

Religion as a Space for Kalash Identity A Case Study of Village Bumburetin Kalash Valley, District Chitral

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Abstract: The study was conducted in Bumburet valley of district Chitral, Pakistan. Qualitative anthropological research technique was adopted for acquiring the ethnographic data for the research in hand. This research paper is an attempt to understand ancestral and cultural traditions, faith, mystic experiences, oral history and mythology of the Kalash people. The natives' concept of sacred and profane, fundamental principle of purity and impurity and the use of religion as a source of socio political strength have also taken into the account. Religion is a universal phenomenon which has existed even in the Stone Age and preliterate societies and serves as a source of identification for the people. Among the Kalash religion is the main divine force for their cultural identity. Religious identity is constructed both socially and culturally and transmitted to the next generation. The changes brought in the religion are the consequence of asserting power to make it more of cultural and group identity rather than a pure matter of choice based on individual's inner self or basic fact of birth. The role of Shamans and Qazi is very significant. They teach and preach youth the rituals, offering and sacrifice. The contemporary Kalash believes in one God but the Red Kalash believed in variety of gods and deities, which includes Irma (The Supreme Creator), Dezalik/ disini (goddess of fertility), Sajigor (the warrior god), Bulimain (divider of riches), Maha-deo (god of promise), Ingaw (god of prosperity), Shigan (god of health), Kotsomaiush (goddess of nature and feminism) and Jatch / Zaz (A Super Natural Being).

Key words: Religion, traditions • Worship • Spiritual beliefs • Social practices • Sacred • Profane • Purity and impurity

INTRODUCTION

Religion is the most effective tool for equipping any group of people with a specific identity. It is a sacred spiritual space which brings order and regulation in the life of people. Religion is a universal phenomenon which has existed even in the Stone Age and preliterate societies. It is intentionally or unintentionally engrossed in every sphere of life and serves as an integral part of every moral and self-respecting society. It is essential for every member of the society to perform the rituals as prescribed by the elders or revelations. Religion like traditions is transmitted from one generation to another. It is believed that during this transmission the purity and essence of the religion is affected. The nature and originality of religion are manipulated according to the beliefs, ideals and perception and according to the suitability and acceptability in modern times. The word

religion is derived from a Latin word "religio" which means "to collect again in an orderly fashion" or "religere *i.e.* to unite [1]. The most common connotation is "to worship".

Religion is often regarded as the "feeling of absolute dependence" [1]. It is a discourse of spiritual beliefs and social practices, a belief in existence of all powerful, invincible supernatural beings which control behavior of people and to create a harmonious society in which the weak can coexist with the powerful, the low can coexist with high. Complete submission and devotion to its commandments, facilitate to establish a group identity. It is often regarded as the set of rituals rationalized by myth, which mobilizes supernatural powers for the purpose of achieving or preventing transformation of state in man and nature [2]. Religion prescribes a set of behavior by which people try to control the area of the universe that is beyond their control [1].

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Religion is the main divine force that in the form of practices and codified beliefs is cherished by the Kalash for cultural identity. It includes the study of ancestral and cultural traditions, faith, mystic experiences, oral history and mythology. It is a clear distinction between sacred from profane and the Kalash owe their religion to the fundamental principle of purity and impurity. It is a source of socio political strength to the Kalash people as a token of identity for their continued survival as a distinct cultural group.

Research Site: The study was conducted in Bumburet valley of district Chitral, Pakistan. The modern state of Chitral district is located in Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa Province. This state was once an old country with its borders extending up to *Badakshan* and *Bashagal* in the North West and the *Kunar* valley in the south all the way to *Bilam* and *Chaghasswari*. Most of these areas now lie in Afghanistan. Border of the state was not permanent due to the ongoing expansion of the neighboring state of Gilgit and Kashmir.

