
A Descriptive Study of the Kalash Community, A Religious, Cultural, and Ethnic Minority Group in District Chitral

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The Kalash people are a distinctive community residing in the valley of the Hindu Kush, near the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan. As the smallest ethnic group in Pakistan, the Kalash population is estimated to be between 3,000 and 4,000 members. They are the indigenous inhabitants of the Chitral district in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province. Known as Siah Posh and kafirs (non-believers or infidels), the Kalash people live in three sub-valleys: Rumbur, Birir, and Bumburet. The community prides itself on its identity as free people, possessing a unique culture that is distinct from the surrounding Muslim communities. Their religious practices and traditions set them apart, as they uphold a belief system that is markedly different from that of their neighbors. A notable aspect of Kalash culture is the freedom enjoyed by both women and men, which serves as a defining characteristic of their ethnicity. The community is renowned for its vibrant dance traditions and expertise in winemaking. Furthermore, the Kalash people often have striking green and blue eyes paired with olive skin. This study aims to examine the religious and cultural profile of the Kalash community, with a focus on their practices and the agency of women, illustrating a uniquely rich lifestyle. Drawing on secondary sources, the research provides an in-depth look at the community's beliefs and customs, highlighting their distinctions from other groups within the same district, province, and country. The intent of this study is not to foster any animosity towards the Kalash community by highlighting the diverse religious and cultural practices, but rather to emphasize the diversity within Pakistani society, aptly captured by the phrase "unity in diversity."

Keywords: Kalash community, Siah Posh, Chitral, unique community, unity in diversity

Introduction

There are various hypotheses regarding the origin of the Kalash people, with two prominent theories currently under discussion. The first theory proposes that they are of Indo-Aryan descent, a view supported by researchers such as George Morgenstiene, Peter Parkes, and Schomberg Karl Jettmar. The second theory, posited by H. Siiger, suggests that the Kalash people are descendants of the Greeks. This viewpoint has been further endorsed by French anthropologists Viviane Lievre and Jean Yves Loude¹.

The Kalash are commonly referred to as a "white tribe" in Pakistan and assert their unique lineage. It is believed that they have close ties to Greece and are descendants of those who accompanied Alexander the Great during his invasion in the fourth century B.C. According to this narrative, some of his men chose to remain in the valleys rather than return home. Interestingly, their language bears more similarity to that of the Indo-Aryan people than to European languages. Despite these connections, the Kalash continue to uphold their distinctive societal identity and religious practices².

The Kalash people are often regarded as descendants of the great Alexander, a notion commonly held in Pakistan. However, they are struggling to maintain their cultural and religious identity for various reasons, including the absence of historical evidence and written records as well as their distinct religion and unique cultural rituals. Consequently, their identification poses a threat to this exclusive group due to their distinctive cultural and religious practices. Proving that the Kalash people are indeed descendants of Alexander the Great remains a challenge, particularly without credible narratives or documentation, especially in Europe. A portion of the Kalash community boasts a rich and unique culture that is recognized worldwide. Locals in Chitral assert their identity as Chitrali people, claiming that Chitral was once the center of Kafiristan³.

Additionally, Captain John authored a book that discusses the Kalash people, titled "A Personal Narrative of a Journey to the Source of the River Oxus by the Route of the Indus, Kabul and Badakhshan," published in 1841. Although he did not visit the land of the Kafirs (Kafiristan), he gathered

information from various sources about the region's society, people, and their ethnic backgrounds. His perspective suggested a connection between the Kalash people and Europe, characterizing them as a European tribe. Thus, their origins continue to be a topic of debate among writers, historians, anthropologists, religious scholars, and sociologists⁴.

The people of the valleys practice their culture and religion freely. They are not Muslims, and their way of worship is different; they worship many gods and goddesses. Their festivals are held in different seasons of the year. "In our religion, you can choose whoever you want to marry; the parents don't dictate to you." Their house's structure is also unique and varies from the rest of the communities. Their houses are connected to one another. Wood and stones are used in their houses surrounded by green mountains and a valley⁵. According to Paul⁶ that women are completely free and they would run away from their husbands at the festivals with whom they love. They have permission to marry another person while leaving their present husbands by paying the same amount that is paid at the time of the first husband. In a study, a woman states as "When there is a festival, whoever the girl is in love with, she can run away with him and that's how I left with the man who is now my husband".

There is also seen division of work among the community, while man does labor work and run businesses, and women mostly do work as housewives. Some rituals are specifically carried out by men while at the seasonal festivals, while women, as well as Muslims, have no restrictions. They also participate without any limitations. There are separate places where women bathe and wash clothes. More interestingly, at the time of a woman's pregnancy, she would live separately in a house outside the village.

