

THE KALASHA CHIEFDOM OF THE EASTERN HINDUKUSH (CHITRAL-PAKISTAN): A MEDIEVAL HISTORICAL ACCOUNT (10TH TO EARLY 16TH CENTURY AD)

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Abstract

The Kalasha of Chitral is Pakistan's only tribe that practises its century-old beliefs and tradition while still attempting to survive. Though the Kalasha are now a small ethno-religious minority, once they had their own rajas (chief or rulers). This article is an attempt to probe the Kalasha history focusing on the era (10th century to the early 16th century AD when they had their rajas. This period of the Kalasha rule will be examined with the assistance of the Kalasha oral traditions and with secondary sources. Folk traditions of the community are one of the most important sources of events and indigenous history. The Kalasha continually asserts in folklores that they were the rulers and that they were prosperous in past. The Kalasha ruled from Mastoj (upper Chitral) to Nagar (lower Chitral), encompassing the Yasin valley in the east and a tiny area of Afghanistan's former Kafiristan, now Nuristan.

Keywords: *Kalasha, Dardistan, Dardic people, Kalasha rule, regional history, Kalasha history*

1. Introduction

The Kalasha is Pakistan's sole animist tribe, residing in three deep and difficult sub-valleys of the world's third biggest mountain range, the Hindu Kush, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's district of Chitral. Their valleys are known as Rumbur (northern valley), Bumburet (centre valley), and Birir (southern valley) by common people and outsiders and these nomenclatures are also used in official documents, media etc. The

Kalasha people, on the other hand, refer to their valleys as Rukmu, Mummuret, and Biri, while these three valleys are together referred to as Kalashdesh and Kalashgom. They speak Kalashamon, a Dardic language belonging to the Indo-Aryan branch of the Indo-Iranian language family.¹ The Kalasha are indeed a vulnerable tribe with a population of around 4000 people their native language is also vulnerable.² Though some Kalasha traditions, tourism literature and scholars or authors maintain that the Kalasha are Greek and attributed to Alexander of Macedonia but there is another version that the Kalasha are Dardic Aryan people This is what modern genetic studies suggest and this argument is supported by archaeology, linguistics and religion of the community.³ Though the Kalasha religion is undergoing changes owing to Muslim influence, they maintain a polytheistic faith that dates back to the early Vedic period⁴. They do not undertake everyday rituals, unlike their Muslim neighbours, but do so on special occasions like as festivals, births, and deaths.⁵ The Kalasha *dehar* (Kalashamon: shaman) is the tribe's most significant religious and spiritual institution, yet it is at risk due to impurity within and around the community. As per the Kalasha *dastoor* (Kalashamon: religion and culture) the Kalasha society is clearly divided in two spheres 'pure' and 'impure' while the current Kalasha society is facing the state of impurity due to mixing with the Muslims and to be *dehar* pure is a core condition.⁶ The major sources of the Kalasha economy is their pastures, flocks of goat, farming and tourism industry. Festivals distinguish the Kalasha as a distinct Pakistani tribe; they celebrate many festivals throughout the year. Cawmos/Chaomos, Uchal/Uchao, Pho/Pul, Joshi/Zhoshi, Biramor, and Rat Nat are their major festivals; Chaomos and Joshi are the two most important.⁷ Although the Kalasha women have more freedom and liberty than their Muslim neighbours, they are unable to stay at home during their menstrual period or during the process of childbirth owing to the Kalasha *dastoor*. They spend particular days in an isolated residence distant from the village (before and after the birth and menses days); the quarter is known as *bashali* and is regarded *pargata* (Kalashamon: impure).⁸ The Kalasha have many unique cultural traits which make them a distinct community of Pakistan. Unlike the rest of Pakistan, they celebrate death with the belief that when a Kalasha is born, the community celebrates it, and when the soul departs, they actually bid the leaving soul farewell. All tribal members, including Muslims, from all three valleys are welcomed and fed throughout the two-to-three-days death rite event. Tribe members sing songs about the deceased and recount his or her qualities, while others dance around the *charpoy* (Kalashamon: woven bed) of the deceased.⁹ Despite their distinctiveness, Kalasha society and culture are quite fragile. First, they have a relatively tiny population, second,

conversion of faith has a direct impact on their culture and society. Bigotry is the third greatest threat to their survival. For decades, they have been fighting for their survival.

