

Muslim Impact on Religion and Culture of the Kalash

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Introduction:

The Kalash are the only non-Muslim ethnic group living in three small and beautiful valleys of district Chitral. They are the last tribe of the Kafirs of the Hindu Kush. The Kalash exhibit, perhaps, one of the ancient and unique primitive traditions and cultures. They are living with the Muslims in this region for a long period of time, and had been under Muslim rule most of this period. In spite of being a small minority community, surrounded by the Muslims from all sides, they still are able to sustain their religious ideas and practices to display the most colourful way of living and celebrating their unique culture in modern world. On the other hand the Kalash do not have any solid ideological foundations. Their religious practices and customs are based on some mythological ideas along with nature, animal and ancestor veneration.

With the strengthen of Muslim rule in Chitral in 14th century C. E. most of the Kalash embraced Islam gradually, except a small number of them who up-hold their religion and customs, but they were restricted to Bumburet, Rumbur and Birir, three small valleys that are known as the Kalash Valleys till today. Despite of increasing Muslim population that converted the majority of the Kalash to a minority even in these valleys as well, their survival with their ancient religious and cultural traditions is a matter of significance. Credit goes, on one hand, to the moderate and caring Muslims community of Chitral who being the ruling power with overwhelming majority neither interfered in religious and cultural matters of the Kalash nor attempt to convert them to Islam by force, and, on the other hand, credit goes to the peaceful and lenient Kalash people who always avoided any form of confrontation with the Muslims.

Surrounding by the Muslims from all sides, with weaker religious foundation it was quite natural that the smallest non-Muslim minority community of the Kalash to have been influenced by Islamic ideology in many aspect of life. It is a historical fact that the Kalash have been influenced by Islamic ideology and culture according to natural social phenomenon in which an influential ideology dominates a weaker one, and a subjugated community loses its cultural identity against prevailing culture. Unfortunately, in the case of the Kalash, this situation is

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portrayed by many "well-wishers of the Kalash" as a threat to identity and existence of this "endangered" community with big exaggerations. Whether Islam is the real and only threat for existence of the Kalash or there are other challenges for their survival? Can Muslim influence be easily blamed for low rate of Kalash population or there are other reasons like tough condition of life with lack of health facilities in the region, high infant and maternal mortality rate in Kalash society that badly disturbed population growth of the Kalash? Can we ignore increasing trend of migration of many outsiders to Kalash valleys, the challenges of modernity, activities of outsiders and role of NGO in changing the environment of Kalash valleys as the real threat for the culture, identity and existence of the Kalash? All these important questions and vital issues can be discussed in separate intensive studies, but in coming pages the focus will be on ideological and cultural impact of Islam on the Kalash.

Muslim Impact on Ideology of the Kalash:

The dominant Islamic ideology has its significant impact on Kalash ideology. A number of changes can be identified in religious ideas of the Kalash due to influence of the Muslims especially after the supremacy of the Muslims over the region and shift of political and social power from the Kalash to the Muslims. Some important examples in this regard are:

1. **CONCEPT OF GOD:**

The concept of god in Kalash religion is ambiguous which lead to call them pagan or infidel by a number of the writers.(1) In fact the Kalash believe in the existence of the Creator, which they call *Dezao* and *Khoday*, and they claim to worship him alone. A famous Kalash religious leader explains their concept of God:

“Our Muslim neighbours blame us for worshiping idols of stones and wood. We do not worship these things, but we go to the places that are signs and symbols of our deities where we offer sacrifice and pray to only one God. We are neither pagans nor atheists.”(2)

Despite of the claim of Kalash that they believe in one god and worship him alone, they acknowledge a large number of deities, fairies, spirits and other supernatural beings as god or associate with him in numerous matters. Beside mythology and animism, many forms of nature, animal and ancestor veneration can also be observed in the religion of Kalash. The respect and reverence paid to supernatural beings and all things, mentioned above, other than God by the Kalash can never be justified with the claim belief in one God.