According to a study that marriage and divorce are less simple for men with respect to women. Kalash women are bold, and they talk freely without any hesitation⁷.

Objectives of the study

1. To observe the traditional and religious influence on the social life of the Kalash community
2. To study the socio-economic and cultural status of the community in their way of life
3. To understand ethnic discrimination against the community and the role of the government for them

4. To know the cultural and religious festivals of the Kalash community

Research questions

1. What are the reasons for living in the isolated environment of the Kalash community?
2. What are those mechanisms that hold the community tight with their social identity and religious practices?
3. What are the hypotheses and myths about the origin of the Kalash people, and can they be explored in depth?

Statement of the study

It has been observed that the Kalash community is under significant pressure from Islamic ideology, leading many of its members to convert to Islam. As a result, the remaining population of Kalash people is diminishing day by day. The influence of Islamic thought is strong, resulting in a loss of their unique identity and cultural practices. Due to their small numbers, the Kalash people are often overlooked, lacking political representation in the national assembly. The government of Pakistan has failed to provide them with necessary political seats, separate educational institutions, recognition of their religious identity at NADRA offices, and any quotas in education or employment. While the community is generally open-minded, it continues to face restrictions within the three valleys of Kalash. This raises questions about the underlying reasons for the limitations placed on their cultural and religious practices. It is noteworthy that the community may soon become an example similar to that of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa. As they convert to Islam and other religions, there is a risk that they may abandon their cultural heritage, leading to its eventual disappearance. It is essential to assume responsibility for their acceptance and to provide them with full protection and freedom, allowing them to play a vital role in maintaining their cultural identity and religious rituals. This should be done rather than subjecting them to mistreatment or attempts to convert them into different religious sects. Additionally, it has been argued that there is insufficient evidence regarding their historical existence and ethnicity, claiming they are merely a group lacking strong written records. Their identity and religious beliefs are under threat.

Furthermore, modernization has deeply infiltrated the community, threatening to erase the beauty of their culture.

Review of Literature

Naz, Sheikh, and Saeed⁸ noted that a study conducted by the renowned Pakistani genetic scientist Dr. Qasim Ayub on the Kalash people sought to uncover their origins. The findings from the DNA tests indicate that they are not of Greek origin. It is also suggested that the Kalash people have ties to the Indo-Aryan lineage. Research indicates a broad consensus that they are of Indo-Aryan descent, having possibly migrated to Afghanistan several thousand years ago. Furthermore, anthropologists classify the Kalash people as practitioners of polytheism, worshipping various deities, including Sajigor, Mahandeo, Balumain, Deزالik, Ingaw, and Jestak⁹.

In the Kalash community, practices such as marriage, purdah, love, and childbirth are approached with greater freedom compared to the Muslims in the region. They take pride in their distinct way of life, which sets them apart from other communities in Pakistan. Despite facing impositions from neighboring religious beliefs, the Kalash people maintain their cultural identity¹⁰.

Notably, Kalash culture has been recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage site, attracting tourists from around the globe who are eager to experience its unique beauty. Each year, photographers, anthropologists, sociologists, and historians visit to learn more about the Kalash people and their traditions. Although their population is small, estimated at around 4,000 as of 2010, the community remains a focal point of interest for many.¹¹

The Kalash people engage in two types of religious events. The first type consists of ceremonies and festivals, while the second, although religious in nature, does not involve singing or dancing. They celebrate numerous festivals throughout the year, with Josh being the most significant¹².

In the Kalash region, there exists a Muslim community that has surrounded them for a considerable period. The dominant Islamic ideology has significantly influenced the local population, leading to a gradual erosion of their religious and cultural identities. Cultural identity serves as a vital force within the Kalash community, which means their religious identity is primarily rooted in their cultural and social existence. A substantial number

of Kalash individuals have converted to Islam, resulting in their status as a minority in the valleys¹³.

The Kalash people speak Kalasha, also known as Kalashamondr, an Indo-European language that is quite complex. Until the 20th century, there were no written records of the language. A new script for Kalasha was developed through the collaborative efforts of a Greek NGO and local Kalash elders to facilitate the teaching of their language to children. In 2004, an Australian linguist named Gregory R. Cooper designed and published a book on the Kalasha language, which is based on the Roman script¹⁴.