2. Literature Review and Research Methodology

The primary written material to explore the Kalasha history during the era when they were rulers is not available. In fact, the Kalashamon language is an unwritten language, though recently efforts have been made to develop a script. As a result, for the understudied period, we must rely on Kalasha folklore and *Tarikh-i-Chitral* and *Nai Tarikh-i-Chitral*. Though Kalasha folklore is an essential source, we should evaluate it carefully. For example, many Kalasha think they are descendants of Greeks, based on their folklore, although linguistic, archaeological, and genetic research do not support this notion. Mirza Ghufran, a courtier of the Chitral ruler, wrote *Tarikh-i-Chitral* in Persian in 1893, but it was never published. In 1921, the author updated his work and included more details, but it was also never published. His son Mirza Ghulam Murtaza continued his father's legacy by revising the manuscript, which was translated into Urdu by Wazir Ali Shah and published as *Nai Tarikh-i-Chitral* in 1962. This publication covers Chitral's history from the old age to Kalasha dominance, and then the Chitral state from 1320 to 1961. Limited sources on Chitral and Kalasha history make this book significant, however Wolfgang Holzwarth, Mumtaz Hussain, and Mytte Fenz have reservations about the veracity of the events, facts, and chronology.¹⁰ Peter Parkes has shed light on the Kalasha history with the help of the Kalasha tradition, in his conference paper¹¹ which was presented in the Third International Hindu Kush Conference in 1995. However, his focus was rule of Kator (from 1595 to creation of Pakistan and to the merger of the Chitral state in 1969) and its link with the Kalasha people. Mytte Fenz very briefly touches the early history of the Kalasha in his book¹² which is an ethno-history of the Kalasha people. To understand the regional and people history of the Kalasha tribe of Chitral, this study combined a historical and descriptive methodology with an analytical approach. The author used both primary and secondary sources, as well as first-hand information collected by the author as a participant observer who conducted interviews of renowned Kalasha and local Chitrali historians and the Muslims from the converted valley Jinjeret Kuh. In 2007, 2008, 2012, 2015, and 2017, the author spent a significant amount of time collecting data and observing in three Kalash valleys and some other sub-valleys which were once inhabited by Kalasha but have now converted to Islam. In 2007, the spring Zhoshi or Joshi festival was covered; in 2008, the main focus was to observe the

summer Uchal festival, with other visits dedicated to data collection on non-festival days. However, the death rituals were observed and covered in 2017. The longest stay with the community was a month in 2015, and the shortest was five days in 2012.

3. The Kalasha in Chitral and their Supremacy

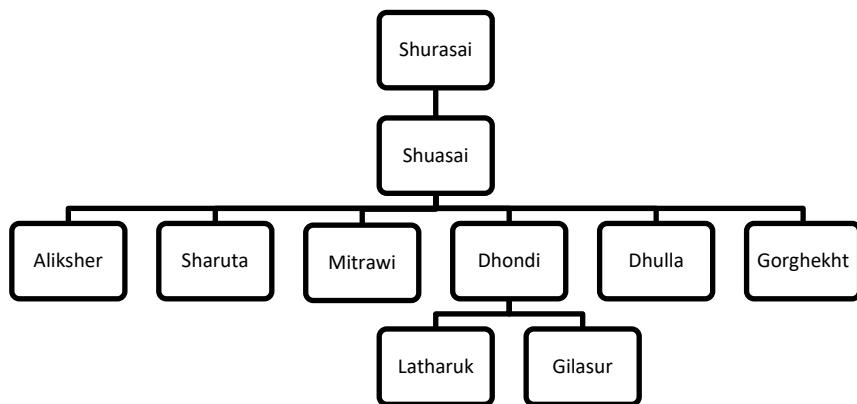
According to Peter Parkes, the Kafiri and Dardic people arrived in present regions during the period of the early Aryan migration waves, towards the end of the second millennium BC. Peter Parkes suggested this era on the basis of linguistic research.¹³ R.C.F Schomberg thought that once upon a time, Chitral was inhabited by a single race who spoke the same language. In Chitral, there are two great tribes: the Kho and the Kalasha, and he claims that the Kalasha are older than the Kho.¹⁴ Wazir Ali Shah, on the other hand, held the opinion that the Kho were residing in Chitral when the Kalasha moved from Afghanistan and forced them to the north.¹⁵ Wazir Ali Shah writes;

