

SONGS OF THE KALASH

by Carol Rose

*Fly little bird
Make a greeting to the new leaves
You are coming to an end
Oh My Joshi! [spring festival]
When will you return?*

— *Springtime Song of the Kalash*

Songs and stories exist in all societies. But for the Kalash, the last pagan worshippers of the mostly Muslim Hindu Kush region, oral traditions are central to the survival of their culture.

The Kalash have no written language. There are no books, newspapers, magazines, television or radio programs in the language of Kalashamon. Instead, the people who live in the three isolated Kalash valleys of northern Pakistan rely on songs and stories told at their religious festivals to transmit current news, to air grievances and to pass history on to future generations.

"The songs are a nice way to revive the past, to tell people what has happened to the Kalash, what they have done and how they have survived," says Saifullah Jan, the elected leader of the 4,000 remaining Kalash people. "Our history is passed from heart to heart. We learn how the rulers of [the district of] Chitral once enslaved the Kalash people and how our ancestors survived and kept the culture alive.

"The songs tell you the places where we started, the names of the ancestors and all the places where we have lived," he adds. "They are a kind of documentary."

In addition to recording history, festival songs enable the Kalash people to express their grief, their gratitude, and their anger with neighbors and relatives. Often one song elicits a reply from another singer, providing a sort of community ministering.

"If I sing that a man has done wrong to me, then perhaps he

Carol Rose is an ICWA fellow writing about Northwest and South Asia.



A Kalash elder sings during the Spring festival.

will realize his faults and not do it again," says Saifullah. "The songs are the main way that people open their hearts to the community about what they think and expect from the people."

Some songs warn about dangers from the "outside" world, while others praise the courageous acts of community leaders. Almost all songs include details of ancestral lineages, akin to Old Testament descriptions of who begot who.

Songs usually are performed at Kalash festivals -- particularly the four big festivals which mark the spring plowing, the harvest, the wine season and the winter solstice.

In recent years, Kalash men have brought cassette recorders to the valleys -- a "modern" technology that has done much to preserve Kalash oral traditions (at least temporarily). During the festival, local boys record the songs on hand-held tape recorders. Anyone who misses a song during a festival can listen to it later.

The following translations of Kalash songs are taken from a recording made at the 1992 spring festival (known as *Joshi*; see CVR-25) in the Kalash valley of Rumbur.

The festival took place on a high ridge near two open-air temples -- one built for the god of honeybees, the other for the fairies. For three days, villagers from the five Kalash villages

in Rumbur celebrated Spring with songs and dance. The men and women formed separate lines to dance, linking arms and stepping counter-clockwise around the perimeter of the festival grounds. Those who wanted to sing stood at the center of the crowd. Listeners gathered around each singer, chanting along or shouting "bravo!" or "oh-ya" as encouragement. Most of the lyrics were sung on two notes -- A-flat and G -- chanted in a minor harmony. Each song was repeated three times.

I have not included phonetic transcriptions of the Kalash language here, but instead have written the English translations. Working with Saifullah Jan, who is fluent in both Kalashamon and English, I also have given short explanations of each song. This is necessary insofar as many of the personal and historical references are obvious only to members of the Kalash community. For example, a man will be called: "Grandson of So-and-so" rather than by his given name, particularly if he is being criticized in a song. Other examples: a "honeybee hive" is a polite name for someone's home; "moon and sun" refer to man and woman; "old wealth" is a family's goats.

I have taken fairly generous liberties with the translations in an attempt to preserve the poetry of the lyrics. In so doing, I hope to share with readers the unique way in which Kalash society copes with grief, change and cultural continuity.



A Kalash woman dances in a trance.

Dramuchiki's Complaint

Dramuchiki is an elderly woman from the Rumbur Valley who was robbed by a Muslim man from the "Kati" Nooristani village at the head of the valley (near the Afghanistan border). In this song, she complains that her brother (Grandson of Sumbara) refused to help her after the robbery and praises another village man (Grandson of Bakar) who came to her assistance.

One word I say, I am speaking
 Listen to me, Moon and Sun (man and woman),
 Into my honeybee hive (my house)
 A wild man did enter
 A dead Kati man.
 But you had no honor, my brother,
 You grandson of Sumbara:
 Our house of hope has become large
 And we have become but distant relatives.
 But your steps were clear, My sweet,
 Oh, my big grandson of Bakar.
 Oh, my God, maybe it is just my luck and fortune
 That life goes like a water channel.