According to Islamic belief the claim of the Kalash to worship one god is very similar to that of *Mushrikeen* (disbelievers) of *Makkah* who considered their idols mediator between God and humans that may bring them near to the God. The Noble Qur'an narrated their view point and strongly criticised it:

﴿والذين اتخذوا من دونه أولياء ما نعبدهم إلا ليقربونا إلى الله زلفاً إن الله يحكم بينهم في ما هم فيه يختلفون إن الله لا يهدي من هو كاذب كفار﴾

(But those who take for protectors other than Allah (say): 'We worship them only that they may bring us nearer to Allah.' Verily Allah will judge between them in that wherein they differ, but Allah guides not such as are false and ungrateful)." (3)

However belief of the Kalash in the Supreme God, *Dezao*, and claim to worship him alone is one of the best examples of Muslim influence on them. In his older form *Dezao* was obviously a distant God, who was seldom addressed in formal rites. He has no shrine, nor is any sacrifice dedicated to him specifically in the whole ritual cycle.(4) Despite the presence of *Dezao* as Supreme God, the Kalash concept of one god has also been stunned by the large number of mythological gods. During their interaction with the Muslims they comprehend one God who is the Creator and the Lord of the entire universe. They identified the Supreme Being with the God of Islam, and started to claim to worship him alone and consider the deities and other super natural beings as His associates or means of connection between God and people only. They also borrowed the word "*Khoday*" for god from their Muslim neighbours who use this word for Allah in same context, (in Khovar, Pashto and Persian languages) but contrary to the Kalash they worship Him alone without making any associate with Him.

The Kalash also use some Arabic and Persian words, for their god, these words are used by the Muslims for Allah, like *Khaliq* (the Creator), *Malik* (the Ruler/Master), *Raziq* (the Provider of sustenance), *Parwardigar* (the Guardian), *Nigahban* (the Protector) etc. with same pronunciation and meaning.

2. GUIDENCE FROM SUPERNATURALS:

The Kalash neither believe in any prophet nor do they have any sacred scripture. They have their traditional shamans whom they call *Dehar*. Shaman work as mediator between gods and human beings, his role in Kalash religion is like the role of prophets in the revealed religions. Messages of gods and other supreme beings are conveyed to the Kalash through these shamans. Kazi Braman says:

“You, the Muslims, follow your prophet Muhammad but we, the Kalash, follow our Dehar in all religious matters. Dehar has special links with our Malotsh (deities) and other supernatural beings. Thus he is the spiritual leader of the Kalash who convey the message and commands of the deities to the people.”(5)

In their golden age the Kalash had a number of famous Dehar like Raik, Naga, Thanuk, Buda and many others. But day by day Kalash shamanism is becoming weaker than the past. Today any competent Dehar/shaman can hardly be found in all three Kalash valleys⁶ but institution of Dehar is the only way to link them with their deities and other super natural beings.

Despite of the vital role of Dehar in Kalash religious traditions, as mediator between gods and human beings, missing of a prophet remained among the main deficiencies of Kalash religion. Through their long interaction with the Muslims the Kalash gradually became familiar with Islamic concept of prophet-hood. Now they acknowledge the prophet-hood of Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم) and other prophets (May peace and mercy of Allah be upon them all), but deny their role in the religion of the Kalash and restrict them to Islam.

