

## **The Kalasha Pantheon: Unveiling the Spiritual Heritage of an Ancient People** By

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### **Abstract**

*The Kalasha people are the small tribe of indigenous people living in the isolated valleys of Chitral, Pakistan, who have kept the ancient polytheistic faith in an overwhelmingly Islamic region. This article is my humble step forward to highlight the diverse and indeed colourful spiritual realm of the Kalasha people via their dominant gods, their ceremonies, and their shrines. Starting with the general information concerning the Kalasha community the article goes through the mountain spirits and prehistoric religious belief systems that formed the basis for the Kalasha's beliefs and values. Some of the basic deities like Dezau – the Creator God, Sajigor of the Rumbur Valley, Mahandeo, the Kalasha guardian deity and other guardian deities like Dezalik and Jestak who are considered to be the protectors of women and families are also considered here. It goes on to do so by discussing the guest god Balumain and enigma like deities Praba and Warin to underline the sophistication of the Kalasha spiritual system. These should be seen as aspects and measures of a cosmology which is genuinely nature-based, community-oriented, and spiritual. Though the Kalasha religion gives the best accounts of the ancient beliefs and practicing culture, the faith is under severe pressure as it comes in contact with other cultures and civilizations. Due to this, in this article, I hope to give a clear explanation of the Kalasha pantheon and why this area of spirituality is important, as well as the reason that they should be saved before they disappear completely.*

### **Key Words**

Kalasha, minorities, pagan tribe, Kalasha religion, shamanism

### **An Ancient Legacy: Introducing the Kalasha Community of Chitral**

The Kalasha are Dardic people of Aryan linguistic stock<sup>1</sup>, residing in the eastern Hindu Kush in Chitral, Pakistan. While some have speculated their connection to

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the Greeks, particularly Alexander the Great's army, genetic studies have disproven this theory. Instead, they are considered descendants of early Aryan groups based on linguistic, archaeological and DNA evidence.<sup>2</sup>

The Kalasha are the only pre-Islamic non-Aryan indigenous people the Hindukush. They live in three isolated valleys: Birir, Bumburet, and Rumbur. As a sub-ethnic and religious group in Pakistan the number of Kalasha is estimated to be 4,000 persons.<sup>3</sup> Traditionally, the community has been virtually cut off from any outside world until the 1970s when the construction of a jeepable road made the valleys accessible to the town of Chitral and beyond.<sup>4</sup>

The background of the Kalasha people although shroud in mystery, most of which has been the subject of myths and legends handed down from one generation to another with relative accuracy. It is believed by the Kalasha tribe that they moved from a mysterious place called Tsaym to the Chitral area.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, historian in the British colonialism age offered the other theories in regards to the antecedent of the Kalasha. Other authors such as John Wood and George Robertson felt that the Kalasha were of European origins – with the latter actually referring to the Kalasha as a ‘western race.’ Some, such as Holdich for instance,

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[delines%20on%20turnitin.pdf](#)). Its abridged version was presented at International Conference South Asia @ 75: Past, Present and Future from October 26 to October 27, 2022 organized by the Department of History & Pakistan Studies, University of the Punjab, Lahore. The present version of the article is enhanced and enlarged.

<sup>1</sup>QasimAyub, et al., “The Kalash Genetic Isolate: Ancient Divergence, Drift, and Selection,” *The American Journal of Human Genetics*, 96, no 5 (May 2015): 775-783, accessed August 16, 2015

<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0002929715001378>, and for detail see, Ali, *A History of the Kalasha*, 41-48.

<sup>2</sup>QasimAyub, et al., “The Kalash Genetic Isolate: Ancient Divergence, Drift, and Selection,” *The American Journal of Human Genetics*, 96, no 5 (May 2015): 775-783, accessed August 16, 2015

<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0002929715001378>, and for detail see, Ali, *A History of the Kalasha*, 41-48.

<sup>3</sup> Muhammad Kashif Ali & Muhammad Iqbal Chawla, "Socio-Cultural Life of the Kalasha People of Chitral: A Study of their Festivals," *Pakistan Vision* 20.2 (2019): 42.

<sup>4</sup> Muhammad Kashif Ali, “A History of the Kalasha in Pakistan: its Origin, Change and Continuity” (Doctoral Dissertation, University of the Punjab, 2019), 167.

<sup>5</sup> Saifullah Jan, “History and the Development of the Kalasha,” In *Proceeding of the Second International Hindu Kush Cultural Conference*, ed., Elena Bashir and Israr-ud-Din (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 239.

posited that they were Greeks from Alexander the Great's army who later decided to settle in the Hindu Kush.<sup>6</sup>

Nonetheless, modern scientific researches have proved that there are no bases for the Greek or European origin of the Kalasha tribe, mtDNA studies have ruled out any biological relationship between Kalasha and Greeks and the Greeks have been though dismissed as an alternative. On the contrary, genetic study has revealed that the Kalasha are from early Aryan stock, about which findings from the linguistic and archaeology disciplines also support. These fields offer further discoveries about the Kalasha's early history and establish them as indigenous people of the region and deride the rumours about their origins linked to Greeks.<sup>7</sup>

### **Mountain Spirits: A Historical Survey of Kalasha Religious Practices**

The Kalasha people are traditionally polytheistic, they worship multiple deities. However, the influence of Islamization has led some within the community to now identify with a monotheistic approach. Despite this, many anthropologists who have studied the Kalasha maintain that their religious beliefs remain fundamentally polytheistic.<sup>8</sup> According to Michael Witzel, there is a strong similarity between the Kalasha and Rig Vedic religions.<sup>9</sup> Even today, all the elements that Witzel listed can still be observed among the Kalasha people. Cacopardo supports Witzel's view, noting that if we examine Indian cosmology, we can find connections between the Vedic and Kalasha belief systems.<sup>10</sup> Before forceful conversion of Kafiristan (Afghanistan) there were many people in Hindu Kush who were sticky to their pre-Islamic culture and religion. Baths believes that "There were priestly families in pagan times; these priests taught that there was no heaven and no hell....and Kalash Kafirs (own material) where life after death is denied."<sup>11</sup> However, now the Kalasha religion is also under transition.