A number of scholars including G. A. Grierson and Ghulam Murtaza have suggested that the Kalasha were inhabiting the area between lower Bashgal valley and Chaga Sarai (in Afghanistan) for about three centuries. In the 10th or 11th century A.D. they were pushed northwards into Chitral by Bashgali Kafirs, who in their turn had been forced to leave their own valleys by other strange tribes from the West.¹⁶

Fosco Maraini similarly claims that the Kalasha were forced to flee Afghanistan in order to protect their faith, but he dates the event to the 9th or 10th century AD,¹⁷ as opposed to the 10th or 11th century AD as computed by Wazir Ali Shah.

The Kalasha history of the mediaeval period is mostly based on their folklore and folk songs. The Kalasha reign (10th to early 16th century) in Chitral and some portions of Nuristan (former Kafiristan) is explored through oral history. However, the chronology of the period under study is vague. Fortunately, there have been some talented persons in the Kalasha society who have extensive knowledge of the tribe, genealogy, historical events, and key figures. Some individual Kalasha narrators, such as Shah Jawan (Rumbur), Qazi Khush Nawaz¹⁸ (Rumbur), Siafullah Jan (Rumbur), Qazi Mir Bacha (Birir) are well-versed in Kalasha history, religion, culture and society. The *Nai Tarikh-i-Chitral* (hence referred to as NTC) is an important historical source for

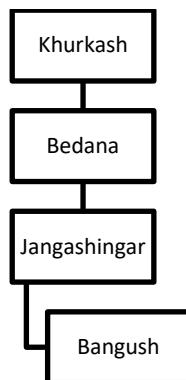
the Kalasha. NTC is a history of the Kator family of Chitral rulers. Written by Mirza Ghulam Murtaza wrote it and it was published in 1962. Mirza Muhammad Ghufran originally wrote the *Tarikh-i-Chitral* in Persian in 1893 in a short version and it was rewritten in 1921. Later, his son Mirza Murtaza authored *Nai Tarikh-i-Chitral* in Persian, which was translated by Wazir Ali Shah.¹⁹ According to NTC, the Kalasha migrated from the Kafiristan (Bashgal valley) to Chitral in the 10th century AD as the result of the Afghan invasion. In Chitral they resided in Bumburet, Rumbur, Birir, Jinjeret Kuh, Urtsun, Kalkatak Drosh, and Ayun.²⁰ Israr-ud-Din claims that before the advent of the Muslims in Chitral, the entire territory was dominated by Kafirs (Kalasha), who were animists.²¹ He referred to the classic Kalasha song *Luli*, in which the Kalasha recount the lands they dominated after they arrived in Chitral under the command of Shalak Shah. They reigned from Drosh in the south to Lutkho in the north, according to the song. Shalak Shah afterwards appointed his brother Adabog the *raja* of Bumburet and divided Chitral among his sons and brothers.²² Other sources dispute Prof. Israr's assertion, claiming that Adabog was the brother Raja Wai of Bumburet rather than Shalak Shah. Raja Wai stormed Rumbur, defeated Balalik (local people), and appointed Adabog as the *raja* of Rumbur.²³ In addition, according to Qazi Mir Bacha Kalash, Adabog was the son of Bangota who was sent to Rumbur by Raja Wai. Adabog had four sons, and the Rumbur region was eventually split among his four sons.²⁴ Qazi Mir Bacha, on the other hand, was unable to establish a connection between Raja Wai and Bangota. The Kalasha of Birir claim a unique origin and genealogy compared to Bumburet and Rumbur valleys, as revealed by Qazi Mir Bacha, who says that Surasai, the Kalasha of Birir's progenitor, lived in Majam, Nuristan. Surasai was an Arab descendent who went to Birir with his grandmother approximately 15-16 generations ago. Asparhoni and Majikdamori were the inhabitants of Birir at that the time. Surasai had a lot of gold, so he acquired nearly all of Birir. Shuasai was son of Surasai and was born in the Birir Valley. Aliksher, Sharuta, Mitravi, Dhondi, Dhulla, and Gorghekht were among Shuasai's six sons.²⁵



