to wax their hair to make braids hard and shiny. Two boys paint a shield on the door of the house, bringing protection to the inhabitants for the coming year.

After the ceremony, I join Yassir Ayas in making walnut bread in her house. First, she crushes walnuts and rock salt on a large flat piece of slate. She pounds the nuts with a smooth round rock collected from the river bed. Then she molds the wheat dough into a cone that she fills with the walnuts and salt, patting the dough into a pancake that she bakes first on the stove, then later in the ashes of the fire. I try. In the time it takes me to make one misshapen walnut loaf, she has made eight loaves -- known as iao. Together she and I work for four hours, making 60 loaves in all. It seems a tremendous amount of bread for one house, but this will be given to the ancestors tomorrow and so is very important.

Finally, around 10 PM, it is time for the main event of the day: the making of the "Lame Animals" -- or shiarabirayak. The children gather as Yassir Ayas prepares the dough. Sitting around the fire, every member of the family begins to mold the dough into animal shapes about the size of a palm. We make only useful animals, such as goats, cows, ibex, markort, and sheep.

⁵ Saifullah bought Yassir Ayas a "tim" just 10 days before our arrival in Rumbur. She is delighted, since she has been pushing for a stove for a long time. He is less thrilled, arguing that the stove uses twice as much firewood, gives off no light and so requires the use of expensive kerosene lanterns, and lacks the beauty of an open fire.

The Kalash believe that only God the Creator can make a perfect being, so it is important that we not make our dough-animals too perfectly. For me it isn't a problem. After watching one of Saifullah's brothers make a beautiful ibex by twisting the dough around a small stick, I attempt to imitate his work. My ibex horns fall forward and everyone laughs, wondering if such a strange animal will visit Rumbur valley this year. After the animals are baked in the fire, they are placed on the shelf at the back of the house that serves as an altar to Jestak.

Tom relates:

While the families are busy making figurines in their houses, a small group of boys has gathered at the fertility temple -- the community Jestak Temple -- also to make figurines and a special offering to Jestak. Four boys, who purify themselves by washing their arms up to the elbows in the icy river nearby, make walnut galettes [flat bread] and ibex and goat figures. Before they begin, they put a holly branch on the fire. It burns with dramatic crackling and hissing sounds and is meant to purify the setting. Three animal figures are placed atop the flat bread and carefully set on a high wooden shelf in the temple next to three carved wooden horse heads (horses are the vehicles of the gods and goddesses and used to represent them at the temples). The boys then throw small pieces of bread at the figures. Then we sit and munch the remaining breads. The ceremony, meant to increase fertility and prosperity through contagion, was carried out matter-of-factly. There were no elders present, only the boys' careful attention to ritual and purification (washing and not touching impure objects) made it different from a campfire outing.

About the middle of the night, their offering done, the pure boys from each family run through the village shouting: "chup, chup" to draw the spirits of the dough animals from the village homes and drive them into the mountains. There, it is believed, they shall multiply and bring prosperity to the valley. And in the morning, the young children will be given the animal-shaped figures with which to play at being shepherds.

December 13: Mondaik -- the Day of Ancestors

Today the air is cold and the sky is plate blue. Breakfast is a special treat of sweet, hot pumpkin, served only during the winter solstice because of its rarity in the valleys. At dawn, men from each Kalash clan carry walnut bread to the cemetery to invite the ancestors to the afternoon celebration. Everyone is hoping that the bread will lure the spirits to the Jestak Temple,

but no one is speaking loudly today lest we scare the ancestors away.

Yassir Ayas invites us to join her in a visit to her father's village, Kalashagrum, about 15 minutes climb from her house. There, we sit by the fire, chatting quietly as the women string necklaces and sew last-minute touches on the new dresses that the young children will wear during the initiation ceremony later in the week. The talk is of the stove that was purchased for the menstruation house a few days ago. It seems that one of the men decided it wasn't needed for the menstruation house and has put it into his own home! Everyone agrees that it must be retrieved and taken to the menstruation house, but only after the festival is completed. This is not the time for confrontation.

In the late afternoon, we are back home in Balanguru when some boys rush into the house calling for us to go as quickly as possible to the Jestak Temple. It is time for the offering to the ancestors. The women pile baskets with walnut bread, dried apples, pears, grapes, apricots, mulberries, and walnuts, carrying the baskets on their hips as they saunter to the temple.

The community Jestak Temple is a wood-and-stone building about 40-feet square with a low flat ceiling and large smoke hole in the center. Inside, the men are collecting the baskets of fruit and bread from the women, dumping the fruit in one corner, piling the bread in another. The women gather around the fire in the middle of the room. Everyone is whispering, telling one another to keep quiet. The ancestors are approaching.

