

Chapter 1

Getting There

It is nearly impossible to get to the Kalash valleys in northwestern Pakistan, either geographically or intellectually, without first passing through Chitral, the district capital. On days when there is no wind or rain or snow, there is a breathtaking flight from Peshawar to Chitral on a Fokker Friendship. (On days when there is wind or rain or snow—and there often is—you brace yourself for a nauseating twelve-hour ride in a rickety passenger van at speeds that seem impossible given the number of switchbacks, potholes, and hashish cigarettes smoked by the driver.) But on happy days when the weather is fair, for forty-five astonishing minutes the landscape of the North West Frontier Province unfurls beneath you. Flat agricultural plains, dotted with brick factories and water buffalo, suddenly tilt skyward. The plane follows the mountainous teeth of the Hindukush, which guard the Lowari Pass. The Hindukush is the youngest mountain range in the world and looks as if it has just been torn from the imagination of some young god who didn't have the patience to soften the jagged edges. Once through the pass, the plane slips between 20,000-foot peaks that shelter hundreds of tiny valleys in their folds. Three of these are the Kalasha valleys of Rumbur (*rukmu*), Birir (*biriu*), and Bumboret (*mumurét*).

The narrow pass suddenly opens to Chitral's rich plains. In summer, clothed in fields of the greenest wheat and rice and corn, the city looks like an emerald set securely in a ring of pronged peaks. At the heart of Chitral is a bazaar, a narrow, dusty strip of shops. Each store sells some unexpected combination of, among other things, sweaters, auto parts, biscuits, vegetables, meat, medicine, beads, paper products, cloth, and souvenirs (rugs, rocks, and jewelry from Afghanistan; the Chitrali cap, the regional hat worn by almost all men in the North

West Frontier Province; and fake Kalasha headdresses). Looming over the bazaar is Tirich Mir, which rises to 25,229 feet (7,690 meters). Both Kalasha and Muslim Chitralis believe that Tirich Mir is the home of fairies.

A long and difficult history, complemented by a fragmented topography, has resulted in great regional ethnic diversity.¹ Chitral and the areas immediately surrounding it are mostly populated by Khowar-speaking peoples. There are also Kohestani people (Barth 1956; Keiser 1971, 1986), Pakhtuns (Barth 1959, 1981a, 1985; Lindholm 1981, 1982; Grima 1992), refugees from Afghanistan, and Indic-Gujar transhumants who travel through seasonally with their flocks and have begun to buy land and farm in recent generations. Uniting these diverse people is a common faith in Islam. Chitral is one of the most religiously conservative districts in Pakistan. Most people scrupulously fast during the month of Ramadan and pray five times each day—or, like my friend Nazir, at least on Fridays. Long before the most enthusiastic rooster has risen, the call to early morning prayers echoes from each of Chitral's many mosques.

For outsiders, much of Chitrali life is obscured by the eight-foot-high mud or cement walls, which shield colorful gardens and intimate family life from the eyes of strangers or, rather, of strange men.² Chitrali culture, like many conservative Islamic societies, makes a strict division between male public and female or familial private space. While the division between public and domestic has received two decades of criticism as reductive (Moore 1985:21–24),³ in Chitral, these categories are meaningful descriptions of a social world that is divided in two—a division that is far more pronounced than in less conservative, more cosmopolitan areas of Pakistan. One sees women outside in Peshawar shopping, their heads and upper bodies covered with a large white *dupāṭa*, or shrouded in a form-concealing dark Afghan *burqua*. But not in Chitral. The feeling that male public spaces are no place for women is so strong that even my most liberal male Chitrali friends would never think of accompanying their sisters or wives or daughters to the bazaar or polo field or other male gathering spots. Chitrali women themselves would not think of going anyway, for keeping strict *purdah* is a powerful expression of women's social morality and devotion to Islam. As I grew accustomed to the ethos of Chitrali life, even I, a foreign woman for whom all manner of allowances are made, began to feel uncomfortable. I began to feel that the

old mullahs, who would berate me when my less than skillfully managed *dupáta* slid from the top of my head, were right: I was out of place.

To get to the Kalasha valleys from Chitral, you can hire a private jeep for twenty dollars or pile into one of the several cargo jeeps that run back and forth several times a day for two dollars. Just south of Chitral, the town of Ayun with its many rice fields fills the basin below the mountains that encircle the valleys. Like Chitral, Ayun presents a partial face to the outsider, and only the dusty edges of richly textured lives are visible. Ayun's wide bazaar is built over what was an old polo field. The now flea-infested hotel was once a viewing platform for Chitrali princes. The jeeps swerve around the dozens of look-alike dogs, who somehow manage to sleep undisturbed in the middle of the road.

Spring graced Ayun weeks before the first pear tree bloomed in Rumbur. Their corn and wheat harvests foreshadowed ours. I learned to take careful note of what was being planted or harvested as I rode through so I could report to my Kalasha friends. I took special care to peek behind the heavy wooden doors into Mr. Jinnah's garden. Mr. Jinnah, a self-proclaimed friend of the Kalasha, loved to dance and came enthusiastically to Kalasha celebrations. Jinnah always encouraged us to stop for tea in his rose garden. Behind the high wooden gates of his family compound, he cultivated a colorful paradise of everything from mountain wildflowers to his delicate and temperamental "green rose."

Yet in Ayun I also tangibly felt the years of quiet (and sometimes not so quiet) animosity and disdain many Ayunis held for the Kalasha. The several times I walked through Ayun wearing my Kalasha dress, when snow prevented jeeps from entering the valleys or when walking to a festival in Birir with Kalasha friends, Ayuni children streamed behind me throwing small stones and chanting derisively "Hey, Kalash', Kalash'."4 (When I was wearing American or Chitrali clothing, they'd follow behind chanting the less offensive "one pen, one pen." Many tourists come to Pakistan equipped with cheap pens to give to children instead of money or candy. Over the course of the years I lived in the valleys, Kalasha children learned to beg from tourists as well but upped their requests to "two pen, two pen.") From Ayun, the winding road forks up into the three Kalasha valleys, Birir to the south and Rumbur and Bumboret to the north.

As Ayun disappears behind the cliffs, the world dries out. There are no trees, no flowers, no grass, only the river below, and the sharp gray and red and tan shale walls rushing to the sky above. The river bends, and the cliffs follow, casting sharp shadows so that one bursts from cool shade into bright, hot sun and back with every turn of the road. Finally, the valley forks again; Bumboret River and Rumbur River, always strikingly different colors, join, and at just this spot is the check post (*dubáč*). A wooden sign proclaims “Wel Come,” and uniformed border police rush out of the small police station to check cars headed for Bumboret or for Rumbur, where I spent most of my time. The first time I approached the check post I bristled at the militarization and the officious document checking and fee collecting (foreigners pay fifty rupees to visit the valleys and Pakistanis pay ten). But later I would look forward to this stop as the first place where I would collect news to take “home” with me. Policemen were both Kalasha and Muslim, from both Rumbur and Bumboret, and were unfailingly hospitable. And since they saw everyone who came and went they knew everything—who’d had a baby, who was sick, who was going to Peshawar, who had eloped with whom.