The Kalasha people typically refer to their creator god as *Dezau*, *Khoday*, or *Paidagaru*, and claim to worship a single supreme deity. Saifullah Jan Kalash

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<sup>6</sup> Ali, *A History of the Kalasha*, 39-41.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 47-48.

<sup>8</sup> Maureen Lines, *The Kalasha people of North-Western Pakistan*, (Peshawar: Emjay Books International, 1996), 35.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Witzel, "The Rgvedic Religious System and its Central Asian and Hindukush Antecedents," in *The Vedas: Texts, Language and Ritual* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2004), 605, accessed May 13, 2014, [www.ling.upenn.edu/~moyer/courses/51/Witzel2002.pdf](http://www.ling.upenn.edu/~moyer/courses/51/Witzel2002.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Augusto S. Cacopardo, "A World in-between: The Pre-Islamic Cultures of the Hindu Kush," in *Borders: Itineraries on the Edges of Iran*, ed. Stefano Pello (Venezia: Universita Ca Foscari, 2016), 255, accessed February 17, 2017, <http://doi.org/10.14277/978-88-6969-100-3>.

<sup>11</sup> Fredrik Barth, *Indus and Swat Kohistan an Ethnographic Survey* (Oslo: Forenede Trykkerier, 1956), 49.

explained that the Kalasha believe in one supreme god, *Dezau*, while all other deities are considered messengers or intermediaries.<sup>12</sup> This idea appears to be influenced by Islamic traditions, as the Kalasha are surrounded by Muslim communities on all sides. Although they assert that they worship one God, their traditions and folklore are rich with references to numerous deities, reflecting a polytheistic heritage.<sup>13</sup>

Gender plays a crucial role in the Kalasha pantheon, evident in the way certain sanctuaries are restricted based on gender. For instance, sanctuaries dedicated to major deities like Mahandeo and Sajigor are off-limits to women, as they are considered impure. In contrast, the temple of Jestak, known as *Jestak-han*, is open to both men and women. The goddess Dezalik is uniquely associated with women and is worshipped inside the *Bashali* a space where men are forbidden. Dezalik, considered the sister of the male creator deity *Dezau*.<sup>14</sup> The major entities of the Kalasha pantheon are as discussed under:

### **Dezau the Creator God**

In Kalasha cosmology, Dezau is recognized as the creator and supreme deity, responsible for the creation of the Universe<sup>15</sup> and occupying the highest position in the Kalasha pantheon. However, after creation, Dezau became largely inactive, rarely interfering in human affairs.<sup>16</sup> The Kalasha people refer to him by various names, such as Khoday, Paidagaru, and DizalaDezau.<sup>17</sup> The use of the Persian word Khoday reflects Islamic influence,<sup>18</sup> resulting from the Kalasha community's coexistence with neighbouring Muslims. In Kalashdesh, there is no sanctuary dedicated to Dezau, and all sacrifices made to him are offered in open spaces.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Saifullah Jan, interview by author, August 21, 2007, Balanguru Rumbur Valley.

<sup>13</sup> Zaheer-ud-Din, "Muslim Impact on Religion and Culture of the Kalash," *Al-Azwa*, Vol. 30, No. 43 (June 2015): 13-14.

<sup>14</sup> MytteFentz, *Natural Resources and Cosmology in Changing Kalasha Society*, (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 1996), 14.

<sup>15</sup> Wynne Maggi, *Our Women Are Free: Gender and Ethnicity in the Hindukhus* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 140 and Michael Witzel, 606.

<sup>16</sup> Augusto S. Cacopardo, *Pagan Christmas: Winter Feasts of the Kalasha of the Hindu Kush* (London: Ginko Library, 2016), 53-54.

<sup>17</sup> Alberto M. Cacopardo and Augusto S. Cacopardo, *Gates of Peristan: History, Religion and Society in the Hindu Kush* (Rome: ISIAO, 2001), 70.

<sup>18</sup> Augusto Cacopardo, "Shamans and the Sphere of the 'Pure' among the Kalasha of the Hind Kush," in *Shamanic Cosmos: From India to the North Pole Star*, ed. Romano Mastromattle and Antonio Rigopoulos (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 1999), 59.

<sup>19</sup> Wazir Ali Shah, "Notes on Kalash Folklore," in *Cultures of the Hindukush: Selected Papers from the Hindu-Kush Cultural Conference*, ed. Karl Jettmar and Lennart Edelberg (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1974), 71 and Augusto S. Cacopardo, *Pagan Christmas*, 54.