Outside, a group of men gathers at the entrance to the temple, splitting wood into small pieces that they use to build a



Young Kalash girl plays with an ibex sculpted from bread.

square 10-inch tall fort, or "kotik," into which they place wood chips. The kotik represents: "a prison, a dungeon, in which the Kalash throw men of evil thoughts, enemies, before symbolically burning them."⁶

When the building of the "kotik" is almost complete, the elders fill a conical willow basket with fruit and bread. This food is placed just outside the temple door, where it shall be eaten by the ancestors. When the fort is ready, the men call for everyone in the valley to crowd into the small temple and to be silent. One of the elders asks to borrow my shawl, which he uses



Men build a small wooden fort, or "kotik," to ward off enemies and evil spirits.

to cover the door of the temple. No one must watch the ancestors. At a signal from the elders, the men set the fort aflame. Everyone crowds inside the temple, standing silently, shoulder to shoulder. Then, each of us lights three small branches of kindling, holding it aloft and remaining silent. As the fort burns, chasing off our enemies, we listen to the crackling sound of the ancestors enjoying the food from the basket. The small torches light our faces as each of us prays silently to our ancestors to ward off evil forces in the world.

At a signal from one of the elders, everyone throws their small torch into the fire. The door is opened and the young children -- those who have not yet been initiated as Kalash -- rush to eat from the basket of fruit just outside the door. No one else must touch this food, for it has already been eaten by the ancestral spirits. The women carry their empty baskets to the remaining piles of fruit, nuts and breads that were

⁶ Loude, *op. cit.*, p. 247.

brought to the temple by each family. Now, each family again fills its basket, but this time in equal portions. Someone fills my shawl with dried fruits and nuts and then returns it to me. Laden with these sweets, we return home for a feast of bread and cheese, apples, dried mulberries and home-made wine.

December 14: Day of Cleaning House

At dawn the women of the valley are taking everything out of their homes, sweeping the soot-covered walls and washing clothes in preparation for the up-coming purification rituals. We clean out the guest house. Then, we help Yassir Ayas to take her chickens out of the village, for these "impure" animals were introduced by Muslims and will not be allowed in the Kalash villages for the next seven "pure" days. Assisted by a handful of children, we carry the chickens upside-down by their feet down the valley, where Yassir Ayas will keep them in her father's storeroom in the lower "Muslim" part of the valley.

Tomorrow, the purification will begin. The local Muslims have agreed to leave the valley for a week -- a sign of cooperation found only in the Kalash-dominated Rumbur valley. Moreover, after today, nothing can be bought at the three local Muslim-owned shops (the two Kalash shops will be closed) since such items are "impure." We buy enough tea and sugar to keep the family supplied for at least a week.

That night, the young boys and girls gather around a fire in the middle of Balanguru village. As before, they sing songs of love, as well as trading insulting jibes. The girls giggle shyly and sing: "Oh, my brother, why do you come to me with an empty hand?"

Interestingly, each songs begins with the phrase: "My brother, the grandson of my grandfather..." or "my sister, granddaughter of my grandmother..." Saifullah says that this phrase has no particular meaning, but some anthropologists suggest that the notion of incest -- strictly forbidden by Kalash custom -- is implied in the song.

Whatever the correct interpretation, these "insulting" songs -- sung only during Chaumos -- intensify everyone's awareness of the sexual abstinence that will be imposed over the next seven days. Men and women will be purified separately, after which time they are not to "touch." After today, the men will take most of their meals separately in the goat stables, while the women eat together in the homes. Thus begins the period of purity.



A woman is purified when one of her clan-brothers waves a burning juniper branch two times over her head.

daughter, Gulistan, and her little girl friends peak in at us from the roof as we strip down and take turns pouring the hot water over one another, scrubbing off days of accumulated wood smoke and dirt. "Don't forget your ears!" laughs Yassir Ayas as she pours hot water over my head. The winter air is cold, but the bath is welcome nonetheless.

Once clean, we don our newly-washed dresses, beads and head-dresses. Then Yassir Ayas, Gulistan and I go to the Jestak Temple, where men from Saifullah's clan are preparing for our purification. First, one of Saifullah's brothers pours water over our outstretched hands. We hold out our arms, careful not to contaminate ourselves by touching our clothing. Then our

December 15: Shiashao -- Day of Women's Purification

An early morning frost covers the mill house, which was purified last night when the men waved a burning juniper branch over the roof, saying: "sutch, sutch" -- or "pure, pure."

At the house, Yassir Ayas and I break open walnuts and fill a bowl with the nutmeat. Each woman is required to prepare the walnuts for the bread that will be used in her purification rite later today.

Next, Yassir Ayas and I go to the riverside. We collect one flat stone and one round stone, which she uses to pound the sichin sap into a paste in order to wax my hair. Within an hour, our braids are newly waxed and shiny. Then Yassir Ayas and I take pails of hot water to the tiny stone-and-wood bathing house near the river. Most of the women in the village have bathed before us, so only about five women remain in the bathhouse when we arrive. Saifullah's 4-year-old

"clan brother" puts in each of our hands five loaves of round bread, each with three small pinch marks on it to represent teats. One crescent-shaped loaf is placed on top of these five loaves. We hold the bread with outstretched arms as the man takes a juniper branch from the fire, and, one-by-one, waves the flaming switch over our heads in a circle two times, saying: "pure, pure!" A piece of the crescent-shaped loaf is then thrown on the fire, and the ceremony is complete.