Fifteen years ago, the only way to get into Rumbur was to walk. Even then, there were tourists and anthropologists, but they were fewer and of a hardier sort. Now a jeep road is etched tenuously into the side of the rather unstable and mostly vertical cliffs that form the mouth of the valley. Slowly the valley starts to open up, and a patchwork of green fields and little congregations of houses and stables begin to nest in the tiny alluvial plains against the valley walls. The valley bottom looks verdant and sculpted, lush against the pale mountainsides above, filled with walnut and fruit trees that serve as arbors for huge, twisting grapevines. The houses furthest down-valley belong to Chitrali Muslims who migrated into the valley two or three generations ago. Their houses are properly walled off from view, but even so women often peep out from the gates to see who is coming and children spill into the road. Just around the next bend, at Kort Desh, are the first Kalasha houses.

Being an anthropologist, or at least wanting to be an anthropologist, I was determined to resist the wholesale romanticism that drips from guidebooks and tourist propaganda about the Kalasha. And yet the first time I rounded that corner I had to agree with the other tourists in my jeep (I remember being slightly annoyed, in fact, that

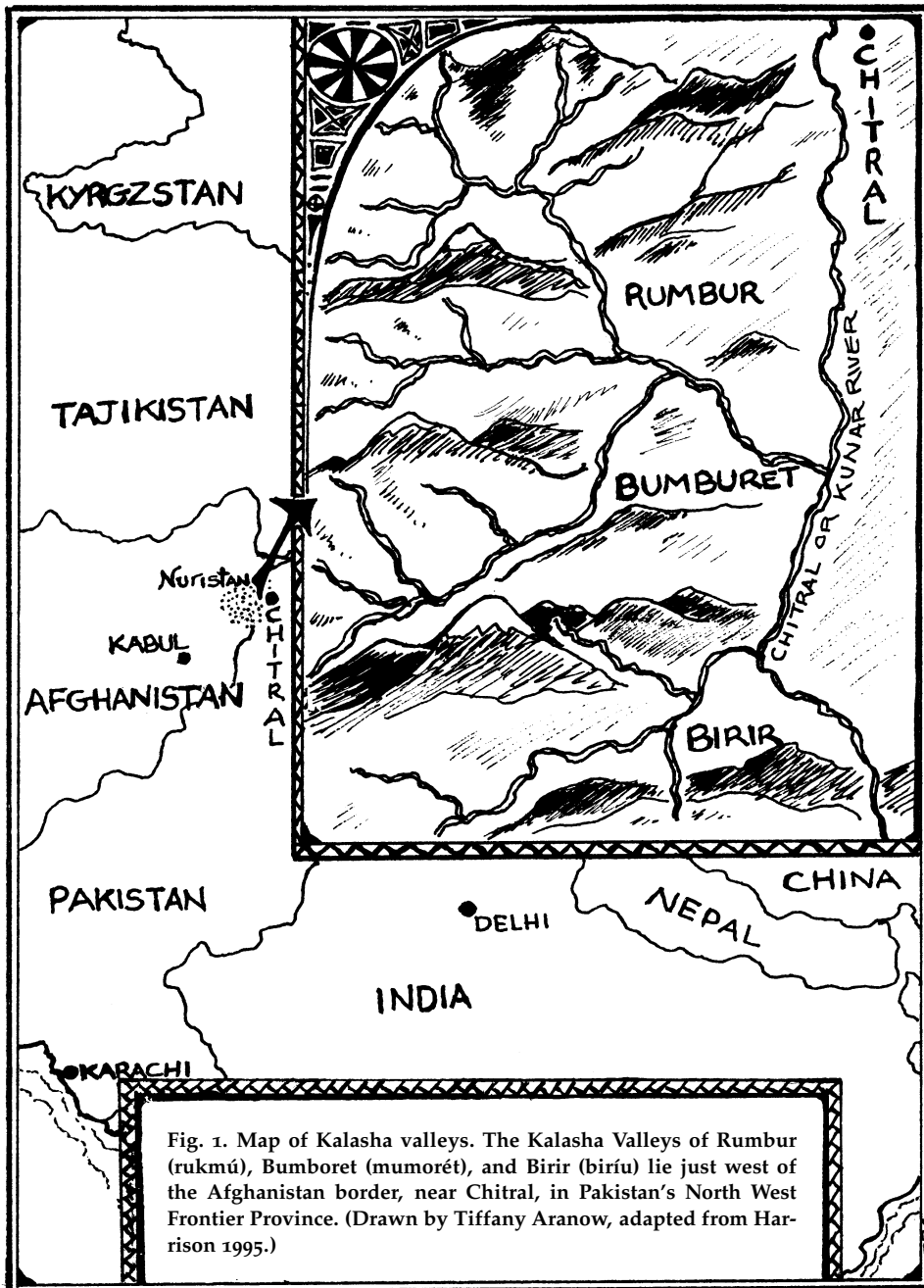


Fig. 1. Map of Kalasha valleys. The Kalasha Valleys of Rumbur (rukmu), Bumboret (mumoret), and Birir (biru) lie just west of the Afghanistan border, near Chitral, in Pakistan's North West Frontier Province. (Drawn by Tiffany Aranow, adapted from Harrison 1995.)

there *were* other tourists in my jeep since, as I said, I so wanted to be an *anthropologist*) that everything seemed to relax somehow. The landscape seemed to breathe a heavy sigh. Suddenly there were women everywhere—women chatting in the shade with their friends, working in their fields, walking from village to village. Coming from Chitral, Kalasha women's bright dresses, elaborate headdresses, and pounds of beautiful beads seemed all the more striking. When we left the jeep to explore, we found that the patched fields are fed by an elaborate irrigation system. Kalasha children led us by the hand to a lovely place where their mothers were shaking mulberries onto a blanket. We were invited to share tea with them.

I was instantly infected with the romanticism I had come determined to resist. Two years of valley life convinced me that Kalashadesh is not Shangri-La:⁵ I saw what one inevitably sees in any community—sickness, conflict, violence, and death. But still I contend that the Kalasha valleys—both the place and the people living there (and not just the women, the men, too)—*are* charming. The Kalasha enjoy their lives and cultivate graciousness, joyfulness, and generosity. They think their valleys and the high mountain pastures surrounding them are lovely, and they are. They participate enthusiastically in a rich ritual life. They think their women's clothing is the most beautiful way of dressing in the world. And, as one schoolboy said to me that first summer I was there, showing off his newly acquired English and his nuanced understanding of the way into an anthropologist's heart, "Sister, we love our religion." I felt, and still feel, an overwhelming sense of gratitude that the muse of ethnography led me to this gentle and interesting people.

My ethnographic muse was Fredrik Barth. He had visited the valleys in the 1950s while he was doing his doctoral field research among the Swat Pathan (1956, 1959, 1981, 1985). He said that when he got tired of the continual drama of Pakhtun honor he took a long trip and visited the Kalasha, where his mentor, Georg Morgenstierne, had worked in 1929. The Kalasha were hospitable and liked to laugh. Fredrik was offered bread and milk and honey. While he was there, he witnessed a young woman eloping from the menstrual house. He said women kept little stores of toiletries hidden in the rocks by the river. He gave me some black and white photographs he had taken, in which women wearing cowry shell headdresses look unabashedly into his camera. I wanted to know more about these women, about

their menstrual house, about their lives. I started digging through the existing literature. I was disappointed. While there are plenty of *pictures* of Kalasha women, there is very little of substance or detail *written* about them. (Although for young anthropologists finding significant gaps in the literature is exciting as well.)