Bumburet Valley of Kalash is part of Chitral and it laid claim to a land of steep slopes, some 35 kilometers to the south of Chitral which opens towards Kunar River. During 1959 the kingdom of Chitral was attached to Pakistan and therefore the Kalash people became citizens of Pakistan. The total area of Bumburet valley is 180 Km sq out of which 51 Km sq is habitable and cultivable. There are six main pasture units at elevation of 3500m above sea level and occupy about half of the total geographical area of the valley. The Kalash villages in all the three valleys are located at a height of approximately 1900 to 2200m [3]. The climate is generally semi-arid.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Qualitative anthropological research technique was adopted for acquiring the ethnographic data for the research in hand. The researchers lived in Bumburet valley and participated in their festivals, feasts, offerings and prayers. Thus a complete immersion in the said culture has been adopted for a very good rapport, acceptance and recognition by the society. The basic data was collected through the socio economic survey. The survey facilitated me to gather information about the village regarding sex, education, family system, caste, population, ethnic groups, occupation and number of household residing in the village. The Bumburet valley is composed of 12 hamlets and through random sampling we selected few hamlets where both Kalash and Muslims coexisted and shared the geographical space. We visited every house of the

village Anish, Brun, Batrik and Karakal and conducted in-depth interviews to collect detailed information about their religion. Audio recording was used during the interviews. The secondary data for this study was collected from library by reviewing journals, articles and documentary programs about the mythical people of Kalash. The data has been assembled in the form of photographs, map sketches and floor plans.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In Bumburet valley when we asked people regarding their religion, they responded that they are "Kalash". Hence "Kalash" for them serves as both the religious and cultural identity. In the region the Kalash reside alongside with the Muslim of Sunni and Ismaili sect. The Kalash amongst them are recognized as a minority community and therefore enjoy certain privileges which Pakistan government has granted to the minorities. Hence it can be assumed that their religion is the foundation of their identity which acts as a significant aspect that can effectively be used to examine the rituals used by general public to attain a particular religious identity. One's religious identity is always an assertive category especially if it is favored by the majority group. In Hinduism it is believed that one was assigned one's religious identity by virtue of one's birth, they say that religion is confined to tribe [4].

Religious identity is constructed both socially and culturally. It is not left on the choice of individuals in their early childhood period. In adolescence when the faculty of mind develops and questions arise to discover the absolute truth by putting faith and beliefs in question; often give rise to certain deviant behaviors which are controlled through chastisement. Religion is exercised through strong social and cultural actors and has often survived periods of tremendous changes through coercion with strong and dominating religions. The result of this contestation comes in the form of confusing people's faith and identity. Kalash as history revealed, were believed to be polytheist and idol worshipper. The influence of Islam and Christianity had brought changes to religious traditions and the number of negotiated religious forms eventually emerged.

This apparent change in religious discourse signifies the extent of confusion that occurred when the imperative nature of religious identity collapsed [5]. The changes brought in the religion are the consequence of asserting power to make it more of cultural and group identity rather than a pure matter of choice based on individual's sinner self or basic fact of birth.

The basic reason behind the fluctuation in the religious identity is the lack of conviction and understanding behind the fundamental truth of ideology or faith in God. Elders discourage the youth to discover God because of their own feeble and shaky beliefs. Should they encourage their youth to question the existence of God, it may lead them to a risky adventure, which may deviate them from the path of their forefathers; leading to a change in religious identity. This constant conversion of religion eventually proliferates the space where the religious identity is encapsulated. Religion is the source of sociopolitical strength which enables people to seek identity for the preservation of their culture. For example the Muslims of the subcontinent, drawing strength from their Islamic identity created Pakistan in the name of Islamic nationhood [6] while ignoring their intercultural and linguistic differences. The Israelites, the descendants of Jacob reasserted their claim on the Palestinian territories as the Promised Land according to the Hebrew Bible. If rationally analyzed these modern day Jews are culturally more Europeans and have a Polish/Russian and German lineage [7].

The Kalash of Bumburet valley is trying to rediscover their lost identity and to build a stable platform which can be used to reassert their right on the region which was principally theirs. Their religion is an unseen cosmic force which is powerful and wrathful [8] for them. The "Dezau" the supreme creator is very powerful and his presence is invisible, he controls the life and death, fate and fortune. He is the creator and administrator of the universe. By creating the invincible concept of creator it becomes easier for them to bring order, system, laws and values to formulate a distinguished cultural identity. The supreme god is supported by some deities to whom certain attributes are assigned. In reality the idea of god is quite disputed because there is no rationale behind his existence and cannot be scientifically proved. Yet the universe becomes a spiritualized extension of the group whose meaning pertains to the group and supports the sense of identity [4]. This diversity in beliefs is created to gain authority and supremacy over others and is further utilized for the purpose of constituting a space, for a separate cultural identity which is exhibited by utilizing the faculty of rituals in a distinguished, stylized and repetitive form of liturgical orders.