Thus purified, we strolled happily back the house, munching on the remainder of the crescent-shaped walnut bread that had been used to purify us moments before. For the next seven days, we must not sleep with our husbands. And we must not drink goats milk until the Joshi festival next May. Nor will we play drums or flutes: only clapping and singing are allowed during the winter months. Such rules have been transmitted from Balumain to the people through the local shaman.

Back at the house, Yassir Ayas and I eat more pumpkin and spend the rest of the day stringing glass beads to make necklaces. An old woman stops me to warn me against my husband: "Don't sleep anywhere near him," she whispers. "I make mine sleep in the goat-shed. I suggest you not even look at him, nor talk to him. You know how it is with men..."

In the late afternoon, the women and girls gather in the center of town, forming a circle with the other women. We join in the clapping and singing songs of both praise and insult to the men:

"Oh, my brother,
Grandson of my grandfather,
Balumain sees the feathers in your cap
And wonders at their beauty."

"Oh, my brother,
Grandson of my grandfather,
The fox saw your dirty penis,
So he ran away in disgust!"

The best joke of the afternoon occurs when a local Muslim man happens to pass through town, on his way out of the valley. The women immediately burst into his language -- Chitrali Kowar -- composing a song in reference to the Muslim custom of circumcision:

"Oh, Muslim, you cut off the
Tip of your penis and
put it on a rock, where
a mouse came along and ate it!"

As the women mock the man in song, he half-grins but makes a hasty retreat out of town.



Saifullah's sons, Massiar and Sher Wyte, prepare to take their goat to be sacrificed at the Sajigor Temple.

December 16: Istongas -- Day of Mens' Purification

Today is the men's turn to be purified. As Tom writes:

The male purification begins in the same way as for the women, with a complete bath and change into new or clean clothes. After bathing, men are not allowed to sit down on chairs or beds for the remainder of the day, as this would be impure. It's not as easy as it might sound. One's natural instinct upon entering a home is to sit down on the proffered chair or bed along the wall. But the penalty for doing so on this day is high: you must strip down and wash all over again, which is cold. Saifullah jokingly tells me that many times he has had to repeat his purifying bath more than once.

At mid-morning, all the families from the valley gather in the center of Balanguru. Each extended family has brought a large male goat, about 35 goats in all, which the young boys proudly herd through town on their way to the sacred altar of the god, Sajigor, protector of all things, about fifteen minutes walk up valley.

The women follow behind the men to the edge of town, chanting and singing prayers to Balumain. There is a growing

feeling of excitement and reverence among the people. The women stop at the village edge, however, as the men disappear walking up the valley toward the altar. While they are gone, we form a large circle in the town center, shuffling continuously to the right in a circle, as we clap and sing more songs of love, prayer and insults. Two or three women dance in the center of the circle, moving their feet to the beat of the clapping hands. Some of the old women dance lewdly, holding their thumbs in a phallic gesture and pretending to pursue the other dancers. Someone hands one of the old women a large stick, to use as her pretend "penis," which she waves at the few men who have stayed behind to guard the women, yelling something like: "I only wish!"

This sparks a response from the dozen or so men, who are watching us from the rooftop. Immediately, they form their own circle and begin to sing lewd songs back at us. Everyone laughs and the dancing continues non-stop for almost two hours.

Meanwhile, most of the men are at Sajigor Temple, a sacred site that is off-limits to women. Tom is with them and describes what goes on:

The temple of Sajigor is said to be several hundred years old. It is a simple stone and wood structure about five feet high and twelve feet on a side. The front of it has a beautifully carved board, with symbols and shield designs. Above this board, numerous branches of holly have been stuck in among the stones. In front of the temple is a large tree and a small flat rock. A fire is going when I arrive with Saifullah. His instructions to me are simple, "Don't go behind the temple or touch it, and stay out of the area immediately around the fire which has been purified for the sacrifice."

The men and boys gather with their goats at the front of the temple. One young man has the job of holding the goats, another wields the knife, and a third acts as assistant to keep the fire going. Young boys from each of the families are standing to the back of the temple with their sleeves rolled up and their arms kept awkwardly away from their sides, a posture I have come to recognize as meaning that they have washed their arms and purified themselves for ceremonial purposes. Today, they will make an offering of bread and juniper branches after the goat sacrifice.

When all the men have arrived, an elder from Kalashagrum village, named Baraman, unravels a cloth and pulls out a large kitchen knife. Although Saifullah has told me that the order of the sacrifice is not important, I am caught in a crowd of families

jockeying for position with their goats in front of the temple.