The Project

After a three-month pilot study in the summer of 1992, I planned a careful research design that would “evaluate the thesis that gendered meanings and practices vary systematically across social arenas.” I had hypothesized that “male insistence on female impurity and its entrainments in female subordinate practice will be most emphasized in community ritual practice, less evident in village and household relations, and strongly countered with female-centric ideology and expressions of women’s power and autonomy in the menstrual house.” I am surprised now to realize that this structure could have worked and that my initial hypothesis, clothed though it is in thick anthrojargon, is correct: Kalasha women do act differently toward one another and toward men in these three contexts, and these differences could be measured empirically. So the problem was not that my initial research questions were untenable. It was that no one besides me (and other anthropologists) thought they were especially interesting.

My Kalasha friends, both men and women, brushed aside my questions about “female subordinate practice.” They were resolutely uninterested in issues of gender “equality” or “women’s power and autonomy.” It wasn’t that these issues were not important. And it certainly is not the case that men and women live in balanced harmony.⁶ But rather, for Kalasha people, comparing the relative positions of men and women—ritually, socially, politically—is not very interesting, is not a focus of identity for Kalasha, as it is for many Westerners. On the other hand, the related concepts that Kalasha women are “free” (*azát*) and have “choice” (*čít*)—especially compared to women from neighboring communities—are compelling concerns (Wikan 1990, 1992). The idea of women’s “freedom” emerges spontaneously in conversation, explains a wide range of behaviors and motivations, and touches the heart of individual women’s identities and the collective identity of the Kalasha community.

Over and over Kalasha men and women say, to one another and to anthropologists and filmmakers and tourists, “Our women are free” (*hóma istríža azát ásan*). “Women’s choice” (*istrížan čit*) is also a common topic of conversation among Kalasha people—interesting to them (and to me) for the way it makes their social world both more complex and less predictable and the way it sets them apart from their non-Kalasha neighbors. In the following chapters, I follow the way these concepts play through several diverse arenas, attending especially to the ways these concepts are experienced and used by women. In attempting to unravel what is meant by *freedom* and *choice*, I hope to unwrap an indigenous theory of women’s agency—a set of pathways and rights through which each Kalasha woman defines herself through the actions she takes or doesn’t take, the choices she makes or doesn’t make. The implications for women’s choice go beyond the shaping of individual lives, also contributing broadly to the flexibility, fluidity, and dynamism of many dimensions of collective Kalasha life.

Before I begin, I want to sketch the history of Kalasha relationships with the peoples who live around them, for it is always implicitly in relation to their ethnoscape (Appadurai 1990) that women’s freedom is meaningful and effective.

A Brief Tour of the Kalasha Ethnoscape

The literature about the Kalasha is historically deep, but not very “thick” in the Geertzian sense. Anthropologists, and the colonial explorers who preceded them, have been writing about the Kalasha for over a hundred years.⁷ Most researchers have concentrated their efforts on descriptions of Kalasha religion. As Peter Parkes noted at the 1993 conference on the Kalasha, together, anthropologists probably know more about Kalasha religion than any single Kalasha person. The Kalasha have also hosted scholars interested in linguistics, merit feasting, material culture, and development.

Nuristan

Due to a tragic historical “accident,” the Kalasha have received more than their share of ethnographic attention. The Kalasha valleys lie on

the eastern periphery of a cultural area once known as Kafiristan (from the Arabic *k'afir*, or "infidel," hence "land of the nonbelievers"—obviously not an indigenous term). A number of independent tribes lived in the nearly impenetrable mountains of the Hindukush extending east from the Kalasha valleys into what is now Afghanistan. Since almost nothing was known of Kafiristan (and thus everything imaginable was possible), it was the perfect setting for Rudyard Kipling's story "The Man Who Would Be King," in which two British scoundrels set off to make themselves kings of Kafiristan, a wild and mysterious place. (John Huston's film adaptation starring Sean Connery and Michael Caine was filmed in the Atlas Mountains of Morocco.) In 1888, Kipling described the country to his vast readership through one of the ill-fated protagonists (the one who lost his head, as it turns out) like this:

They call it Kafiristan. By my reckoning it's the top right-hand corner of Afghanistan, not more than three hundred miles from Peshawur. They have two and thirty heathen idols there, and we'll be the thirty-third and fourth. It's a mountainous country, and the women of those parts are very beautiful. (1953:169, quoted in LaRiche 1981:6)

In 1889, only a year after the publication of Kipling's story, George Scott Robertson (who later became Sir George Scott Robertson) made a preliminary expedition to the Kam tribe of Kamdesh in Bashgal Valley. A year later he returned to live among the "Kafirs" for over a year. Although his ultimate goal was to figure out how best to secure British India's North West Frontier against possible invasions by the Russians, he was also fascinated by these "wild and interesting people" and was a thorough (if not at all reflexive) ethnographer and a poetic writer. Robertson described societies with complex social organizations and distinctive religions. Powerful men competed with one another for positions of rank through lavish "feasts of merit" (1896:449–59). The facades and interiors of buildings were covered with beautiful, elaborate carvings, symbols that represented the rank and accomplishments of the inhabitants.⁸ Each tribe worshiped a distinct but related pantheon of gods and goddesses (381–415, 376–77), and believed in spirits and fairies (1896:412–13). According to Parkes, their religion "appears to have preserved many archaic features that seemingly date from the

time of the earliest Aryan migrations into North-West India" (1983:2). The tribes were often at war with one another. Men who were ruthless warriors were much respected. Victors characteristically cut off the ears of their defeated enemies as trophies. Livestock raiding was a practiced art form.

In 1895, British representatives, wishing to create a buffer between British India and Russian expansion in Central Asia, drew the famous Durand Line on a map, separating the North West Frontier from Afghanistan. The British ceded territory west of the Durand Line (territory that they did not in fact control), to the amir of Afghanistan, Abdur Rahman.⁹ (Not surprisingly, there were no representatives of Kafiristan present at the signing.) Durand himself had mused ten years earlier, "I have always been a little afraid of the Amir turning our breechloaders upon the independent tribes, and especially upon the Kafirs" (see Jones 1974:2–20). His fears were well founded. In the winter of 1895–96, Abdur Rahman led his army into Kafiristan and in only forty days ruthlessly conquered the non-Muslim communities, slaughtering and relocating tens of thousands and forcibly converting the rest to Islam. Male children were taken and educated to become mullahs. Other Afghans were settled in the valleys. The Amir's son, Habibullah, finished the job by allowing those who converted to Islam to keep their land, while those who stubbornly held to their religion had their lands confiscated (Gregorian 1969:181–82; LaRiche 1981:1). Kafiristan, Land of the Infidels, was then renamed Nuristan, Land of Light. The inhabitants of present-day Nuristan are called (and also call themselves) Nuristanis.¹⁰