Rituals are social acts and the extent of commitment is dependent on the sincerity and faith of the believer. For an outsider it may appear to be the ritualistic identity of the particular group. Rituals are often in complete

harmony with the religious ideology but sometimes people having power and spiritual position modify the rituals to safeguard their personal vested interests. Though this corrupts the purity of the religion but often is ignored because the believers have complete faith in their spiritual leaders.

They never doubt their intentions. The people of Kalash also owe their religious identity to their shamans "Dehar" who are spiritualists and are capable of understanding the language of heaven. They get in to a state of trance where they are able to communicate with the holy spirits or deities. They are the carriers who pass on the revelations of god to the masses. They are healers and often possess unlimited magical powers and countering spells to cure the people from their misery. The shamans in Kalash reside in the village of their origin and are mortal beings. The people of the village believe in the supernatural qualities possessed and claimed by the shamans. The trance is then followed by the fumigation of juniper leaves and often by sprinkling of the scarified animal blood, offerings and prayer. The deities and fairies communicate with the shamans and deliver a supernatural message [9]. The shamans are approached for the cure of natural illnesses and misfortune. Elders believe that they also had a book related to their religion handed over to them by the fairies having accounts and detailed description of their forefathers but due to the subjugation and persecution the Muslims had ripped them of their glorious past and taken away everything which could facilitate them to re-organize their identity. They are grateful to god for not forsaking them and had communicated through the shamans and enabled them to regularize and manage their society and salvage their identity.

Numerous shamans have appeared but due to the scarcity of written literature they don't remember all of them and the miracles are also forgotten in the mist of time. Qazi in Kalash acquires the same status as the Imam and Ulemain Islam and Pope and Priest in Christianity. He is known as the religious preacher who guides the norms of the traditional culture. He is a respectable member of a society but possesses no supernatural quality. He cannot cure the sick, make prophecies, find evil and hidden spells or even communicate with the fairies. The qualification for the Qazi is a well-informed, wise and honest man. The one who remembers most of the shamans with maximum miracles and stories regarding their heritage is selected for the post. Every village has its own Qazi. He is also serving as a permanent member of the Jirga to resolve any conflict among the community

members. These Qazi's are responsible for announcing the date for every festival. They teach and preach youth the rituals, offering and sacrifice [9].

Kalasha Dastur (The Kalash Tradition): Tradition plays an important role in establishing the identity of any group. Religion, language, dress patterns, art and architecture are the tools which facilitate the tradition to delegate certain characteristic to any distinct group. Malinowski believed that tribal religions are concerned mainly with organizing: commemorating and helping people to get through life events including birth, puberty, marriage and death [10]. The people of Kalash though found their affiliation with the religion have not yet accumulated their religious fundamentals and stories in a written form. The oral literature is transmitted to other generation in oral form. There is a school of thought in Bumburet Valley Kalash who believed that their religious Holy Books were destroyed by the Muslims when they were subjugated later the remnants of their sanctuaries, temples, worship places were lost by the unkindness of nature. Though in reality there is no empirical proof of such claim. However it is evident in the pages of history that Muslims have never destroyed any worship places anywhere during their reign. The indigenous people are reinventing traditions and negotiating an identity in a politically expedient and historically superior way by misreading an anthropological text [11]. Whatever they say and believe is their truth and should be accepted and respected by others beyond doubt because this is the very essence of their existence and a space for their identity. The data regarding their gods is collected through interviews from their religious preachers.

The contemporary Kalash believes in one God the creator known as "Dezaw" or "Khodai" and sometimes "Paida Goorav" the one who created universe, controls life and death, Day of Judgment "Qayama", concepts of life after death, hell and heavens are present in Kalash Society. An animal is sacrificed to win the favors and blessings of the great God. Kalash claimed that the concept of monotheism is borrowed from Islam where as their predecessors Red Kalash believed in variety of gods and deities. They are believed to be idol worshippers but do not carve any idols because God is invisible and is omnipotent. Following is the list of gods, deities and super naturals which are worshiped or feared by the people of Kalash in past and contemporary times.