Suddenly, the sacrifice begins. The first goat is flipped off its feet and onto its back in the lap of the holder who sits on the flat rock in front of the temple. He grabs the front legs of the struggling beast, another man holds the hind legs. The second man grabs the goats beard and cuts cleanly through throat severing all the main neck arteries. He quickly puts his hand in the warm blood and throws a handful on the fire and another handful on the holly branches stuck on the temple. A piece of the ear is cut off, drenched in blood, and put in the fire also. The head is cut off and set in front of the temple. The body is quickly dragged away to be retrieved by the family that brought it for the sacrifice. The process takes less than a minute for each goat. It is both dramatic and, like other Kalash rituals, matter-of-fact. During the sacrifice, the men mutter or cry aloud prayers to Balumain, to accept their sacrifice, grant them fertility and prosperity in the coming year and to avert disaster.

As the goats are dispatched one by one, the blood forms a thick red puddle on the ground by the seated holder. The man with the knife is blood-covered to the



Holding each goat upside-down, the men sacrifice dozens of goats by slitting their throats.



Waving the head of a goat over the altar fire.

elbow. He pauses now and again to sharpen the knife against one of the stones of the temple.

The heads pile up in front of the temple, and the bodies are dragged down the hill a little way, where the men tie the front and back legs together on each side. Putting their arms between the legs of the goat, they heave the heavy bodies onto their backs, much like a backpacker, and trudge off to their respective goat stables. The meat from these goats provides food for the male population for the remainder of the festival.

When all the goats have been sacrificed, the heads are singed in the fire one-by-one as a signal to Balumain of the sacrifice. Now it is the turn of the purified boys to throw small pieces of walnut bread on the fire and at the temple, and to put a juniper branch on the fire. Smothered with juniper branches, the fire sends up billows of fragrant smoke, completely clouding my view of the proceedings. When the smoke clears, everyone present kneels down on the ground before the temple and offers final prayer bringing the sacrifice to a close, "Oh Balumain, accept our sacrifice, make everything good, fill the pastures, protect us."

As soon as the prayers are completed, the young boys rush forward to retrieve the head of the slaughtered goat that came from their own stables.

When they crowd too close to the temple, they are reprimanded severely by the elders for coming too close to this pure place. Nevertheless, the boys' jostling doesn't abate until the heads have been gathered up and there is a line of boys walking down the path carrying bloody heads. Now all the men begin to hurry down the path toward the village for the next proceedings of the day. There is a feeling of power and accomplishment. The sun has broken through the clouds and casts bright rays among the trees.

As we approach the village we see a large crowd gathered singing and dancing. Filled with enthusiasm, Saifullah remarks, 'What a great and happy religion we have. If I had been born a Hindu, Christian or Muslim, I would have had to convert to Kalash. I would have come to the valleys to die here.'

When the men return from Sajigor, the dancing ends and everyone moves quickly toward the Jestak Temple. It is time for the sambhak, the initiation of the young boys and girls into Kalash society.

This initiation ceremony takes places when the girls are approximately three years old and the boys are around age five -- ages when survival seems likely. Each child is taken to a corner of the Jestak Temple, where a maternal uncle -- the favorite uncle of any Kalash child -- dresses him or her in new clothing. The girls are given a perun, or black dress with colorful embroidery, and the boys are given their first pair of baggy cotton trouser, always white, as well as a turban-like headdress and a sash -- all clothes representative of the Kalash ancestors.

Some of the children cry as they are stripped naked before beaming relatives. Others relish the attention, smiling and laughing in their new clothes as they are covered with beads, bells and other trinkets. It is an important day for the family and Kalash society. From this point forward, these children are official members of the Kalash community. They are expected to live by the rules of the Kalash. When they die, they will be buried with full Kalash honors -- and buried by this same maternal uncle. In addition to dressing the child, the uncle also gives each child one goat, the beginning of the herd, or the equivalent value in money.

While the children are dressed, it seems as if the whole valley has crowded into the temple -- it is noisy, smoky, and ebullient. The teenage boys and girls have formed two dancing circles inside the temple and are singing madly, shaking sticks at one another. The girls sing: "Oh, brother! Oh pain! A wasp has bitten your penis and you are crying!" The boys sing: "Oh,

sister! Oh pain! A wasp has bitten your vagina and you are crying!"

When all the children are dressed, the families present the maternal uncles with baskets of fruit and bread, brand-new cooking pots and metal water jugs. Maternal uncles are dressed in robes of shiny cloth. Necklaces of colorful woven threads, berries and walnuts are hung around their necks as a sign of honor.

For families that live in the villages high on the cliffs of Rumbur valley, carrying these items to the Jestak Temple is a big chore. Leaving the temple, I go with Yassir Ayas to her father's home in the high village of Kalashagrum, where more children are to be initiated at household Jestak altars. There, we sit around the fire while the uncles dress two new initiates. Then a "pure" boy, one of age 7 or 8 years who has washed his face and hands, puts juniper branches and bread on the fire. After that, baskets of fruit, nuts and glasses of wine are handed around. Necklaces of walnuts soaked in wine are hung from our necks, along with woven necklaces, signifying honor and friendship.