The Durand Line also divided the Kalasha from the "Kafirs" in larger Kafiristan. The then five¹¹ small Kalasha valleys fell under the protection of British India, and so were spared the Amir's religious zeal. Yet even before the Durand Line split them off from neighboring communities, the Kalasha appear to have lived on the periphery of this larger world, culturally as well as geographically. It seems clear that the Kalasha were not held in high esteem by their fellow non-Muslims (Loude and Lievre 1988:6). Robertson was not much impressed with the Kalasha, calling them a "most servile and degraded race" and explaining that they were "not the true independent Kafirs of the Hindu-Kush, but an idolatrous tribe of slaves subject to the Mehtar of Chitral, and living within his borders" (1896:4). As Albert Cacopardo notes, Robertson, in this much-criticized comment, was only reflecting the

opinions of neighbors on both sides of the present border (1991:279). Kalasha were considered easy prey by neighboring Kati peoples, who both raided their livestock (in fact there was an attempted raid while I was there during the summer of 1995) and captured them as prisoners (Holzwarth 1993). Two Kati men, Tak and Shamlar of Kamdesh, who answered a questionnaire about their culture (through a Muslim interpreter) in about 1835, reported that "All Kafirs together are called 'Kalasha' [i.e., Kalasha was the generic term for all the Kafir tribes], and offered without being asked that the so-called Kalasha of Chitral are not 'true Kafirs.'"¹² It is an ironic twist of history that, although they were apparently peripheral to Kafiristani culture and scorned by many "true Kafirs," Kalasha have come to be the only living heirs to what was once a huge and diverse cultural area.

In fact, Kalasha mythology and ancestor legends predicted that this would be so.¹³ Kalasha histories about the origins of ritual practices are quite detailed, and almost all trace back to the glory days, twelve to fourteen generations beyond living elders, when the famous Kalasha kings, Rajawai and Bulasing, controlled most of Chitral as well as part of Bashgal Valley in Kafiristan. Almost every major religious institution in Kalasha culture—from the women's menstrual house to the location of ritual altars to specific rites and sacrifices—was introduced during this period under the inspired revelations of Nanga Dehar, the most famous Kalasha shaman-prophet. Nanga Dehar accompanied King Rajawai on his frequent excursions into Kafiristan. In trance, Nanga Dehar was made to understand, by the gods of Kafiristan, that the entire region would eventually be converted to Islam. The gods wished to have their altars transported to the Kalasha valleys so that they would continue to receive their necessary offerings. Nanga Dehar arranged for shrines to be built in their honor and instructed the ancestors of the Kalasha in the proper way to perform religious rites (Parkes 1991, 1983:16–18; Wazir Ali Shah 1974:70).¹⁴

Borrowings from Nuristan continue today. Peter Parkes (personal communication) has noted that even in 1975 the Kalasha had an "inferiority complex" in relation to neighboring Nuristani tribes. Kalasha would often comment that this or that aspect of their culture was inferior in comparison. I heard similar comments twenty years later, though I would have to qualify this by saying that such comments were almost exclusively made by men and referred specifically to aspects of

war, religious practice, merit feasting, or building techniques.¹⁵ After recounting for me a very accurate history of the amir's conquest of Kafiristan, Baraman, the most respected *kasí*, or ritual and historical expert in Rumbur Valley, pronounced "the Kafirs of Kafiristan were always 'above us' (*hóma pi tára*) in both purity (*ónjesta*) and strength." He explained that merit feasting was a tradition in Kafiristan that the Kalasha had "brought back," and he went on to recount which aspects of which feasts had been instituted by whom (see also Klimburg 1995). Nuristani craftsmen, renowned for their beautiful woodworking, are often hired to decorate Kalasha houses. Women buy the conical baskets that they use to carry everything from babies to pears to firewood from Nuristani craftswomen. Nuristanis also make most *kálun*, the traditional soft-soled shoes once commonly worn and still important for burial dress (replaced for everyday wear with plastic slippers made in China or Power brand tennis shoes).

Yet fear and general mistrust of Nuristanis also continues into the present. Baraman, for example, added that as well as being "stronger and more pure" the Kafirs of Kafiristan were also evil and killed and stole often and for sport (in comparison with the Kalasha, who, like the *anglís* (English, a reference to Westerners in general), are "more gentle and honest." Today, women bristle when unknown Nuristani men walk by, and with reason: a young Kalasha girl was attacked and nearly raped by a Nuristani man while I was there, an occurrence that women considered not uncommon. A tragic bombing that killed a beloved young man is widely believed to have been committed by a Nuristani. And raids and attempted raids on Kalasha livestock in the high pastures are commonplace. Counterbalancing this picture, true though it is to the Kalasha stereotype of Nuristanis, are fictive kinship relationships that have endured through generations, close friendships and trusting trading relationships, and a mutual interest in preserving the forest in their valley.

Chitral

The relationship of Kalasha to Chitralis is no less complex or ambivalent. The Kalasha rulers Raja Wai and Bula Singh were defeated by the first Muslim kings of Chitral, the Rais, between the fourteenth (Wazir Ali Shah 1974:70) and the sixteenth century (Siiger 1956:33; Loude and

Lievre 1988:21).¹⁶ The Rais were succeeded by the Katur dynasty toward the end of the sixteenth century. The Katur princes, or Mehtars, further developed the feudal order begun under the Rais, and Chitral emerged as the most powerful principality in the region (Parkes 1983:21–22; Biddulph 1986:66–68). The Kalasha therefore have been a subject people to Chitrali rulers for the last three to five hundred years.¹⁷ The Kalasha received some protection as dependents of the Mehtars from both the raids of the Afghan Kafirs and the incessant proselytizing of Islamic missionaries and for the most part were left to govern their own internal affairs. Parkes (1995) has speculated that Kalasha “pagan” beliefs were tolerated because they were often consulted as diviners by Chitrali rulers. Like other Katur subjects, Kalasha were forced to pay substantial tribute in honey, walnuts, and livestock to Chitrali overlords. One male from each household was required to perform arduous *corvée* labor several days each month. Young women and children were sometimes sold into slavery. The proceeds from these sales were used to pay for foreign luxuries (Durand 1899:51–52, cited in Parkes 1983:22).

This oppression, still remembered bitterly by the older generation, continued until the Kalasha and other subject peoples in Chitral were freed from serfdom in the early 1950s (Parkes 1994:159). Baraman (an elder respected for his amazing command of historical details), after recounting for me the names of the last ten Mehtars recalled that while all the Mehtars had exploited them some were more cruel than others. The last Mehtar wasn’t so bad, he said. He required his subjects to pay heavy taxes to him in goats and grain and honey, and ten men were sent to do *corvée* labor in a rotation of nine or ten days. (This was at a time when the population of the valley was much smaller, and so this was a considerable burden.) Baraman said proudly that he himself was willful and disobedient: he was put in jail twenty-six times for refusing to pay as much as was required, though he always tried to pay something.