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According to Morgenstierne, the Kalasha deities closely resemble those of the Kati or Red Kafirs, with Dezau sharing characteristics of Imra, a Kati god.<sup>20</sup> Michael Witzel similarly identifies Dezau as Imra, the god of death, equating him to Yama Raj of the Rig Vedic period.<sup>21</sup> Alberto and Augusto note that Dezau was a distant god in earlier times, rarely invoked during rituals, and no shrine is dedicated to him. Today, however, Dezau is often depicted in a manner similar to the God of Islam or Christianity.<sup>22</sup> Qazi Khush Nawaz suggests that little is known about Dezau, as "his presence has never been revealed."<sup>23</sup> Loude and Lievre propose that the name Dezau may originate from the Sanskrit word *div* (meaning "light of the day") and argue that the Kalasha Dezau is linguistically connected to the Indo-Aryan deity Dyaus.<sup>24</sup> In Hindu cosmology, Dyaus is the god of the sky, father of Indra, Agni, and Ushas, and the spouse of Prthivi (the earth). In the Rig Veda, he is referred to as the "Father of Heaven."<sup>25</sup> Once a father deity, Dezau is now the sole object of worship for the Kalasha, while other deities are seen as intermediaries. Saifullah Jan, a Kalasha elder, has affirmed that "The ancient Supreme Creator Being, the idle God Dizala Dezau, has been identified, now for a long time, with the very active God of the Quran, who oversees and sanctions the actions of men."<sup>26</sup>

### **Sajigor the Deity in Rumbur Valley**

The deity Sajigor holds great significance in the Kalasha religion and is frequently mentioned in their traditions and legends. He is believed to oversee worldly affairs, acting under the command of Dezau, the creator god.<sup>27</sup> According to Morgenstierne, Sajigor is the son of Jestak.<sup>28</sup> There is only one sanctuary dedicated to Sajigor (Figure. 1), located in the Rumbur Valley. This altar is square-shaped, built from stones, and adorned with roughly carved horse heads. The sanctuary is surrounded by dense, ancient oak trees. Sajigor was once revered as a warrior god, but today, he is regarded as the protector of territory and herds,

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<sup>20</sup> J. Morgenstierne, "The Kafirs of the Hindu Kush," *Man*, Vol. 3, (July 1932): 167, accessed February 15, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2790783>.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Witzel, 606.

<sup>22</sup> Alberto and Augusto, *Gates of Peristan*, 70.

<sup>23</sup> Jean-Yves Loude and Viviane Lievre, *Kalash Solstice: Winter Feasts of the Kalash of North Pakistan* (Islamabad: Lok Virsa, 1988), 189.

<sup>24</sup> Loude and Lievre, *Kalash Solstice*, 186-87.

<sup>25</sup> Akhilesh Sabharwal, "Dyaus and Prithvi-Sky and Earth," February 11, 2013, accessed January 10, 2018, <https://www.asabharwal.com/dyaus-and-prthivi-sky-and-earth>.

<sup>26</sup> Augusto S. Cacopardo, *Pagan Christmas*, 62.

<sup>27</sup> R.C.F. Schomberg, *Kafirs and Glaciers: Travels in Chitral* (London, Martin Hopkinson Limited, 1938), 52-53.

<sup>28</sup> George Morgenstierne, *The Kalasha Language & Notes on Kalasha, Indo-Iranian Frontier Languages*, Vol. IV (Oslo: 1973), 53.

as well as a bringer of prosperity to Kalasha society.<sup>29</sup> Throughout the year, various religious ceremonies take place at Sajigor Dur,<sup>30</sup> accompanied by feasts of merit. Near the altar, wooden vertical prestige posts<sup>31</sup> called *maleri* (Figure. 2) are erected to honour the donors of these feasts. Occasionally, when abnormal rains occur in the valleys,<sup>32</sup> the Kalasha people approach Sajigor's sanctuary to offer a goat as a sacrifice.

As a participant observer, the author witnessed an event during the Uchaw festival in August 2007. Early in the morning, a group of Kalasha left their villages for the upper Rumbur Valley, where Kalasha shepherds had been waiting with plentiful cheese and juniper leaves (*saras*). A fire was lit, and the fragrant juniper leaves were burned. In Kalasha cosmology, juniper is considered a sacred tree, with its smoke used for purification.<sup>33</sup> The Kalasha people believe these trees are the dwelling places of fairies<sup>34</sup>. Loude and Lievre referred to juniper as "the plant of the gods," cultivated by Indra in his garden, Indrakun,<sup>35</sup> in Kafiristan.

The rituals at Sajigor were led by Qazi Fal-i-Azam.<sup>36</sup> After prayers for a good harvest and the protection of herds, thick wheat bread with cheese was distributed among all participants, including Muslims. However, Muslims were not permitted to approach Sajigor's altar.

Sajigor is believed to have originally belonged to the Bashgal Valley<sup>37</sup> in Nuristan. According to Kalasha traditions, when Raja Wai raided Bashgal, a *dehar* (spiritual guide) informed him that the valley would soon be Islamized. Raja Wai was advised to take the shrine of Sajigor to Kalashgum (Kalashdesh). Wazir Ali Shah

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<sup>29</sup>Loude and Lievre, *Kalash Solstice*, 134 and 351.