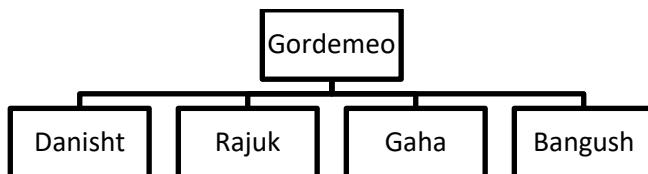
Ancestors of Birir valley according to Qazi Mir Bacha of Birir

According to Mir Bacha, Dhondi had two sons named Latharuk and Gilasur, whereas Peter Parkes names them Latharuk and Babura²⁶ two sons of Dhondi. People of Aspar village in Birir are descendants of Alikshar, Sharuta, and Miteravi, residents of Guru Village are descendants of Dhondhi and Dhulla, and Gorghekht settled in Nagar, south of Drosh, according to Mir Bacha. Gorghkht's son, Kolandy, migrated to Upper Dir and later converted to Islam.²⁷ Like Birir, the residents of Jinjeret Kuh valley also claim to be descendants of Arab (Quresh). They do not have any folklore regarding Shalak Shah or Alexander the Great. According to Muzaffar Khan, the author's main informant from Jinjeret Kuh, the valley was completely converted to Islam around a century ago. The people are descended from the Quresh, who migrated from *Arabastan*²⁸ many years ago. Their forefathers moved from *Arabastan* to Chaga Sarai, then from Chaga Sarai to Bajaur, eventually arriving in the Jinjeret Kuh valley.²⁹ Alberto and Augusto Cacopardo also cited oral traditions of Quresh origin claiming that the Kalasha of Jinjere tKuh valley people migrated from Arabia during the time of Prophet Muhammad (*The Final Prophet Peace be Upon him, his Progeny and Companions*), but the route was slightly different: Kabul to southern Chitral, then to Jinjeret Kuh valley and other Kalasha valleys. Cacopardo and Cacopardo question this tradition due to the absence of any "linguistic or other evidence".³⁰ In early literature of 19th century, we find a reference of Quresh origin for the *Kafirs* of the Hindu Kush as Alexander Burnes reported in 1838. He did, however, claim that Kafirs saw themselves as ancestors of Komak shai, which was ultimately distorted by Muslims into

Koreish (Quresh).³¹ Despite having never visited Kafiristan, Charles Masson mentioned the Quresh origin concept for *Siah Posh* in his famous book.³² Raja Chiu is mentioned in oral Kalasha traditions as Jinjeret Kuh's ancestor. Khurkash, Chiu's son, established Khurkashande as a new settlement (near to Chitral town). Rais, the Muslim ruler, assassinated Chiu and his son Khurkash. His son Bedana and grandson Jangashingar, escaped to Bumburet and settled in Krakar (Krakal). Later, both sought refuge in Birir until they were assassinated by Rais soldiers, and Bangush, Jangashingar's son, escaped to Jinjeret Kuh. As a result, Bangush is regarded as the founder of the Jinjeret Kuh Kalasha people, and he was descended from Raja Chiu of Chitral.³³ Innayatullah Faizi, a local historian, holds that there were at least two Kalasha villages in Chitral Khas (Chitral proper): Khurkashande and Dowashish, and that the Kalasha's major Joshi festival was held in Broze, Chitral during the era when Chitral was under Kalasha dominion.³⁴ Bangush is a popular reference in Jinjeret Kuh and Birir valleys. According to Qazi Mir Bacha, a young child appeared in Gasguru, a village of Birir, and was adopted by ancient Buleys people. The boy was given the name Gordemo. Gordemo had four sons: Danisht, Rajuk, Gaha, and Bangush. Three settled in Birir Valley, where some of them still remain, while the fourth son, Bangush, migrated to Jinjeret Kuh, where his descendants now live.³⁵