Even after they were released from serfdom, Kalasha were required to pay heavy taxes to the Chitrali Mehtar. They continued to suffer sometimes brutal attempts at forced conversion by Muslim neighbors. Kalasha say they were poor and *sadâ* (simple, straightforward, honest) and *jangalî* (from the jungle, hillbillies) and were often taken advantage of by “clever” Chitralis (Parkes 2000). Many people

were forced to sell valuable resources for very little; there is a well-known modern myth about a man who traded a productive walnut tree for a Chitrali hat.

In 1969, Chitral District was officially incorporated into the nation of Pakistan. Because Chitral is classified as a disadvantaged region, the people of Chitral District (including the Kalasha) do not pay national taxes, although they receive government services in the form of schools, roads, police, and medical clinics. The Kalasha are still relatively disadvantaged politically as one of Pakistan's few non-Muslim minorities, although they are protected by Pakistan's constitutional commitment to freedom of religion. (The women's march to Chitral demonstrated that they are well aware of this right.) Kalasha men and women vote in national, regional, and local elections and have representatives at the district level. Kalasha candidates have campaigned (thus far unsuccessfully) for a minority seat in the National Assembly.

But as significant as the changes in the last thirty years have been, Kalasha experience with and relations to the administration in Chitral remain much the same. As Parkes noted,

The distant D.C. (district commissioner) may have replaced the Mehtar, but government officials come from the same families as the wazirs, the court advisors, of former years. Local princes can no longer call upon the free labour of the Kalasha, but they retain their importance as contractors, for example, over the new roads and irrigation projects that are now reaching these valleys. Old networks of dependence continue to dominate their relations with a "foreign" world into which they have long been partially incorporated. (1983:23)

Muslim Neighbors and Kalasha šek

Kalasha relations with the Muslim world are complicated because Kalasha and Muslims live together in the same valleys and even in the same families. Although the center of each of the three Kalasha valleys is primarily populated by Kalasha people, Chitralis (whom the Kalasha call *pātua*) and Gujar families also own houses and fields. In Rumbur Valley in 1995, there were eight families of Kho-speaking Chitralis and four Gujar families living near, but not in, the main

villages.¹⁸ Both Muslims and Kalasha own shops in the small bazaar in the center of the valley. There are two mosques in Rumbur.

Usually people treat one another in a “neighborly” way, borrowing sugar or walnuts, helping with harvesting, dropping in for visits. Our Gujar neighbor was known to be an excellent herbalist, and many Kalasha women sought her advice. My Kalasha “aunt” was also a renowned healer, practiced in the art of *khet thek*, in which smoldering threads of special bark are applied to specific points on the body. Muslims as well as Kalasha asked for her services. Kalasha also ask Muslim *daṣmān*, Muslim mullahs, to write specific prayers that are made into necklaces and thought to bring health or make someone fall in love. Kalasha and Muslim children play together. But there was also suspicion and disrespect between the communities. In private, people from each community harbor negative stereotypes about the other. Kalasha complained that their Muslim neighbors were constantly trying to talk them into converting. The deep ambivalence, but also the interdependence, of these communities was illustrated for me when the village mosque burned down.

In the middle of a dark, quiet summer night, shrieking Kalasha children began beating on the doors and windows of my room. Outside on the porch women and children were singing and dancing. The mosque across the river was burning down. The men in the family had already left to help put out the fire. The dancing subsided, and everyone stared at the horrible blaze. What a shame, *kía darkár*, the women said, shaking their heads. They said they hoped no one had been hurt. I noticed that Bayda Aya was crying. Then they all broke out dancing again. When the fire was finally out, and the men had returned, saying no one had been injured, we all went to bed. During the next week, all the neighboring Kalasha men dropped their own work to help rebuild the mosque. Women baked and sent bread. Many Kalasha families donated money to help pay for the reconstruction.

In addition to Muslim neighbors, almost all Kalasha have Muslim family members. Of the 848 people in the Kalasha community in 1995, 84, almost 10 percent, had converted to Islam or had been born in the valleys to parents who had converted before they were born. Converted Kalasha are called Kalasha *šek*. During the two years I lived in the valleys, there were fifteen conversions to Islam in all three Kalasha valleys. In my valley, Rumbur, there were two. The Kalasha population is growing, as their birth rate far outstrips the rate of conversion to

Islam. Still, from a Kalasha perspective every conversion feels like a threat to their whole way of life. News of a conversion ripples within minutes down the length of the valley. And while converted relatives are eventually reintegrated into valley life, families are initially grief stricken.

Most unmarried Kalasha *šek* continue to live in the same houses as their Kalasha relatives. Eleven Kalasha families shared their houses with a sibling, parent, or grandparent who was Muslim. One older Kalasha woman, who is blind and childless, lives with her dead husband's second wife's son and his family, all of whom are *šek*. Married *šek* commonly set up their own households, often on land outside of the village near the river or slightly down-valley (because these places are less *onjesta* and Muslims are explicitly *pragata*). There were ten households of Kalasha *šek* in Rumbur in 1995. Kalasha *šek* participate in the everyday and economic life of the community and maintain obligations to their Kalasha lineages (*kam*), although they no longer take part in most Kalasha rituals. They are also integrated into the social world of the other Muslims living in the valley. At feasts, Kalasha take care that some animals are slaughtered by a Muslim so that the meat is *halal*, permissible for Muslims to eat, and *šek* relatives can share the meal. Kalasha women who are having difficult births often are taken to *šek* houses (rather than to the *bashali*) so that they can be attended by doctors (since men are not allowed in the menstrual house). Many Kalasha *šek* try to marry their children to other *šek* rather than to Muslims from outside the Kalasha community.

Every *šek* has a personal and poignant story about how and why he or she converted. Some tell of being tricked with promises of health or fortune. One old woman says that when she was a young woman her husband was "tricked" into converting and then she was coerced with force and cruelty (*zor kay, zulum kay*). Young couples sometimes convert if their families won't allow them to marry. Young Kalasha sometimes fall in love with someone Muslim and convert so they can marry. Kalasha claim that there are financial incentives to convert, but I had no way of confirming this directly. Many of the conversions while I was there were among young people, usually schoolboys who learn about Islam as one of the required subjects in school. Many *šek* say they converted out of genuine religious conviction or revelation. A teenage boy who had attended high school told me, "I have read all the spiritual books—Christian, Bahai, Hindu, and

Islamic. The Koran is the most beautiful. My family just doesn't understand." Whatever the reason, each person's decision to convert is final. For a *šek* to change his or her mind and become Kalasha again is thought to be impossible. And yet, among Kalasha, there is likely to be an imagined exception for each impossibility. In Bumboret Valley, a myth (at least to me it sounds like myth, though many swear it is the truth) circulates about a Kalasha man who converted to Islam and then became Kalasha again. This man is said to have converted under duress and then spent a number of years across the border in Nuristan. He wanted to come back to Bumboret, but the Nuristanis knew that he was thinking of becoming Kalasha again, so they kept guard over him, blocking the bridge that was his only way out. Every night, he tried, and for many nights he failed. One night, all the guards fell asleep, and he stole over six sleeping bodies and went back over the mountains to his home village. There the elders and all the men of the community held a ceremony for him, sacrificing a one-year-old male goat, sprinkling him with the blood, and purifying him with juniper. He knew that the Muslims would try to kill him at night for converting back to Kalasha, so he had a coffin built, and every night he closed the lid and slept inside. He was never discovered by his tormentors. Years later, when he was very ill, he told his son that when he died he shouldn't bother making another coffin for him, as he had been sleeping quite comfortably in this one for many years. "Just bury me in it," he said.