3. CONCEPT OF HEREAFTER:

Muslim influence on Kalash concept of hereafter is quite clear. The Kalash concept of hereafter has gone through many phases. Basically hereafter have no meaning for them; rather they are concern with this world only. Happiness in this life is considered as ultimate success, while bad luck and difficulties on earth are regard as punishment by the gods. As the concept of hereafter was one of the most important aspects of human concern and no religion could ignore it, the Kalash borrowed the ideas of hereafter from the influential Muslims who were ruling the area, and the Kalash were living under their authority as a minority community. Influenced by Islamic concept of hereafter the Kalash started to use the terms of Qiamat (hereafter) Arasat (day of resurrection and judgement), Likewise they use the words of Behesht (paradise) and Duzhakh (hell) in the context that the Muslims of the area use these terms with the same meaning and pronunciation. “Gilded houses” (of the paradise) and “invisible bridge” (Siraat), typical Islamic terms, can also be found in Kalash traditions, another indication of Muslim influence on the Kalash thought. But the Kalash do not have any detailed information in this regard, which proves that these are not their original concepts, rather imported one from their Muslim neighbours.

Muslim Impact on Religious and Cultural Practices of the Kalash:

Impact of Islam on practical life of the Kalash is more obvious as compare to ideological impact. A number of changes have taken place

in religious and cultural practices apparently due to influence of Muslim community, like:

1. SOCIAL NORMS:

“Perhaps our Kalasha custom is wrong, since other people say it is bad”.⁷ This is a general perception that has emerged among the members of Kalash community to think over many aspects of Kalash social norms as these are not good. Perhaps the continuous pressure of Muslim community on the Kalash regarding many socio-religious matters has changed Kalash thinking over these things.

The Kalash are not frowns on contact between the both sexes, and do not in general separate males and females. Women can freely interact with males in public and has the right to choose her husband, even after marriage and having children she can elope with her lover. Women can take part music and dance parties in public without any hesitation or restriction. There are no severe punishments on sexual crimes in Kalash society, and their social norms and traditions are absolutely different from that of their Muslim neighbours who are very strict in observing *hijab* for women and conscious about chastity and honour, having severe punishment on sexual crimes. Being a minority community surrounded by a vast majority Muslims, it was quite natural that the Kalash started to think over the false impression of sex free society about their valleys. Now a sense of honour is emerging among them. Despite of their hospitality, kindness and lenient attitude in general, and especially towards the visitors, now they do not like free movement of the outsider in their villages. Recently some cases of aggression on sexual offences are reported, which could not be imagined in Kalash society in the past.

2. Music and Dance:

Music and dance are integral part of Kalash culture. Singing and dancing is not simply an amusement but rather it has religious meanings and can never be parted from their life. Kalash women actively take part in the functions of music and dance on the occasions of their festivals in their respective valleys. In 1970s, after the visit of Mr. Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto (the then Prime Minister of Pakistan) to Kalash valleys, a group of Kalash women was invited by local authorities to perform dance and other cultural activities on the occasion of Jashn-e-Chitral, (grand festival of Chitral) at polo ground. But strong resistance was shown from Muslim religious leadership and members of civil society declaring that this action is against the cultural values of the region. The authorities were forced to withdraw their decision and send back the Kalash women without performing dance.⁽⁸⁾ Although the Muslims do not interfere in the private life of the Kalash to observe their socio-

cultural activities freely even in cases of its contrary to the values of surrounding Muslim majority, however bringing Kalash women to perform dance in public gathering of Muslim majority was not only unacceptable for the Muslims but even sober and moderate Kalash also disliked it. But the elite class of the society, including government officials and their guests use to go to Kalash valleys to enjoy special arrangement of dance parties by the groups of Kalash women.(9) Delegations of Kalash women also take part in cultural activities at national and international levels. Recently a sense of dislike for the dance of Kalash women outside the valleys has developed among the Kalash, specially the orthodox class and some modern educated people, like Saifullah Jan of Rumbur in his clear statement:

"We are in Pakistan, and Pakistan is an honourable country. So we feel it wrong if our women are taken from our valley to dance for other people elsewhere. We feel it shameful, for elsewhere in Pakistan women keep purdah. It is true that our women are free: they do not keep purdah. But they should not be taken freely outside the valleys." (10)