Irma (The Supreme Creator): The supreme creator for the red Kalash was Irma, the temple of this goddess is located at the river *Kushtiki* [12] which is about in the

middle of *Puran* valley. A U shaped valley high up in the mountains [12]. The people of Puran were regarded as the specialist in religion. The god was supported by the lesser idols who act as his advisors and prophets. Recently from past few generations they have converted to Islam and are known as "Nuristani". They are found along the border region between Chitral and Afghanistan in Bumburet valley known as Shakenandeh I and II. The contemporary Kalash do not recognize this god. But the literature, its art and architecture bore significant resemblance with the Kalash traditions.

Dezalik / Disini (goddess of Fertility): This goddess holds power over life and death and controls the souls of the unborn children [9]. Her temple is located in every menstruation home; it is represented by a vertical roughly flat timber in form of female vulva. The temple is considered as a labor room for pregnant women and here they remain till complete recovery. The male members and pure women of the society are forbidden to enter this temple. Every Kalash girl enters this house when she has her first periods and takes part in a religious custom "tus'ul'ek" performed by the other females present in the *Bashalini*. Special offerings are made when women enters with labour pain for delivery.

Sajigor (the Warrior God): In Sanskrit *sajigor* means "to equip or to be armed" but has no meaning in Kalash language. The concept of this god is the result of cultural diffusion and was introduced by king *Rajawai* in 100 A.D. This is a warrior god, the most important god who is considered as the protector and guardian of the territory. This is also responsible for the safety of livestock which consequently brings wealth and lushness. This god has the power to intervene over the spring rains. The temple is made in a circular shape made of oak wood surrounded poles. The Kalash elders insisted that *sajigor* is a sanctuary a place for worship and to offer sacrifices the perception that Kalash regard *sajigor* as a god is a false statement and is based on misinformation.

Bulimain (Divider of Riches): "Bulish" in Kalash language means divider of riches, where as in Sanskrit "bala" means force or strength, "Mayin" is referred to magician who has the ability to change. Myth is that a great *deo*, who lives in *Tsyam* comes to Kafiristan once a year markedly in the month of December. It is believed that god *Bulimain* with glowing appearance, blistering face, comes on a horse and brings salvation, prosperity and good health for the Kalash

people. The festivities last for 40 days in the presence of their invisible god who is often symbolized by a horse. Due to the cruel winters the Kalash confine themselves to their homes and hibernate. They rely on their stored food items and pass the time while praying, feasting and entertaining themselves to endure the harsh winter's atrocities.

Maha~deo (God of Promise): The concept of *Maha~deois* borrowed from the Sanskrit language which means great god. *Devis* referred for a giant or evil spirit. This god is regarded as the messenger between the creator and man. He is popular in the masses and accepts a great deal of homage and offerings. He is known as a god of kept promises, concerned by transgression and soiling of purity and above all protector of population. His altar *Maloshis* well attended and people approach him on daily basis by offering a sacrifice of bull or goat. His altar is situated in all the valleys the altars are transplanted from *waigalto* Kalash territory. The altar happens to be an open air worship place under the shaft of large rock. The large rocks are surrounded by carved poles with four horse head carved on wood. The place is also called "*deradur*" where the spirits dwell.

Ingaw (god of Prosperity): This god is responsible for good crops and prosperity in the region. People offer sacrifice of a lamb or a goat without any defect to this god, before the seeds are sown [13]. The lamb is especially selected at birth and is embarked for sacrifice. The animal is reared with special care. If it gets hurt or dies it is considered as a bad omen and the crop would be in scarce. The sacrifice is offered at the "*Ucaw*" festival which is celebrated on 18th to 25th August every year.

Shigan (god of Health): When the child is ill his grand father sponsors a sacrifice through the *betan* (Priest) to the *shigan* for the recovery of the child. This sacrifice is very common due to the poor health and medical facility in the region. It has been observed that the Muslims of the region often request the *betanto* offer the sacrifice for the safety of their children, but do not devour the sacrifice with the Kalash.