Saidan Shah's Reply to Dramuchiki

In this song, a village leader named Saidan Shah responds to Dramuchiki's complaint against her brother by praising her entire clan and recounting how one of her ancestors was also robbed, but managed to out-smart the thieves with the help of the gods.

Bravo to you, my sister!
 Granddaughter of Sumbara
 Life is like this:
 From mountaintops we come down,
 To mountaintops we climb.

Your grandfather was one of two brothers
 A family of old wealth,
 When in the middle of a generation (14 years)
 People from Werdesh (robbers from Nooristan)
 Came to Rumbur through a narrow valley.

Against your Grandfather Sumbara
 The robbers made a siege.
 Around your house they gathered
 But your Grandfather Sumbara
 Put his son Sharuta under his arm
 And escaped.

He opened the door to the male goat pen
 And let the goats flee to the forest.
 The goats went to Ramadeer.
 And from this place, the goats appeared
 To be marquorts (prized mountain goats).

But when the thieves climbed there
 They found your grandfather's wealth (goats)
 Had turned to white stones.

Wandering, wandering,
 The old wealth (goats)
 Appeared again the next morning
 To the thieves. It was as before,
 The thieves saw something on the hill,
 But when they went to see
 The wealth became invisible.

In that time it was known that
 Your grandfather's wealth was hidden
 By the god Jach (protector of crops).

After that, your Grandfather Kasoom
 Your Grandfather Sharuta
 Divided the kingdom of your grandfathers into two.¹
 Your Grandfather Malik became the headman of your household.
 From him there are two sons,
 Matisa and Saidaman.

Look! Yours is an ancient household!
 Your Grandfather Sharuta settled here
 A seven-story house he built!
 A seven-story house!

And your grandfathers put an altar
 High in the valley
 A place called Sajigor (protector of all things)
 In this way, every generation of descendants
 Has earned a good reputation.
 And nowadays, we live under the strong hands
 of Shah Juan (present lineage leader).

What a big talk I have given,
 Oh, sister.
 The speech from your tongue
 Has told us all.

¹ "Grandfather" or "grandmother" in Kalash refers to any direct ancestor.

Gulbahat's Lament

Last January a Kalash woman (named "Lahore Film") died in childbirth in the Rumbur Valley, leaving behind a small daughter (named Shamsoo Begum). Her father, Gulbahat, sings of his grief for his dead daughter. At the end of the song the father complains that "traditions have gone off the cliff" (i.e., been abandoned). This is a veiled attack on his daughter's husband for not remaining long enough in mourning.

Fly away little bird
 Take a greeting to the heaven
 How is my little truthful daughter,²
 She who is (soothing) like sheep's milk?

Her little daughter is saying:
 Where is my mother?
 Where has she gone?

Where is your mother?
 She is gone and is shining
 Like the sun in the heavens.

But in my bed at night
 I have no sleep.
 In my thoughts I cannot forget her.

At dawn I awaken
 But there is no chirping in the Mootik tree
 Of my little Titaiung bird.

God will give a long life
 To your little daughter
 Shamsoo Begum.

But time has changed
 Customs and traditions
 Have gone off the cliff

In the future we will see
 How the world goes
 How the time will pass.

² "Truthful" here comes from the Kalash word "sari", which means someone who eats a special bird and thereafter can converse with the animals of the forest.

A Song of Praise

Saidan Shah sang this song in praise of Saifullah and the other village men who earlier this year fought a battle against local Muslims who were stealing wood from the Kalash forest. The Kalash refer to Muslims as "white butterfly" because they "wear white and suck the life out of things."

The second part of the song refers to a refusal by the Kalash to answer a police summons from the district capital of Chitral. At the time of writing, Saifullah and other village men face jail sentences for their refusal to respond to the summons.

Bravo to you
Community elders
Men of Rumbur.

In the winter months
Came a big siege of white butterfly (Muslims)
Who else became wise among us?
Oh, Elders!
It was your son: Saifullah.

Sending the (armed Kalash) men
To the police check post (at the entrance to the valley)
He put an iron lock on the valley (to keep out Muslims).

"Come Here!"
A command was issued to us.
But "Disagree" said he,
The big grandson of Mooti Mir.

To Chitral's (police) yards
He gave a refusal,
That grandson of Bakar.

From his reply
The tempers cooled
In Rumbur's narrow valley.

And then we prayed
We met, we accepted,
It was done
By Sajigor (god of protection).