<sup>30</sup>Halfdan Siiger, *Ethnological Field Research in Chitral, Sikkim and Assam: A Preliminary Report*. Vol. 36. No. I Kommission Hos Munksgaard, 1956, 19, accessed June 7, 2017,

[http://www.royalacademy.dk/Publications/High/623\\_Siiger,%20Halfdan.pdf](http://www.royalacademy.dk/Publications/High/623_Siiger,%20Halfdan.pdf).

<sup>31</sup>The carved life-size wooden planks or posts are erected at/around the Kalasha sanctuaries such as Mahandeo, Sajigor and Shingmo etc. in honour of feast donner. Each *maleri* post has different design and given some ambiguously anthropomorphic (human-like) characteristics. For detail see, Michael Oppitz, "Drawing or Photograph: Questions on Ethnographic Illustration," in *Himalayan Drawings*, ed. Robert Powell (New York, Routledge, 2016), 99-100.

<sup>32</sup>Loude and Lievre, *Kalash Solstice*, 74-75.

<sup>33</sup>For detail about Juniper and its relevancy to the society in the Hindu Kush see, Mumtaz Hussain Shah, "Juniper—An Endangered Plant of the Hindu Kush Region," in *Proceedings of the Third International Hindu Kush Conference*, ed. Israr-ud-Din (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2008), 40-42.

<sup>34</sup>Fal-i-Azam, interview by author, June 23, 2017, Grom village, Rumbur.

<sup>35</sup>Loude and Lievre, *Kalash Solstice*, 134.

<sup>36</sup>Fal-i-Azam (from Baloe lineage) is a Kalasha Qazi/elder of Rumbur. His father Baraman was the famous Qazi in all three valleys.

<sup>37</sup>Now the Bashgal has been renamed as Landai Sin Valley.

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mentions that Raja Wai was given a bow and two arrows—one with a red filament and the other with a black one. The arrows were shot from a high pass into Rumbur Valley, and the shrine of Sajigor was built where the red-threaded arrow landed, while a *bashali* (women's sanctuary) was established where the black-threaded arrow fell.<sup>38</sup> It is believed that under Sajigor's altar, Raja Wai's knife is buried, with another version claiming that 180 of his army's swords are buried there.<sup>39</sup>

Irum Sheikh suggests that the concept of Sajigor was introduced to Kalashdesh by Raja Wai around 100 CE<sup>40</sup> through cultural diffusion. Contrary to Irum Sheikh's claim, it could not have been in 100 CE, since Raja Wai died during the reign of Shah Nasir Rais (1531-1574). After Raja Wai's death, the last Kalasha kingdom in Bumburet was seized by Shah Nasir Rais<sup>41</sup>, placing the event in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

### Mahandeo and the Kalasha: Divine Protection in the Heart of the Hindukush

Mahandeo is a significant deity in the Kalasha pantheon, with his name derived from two Sanskrit terms: *mahan* (great) and *deo* or *dew* (being or deity). His sanctuary (Fig. 3) is accessible year-round, allowing male Kalasha individuals to approach him for prayers and sacrifices, typically of goats or bulls. Mahandeo is seen as an intercessor for all needs and petitions.<sup>42</sup> At the centre of the sanctuary, horse heads are roughly carved on a wooden plank, supported by rocks, with the blood of sacrificed animals sprinkled on them. While Halfdan Siiger recorded four horse heads,<sup>43</sup> the present author has observed a two-headed sanctuary dedicated to Mahandeo in the Birir Valley. As a deity, Mahandeo is associated with war, serving as the protector of corps, herds, hunting, and the community as a whole.<sup>44</sup> Loude and Lievre describe Mahandeo's primary role as a messenger between the Creator and humanity, and he was historically revered by warrior heroes victorious in battle.<sup>45</sup> Peter Parkes suggests that Mahandeo is a central figure in Kalasha

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<sup>38</sup> Wazir Ali Shah, "Notes on Kalash Folklore," in *Cultures of the Hindukush: Selected Papers from the Hindu-Kush Cultural Conference*, ed. Karl Jettmar and Lennart Edelberg (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1974), 77-78.

<sup>39</sup> Loude and Lievre, *Kalash Solstice*, 133.

<sup>40</sup> Irum Sheikh, "Traditional Culture as a Space for Identity (A Case Study of Village Bumburet Kalash Valley)" (PhD diss., Quaid-i-Azam University, 2013), 63.

<sup>41</sup> Mirza Ghulam Murtaza, *Nai Tarikh-i-Chitral* (Peshawar: Public Arts Press, 1962), 49-41.

<sup>42</sup> Shahzada Hussam-ul-Mulk, "Kalash Mythology," in *Cultures of the Hindukush: Selected Papers from the Hindu-Kush Cultural Conference*, ed. Karl Jettmar and Lennart Edelberg (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1974), 81.

<sup>43</sup> Halfdan Siiger, *Ethnological Field Research in Chitral*, 17-18.

<sup>44</sup> Fosco Maraini, *Where Four Worlds Meet: Hindu Kush 1959* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1964.), 261.

<sup>45</sup> Loude and Lievre, *Kalash Solstice*, 351.

cosmology, identifying him with Imra, the god of the Red Kafirs.<sup>46</sup> Notably, Mahandeu is the only deity with shrines in all three Kalasha valleys—Bumburet, Rumbur, and Birir.