This is the real feelings of educated, social and moderate Kalash personality regarding the performance of Kalash women outside the Kalash valley, but even in Kalash valleys the overflow of the visitors, their presence during cultural activities, especially dance parties, and their attempt to interact with Kalash women is disliked by the majority of the Kalash.(11)

3. Marriage by Elopement:

In the Kalash society marriage by elopement (*Arlatshing parik*) is counted as one of the "great customs" (*ghōna dastūr*). It is a legal form of marriage in this society where the couple decide their marriage themselves without consulting their elders. In these situations the parents have no option but to accept the decision of their children and make all arrangements for wedding and its related requirements. Even a married female also has the right to leave her husband and marry another person who is ready to pay *Duk*, double bide price.¹² Influenced by Muslims, now wife-elopement leads to a quasi-feud between Kalash clans until peace is negotiated by mediators, in the form of the double bride-price paid by the abductor to the ex-husband. Recently many cases of aggression from the effected husbands and their family members on the abductors have been reported in which the abductors have been beaten by the effected husbands and members of their clan. (13) The Muslims of the area, contrary to the Kalash, are very strict in matters of contacts between male and female. They continuously blame the Kalash for being coward, promiscuous or even shameful in matters of honour and chastity. It is, certainly, impact of the Muslims on thought and

practice of the Kalash that results in forms of untraditional reaction on elopement of women in Kalash society.

4. Burying of Dead Bodies:

In the past, dead bodies of Kalash were put in wooden boxes (coffins) and placed in open air. In recent years (since 1970s), the Kalash have started burying their coffins, but the old ones can be seen in *Mandao Jao*, the Kalash cemetery, in all three Kalash valleys.¹⁴ In fact there was continuous pressure on the Kalash by their Muslim neighbours to stop placing the coffins in open air. Environmental problems caused by the bad odour of dead bodies and consumption of expensive alpine wood for the coffins were the main issues raised by the Muslim community of the area against open air placement of the dead bodies by the Kalash.¹⁵ Cases of stealing the weapons, jewellery and skeletal remains, which have been put in the coffins with the dead bodies at time of funeral, by the outsiders also mentioned as reason for burial of the coffins.¹⁶ However influence of the Muslim on Kalash thought and practice is the prime factor in changing the age-old tradition of the Kalash for dispose of the dead bodies from open-air cemetery to under ground burial.

5. Statues of Forefathers:

The Kalash used to erect big wooden carved effigy called *Gandao*, which is placed in the cemetery, for the memory of the dead ancestors.¹⁷ They also used to make *Gandurik*, a small statue of a man seated or on horseback. It would be hoisted on a decorated pole, placed in one of the dead man's fields or at the entrance of his village.¹⁸ The ceremony of making *Gandao* and *Gundurik* is quite costly, only a few can afford them, but despite of its heavy cost many *Gandao* and *Gundurik* were erected by the influential Kalash in the past.(19)

During the course of the present century, the cemeteries have lost their standing and equestrian statues, which were either destroyed by iconoclasts or stolen in order to be sold to Westerners or to museums. Some, it is said, had even been sold by members of the Kalash community. Since November 1980, some new statues were reintroduced in the valleys.²⁰

The concept of Ancestor Veneration can not be ruled out from Kalash religious thought but they never worshiped these statues, rather these are made to perpetuate the memory their ancestor only, but the Muslims were blaming them of being idolatry due to these images. Heavy expenditure during statue making ceremonies and cultural changes caused by modernisation may have played its role in absence of Kalash statues but it seem that the continuous social pressure as well as ideological and cultural influence of the Muslims on subjugated

minority community was the main reason behind the surrender of this important custom by the Kalash.