It is early afternoon when we returned to Balanguru, but already the sun has dipped behind the steep mountains of the valley. In the house, Yassir Ayas and I sit on the small stools normally reserved for honored guests. Today, men are not allowed to sit on these stools, since the seats are woven of cow-hide and thus considered impure.

In the mid-afternoon, the men disappear once again up the valley. It is time for the final act of male purification, to take place



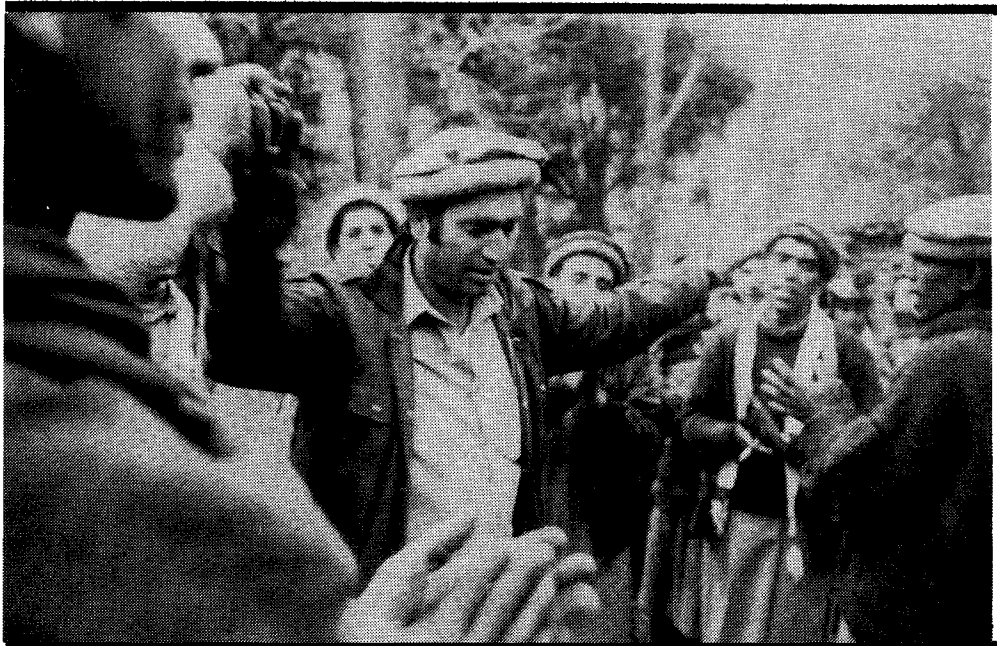
A young boy dressed in his "ancestor" clothing is initiated into the Kalash community.

in the goat stables in the absence of the women. Tom describes it this way:

The men's purification is a blood ceremony that is carried out at the goat stables. In contrast to the gathering at Sajigor Temple in the morning, the purification is done in small groups. Balumain has indicated through a shaman that fathers and sons should not be purified together. Saifullah and I will go to his maternal uncle's stable, while his sons and father are purified at his family stable.

As the men walk along the path up the valley to the goat houses, a few Muslim men happen to be walking down the path. Having washed and prepared for purification, the pivotal moment of Chaumos for the men, they feel particularly vulnerable to being despoiled. The Kalash men keep carefully to the side of the narrow path and warn the Muslim men not to touch anyone.

When Saifullah and I reach his maternal uncle's goat house, we join others on the flat earthen roof. The sun has disappeared behind the mountain, the light is flat, and it is cold. I am instructed to roll up my sleeves to the elbow. A pitcher of water is brought and everyone washes their hands, forearms and faces.



Saifullah Jan, leader of the Kalash people, leads the men in a solstice dance.

About ten of us line up on the roof with our hands washed and held away from our bodies. Saifullah has warned me that to touch my clothing would contaminate me and I would have to again wash my hands and face.

A small kid goat is brought to the roof, a fire built, juniper sprigs are gathered, and a knife produced. A juniper sprig lit from the fire is waved hissing and smoking over our heads. The boy runs around us in a circle twice saying, "sutch, sutch."

Then the goat is sacrificed in the same manner as during the morning: its throat is cut, and blood poured into the fire and over a small juniper branch, representing a temple, at the edge of the roof. One of the ears is cut off and put on the fire. This time, in addition to the blood offerings to the gods, blood is thrown in our faces. The boy who made the sacrifice flicks his blood-soaked hand in each of our faces in turn as he says, "sutch!" One young boy recoils at the moment when the blood is flicked on him. The elders present quickly confer as to whether he has been properly purified, and decide that since he was splattered he has been purified. When it is my turn I feel a few faint drops of blood against my face. Saifullah warns me not to wipe it off.