The Kalash people lead a lifestyle characterized by liberal values. In recent years, many religious minorities in Pakistan have been displaced due to the actions of Muslim militants. These militants have initiated an assault on the liberal Kalash community, targeting their cultural heritage and even kidnapping those who support them. Among the victims is Professor Athanasion Larounis, a Greek aid worker dedicated to social welfare. He devoted his efforts toward building schools, hospitals, and museums, as well as providing the local community with access to clean drinking water. Despite raising significant funds to assist the Kalash people, the militants demanded a ransom for his release. Kalash women were actively advocating for his freedom and had urged the government to intervene, while local elders continued negotiations with the kidnappers¹⁵.

A local resident has remarked on the rich traditional norms and values present in Kalash Valley. The community deeply cherishes its folklores and cultural traditions, taking great delight in their vibrant festivals filled with dance and music. Young men and women alike participate enthusiastically in these celebrations. However, a sense of disturbance was introduced when the Tableeghi Jamaats, a missionary group, entered the valley. They began purchasing land, gradually displacing the Kalash people from their ancestral homes¹⁶.

Moreover, a study indicates that prior to the Afghan-Russian war, the Pakistani government aimed to invest resources in the valley to establish a museum. However, these efforts were ultimately in vain due to the influx of refugees, which led to a redirection of resources towards settling Afghan refugees in the area. The local community's population is diminishing, largely due to pressure from the Taliban¹⁷. Additionally, members of the community face neglect in governmental employment opportunities, often due to their ethnic and religious backgrounds. There have been instances of

forced conversions to Islam, which further fueled tensions between Muslim and Kalash communities, particularly following the conversion of a girl to Islam. While there are some internal conflicts within the Kalash community concerning their religion, the overall relationship between the Kalash and Muslim communities is generally positive, as they are fundamentally peaceful people¹⁸.

The community also grapples with significant challenges related to health care and the upbringing of their children. Local residents report numerous issues, such as the lack of proper roads in the valleys. There are insufficient hospitals and schools available to the community. Additionally, frequent natural disasters often place the community in peril, as roads can be blocked for weeks at a time¹⁹. Changes in the cultural traits of the population have been observed. The mechanisms driving these cultural transformations include modernization and the social and cultural influences of neighboring communities²⁰. The consumption of wine is widely practiced during religious and cultural festivals. Although wine is prohibited in Islam, it continues to be sold illegally in the region²¹.

Theoretical Framework

Social Constructionism

Social Constructionism is a theory articulated by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in 1966. This theory posits that concepts such as culture, environment, beliefs, and religion do not possess an inherent existence; rather, they are constructs derived from the social structures within society. Social Constructionism emerges from historical knowledge and conversations among individuals. The concept suggests that meanings are assigned to various symbols that people create in social contexts. Interaction among individuals is primarily based on these established symbols, which are essentially artificial or manmade constructs that facilitate social practices. Moreover, these constructs are perceived realities shaped by historical contexts, reflecting societal interests. This highlights that reality itself is significantly influenced by social environments²².

In this context, Marx argued that human consciousness is shaped by social conditions, and both Berger and Luckmann regarded his work as foundational. They also engaged with the ideas of Durkheim and Weber. Durkheim focused on social facts as objective entities, while Weber established a connection to history, suggesting that cognitive processes are socially constructed materials imbued with objective meanings. Thus,

socially developed actions and meanings play an essential role in forming the reality of society. Ultimately, the essence of Berger and Luckmann's work emphasizes that society is a construct of human interaction, with Alfred Schutz and George Herbert Mead serving as pivotal influences in their theoretical framework. The concept presented by Alfred highlights that change occurs in everyday life through an understanding based on interactions within specific situations. According to Mead, social interaction relies on the collective and shared meanings of objects. In this context, language and culture serve as the tools through which individuals engage with these meanings, consistently interacting based on shared understandings. The central theme of this theory is that objects are products of human activity and their social environments. These concepts are generally accepted and maintained to support the processes necessary for survival within society.

Application of the Theory

The theory of Social Constructionism posits that all aspects of life are constructed through social interactions and consensus, shaping the realities that individuals experience. People's lives are influenced by social structures, which contribute to their understanding of social reality. In this context, individuals create social facts based on their connections with others. To maintain their environment, people rely on historical social facts that affirm their existence. The concepts of culture and religion are inherently tied to these social facts. Religion and culture play critical roles in society, as individuals' social frameworks are built upon these concepts. Different cultures and religions provide a foundation for beliefs that support individuals' life processes. The social structures of religion and culture are formed within society to help define the identities of various groups or classes. Members of these groups find faith and a sense of belonging through their cultural and religious affiliations, which facilitate practical life processes.