Foreign Relations: Tourists and Anthropologists

There has been another player on the Kalasha ethnoscape. For more than a hundred years, Europeans have been peering into the valleys. Following the famous Siege of Chitral in 1885 (Robertson 1898), the British named the fourteen-year-old boy Shuja-ul-Mulk as Mehtar, and established a permanent garrison in Chitral. From then on, British political officers governed the region and more or less controlled the Mehtars. Aside from Robertson's account, I could find very little written about British relations with the Kalasha, although British control of the border spared the Kalasha the fate of the Kafirs in Afghanistan.

The first anthropologists arrived in the valleys in the 1920s, and, as noted earlier, the Kalasha have received a steady stream of ethnographic attention ever since. The presence of foreign tourists has

increased dramatically in the past decade.¹⁹ Most are European, but tourists from Australia, North America, Japan, and more rarely the Middle East or South America also wander through. I never saw tourists from elsewhere in South Asia, Africa (except white South Africans, who do seem to travel widely in South Asia) or the former Soviet Union or China. In 1995, fourteen hundred foreign tourists passed through the check post on their way to the Rumbur or Bumboret Valley. Most tourists go to Bumboret, a larger and more scenic valley. Most come for day trips, but some spend several nights in the valleys.²⁰ Some tourists are so drawn by the beauty of the valleys and the warmth of the people that they stay all summer and return almost every year. One Japanese woman married a Kalasha man and now lives with his extended family. In addition to tourists and anthropologists, foreign aid organizations have funded numerous small development projects in the Kalasha valleys (Parkes 2000), and the directors of two organizations are well-known personalities throughout the valleys.

The effects of foreign involvement in the valleys are multiple, contradictory, sometimes alarming, and sometimes funny.²¹ Yet despite the presence of tourists during the summer months, and of a constant succession of anthropologists and development workers, I would still argue that the "tourist gaze" (Urry 1990) has not yet pierced as deeply into the heart of Kalasha culture as it has done in many other tourist destinations (cf. Selwyn 1996; Greenwood 1989; Boissevain 1996; Adams 1996). MacCannell (1992), for example, has argued that the penetration of tourism is everywhere so all-encompassing that there are no "primitives" left in the world, only "ex-primitives" playing the part of primitives in order to satisfy the desires (and capture the dollars) of tourists who come dreaming of a premodern, authentic Other.²²

To this, I think most Kalasha would say (if they had read enough anthropological theory to use the jargon) that they have a sophisticated understanding of the idea of "authenticity," that part of being Kalasha means bringing new people and ideas in and making them their own. I often heard Takat Jan, for example, reassuring tourists worried about the new mini-hydroelectric plant (built in 1995) that electricity won't destroy Kalasha culture but it will help them see better at night. In fact, rather than playing the part of primitives (or rather "pagans," as tourist literature on the Kalasha valleys promises)

for tourists, Kalasha tend to pull foreigners into their own cultural fantasies and use them toward their own political ends.

An interesting fictive kinship has developed between Kalasha and the foreigners who are so fascinated with them. As with much contemporary “ethno-tourism,” tourists come to the valleys (or rather they pause there, as these small valleys are always a stop on a larger journey and rarely a final destination) looking for “authenticity,”²³ for a way of life that seems somehow less commodified, less fragmented, less harried, and more social than their own. Westerners have been quick to recognize their authentic/original selves in the Kalasha. Some come seeking the descendants of Alexander the Great, some one of the lost tribes of Israel, and one traveler even waxed poetic about how they reminded him of the Whos in Dr. Seuss’s Whoville—that is, they reminded him of the best of what we imagine ourselves capable of being. This imagined sameness is cultivated by Kalasha people, who also search for reflections of themselves in their visitors, though for different reasons.

Because the Kalasha are a tiny population whose religion and customs stand out in relief against the Islamic background of the rest of Central Asia, foreigners (who are mostly non-Muslim themselves) coming into the valleys find themselves in the somewhat unique postcolonial position of working with or visiting a community that identifies *with* rather than *against* them. If foreigners are looking to Kalasha for confirmation of their own essential (or potential) goodness and wholeness, Kalasha look to foreigners for confirmation that Kalasha culture is good in contrast to the daily barrage of hellfire and damnation promised by their Muslim neighbors. Countless times my Kalasha friends said something like this to me or to other visitors: “We are all Kafirs [nonbelievers], after all. We are all one *kam*, one lineage.”²⁴

One example, of almost daily possible examples, occurred early in my fieldwork. My friend Wasiara Aya and I were sitting on little stools outside her guesthouse in Rumbur Valley. She was using her most animated gestures to help me learn Kalasha. I had been staying with Wasiara Aya and her family for the first several months of my fieldwork. We were both laughing at my silly mistakes when Abdul Salam and his friend, Mohammed Asam, came up the stairs. My husband and I had visited their home in Urtsun when I was conducting a pilot study the previous summer. Urtsun is inhabited by a population of people who converted from Kalasha to Islam only a few

decades ago (Aug. Cacopardo 1991). Abdul Salam had given me an enthusiastic tour of his valley, pointing out the ruins of Kalasha shrines and the women's menstrual house. The men good-naturedly joined in the language lesson, and Wasiara Aya made a game out of sorting out the differences in dialects spoken in the two valleys.

Then, out of nowhere, Mohammad Asam turned to Wasiara Aya and asked why she and the other Kalasha don't convert to Islam so they could go to heaven rather than burn in hell. I hadn't been in the valleys long enough to realize that this sort of pointed proselytizing is commonplace. Wasiara Aya turned to me and said, "Why should we convert, *ne bāba* (right sister)? Kalasha is a good religion, a free religion (*azát masaháp*), *ne bāba*?" To the men she said, "Everyone comes here to see us. You don't even have any hotels in Urtsun. *amerikáy* (Americans), *pharansí* (French), *anglís* (English), *kanadá* (Canadians), *ĵapaní* (Japanese)—they all like Kalasha. No one comes to see you. Kalasha is good, isn't that right, sister?" The appreciation of foreigners, the imagined kinship propagated on both sides, contributes to the sense, held by all Kalasha I know, that they are special and that their culture is valuable.