Like the purification of the women, the simplicity and brevity of the moment of purification seems to be out of proportion with the significance of the transformation. Transformed, purified, the men must abstain from touching any Muslims or "impure" objects for the next several days. Most importantly, we must abstain from sex. But at least when the ritual is finished we are allowed to sit again on the low Kalash stools.

For the next few days I will take my meals in the goat stables with the other men. Today, after being purified, we eat meat and a delicious gravy sopped up with walnut bread in the stable of Saifullah's maternal uncle. Several generations sit around the warm fire in the stable, eating and talking. A large dog waits hungrily for scraps just outside the door. I don't feel dramatically different after the purification, but contented and at ease with my Kalash hosts.

The men return at dusk, proudly showing off their blood-splattered faces to the women. They have feasted on the meat of the goats that were sacrificed earlier in the day. Women are not allowed to eat the meat of a male goat, which is considered pure and thus reserved for men. Instead, a few families in the valley

slaughter female goats and the meat is served to us, in smaller portions. That night, the singing resumes in the village square. As I drift off to sleep, I hear the voices of the men singing:

"Oh, my sister, my dearest sister
There is a channel of honey,
A channel of milk,
Below which is a small valley
Where my goats are getting fat.
Oh, my daughter, my sparrow,
Come and sit with me,
Singing, you and I can be together."



Girls in a dancing circle.

December 17: Chehtai Adu -- Balumain's Census

Last night, a few men stayed in the goat stables making "pure" bread that they will take to Sajigor today. There, Balumain will count the number of Kalash men.

But this morning, people from all five villages in the valley are gathering in the center of Balanguru. My friend, Cybor-bibi, pulls me into her house and hands me hunk of goat fat and a bowl of wine. Like many Kalash women, she insists that she doesn't drink much wine, but welcomes the chance to partake -- "because there is a guest here, and, after all, it is Chaumos."

At mid-morning, before the men move up the valley to Sajigor Temple, the young boys who received new clothes yesterday dance in the village square. They are wearing turbans and bandoliers of beads criss-cross their chests. Some

carry small walking sticks. They suddenly look grown-up. They dance with a stiff-legged stamping, looking alternatively tough and laughing at all the attention they receive. Then the men depart up the valley, and the women stay behind to dance. Tom describes what happens at the temple:

A large group of men gather at the Sajigor Temple. Assembled at the back of the temple are young boys, one from each family. They have purified or washed their hands and arms and each holds a large bundle of willow branches. Each willow branch represents an adult Kalash male, and each boy has the equivalent in willow branches of the adults in his extended family. The Kalash believe that Balumain comes and counts the willow branches each year to take a census of the Kalash people.

The boys fan out around the temple to get a clear path to the temple. At a signal from one of the elders, together they throw their bundles on top of the flat roof of the temple. The sudden rain of willow branches forms a jumble on the roof. Only a god could sort out the mass of branches.

Meanwhile, the young boys who just yesterday received their new clothes will be counted for the first time this year. They stand by the fire in their



Boys in a dancing circle.

new clothes coached by their fathers. Each boy holds his own willow branch. They too are helped to throw branches on top of the temple.

The second part of the ceremony involves placing a juniper branch on the fire and throwing pieces of walnut bread both on the fire and at the temple. When each of the purified boys has completed the offerings of smoke and pure bread, all present bow down again around the temple and offer prayers either aloud or silently. Saifullah tells me that you can ask for anything, but that this is the last chance to make a prayer this year before Balumain gathers up the prayers and takes them to God, the creator.



Girls await the lighting of the bonfire.

When the men return from Sajigor, they first dance on the rooftops above the women -- waving axes and walking sticks in the air toward us. One of the women holds a big stick up and yells to the men, "Hey brother! Sit on this!"

Amid the general laughter and joking, the men begin to make their way down from the rooftops, forming a human chain around the women. Each man holds the shoulders of the man in front of him, tightly encircling the women, as if both to crowd and protect us. Thus unified, the community then moves en masse through the village dancing grounds and continues dancing.

We dance for another two hours before the men leave again for the goat stables. The women spend the rest of the afternoon visiting one another, stringing bead necklaces and making bread. It feels natural to relax with the other women, who talk at length about a woman who had

died in childbirth earlier this year and whose husband is still distraught, although he had married the woman's younger sister. The general consensus is that he should consider himself lucky to have found another wife.

Meantime, a few men who remained in the village work to build a large pyre in the middle of town. A huge tree trunk, piles of firewood, and dozens of old baskets are piled on the ground. The burning of the old willow baskets is yet another sign that solstice is a time of renewal. The bonfire readied, everyone agrees to rest. It is going to be a long night.