Kotsomaiush (Goddess of Nature and Feminism): This goddess combines the nature and feminists to protect fruits, crops and children. She ordered the women to adorn themselves with beads, pearls and cowries. A goat is sacrificed in her name. She is represented by a naturally carved stone primarily having the feminine curves. The

goddess is recognized and respected by men and huge offerings are presented for the safety and longevity of their spouse and children.

Jatch / Zaz (a Super Natural Being): This god is responsible for breeding goats. A sacrifice of a goat is offered to him when they are leaving for summer pastures for the purpose of grazing goats and other domestic animals. Afterwards another sacrifice is arranged when the cattle's are returned from the high pastures in autumn. Special prayers and offerings are made during the numerous rites in the *chawmos* festival.

Istogosh (Custodial of Tradition): When children up to three years wear their traditional clothes for the first time in their life a goat is sacrificed in the name of this god. The forehead of the child is marked with the blood of the sacrificed animal. The people believed that after that the child is recognized as a pure Kalash and a true, faithful custodian of traditions and customs.

Suchi (Fairies): The term *suchi* refers to fairies in Kalash language. The most romantic part of Kalash religious beliefs. They deal with the supernatural beings and divinities. They are the guardian of the wild animals and ibex. They have the ability to assist hunters by allowing them, to kill their target. Sometimes they communicate with the chosen people and grant them with special powers. It is believed that they reside in inaccessible high pastures, glaciers or Mountain Lake [13]. In Rumbour valley two places "*Katsair*" near *sajigor* and "*shingmu*" near *Maha~deo* are linked with the presence of these fairies.

Bhut (Demons): There is no meaning of the word "*Bhut*" is found in Kalash language. These are regarded as the evil male spirits of night, reside in dark shadows, have the ability to change their physical appearance; from man to snake. They are harmful and are killers. The people of Kalash believe that the origin of *Bhuti* is borrowed from the Muslims of the region because they use this phenomenon to scare their children from wrong and evil doings. When a man gets possessed by these demons, a sacrifice of sheep or an offering of juniper leaves is made to *bhutsaara* (residence of demons) this ritual is a kind of exorcism and is meant to drive away the demons.

Wawa (Ancestors): In Kalash "*wawa*" means souls of the elders. It is believed that the deceased ancestors of each lineage protect and pray for their living descendants.

In graveyard, graves are grouped in sectors according to their lineage and are buried in coffins. To represent the glory of the ancestor sculpture of the dead is created in the woods. This life style statue is erected on the tombs of *Gandao* [9] monument of the deceased ancestors. It is situated in the field near the village. The wood carvings of the ancestors are carved before the *chawmos* festival. The tradition has been revived after a very long time in November 2008. This festival exhibits the inextricable linking of souls of both living and dead.

The traditional beliefs of Kalash identity can be regarded as the multiplicity defined and unified phenomenon; where the self is constructed through both discursive subject positions and social encounters [14]. Every juncture leaves a severe mark and distorts the original essence and absolute reality of the belief. Such identities are the result of manipulation (external and internal) of boundaries and beliefs in the existing space for survival. The persecution and humiliation suffered by these ethnic groups is not a very unimaginable phenomenon.

Pages of history are filled with such stories. In the cultural divide some societies assume dominant positions and some become subservient. When India was conquered by the Aryans, the native Dravidians were relegated to the class dubbed as "untouchables". Aryans further subdivided themselves into a class system in which every cast was assigned a specific role. In their society class jumping was not allowed. The original inhabitants were driven to the lowest strata and were awarded only those jobs which called for their total surrender. The rationale was to crush their self-respect and integrity so that they can never think of regaining their past glory. They may be economically so suppressed that all their thought process revolves around basic survival.