### **The Arrival of Balumain: Exploring the Guest God in Kalasha Tradition**

Balumain (also spelled Balimain) is an advisor and visitor god who resides permanently in the Bashgal Valley.<sup>47</sup> The name Balimain (*balima'in*) is a combination of an adjective from the neighbouring Kati language, *Bal'ima*, meaning "very powerful," and "in," which refers to Indr. Augusto Cacopardo suggests that Balumain may be a remnant of the Vedic pantheon.<sup>48</sup> According to Qazi Khush Nawaz, as quoted by Loude and Lievre, Balumain serves as the first assistant to Dezaui, the Creator God.<sup>49</sup> Each year, during the winter festival Cawmos or Chaumos, Balumain rides into Kalashdesh,<sup>50</sup> visiting only the Bumburet and Rumbur valleys, but not Birir.<sup>51</sup> Wazir Ali Shah did not specify which valleys Balumain visits, but Cacopardo confirms that he only goes to Bumburet and.<sup>52</sup> There is no designated sanctuary for Balumain in any Kalasha valley. In Rumbur Valley, he is worshipped at the Sajigor sanctuary, where large numbers of he-goats are sacrificed in his honour.<sup>53</sup> Although Balumain visits both Bumburet and Rumbur, Bumburet is considered the centre of his cult, where he travels from Tsyam to Indr'ein. In Rumbur, he is a guest of Sajigor during the winter festival.<sup>54</sup> Loude and Lievre assert that the Kalasha adopted the deities of Sajigor and Balumain from former Kafiristan during their migration to the present valleys long ago.<sup>55</sup>

### **Dezalik: Kalasha's Sacred Guardian of Women and Life**

Dezalik is a goddess revered as the protector of women, particularly during childbirth, and the guardian of both mothers and babies. She is symbolized by a vertical wooden plank in the *bashali*, a secluded space outside the village where

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<sup>46</sup> Peter Parkes, "Temple of Imra, Temple of Mahandeu: A Kafir Sanctuary in Kalasha Cosmology," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 54, Part I (1991), 75.

<sup>47</sup> Wazir Ali Shah, 78.

<sup>48</sup> Augusto S. Cacopardo, *Pagan Christmas*, 58.

<sup>49</sup> Loude and Lievre, *Kalash Solstice*, 189.

<sup>50</sup> Wazir Ali Shah, 78.

<sup>51</sup> Alberto and Augusto Cacopardo, "The Other Kalasha: A Survey of Kalashamun-Speaking People in Southern Chitral: Part III: JineretKuh and Problem of Kalasha Origins," *East and West*, Vol. 42, No. 2/4 (December 1992): 353-54, accessed November 19, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29757042>.

<sup>52</sup> Augusto S. Cacopardo, *Pagan Christmas*, 58

<sup>53</sup> Loude and Lievre, *Kalash Solstice*, 349.

<sup>54</sup> Augusto S. Cacopardo, *Pagan Christmas*, 199-200.

<sup>55</sup> Loude and Lievre, *Kalash Solstice*, 191,



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women go during their menstrual cycle or before giving birth. As Paolo Graziosi noted, the wooden statue of Deزالik is placed in a corner of the *bashali*.<sup>56</sup> Loude and Lievre also reported that Deزالik is represented by a simple wooden plank in the *bashali*.<sup>57</sup> Both Halfdan Siiger in the 1950s and Wynne Maggi in 2001 observed that the wooden plank representing Deزالik takes the shape of a *yoni* (vagina),<sup>58</sup> with Siiger specifically referring to it as such.<sup>59</sup> Deزالik is not considered a mother goddess but is seen as a protector during childbirth.<sup>60</sup> Georg Morgenstierne, in 1929, described her as "the goddess of birth and the sexual functions of women" and compared her to Nirmali, also noting that she is the guardian of the *bashali*.<sup>61</sup> In the ethnographic studies of the Kalasha, Halfdan Siiger heard of Deزالik in the 1950s, but it was Paolo Graziosi, during an Italian Mission in the 1960s, who first provided detailed information about her. Graziosi, despite the Kalasha *dastoor* prohibiting male entry into the *bashali*, secretly visited the sacred space, where he measured and photographed the altar of Deزالik (Fig. 4).<sup>62</sup> In the Kalasha pantheon, Deزالik is considered the sister of Deزالu, the Creator God. Both are deities of creation, and Deزالik is the only deity with anthropomorphic characteristics.<sup>63</sup> Wynne Maggi is suspicious that Deزالik is sister of Deزالu, she writes that she could not find any woman who "claimed to know myths or stories about Deزالik".<sup>64</sup> However, Sayed Gul Kalash confirmed that the Kalasha people believe Deزالik is indeed Deزالu's sister.<sup>65</sup> Deزالik and statue of Deزالik is *onjesta* (pure), although she lives in *bashali*, the most *pragata* (impure) place in the Kalashdesh. Women never touch the statue of Deزالik during their menstrual cycle; they only do so after they have cleansed themselves.<sup>66</sup> A woman inside the *bashali* will offer a walnut to Deزالik and pray for a smooth childbirth. The number of walnuts increases daily—two on the second day, three on the third day, and so on—until the child is born.<sup>67</sup> The *bashali* serves as the

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<sup>56</sup> Paolo Graziosi, "The Wooden Statue of Deزالik, a Kalash Divinity, Chitral, Pakistan," *Man*, Vol. 61, (Sep., 1961): 149.

<sup>57</sup> Loude and Lievre, *Kalash Solstice*, 53.

<sup>58</sup> Wynne Maggi, *Our Women are Free*, 139.