Ancestors of Jinjeret Kuh as described in survey report by Alberto and Augusto Cacopardo, 1992.



Ancestors of Jinjeret Kuh valley according to Qazi Mir Bacha of Birir

Bangush is a notable Kalasha of Jinjeret Kuh, and he is credited with founding Grom settlement (now Sheikhandeh) and constructing a tower³⁶ for security and as residence. The tower is called *kot* in Khowar and *sun* in Kalshamon.

4. Raja Wai and Bulasing: Two Most Revered Chiefs

Now we move to the age of Raja Wai and Raja Bulasing, two renowned and well-known Kalasha chiefs. These two Kalasha rulers are prominent in the majority of Kalasha legends. According to the NTC, Shah Nadir Rais, a Muslim invader, stormed Chitral from the north in 1320 AD and overthrew the Kalasha Raja Bulasing who was ruler of Chitral proper and his capital was Uchusht.³⁷ The Rais Dynasty was founded by Shah Nadir Rais.³⁸ Rais is said to have originated in eastern Turkistan. In Chitral history, Eastern Turkistan is also known as Chinese Turkistan. The Rais dynasty controlled Chitral from 1320 until 1595.³⁹ Bulasing was slain in combat against Rais, and his son, along with a few other chiefs, converted to Islam. Bulasing's castle was dismantled, and the Kalasha were enslaved.⁴⁰ Bulasing is the last Kalasha chief of Chitral proper, and many Kalasha moved to southern Chitral following the defeat. Bulasing also had relations with Sirang, ruler of Wirishikgum (now Yasin valley), as recorded by Peter Parkes from oral Kalasha tradition. Sirang was a Kalasha or at least a Kafir ruler.⁴¹ In oral history, Raja Wai is known as the Kalasha chief. He is regarded as the tribe's grand chief who ruled over three existing Kalasha valleys (Bumburet, Rumbur, and Birir), Drosh, Arandu, and parts of the eastern Bashgal valley in Kafiristan/Nuristan, according to Wazir Ali Shah. His capital was Batrik, a village in the Bumburet Valley. According to Wazir Ali Shah he was the ruler of the Kalasha in the late 15th and early 16th centuries AD. He invaded Kafiristan on the dawn of the 16th century AD and enslaved numerous Red Kafirs, including several women. According to legend, he forced ladies to dance nude on holy mountains, which angered the gods, and he had to suffer the consequences.⁴² Raja Wai had

extended his territories to the Suwer, Jinjeret (JinjeretKuh), Kalkatak, and ShishiKuh valleys in the south of Chitral, according to Mirza Ghulam Murtaza. However, Shah Tahir Rais (1520-1531) destroyed Raja Wai and Raja never tried to assault Chitral proper again. Shah Nasir Rais (1531-1574) succeeded Shah Tahir Rais as ruler of Chitral after his death in 1531. Raja Wai died during Shah Nasir's reign, and heirs of Raja Wai fought for control, resulting in the weakened the Kalasha chiefdom. As a result, Shah Nasir invaded the Kalasha at Bumburet, swept away the Kalasha authority, and took all of their domains, including Kalashgom or Kalashdesh (Bumburet, Rumbur, and Birir), Ayun, Droshe, Jinjeret (Jinjeret Kuh), Suwir, Kalkatak, and Shishi Kuh valleys, among others. Many Kalasha converted to Islam, while others faced *qalang* (Kalashamon: a tax) and *beggar* (Kalashamon: forced unpaid labour).⁴³ Raja Wai was the last known great ruler of the Kalasha tribe in Chitral, and after him, the Kalasha tribe was subjugated by the *Mehtars* of Chitral for a long time. Raja Wai is revered in the indigenous folklores for bringing Sajigor (the warrior god) from Bashgal (Kafiristan-Afghanistan) to Rumbur.⁴⁴