Similarly same is witnessed in the recent phenomenon of colonization of Asia and Africa by the Europeans. This has same behavioral patterns *i.e.* of the oppressed and the oppressor. America and Australia were the worst with their deeds in the way they treated the original inhabitants of their respective areas. Red Indians in America (both north and south) were exterminated; while the remnants were forced to live in reservations where the resources of the land were scarce. They could hardly keep themselves alive with their associated civilization and thus human order was torn into shreds. Their children were taken away from them to be educated in the civilized environment for having well groomed and trained slaves for the invaders. With the passage of time,

the subservient tried to organize themselves for their survival with honor and they regrouped themselves by creating their culture as a space for their identity to put up a unified resistance to oppression. The process of regrouping followed the same pattern which had originally necessitated for their survival. From the pattern of society a specific cultural and national identity evolves. The consequence is a conflict between various cultural identities. This terminates finally in to wars and subjugation of one cultural identity by the other. The cycle of social destruction and construction has gone on for centuries and is the story of human evolution. This pattern facilitates man to become stronger and more challengeable, adaptable of nature and survival. This led any specific group of people to put together their traditional culture as a space for identity. This can be successfully applied to the history of Kalash who were originally a part of Kafirs of Hindukush. The intrusion of various tyrant forces such as Indians, Chinese, Arabs and Afghan rulers subjugated them and gradually pushed them into inaccessible, unfriendly pockets where they existed in a low profile keeping their beliefs, traditions, customs, honor and their way of life intact. They were isolated and free from any external influence.

It was only after they became the part of Pakistan, the course of their social betterment was started. The developmental work initiated by the government with the help of other nongovernmental organizations facilitated in narrowing down the gap between the dominant and subservient group. Greeks for that matter regard these Kalash as their lost tribe and therefore made special efforts to raise their standard and take steps to protect their culture.

CONCLUSION

The present study was conducted in Bumburet valley of Kalash, District Chitral, Pakistan. The key technique used for data collection was participant observation in which the researcher lived in the community, observed and documented their cultural patterns as an indicator of their traditional culture as a basis for identity. The basic purpose of the study was to understand the role and significance of religion as a tool for establishing identity for the conventional people of Kalash.

The people of Kalash have managed to maintain their identity through their unique and nonviolent way of life based on their oral traditions and the religion practiced through centuries. It is a known fact that rituals, beliefs and practices which are based on religions survive the

longest. In contrast to ancient lost civilization, the people of Kalash symbolize as the model of harmony within their own tribe and with other cultural groups occupying the region. Because of their exclusivity their neighbors may not like them but they certainly tolerate them otherwise this small group may have gone to virtual extinction hundreds of year ago. Their survival and their individuality is a testament to the fact that culture is actually a cocoon in which group can survive and maintain its identity and perpetuate.

The Kalash ethnic identity has survived the double trauma of fundamentalism and colonization and at present they are interacting with the modernization and technological advancement which is a direct threat to their traditional culture. This interaction of nature and human societies facilitate in maintaining diversity and identity simultaneously for survival. The Kalash society does not have any social stratification based on creed, cast, power and wealth. Knowledge and wisdom is perhaps the only criteria by which certain individuals command more respect than the others. They are distinctively different from people around them. They appear as an oasis in a desert with their pleasant and colorful style in region.

The conversion to Islam started with the arrival of Arabs in the region and gradually it took momentum though it had effected their religious ideology but it had no influence on Kalasha culture because the Kalasha who converts to Islam formed another community Nuristani following Islamic culture, the Kalashaconvertes, seems to have taken the whole of chitrali culture in all its aspects as synonymous with Muslim culture. In their eyes, apparently, to behave like a perfect Muslim means to behave like a perfect Chitrali. Thus they have taken great care in trying to eliminate all elements of material culture that may bore mark of Kalasha Identity, starting from their traditional dress patterns to conformation of their houses, which are now changed to suit the chitrali model surrounded by high walls. The older women still like to braid their hair, as they find this habit hard to let go.

It is believed that the concept of formulating identity through culture or religious beliefs is a reactionary phenomenon and people adapt it to guard themselves from the persecution and atrocities exercised by the powerful oppressor. They seek salvation in being loyal to their religious and cultural ideology. The Kalash people have maintained their centuries old traditional culture despite the fact of current globalization and modernization. Media is invading their privacy, esteem and societal norms by introducing new ideas and inspirations to the youth. Albeit the people have

subjugated to the latest trends of globalization and modernization but are also striving to keep pace with their socio- cultural and religious traditions transmitted to them by their forefathers. Currently the society is passing from the phase of transition and transculturation due to the impact of modernization and change but still the people are trying hard to preserve and maintain their centuries old cultural identity.

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