<sup>59</sup> Halfdan Siiger, *Ethnological Field Research in Chitral*, 18 and Wynne Maggi, *Our Women are Free*, 139.

<sup>60</sup> Augusto S. Cacopardo, *Pagan Christmas*, 58.

<sup>61</sup> Ethnographic Notes (unpublished) of Georg Morgenstierne from Halfdan Siiger Archive, Box 14 EA 572, Moesgaard Museum, Moesgaard Denmark.

<sup>62</sup> Paolo Graziosi, 149-50 and Halfdan Siiger, *Ethnological Field Research in Chitral*, 18.

<sup>63</sup> Alberto and Augusto, *Gates of Peristan*, 70-71.

<sup>64</sup> Wynne Maggi, *Our Women are Free*, 140.

<sup>65</sup> Sayed Gul Kalash, interview by author, July 15, 2015, Chitral Museum, Chitral.

<sup>66</sup> Wynne Maggi, *Our Women are Free*, 139.

<sup>67</sup> Loude and Lievre, *Kalash Solstice*, 53.

sacred space where Kalasha women can offer prayers and sacrifices directly to Dezalik.<sup>68</sup>

### **Ingaw, the Sage of the Kalasha Pantheon: Advisor to the Supreme God Dezau**

Ingaw or Ingao is a male deity who serves as an advisor to Dezau. He is said to dislike the sound of drums, so during festivals when his shrine in Bumburet is visited, drumming is avoided. Ingaw's only shrine is located in Batrik, within the Bumburet Valley.<sup>69</sup> He is venerated for good harvests, and a sacrifice of a carefully chosen lamb of a single colour is made in his honour.<sup>70</sup> Irum Sheikh notes that his shrine is approached, and a lamb is sacrificed to him during the Uchaw festival.<sup>71</sup> However, Luke Rehmat clarified that Ingaw is primarily honoured during the Cawmos festival, when a male goat, not a lamb, is sacrificed. The male goat, known as *onjestabira*, is selected by marking a physically strong lamb at birth with a sprinkle of milk, raising it carefully, and then sacrificing it during the Cawmos festival. Rehmat further mentioned that, in some cases, any individual, family, clan, or tribe may visit Ingaw's sanctuary at any time during the year, following the guidance of a *dehar* or an elder of the clan. Occasionally, sacrifices are made in villages in Ingaw's name as well.<sup>72</sup> The sanctuary of Ingaw is located in Batrik village, near the temple of Mahandeo, in the Bumburet Valley. It is a simple, open site with no formal structure.

### **Jestak: The Divine Protector of Kalasha Women, Families, and Children**

Jestak is regarded as the protector of family, lineage, and the home. She is described as "the goddess of the health and of life force."<sup>73</sup> According to Schomberg, Jestak is a manifestation of the female divine, particularly safeguarding children—especially new-borns—and offering protection to women during labour.<sup>74</sup> The temple dedicated to Jestak is called *Jestak-han* (where Jestak refers to the deity and *han* means "house of Jestak") in Bumburet and Rumbur, while in Birir it is known as Rikhini.<sup>75</sup> The *Jestak-han* can be visited by both men

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<sup>68</sup> Wynne Maggi, *Our Women are Free*, 138.

<sup>69</sup> Wazir Ali Shah 73.

<sup>70</sup> Shahzada Hussam-ul-Mulk, 81.

<sup>71</sup> Irum Sheikh, Hafeez-ur-Rehman Chaudhry and AnwaarMohyuddin, "Religion as a Space for Kalash Identity: A Case Study of Village Bumburet in Kalash Valley, Chitral," *World Applied Sciences Journal*, Vol 29, No. 3 (2014): 430, accessed March 26, 2015, [www.idosi.org/wasj/wasj29\(3\)14/17.pdf](http://www.idosi.org/wasj/wasj29(3)14/17.pdf) and Irum Sheikh, *Traditional Culture as a Space for Identity*, 63-65.

<sup>72</sup> Luke Rehmat, interview by author, Anish Bumburet valley, June 24, 2017.

<sup>73</sup> Michael Witzel, 606-07.

<sup>74</sup> Schomberg, 48.

<sup>75</sup> Augusto S. Cacopardo, *Pagan Christmas*, 57.

and women. Apart from Dezalik, *Jestak-han* is the only sanctuary that Kalasha women may enter.<sup>76</sup>

The *Jestak-han* (Figs. 5 and 6) is a one-room structure made of stone and timber, designed in the shape of a square with four columns. It is the only Kalasha sanctuary with a formal structure, as all other sanctuaries are open-air sites.<sup>77</sup> Each clan or lineage has its own *Jestak-han*, and if a clan does not have a dedicated temple, they create their own emblem of Jestak (such as a horse-head plaque),<sup>78</sup> (Fig. 7). The *Han Sarik* ceremony is held when a new *Jestak-han* is inaugurated. During this ceremony, all clans are invited, and it is believed that the Balumain also travels from Tsyam to Kalashdesh to attend and listen to the prayers. Horse heads are placed on a plank on the wall as a symbol of Jestak, and sacrificial blood is sprinkled over her. The Jestak symbols face west, toward the mythical land of *Tsyam*.<sup>79</sup> Each year, during the Cawmos festival, Kalasha youth paint various animals on the walls of the temple, both inside and outside. During Cawmos, a goat is sacrificed, and its blood is sprinkled over Jestak by a man, while during the Zhoshi festival, women perform the act of sprinkling blood on Jestak.<sup>80</sup> As the *Jestak-han* is used for various community functions throughout the year. Schomberg recorded in the 1930s that the temple was used for death rituals lasting two days and two nights.<sup>81</sup>