December 17 continued: Chanda Rat -- The Night of Lights

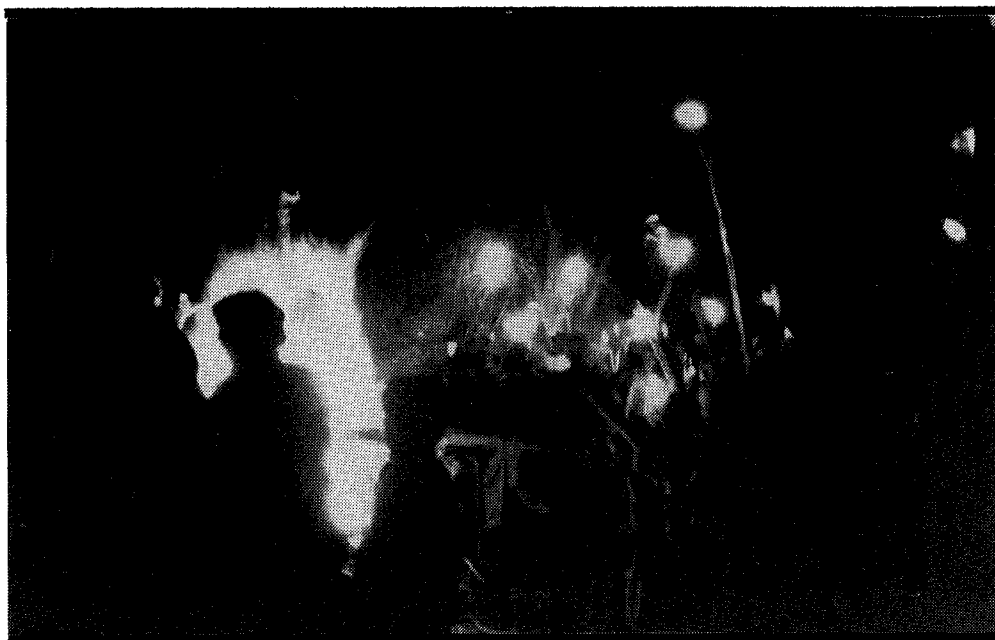
Soon after nightfall, a procession of flaming torches moves from the hill villages toward Balanguru. Tonight, every Kalash from Rumbur will congregate in this village, the final act of purification of the entire valley and the farewell to Balumain. Only the women hold torches, perhaps proclaiming their existence to Balumain, as the men did with their willow branches earlier in the day.

I have been drinking wine with Tom, Saifullah, and another man, Kuresh Khan, when we see the approaching lights. Yassir Ayas finds me in the crowd, hands me a hunk of meat (for strength, I presume) and drags me into a mass of women just as the torch-light procession arrives.

When it does, the crowd of around 400 people erupts in a frenzy. The bonfire is lit. The women dance in circles of a dozen people, standing shoulder to shoulder and circling both male and female dancers who spin wildly in the center. After a few moments, all the men of the valley again form an enormous human chain around the women, pressing us ever closer to the blazing bonfire.

According to Tom: "Each man holds tightly to the clothing of the man in front of him. The man directly in front of me was following a young child, and the line or circle alternately compressed and stretched but never broke. On the downwind side of the bonfire it was warm, but the sparks continually set our clothes alight and each man relied on the one behind him to brush the cinders away or put out small clothing fires."

Suddenly the men begin to gesture violently to the women: "Get down, get down!" As we squat on the ground, I realize that Balumain is among us, viewing the Kalash community a final time before he departs into night. After about a minute of reverential bowing, the men motion for us to stand again -- and dance!



Night of Lights

Immediately, the crowd becomes a swirling mass of bodies, spinning violently toward the fire. I am caught up in the crowd, reeling rapidly around and around. When Yassir Ayas drops her headdress near the bonfire, I stoop to pick it up and am nearly trampled by the people who leap over my back, pushing me down toward the ground. I regain my footing, but fail to escape the throng. An old woman grabs my dress and pulls me into the center of a dancing circle, holding my neck in a vice-like grip, she spins me first to the left, then to the right, then back to the left. All around, torches are blazing. The bonfire is spitting orange embers high into the air. The silhouettes of the axe-wielding men and torch-bearing women cast an eerie glow against the blackness of the night. One old man dances in a circle around the bonfire holding a ten foot torch in front of him, like a phallus, singing dirty songs to the amusement of onlookers.

The energy dissipates after about 30 minutes, but the singing and dancing continues throughout the night. Many people sing:

"I went to the fort of Balumain,
He gave me some goats
[or lovely wife, fine husband, good health, etc]
If possible, I would share this with you."