Israr-ul-Din, Wazir Ali Shah and Innayatullah Faizi mention some other lesser-known Kalasha chiefs in addition to these two noteworthy Kalasha chiefs. Khayurr Pasar Batarr was a Kalasha chief of Jinjeret (not to be confused with Jinjeret Kuh), about 400 years ago and his citadel was at Damik, a settlement near Droshe. He ruled Jinjeret, Droshe, and the Suwir Valley. Ye'rarr Washi Pasar was the Kalasha chief of Nagar and its environs in southern Chitral. Nagar is remembered as a spot where the Kalasha people gathered in the past for large celebrations during the festivals. Tambur Kalash is said to be the chief of Kalkatak, which is located in southern Chitral.⁴⁵ Another Kalasha chief, Chiu⁴⁶ (also spelt as Chew and Chiv), is also found in the dusk of the Kalasha traditions. He is renowned solely for the bridge he built in Chitral town, which is today known as Chiu Bridge. Peter Parkes noted that the bridge was rebuilt in the 1980s.⁴⁷

The Kalasha people say through their folklore and folk songs, during the festivals or anytime they are asked, that they were once the lords of the region and that they held dominion over the whole valley of Chitral, resulting in the community's wealth. They were affluent and had a large numerical advantage, but the Muslims quickly overtook them. Hundreds of people used to gather in the main valley of the vast plain near Nagar for the spring festivals, according to Augusto S. Cacopardo. He also says that while the Kalasha flocks of sheep and goats were out

grazing, they filled up a significant stretch of the Chitral River's vast valley.⁴⁸

5. Conclusion

It may be carefully estimated that the Kalasha had been a chiefdom rather than a kingdom. We do not find a formal political hierarchy of kingdom associated to the Kalasha. The Kalasha had chiefs and some are recorded in the folklores. Though we have limited sources for the early history of Kalasha through their folklore but they lack proper chronology. Limited historical events and figures are revealed through Kalasha oral traditions and Chitrali historiographers. In folklore, their forefathers (Shalak Shah and Adabog), two chiefs (Raja Bulasing and Raja Wai), and Nanga Dehar are frequently mentioned. These characters are common in the Kalasha stories, songs, and traditions. Prior to the rise of the Rais Dynasty, the Kalasha ruled over the major portion of the Chitral valley. With the Rais dynasty, the Kalasha chiefdom came to an end, and Kalasha conversion began in the first decade of the fourteenth century AD, confining them to present three Kalash valleys (Bumburet, Birir and Rumbur) and to some other southern valleys. The Islamization of Kalasha, on the other hand, took a long time, was gradual and slow, and was mostly peaceful. From the 14th century AD till the state of Chitral was disbanded in 1969 AD, they were a subject of Rais and Kators.

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²² *Ibid.*, 27-28.

²³ Jean-Yves Loude and Viviane Lievre, *Kalash Solstice: Winter Feasts of the Kalash of North Pakistan* (Islamabad: Lok Virsa, 1988), 37 and Halfdan Siiger, *Ethnological Field Research in Chitral, Sikkim and Assam: A Preliminary Report*. Vol. 36. No. I Kommission Hos Munksgaard, 1956, 32-33, accessed June 7, 2017, http://www.royalacademy.dk/Publications/High/623_Siiger,%20Halfdan.pdf.

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²⁸ The Arab land

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³⁵ Qazi Mir Bacha, 2017.

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³⁹Rehmat Karim Baig, Firuza Pastakia (Ed.), *Chitral: A Study in Statecrafts (1320-1969)* (Karachi: IUCN, 2004), 3.

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⁴⁵Israr-ud-Din, *Chitral Aik Ta'ruf*, 102.

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