Identity, Ethnicity, and Gender

I hope that this brief cultural and historical tour has conveyed the sense, keenly felt by Kalasha themselves, that they are a tiny minority community treading water in a vast and compelling sea of Islam, which threatens daily to flood into their valleys. They have struggled for centuries to preserve their cultural identity in the face of "chronic . . . oppressive subordination" (Parkes 1994:159). This continual pressure has had a profound effect on the ethos of Kalasha life. Peter Parkes, following Mary Douglas, has diagnosed the Kalasha community as an "enclave culture" (cf. Castile and Kushner 1981). He writes:

The societal institutions of enclaves are expressly modified to ensure communal solidarity in the face of an encompassing and alien social universe, being particularly adapted to discourage the "defection" of internal members to this more dominant exterior environment, as irrevocably occurs through Kalasha conversions to Islam. The religious culture of enclaves also tends to be preoc-

cupied with exacting ritual criteria of purity and pollution (Parkes 1987), serving to demarcate a distinctive group boundary that defines insiders from outsiders; and the political institutions of enclaved societies are similarly instituted in contrastive opposition to the “hierarchical” polities in which their communities are encapsulated. In other words, enclaves are determinedly *egalitarian* in principle, where all members are supposedly alike in status and moral evaluation. (Parkes 1994:159–60)²⁵

If you ask most any Kalasha adult whether the community will be practicing its religion in ten or twenty years, the answer will be “probably.” “What about 50 years from now, or a hundred?” you ask. And they’ll answer, “Who knows? Who knows? We hope so.” The persistence of their cultural identity is not something that can be taken for granted but something that is won daily. Kalasha ritual life is focused explicitly on maintaining the purity (*ónjēṣṭa*) of their people, and their valley, against the impure (*prágata*) world outside. And the rhetoric of Kalasha political life often repeatedly emphasizes the fact that “‘all Kalasha are poor, all are equal’ in contrast to the hereditary status grading characteristic of surrounding Muslim peoples in Chitral” (160).

I would take Parkes’s argument one step further by noting that every aspect of this cultural work of defining and maintaining ethnic boundaries, and of generating solidarity through a commitment to egalitarian principles, is inextricably bound up with gender. Kalasha women have come to represent Kalasha ethnicity in the way they dress, behave, and interact with men.

Two generations ago, Kalasha men wore clothing that marked them as distinctively Kalasha. Today Kalasha men are almost indistinguishable from their Muslim neighbors, while women continue to wear almost all the distinctive physical markers of Kalasha ethnicity. When a Kalasha woman converts to Islam, she immediately changes her clothing, tearfully gives her headdress and beads to her female relatives, and unbraids her hair. While there is no scriptural basis in the Koran for these changes (since Kalasha women’s clothing is already quite modest and their heads are covered at all times), women’s dress is the central marker of Kalasha ethnicity. It is unthinkable that a Muslim woman would dress in Kalasha clothing (I discuss this in detail in chapter 3).

Kalasha “exacting ritual criteria of purity and pollution” are inherently gendered. The Kalasha ritual world assigns both Muslims and Kalasha women to the realm of the impure. So it is women who are responsible for maintaining the purity of the valleys by means of their conscientious attention to boundaries between pure and impure. Thus, they also symbolically maintain the “group boundary that defines insiders from outsiders.”

Finally, when asked what differentiates them from their Muslim neighbors, Kalasha people almost always remark that “Our women are free (*hóma istríža azát ásan*).” While clearly different from “egalitarian principles” (freedom in this sense in fact has nothing to do with equality), the concept of Kalasha women’s freedom gives women great latitude in determining the course of their own lives—sexually, emotionally, and ritually. This concept is both a core marker of Kalasha ethnicity and an important incentive for women not to “defect” from the community by converting to Islam.²⁶ At the same time, the ever-present knowledge that women *could* leave the community serves to strengthen community commitment to the constellation of rights and responsibilities involved in women’s freedom—even when these directly contradict an also present value of respecting men’s and familial authority.

That gender and ethnicity are intertwined is not unique to the Kalasha. There is a large body of both theoretical and ethnographic works that deal with the embedded nature of gender,²⁷ the inability to disentangle gender theoretically from the lived experience of other aspects of identity—ethnicity, race, class, age, religion, sexual orientation, and so on.²⁸ But in the Kalasha valleys ethnic boundaries are so near and so clear, and gender is so important to their maintenance, that the mutual construction of gender and ethnicity is explicit in a way it is not in many other places.

Our Women Are Free

During the winter, Steve and I lived in Kalashagrom village, which is perched atop a steep hill, so we could see all the other villages in Rumbur, the road and the river below, and the snow-covered peaks that rise to 17,000 feet in the background. Steve shoveled snow and chopped firewood for our family, did our laundry, and wrote poetry and an autobiographical novel. I did “fieldwork.” This meant, as far as

my Kalasha family could discern, that I spent all my time gossiping and drinking tea with our neighbors. My favorite neighbor, Mushiki, was eighty years old, or so she claimed. *Mushiki* means “alfalfa,” an old-fashioned name that suits her, although everyone addresses her with a more respectful term such as *mother* or *great-aunt*. Her clear blue eyes were nearly completely blind. She loved babies, and her nephews’ wives would drop their infants off with her while they went to braid their hair or to the mill to grind grain. They would return with news they had picked up while they were out, so Mushiki kept an intricate command of valley politics and intrigue, even though she never left her house. She would make sharp, sweeping pronouncements on everything from national politics (men should look out because a woman, Benazir Bhutto, sat on the throne now) to local culture (“girls these days don’t know how to sing—why, when I was a girl, my friends and I used to sing and dance for days”), but her favorite topic was ethnicity.

One afternoon, Siasat came over with her new baby girl. I handed the baby to Mushiki backward from the way she had expected, and since she couldn’t see she scooped up the swaddled bundle and gave the baby’s feet an affectionate kiss and nuzzle. Everyone laughed. Mushiki laughed so hard she almost fell off her stool, baby and all. Then Siasat said she had come bearing bad news. She’d just returned from visiting her mother in Birir Valley, and two more Kalasha had converted to Islam. Mushiki shook her head, saying that she just didn’t understand how women could do this. “They don’t think!” she exclaimed. “They don’t think, and then it is too late.” Then she turned to me and said, “We Kalasha are free. We women go where we want. We go to Birir, to Bumboret, to Balanguru, to Chet Guru. We go to Peshawar if we want to.” I interjected that it appeared to me that women had to ask permission from their husbands to travel, but she insisted that this wasn’t true. Of course, they probably would ask their husbands, but they didn’t have to, and if he said no they still *could* go, though probably they *wouldn’t*. “So even without permission Kalasha women go where they want. *Pátua* (Chitrali Muslims) are bad. They don’t let women out of the house. They can’t go visiting. Women cover their faces, and if other people see their faces they will be killed. Not so with the Kalasha. The Kalasha religion is a free one. We say ‘*móá* (mother’s brother),’ ‘brother,’ ‘son-in-law,’ so we are free [in other words, Kalasha women have relationships with

men that are not suspected of being sexual in nature]. *Pátua* don't. They can't even go to their own brothers' houses. We Kalasha go *ałášıŋ* (elope) if we don't like our husbands. Those 'shit-eating' [stupid—as in stupid enough to eat shit instead of food] *šek* [Kalasha who have converted to Islam] are very jealous."

This book is an attempt to unwrap what Mushiki meant by "Our women are free" (*hóma istríža azát ásan*),²⁹ a refrain that is echoed again and again by Kalasha men and women both. At the time that I noted down this conversation, I hadn't realized that this would become the focus of my work for the next several years. In fact, I remember I almost didn't bother taking notes—the sentiments Mushiki expresses are so common that they had become a cliché to me in a very short time. When I look at them now, after having spent years trying to understand what Kalasha women do and why they do it, I am amazed that Mushiki captured, in a few short sentences, almost everything that I have to say about what I have begun to call an "ethno-theory of Kalasha women's agency."