Moreover, the notions of good and bad prevalent in religions and cultures are rooted in societal constructs. Consequently, people's perceptions of superiority or inferiority are merely reflections of their self-worth, often rooted in cultural and religious contexts. This mindset perpetuates a consciousness of myths surrounding notions of superiority and inferiority. According to Social Constructionism, individuals have developed their understanding of reality through their cultural and religious beliefs, leveraging these constructs to derive value and benefits in their lives. The

interplay of culture and religion significantly influences the circumstances of minority groups, often placing them in limited situations. This dynamic is largely socially constructed and learned, creating a perceived reality that benefits certain groups. For the Kalash people, religion and culture hold a prominent societal position, subjecting individuals to a constructed reality of superiority and inferiority. As a result, one community may label itself as "good," while another is deemed "bad." The survival and societal standing of a community often depend on the quality of social interactions among its members.

In relation to this theory, socially constructed concepts perpetuate assumptions necessary for navigating life within the frameworks of religious and cultural norms and values. Communities that adhere more closely to their religious and cultural traditions tend to maintain various societal aspects—such as economics, politics, education, norms and values, and family structures—often alongside outdated customs. Ultimately, the theory posits that societal reality is both subjective and objective in nature; those who seek to balance this reality must navigate all positions within society.

Conceptualization and Operationalization

Conceptualization is a process that facilitates clear and straightforward analysis of typical variables, drawing upon the works of various writers and researchers. Through this process, the researcher categorizes variables into distinct categories and sub-categories to provide research-based definitions. The aim is to ensure that these variables are presented in a manner that is easily understandable for other researchers. Conceptualization involves making variables comprehensible by referencing a variety of articles and research materials. Additionally, variables can be categorized into indicators and sub-indicators, progressing from more complex to simpler forms.

In the operationalization phase, different ideas and concepts emerge throughout the research process. These ideas and concepts are then documented as the operationalization of variables. During this stage, the researcher analyzes the variables, indicators, and sub-indicators, creating a cohesive understanding of the constructs involved. Furthermore, the researcher provides definitions and simplifies the variables based on personal concepts and insights derived from the study. For example, variables can be classified as material culture (concrete, tangible objects),

non-material culture (abstract, intangible elements), sacred (items related to divine revelation), and profane (man-made symbols).

Materials and Methods

Area Profile

Chitral district was formerly a princely state under British rule, situated on the outskirts of the Ayun Valley. Currently, it is divided into upper and lower Chitral districts. In 1959, Chitral became an official part of Pakistan.

There are two primary means to reach the valleys: the first involves trekking across landslides, while the second allows for vehicular travel from Chitral city, a significant trading hub located approximately 32 kilometers to the northeast of Kalash Valley. The climate in the Kalash Valley is predominantly cold, with moderate temperatures; winter is characterized by cold and dry conditions. The region consists mainly of mountains and valleys²³.

The local population is proficient in both Urdu and English, with Urdu being the primary and official language of communication within the community and across the country. Local residents prefer to converse and respond to inquiries in Urdu, while many are also able to communicate in English. Children in the area commonly speak Urdu as well.

In terms of marital customs, there is a tradition of spouse selection in which women have the complete freedom to choose their partners. Women in the community enjoy the liberty to select their husbands, with parents of both parties simply supporting their decisions and making arrangements for the marriage ceremony. The Kalash people embrace a joint family system, preferring to live in close proximity to their relatives, such as parents, grandparents, uncles, and cousins. The valley is considered a paradise for tourists, standing out as one of the most attractive destinations in Pakistan. Life here appears vibrant and filled with joy. Travelers can easily find a variety of hotels offering unique experiences and meals, and there is also the option to stay with local families as guests.

Conclusion

This study relies on secondary sources that offer insights into the profile of the area inhabited by the Kalash community. It primarily focuses on their religious and cultural practices in comparison to those of other residents, particularly the Muslim community in the region. The findings reveal that the distinct cultural and religious traditions of the Kalash are facing

challenges due to religious conversions and the influence of groups such as Tablighi Jamaat and other religious organizations. Nevertheless, the Kalash community has successfully maintained its culture and religion, despite being a small minority within the district and province. Their traditions, including dance, winemaking, and the practice of women choosing their own grooms, remain vibrant and actively practiced. It is also encouraging that UNESCO listed Kalash culture as 'Intangible Cultural Heritage', providing a level of protection and assurance. This designation ensures that both provincial and central governments are aware that any complaints from the Kalash community to international bodies could have negative repercussions for Pakistan. Furthermore, the preservation of diverse identities and cultural practices reinforces the concept of 'unity in diversity,' which is essential for fostering a peaceful society.

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