Alberto and Augusto observed that in Bumburet and Rumbur, emblems of the goddess Jestak (such as horse-heads) are kept in the *Jestak-han* temples, while in Birir, Jestak's emblems are displayed inside homes instead.<sup>82</sup>

### **Warrior Spirit: Warin, the God of War and Protection in Kalasha Belief**

Warin is a deity originally from the Bashgal Valley. The shrine of Warin is located in Grabet village in the Birir Valley. This sanctuary features an altar with two horse-heads, where the Kalasha people offer their sacrifices to the god.<sup>83</sup> Witzel suggests that the name Wareen or Warin is a distorted form of Varendr or Inder

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<sup>76</sup>Loude and Lievre, *Kalash Solstice*, 352.

<sup>77</sup> John Harrison, "Kalash Buildings," in *Proceeding of the Second International Hindu Kush Cultural Conference*, ed. Elena Bashir and Israr-ud-Din (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 347.

<sup>78</sup>Alberto and Augusto, *Gates of Peristan*, 71.

<sup>79</sup>Imran Kabir and Luke Rehmat, "The Kalasha and the Kalash Traditions," accessed January 29, 2014, <https://thekalashatimes.wordpress.com/the-kalasha-and-the-kalasha-tradition>.

<sup>80</sup>Schomberg, 48.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>82</sup> Alberto and Augusto, *A Survey of Kalashamun-Speaking People in Southern Chitral: Part III*, 353 and footnote No. 17.

<sup>83</sup>HalfdanSiiger, *Ethnological Field Research in Chitral*, 20.

(Indera), a Rigvedic God.<sup>84</sup> Warin, as claimed by Augusto Cacopardo, is not a god of war, but he is warrior god in the sense that he protects his people in wars.<sup>85</sup> The sanctuary of Warin, known as the Warin Dur, is particularly visited during the Cawmos festival. During this festival, men offer sacrifices of goats addressing him by first asking him to accept the sacrifice, and then petitioning for good health and the blessing of more children.<sup>86</sup>

### **Praba: The Enigmatic God of the Kalasha and His Sacred Traditions**

Praba is a deity specific to the Birir Valley and is not venerated in either Bumburet or Rumbur. He is believed to have originated from Nuristan. Both Augusto Cacopardo and Loude reference Ralfh Turner, who posits that the name Praba is a corrupted form of Pravabhra, another name for the Vedic god Indra.<sup>87</sup> Kalasha traditions hold that the origin of Praba's worship in Birir is based on an ancient legend. It is said that an elderly woman named Sondi lived in the Bashgal Valley and had a nephew named Ratharie.<sup>88</sup> Contrary to tradition, the people of the area were sacrificing cats and dogs to their deities. Sondi instructed Ratharie to procure a goat, and when they did, the protective god Warin appeared. He warned them of an impending earthquake and advised them to stay indoors. As predicted, the village was destroyed, except for Sondi and Ratharie's house. The next morning, Warin gave them three arrows—red, black, and white—and instructed them to build a temple where the red arrow landed, a sacred space for women where the black arrow landed, and a village where the white arrow fell. This marked the origin of Warin's presence in the Birir Valley.<sup>89</sup>

Qazi Mir Bacha shared another version in 2017, stating that the story traces the migration of people from Nuristan to Birir 450 years ago. Shurasai, upset by his community's improper sacrifice of puppies instead of goats, was advised by his grandmother to buy a lamb. After the sacrifice, a saint appeared, warning of an impending earthquake, which destroyed Majam<sup>90</sup> but spared Shurasai's house. The saint then led them to Durik<sup>91</sup>, where he shot three arrows—red, black, and white—towards the Birir Valley. Following the saint's instructions, they built a temple at the red arrow's location in upper Birir, a bashali at the black arrow's site

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<sup>84</sup> Michael Witzel, 606.

<sup>85</sup> Augusto S. Cacopardo, *Pagan Christmas*, 59.

<sup>86</sup> Augusto S. Cacopardo, *Pagan Christmas*, 120-21.

<sup>87</sup> Loude and Lievre, *Kalash Solstice*, 337 and Augusto S. Cacopardo, *Pagan Christmas*, 58.

<sup>88</sup> Suhin Shah is mentioned by Loude and Lievre instead of Ratharie, for details see, Loude and Lievre, *Kalash Solstice*, 337.

<sup>89</sup> Shahzada Hussam-ul-Mulk, 82-83.

<sup>90</sup> A village in Nuristan

<sup>91</sup> Durik Pass connects Majam and Birir valley, near the Durand Line, international Pak-Afghan border.

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in Gasguru, and a village at the white arrow's point in Aspar. In gratitude, Praba granted Shurasai gold, allowing him to purchase fields in Birir.<sup>92</sup>

Though the core structure of both versions of the story is similar, with minor variations in names and details, a major issue remains in tracing the origin of Praba (or Warin) from Nuristan to Birir. While Qazi Mir Bacha clearly states that Praba came to Birir from Majam, Hussam-ul-Mulk's account references Warin instead, without providing any sources or specific informants to verify the story.