As midnight approaches, I join many of the women sitting on the ground near the bonfire, tired and cold but trying to stay awake throughout the night. But, like most, I don't make it

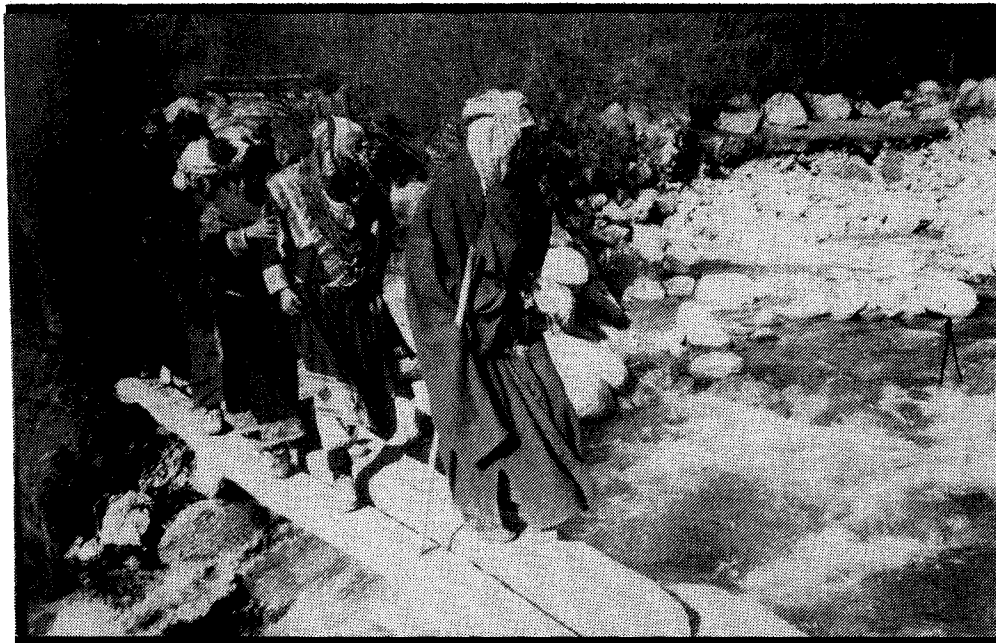
until dawn. When the chilling air forces me beneath the blankets around 2 AM, the crowd has fallen to about 70 people, a fraction of its original size. The next morning, a group of 20 men are still singing somewhat hoarsely around the fire, saying farewell to Balumain, welcoming the dawn and greeting the New Year.

December 19: Labe -- The Carnival

Everyone agreed to take yesterday off to rest after the all-night dancing. Most of the day was spent visiting friends, drinking wine, and eating meat. Today is traditionally the day of the fox chase, when the Kalash in ancient times would chase a fox through town. If they could chase it to the sunny side of the river, the year would be good. If not, the year would be bad.

Owing to the scarcity of foxes, or at least the difficulty of chasing them, this tradition has been dropped. Today is marked by the arrival of the "mystery guests."

Some researchers suggest that these guests are actually local men who dress as women, or women dressed as men, who put a gauzy cloth over their face to hide their true identity. As the



"Mystery" guests, their faces shrouded, arrive on the carnival day in the Rumbur valley.



Mystery women reveal their faces...

anthropologist, Loude, suggests: "Might this exchange of clothing not point to the persistence of the vision of a primordial androgyny?"⁷

However, no Kalash with whom I speak discusses such complex theories. But everyone agrees these new women are simple lovely visitors, albeit a bit larger than your normal Kalash lass. And the mystery men are handsome, but strangely petite.

When three of these mystery women arrive in the village of Balanguru, all the local women encircle them and begin to dance and sing:

"Oh, my sister,
You have just come from a
place called Muk-a-muk
But here is an old man
Who wants to be with you!"

Some of the local men are less polite to these large, hairy-armed women, heckling them with comments like: "Oh, sister, I think you've had too many babies!" Such remarks often elicit a violent reaction from the "female" guests, who chase the men and pummel them with sticks, amid great laughter and enjoyment from the crowd.

⁷ Loude, op. cit., p. 303.

After a few minutes of dancing, the villagers march with their mystery guests down the valley. Along the way, residents from the village of Grum join our procession. They, too, are accompanying some mysterious large women and petite men. Finally, the five villages join together on an open field in the village of Maladesh for an afternoon of carnival theater and dancing.

After an hour of entertainment, however, the bulky ladies suddenly disappear. Coincidentally, some local men who have not been seen that morning, arrive soon after the women depart. Then, the real Kalash women begin to dance, their graceful movements and lithe bodies accentuated by the comparison with the earlier mystery guests.

The tension of the previous days is dissipated in the laughter and dancing of the final carnival. But as the day comes to a close, I sense the Kalash are ready to move on. In two days, men and women will be permitted to touch again, and already men and women are sitting, eating and laughing together.

It also is time to get on with the work of a new year. The men must return to collecting firewood from the forest and hillsides, tending their goats and gearing up for the January "snow games" -- a version of winter golf, in which two groups of men armed with mallets chase a ball in a two-mile long race. The women soon will be busy milling wheat, making bread, washing clothes and weaving dresses.

And everyone is awaiting the birth of a new Kalash baby, expected any day.



Photographs by Tom Harrington and Carol Rose

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