Diwaki's Lament for Her Dead Son

A 16-year-old Kalash boy died of leukemia last year, despite a tremendous amount of money spent by the family on medical care to save him. His mother, Diwaki, sings of her grief for the boy and thanks the villagers who gave her comfort. Note that she also makes a slight jab at her daughter, Golan, who is "driving me out of my mind";

My days of counting are not complete
The fairies have taken away my life
To the high mountain Tirich Mir.
Standing up, sitting down (life activities)
God has left my life incomplete.

Your defeat (death) has left
My heart burning
This is my fortune and luck.

Your place (by the hearth)
Sits empty now
And my solitude grows.

My heart is with you
And I can no longer
Look at the world
On this Earth.

Fly away little bird!
Go and look for him in heaven!

For a full year
We walked (from house to hospital)
As your relatives and friends.

But your choice was fulfilled,
Oh grandson of Sumbara and of Bakar,
For I remained in the summer place (above the village)
On the mountain top
Waiting for news of you.

From relatives I asked
Every day, seven times,
For happy news
From your same-age friends.

Now I am an admirer of the human beings
Who are so kind
But what can I do
To thank all those who helped me?

One day a bird awoke
And prayed to the Gods
From the Gangawat pass (a message came of her son's death).
So I set out for the village
My brain wild, my senses lost.

A chain-mail suit and shield,
A fence before the cliff,
They (relatives) did make for me
With their counseling and advice.

They told my heart
To be a politician (fighting)
Within and without.
Even as the sky fell upon me.

All the relatives controlled me,
And having gathered their sympathy,
Such as I have never seen,
Before or after,
This sorrow now comes out
In a song.

To the same-age boys
Of the three Kalash valleys
They showed sympathy that
Made me reach the Springtime.

(But your sister, Golan,
Is driving me out of my mind.)

Still my brain cannot accept
Though trying a thousand times
I have no control
To bring light to my heart
I have only solitude.

Have a thought
Oh elders of the valley,
And give an answer to me
For my grief.

An Elder Reprimands Diwaki

It seems many people of the Rumbur valley felt that Diwaki's continuing grief for her dead son had gone on too long; more than one year of mourning was considered unseemly. Thus, Saidan Shah sang this reply:

There are four children
In your wealthy house
[tape garbled]

Father Mir Alam (father of dead boy)
Hunts the marquort
And makes the children drink
The marrow (i.e. he takes care of his children).

He looks after, my sister,
the Doni Cheemitsun (hunting place)
Hunting the marquort
And bringing it to the summer place.

Sorrow remains, my sister.
For wealth makes you smile,
And poverty makes you cry.

But in this world
Sorrow should not linger
For your husband gathered
Three valleys (for the funeral of the son)
And turned your son into a flower.

It was a decision of God
So don't make your heart defeated
Look also in heaven.
It is a blessing for fathers and mothers
To have a son in heaven
Shining like the sun upon them.

Let no sorrow remain
For strong Shah Juan (lineage leader)
and Mir Alam (boy's father)
Took out their wealth
And spent it here (on medical bills)
But God did not accept that
And took the life away.

Your lake of ghee³
Drained away,
Flowing to a pleasant place
In the village of Balanguru (in the Rumbur Valley.)
Making headmen of your fathers and brothers.

But if you make your heart
Still defeated
It will bring harm
To your son in heaven.

To hear from your tongue
All that you have said
We are surprised.



A young man records the song of a
Kalash elder.

³ Ghee is clarified butter that is distributed by the family of a deceased person to all the villagers, bringing honor to the family.

Springtime Songs of Joy and Love

The following are songs sung repeatedly by Kalash boys and girls as they dance during the springtime Joshi festival. These are chanted purely for fun:

A Prayer for Protection

There is a long valley to Nooristan [Afghanistan]
 Upon which I will place a lock [to keep out Muslims]
 If you put it there, Sajigor [god of protection]
 We will make an autumn sacrifice to you.

Song of Love (sung by the boys)

I ask nothing from you,
 Nothing should you give me,
 But that you sit beside me
 and see my lovely coat,
 But you run away!

Song of Love (sung by the girls)

Sour cheese will be given by the shepherds
 It is the cheese harvest time
 And I go to decorate the cattle house.
 But where is Kiosh-taleh (boy's name)?
 Where are you when I go to the goat house?
 Are you in the forest
 Taking bark from the trunk
 Of an almond tree?

Dancing Song (sung by the girls)

Meow, meow, Grandmother
 Eat the skinny one (food) yourself
 And give me another.

Dancing Song (sung by the boys)

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!