The shrine of Praba, located in the upper Birir Valley, is visited by the Kalasha for religious rituals. The sanctuary features an altar with two wooden horse-heads and tall masts. During festivals, young Kalasha climb the masts in a competition, and goats and sheep are sacrificed to Praba, who is petitioned to protect the community from illness and floods.<sup>93</sup> During the Prun (also spelled Pul and Poh) festival, grapes are offered to Praba, and the blood of the sacrificial goat is sprinkled over his altar.<sup>94</sup>

Dehar: The Sacred Shaman of the Kalasha

The *dehar* (or *betan/bitán*) is a highly revered spiritual leader in Kalasha society, sought for prophecies, healing, and guidance. Unlike the Qazi, becoming a *dehar* is a divine calling<sup>95</sup>, often marked by spiritual struggles. The *dehar* serves as an ecstatic prophet and intermediary between the community and the gods.<sup>96</sup>

### Mand'awjaw: Sacred Spaces of the Kalasha – Graveyards and Their Traditions

*Mand'awjaw* is the Kalasha term for a cemetery or graveyard. The word *Mand'awjaw* is a compound of two parts: *manda'w*, meaning coffins, and *jaw*, meaning many.<sup>97</sup> The *mand'awjaw* is considered a *pragata* place, therefore, it is avoided by the community except for funerals or when installing memorial wooden effigies known as *gandau*.<sup>98</sup> Historically, the Kalasha people followed the

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<sup>92</sup>Qazi Mir Bacha, interview by author, June 29, 2017, Aspar village, Birir.

<sup>93</sup>Halfdan Siiger, *Ethnological Field Research in Chitral*, 19.

<sup>94</sup>Loude and Lievre, *Kalash Solstice*, 68.

<sup>95</sup>Halfdan Siiger, *Ethnological Field Research in Chitral*, 21.

<sup>96</sup>For details regarding *dehar*, its significance, role and practice the present author's work can be consulted, "Library Sources Available on Pre-Islamic Religious Traditions of the Eastern Hindu Kush and on Shamanism among the Kalasha People," *Library Philosophy and Practice* (2021): 1-17.

<sup>97</sup>Schomberg, 49.

<sup>98</sup>Ibid.

practice of placing coffins on the ground,<sup>99</sup> but in more recent times, they have adopted the custom of burying the dead underground.<sup>100</sup>

### **Purity and Impurity in Kalasha Tradition:**

The Kalasha religion centres around the concepts of purity (*onjesta*) and impurity (*pragata*), which govern their society and religious practices. The upper valley is considered pure<sup>101</sup>, while the lower valley is deemed impure. Elements like pastures, shrines, and males are associated with *onjesta*, while women and *bashali* are linked to *pragata*.<sup>102</sup> Sacred high pastures, viewed as dwelling places of fairies, are off-limits to women. This dualistic division influences gender roles, rituals, and daily life, with purity rules being essential for the acceptance of sacrifices and prayers.<sup>103</sup> Witzel compares this emphasis on purity to Vedic traditions<sup>104</sup>, and Sperber notes that these concepts permeate every aspect of Kalasha life.<sup>105</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The Kalasha religion, rooted in ancient polytheism, is centered around a rich pantheon of deities, including figures like Dezau Sajigor and Mahandeo, as well as mountain spirits and fertility gods. Central to their beliefs are divine protection and guidance, especially for women, families, and warriors. However, these traditions, including the worship of goddesses and the concepts of *onjesta* and *pragata* are increasingly threatened by assimilation into dominant Muslim culture. Despite these pressures, the Kalasha maintain a unique spiritual identity, but there is an urgent need to document and preserve their practices as they face cultural erosion.

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<sup>99</sup>HalfdanSiiger, *Ethnological Field Research in Chitral*, 18.

<sup>100</sup>For details regarding Kalasha graveyards, its traditions and burial system the present author's work can be consulted, "Resilience or Assimilation: A Critical Analysis of the Burial Practices of Kalasha in Pakistan," *Pakistan Journal of History and Culture* 42, no. 1 (2021): 155-181.

<sup>101</sup>HalfdanSiiger, *Ethnological Field Research in Chitral*, 18.

<sup>102</sup> Wynne Maggi, *Our Women are Free*, 46.

<sup>103</sup> Akiko Wada, *Kalasha: Their Life & Tradition* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publishers, 2005), 10.

<sup>104</sup> Michael Witzel, 608.

<sup>105</sup>BirgitteGlavind Sperber, "Nature in the Kalasha Perception of Life," in Bruun, Ole and Arne Kalland eds. *Asian Perceptions of Nature: A Critical Approach* (London: Routledge, 1995), 132.

**FIGURES**



Figure 1: Shrine of Sajjigor in Rumbur Valley

Source: Muhammad Kashif Ali, 2012



Figure 2: The wooden post *melari*

Source: Muhammad Kashif Ali, 2017





Figure 3: Shrine of Mahandeo in Rumbur Valley

Source: Muhammad Kashif Ali, 2017



Figure 4: Wooden plank represents Deزالیک

Source: Paolo Graziosi, 1961



Figure 5: Jestak-han (exterior) Birir Valley

Source: Muhammad Kashif Ali, 2017



Figure 6: Jestak-han (interior) Birir Valley

Source: Muhammad Kashif Ali, 2017



Figure 7: Emblems of the divinity Jestak, Rumbur Valley.

Source: Muhammad Kashif Ali, 2015

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