6. Taboos:

Taboos are basic things which are strictly observed in a traditional society, like of the Kalash. Changes in some taboo have taken place in Kalash society. For instance:

- a. Chicken and eggs were supposed to be deadly polluted, and were forbidden in the Kalash society. In the old days, no Kalash village ever permitted its presence. Going a chicken near altars or shrines is bad omen and can cause for some disaster in the valleys. But now chicken can easily found in Kalash villages and it is, even, available in the houses and hotels run by the Kalash.²¹ Some Kalash families started to breed chicken in their houses. Presence of the Muslims in Kalash valleys, who continuously breed chicken in their houses and flood of visitors, mostly the Muslims, that requires bringing poultry from outside the valleys as well. These are the main reasons of change in this age-old taboo of the Kalash.
- b. Similarly use of onion was forbidden in Kalash society, especially on the occasions of religious and cultural ceremonies. It was due to its bad smell that is disliked by Kalash deities according to Kalash tradition. But nowadays the Kalash do not feel any hesitation in use of onion. Although the onion was disliked by the Prophet Muhammad (may peace and mercy of Allah be upon him) who advised his followers to avoid the use of onion before attending the *Salat* congregations in *Masjid*,⁽²²⁾ but it not strictly forbidden or *Haram* according to Islamic injunction. So Muslims freely use onion and influenced by them the Kalash also started to use it despite of being strictly forbidden religiously and culturally.

7. Mourning:

Mourning is an important part of funeral in Kalash society and it continues till the next festival following the incident of the death. There is special mourning for couples. During this period there are some restrictions on their movements, along with other requirements of mourning. After giving sacrifice of goats on different stages the mourning period comes to an end. In the past this period was about 5-6 months but nowadays it reduced to 2-3 months. Beside reduction in the period of mourning some relaxation in restriction of movement and taking part in social activities can also be observed. This change also seems due to the influence of Muslim majority who have no such tough restrictions.⁽²³⁾

8. Use of Wine:

Wine is used by Kalash at large scale especially on cultural and religious ceremonies, thus it can be considered as integral part of Kalash culture. They make wine locally and preserve it in cans, buckets and underground tanks. There are especial events to open preserved wines, usually in seasonal festivals and events of birth, marriage, death or feast for prestige these preserved wines are opened and use freely at large scale. In their ordinary life the Kalash use wine freely and frequently. Local brand wine of the Kalash sometimes smuggled to nearby Muslims areas illegally. Moreover few non-practicing Muslims try to get wine from the Kalash. This phenomenon has lead to impose some restrictions on wine production of the Kalash by local Muslims through district government administration. The Kalash are now bound to produce wine for their own use only and they have to ensure that their wine must not travel to Muslim areas otherwise they will not be allowed to produce wine for themselves as well.²⁴ It is apparent that this socio-religious activity of the Kalash i.e. production and use of wine is under severe restriction due to the influence of the Muslims.

Conclusion:

Absolute dominance of the Muslim in the region of the Hindu Kush and adjacent area, for more than seven centuries, resulted in their religious and cultural influence on the subjugated minority community of the Kalash. Long history of Kalash Muslim interaction from rivalry to friendship has its own continuous impact, but the weaker socio-religious position of the Kalash added by lacking in many fundamental aspects of their religion pave the way for influence of Islam on them. Islamic impact on different aspect of Kalash life has been described. Ideological and practical changes in Kalash life, due to influence of Islam and Muslims, have been indicated and discussed independently. Impact of Islam on the religion and culture of the Kalash should be seen in consequence of the historic Kalash-Muslim relations. Misunderstanding created by some “well-wishers” of the Kalash by considering Islam as a big threat for identity and survival of the Kalash, ignoring many other crucial reasons. Increasing trend of migration of many outsiders to Kalash valleys, the challenges of modernity, activities of outsiders and role of NGO in changing the environment of Kalash valleys have emerged as the real threat for the culture and identity and existence of the Kalash. All such issues should not lead to create quarrel between the Kalash and Muslim of the region. Best example of interfaith harmony among the Muslims and the Kalash must be understood in the context of centuries old good relationship between the two communities, while Muslim impacts on religion and culture of the Kalash should be taken as natural historic phenomenon.

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