Throughout this work, I have glossed the Kalasha word *azát* as the English word *free*. In doing so, I know that I run the risk that readers will carry into this discussion their own cultural associations of *freedom* with lightness, boundlessness, and independence rather than interdependence. I know too that *freedom* conjures up all sorts of unsavory associations with unreflective patriotism or naive feminism. And yet I want to rescue the word and use it, even though it is out of vogue. For one thing, I think *free* really works as a translation for *azát*, at least for one particular meaning of that word in English. You cannot use the word *azát* to describe something that is "empty"—as in the English "free from infection," nor can you use it to signify something that doesn't cost anything. However, if you catch a bird in a trap and then release him, he would be *azát*, free. You are also "freed" from prison. A woman whose husband marries a second wife is *azát*—she can choose to stay with him if she wants to or she can leave him and her husband then forfeits the bridewealth his family paid hers when they were first married. (In either case, the children are "his," so it's not a decision without consequences.) *azát* then carries the meaning of the English word *free* as in "released from restriction"—but always within it is the assumption that those restrictions were there, were real. If women are

“free,” it is because they *are also* bounded—by traditions and rules, in marriages, by where they should and shouldn’t go and what they should and shouldn’t wear. Being free for them means being free to step outside the boundaries of those rules—or to choose not to do so—but it doesn’t mean that there are no restrictions, no frame, no norms, no expectations, no consequences.

It isn’t only that Kalasha women are self-possessed and active. Like all humans, some are and others are less so. Like all of us, most are sometimes but not all the time. I take for granted that individual Kalasha women have “agency” in this more general sense. They negotiate the nooks and crannies of their world in many and varied ways; they do things, and what they do makes a difference. Rather, women’s freedom among Kalasha refers to a particular constellation of rights and abilities that are claimed by Kalasha women as a group—because they are women and, more specifically, because they are Kalasha women.

As Mushiki points out, Kalasha women’s freedom involves the ability to travel freely and widely, or at least the ability to think of yourself as being able to travel freely and widely if you really, really want to. It is the freedom to be “seen” in a cultural milieu where women from neighboring cultural groups take pride in being out of sight. It is about the freedom to have relationships with men that are not immediately assumed to be sexual in nature. It is the freedom to make choices about sexuality and marriage, although these decisions are always difficult. It is *not* limitless freedom but rather the freedom to choose, sometimes, to step beyond limits. It is also the freedom to *choose* to live *within* cultural norms, and thus to embrace rules not as something imposed from without but as something that you, too, have played a part in creating.

The women’s march to Chitral detailed in the prologue was characterized by Kalasha women as an enactment of this freedom. In these few dramatic hours, many of the assumptions implicit in the trope of women’s freedom were made visible, as were the limits on that freedom. First and foremost, by leaving the valleys in the midst of a war, women were exercising what they see as a fundamental right—the right to exit an intolerable situation. That this exit was made by physically walking out of the valleys is important, for freedom almost always involves embodied action. While men may make speeches, give

their word, and issue orders, women act—in fact, usually they *walk*—and this freedom of movement is important to their identity as Kalasha women.

Further, and this, too, is important, it was not only women who were involved in the march. Later I was told that the march was in fact organized by men, who thought eighty Kalasha women walking to Chitral would be an effective form of civil disobedience. (It would have been if CNN had been there.) Men and boys were essential for the ritual component of their march as well. Women's freedom is a value that is shared by men and women, not a value that women cultivate at the expense of men.

The march also emphasized the role Kalasha women play in the cultural work of representing and maintaining Kalasha ethnicity—through their dress, their behavior, and especially the way they relate to Kalasha men—as well as inherent contradictions of that work. Every woman on the march remembered to wear her heavy *kupás* head-dress, which is saved for festivals or funerals or other special religious occasions or excursions. They were keenly aware of their visual impact, and, although it was cold, they consciously pulled down their woolen shawls so that their *kupás* were visible as we passed the few tiny Muslim settlements down-valley from the Kalasha villages. The conservative Islamic milieu of northern Pakistan serves as the foil against which Kalasha ethnicity is reflected back as bold, strong (as Lilizar put it), attractive, and slightly shocking. But the Kalasha are not isolationists, and they also want to be understood and respected by their neighbors. They do want to be seen but as more than spectacle and costume. So, while the marchers took the regionally shocking action of walking, unescorted by husbands, and unveiled, down the road toward Chitral, they also modified their religious gestures so that they would be understandable to their Muslim audience. They wanted to be seen as serious and pious so their neighbors and Chitrali officials would understand that they were marching on behalf of the right to worship.

This story also points out my own role, witting and unwitting, in Kalasha women's exercise of freedom. Early in my research, I was ejected from a self-absorbed period of gnawing guilt at not "doing" anything to "help" the Kalasha by some sharp words from one of most respected and educated (and funny, smart, and sexist) men in the community. When I asked him what I could do to "help," he

proceeded to speculate about Western women. Why was it, he asked, that they went crazy with loneliness when they grew older and either kept hundreds of chickens or cats or dogs or felt compelled to go and “save” some poor people somewhere? To me, he advised, “Write a book about us. Make a movie. Write ten books—we don’t care. If you want to live here, come! Live in my house. We’ll give you food. We’ll even give you land. But please don’t save us.” I recommitted myself to the role of participant/observer, and, until the women’s march, I really thought I could simply watch and listen with attention and compassion and my presence wouldn’t matter much. (Of course, I knew better theoretically, but then I knew many theoretical things before I went to the field.) But Steve and I were quickly drawn in, and it was impossible to be disinterested, impossible not to change things by our very presence. As I write this book, I am keenly aware that my friends must have tried to represent themselves to me using images and ideas they thought I would understand and admire. While it is true that Kalasha people never seemed to tire of talking about women’s freedom, it is also true that they knew that *I* never tired of talking about it. Surely my questions about and interest in Kalasha women’s freedom must have influenced the way they represented themselves to me. And possibly, at least among my closest friends, my presence may have affected the way they think about themselves and their lives.

Western women have become a new point of comparison against which Kalasha women measure themselves. My intimate involvement in the lives of my family and friends brought this comparison into even sharper focus. One day, when Wasiara Aya was visiting me at her father’s house in Kalashagrom, she remarked, “Wynne, I have never been jealous of anyone before in my life, but when I see you and other *anglís* (English—the Kalasha gloss for all foreigners) women traveling around the world, going wherever you want to go, I feel jealous.” Wasiara Aya and her sisters-in-law embarked on a discussion about whether or not *anglís* were freer than Kalasha. Was it really true, they asked me, that *anglís* women give wealth to marry their husbands? Barzangia Aya, who had been listening in on our conversation, jumped in. She said that it wasn’t that *anglís* were freer than Kalasha but that in addition to freedom *anglís* had “power” (*pawa*). (I don’t know when this word entered the Kalasha language, but I suspect it was introduced by anthropologists.) Everyone is afraid of *anglís*, she

said, even the government of Pakistan. No one would dare to hurt *anglis*. This isn't true of Kalasha women, who do feel vulnerable outside of their familiar valleys.

In other words, Kalasha women find themselves bounded on all sides by a larger geopolitical world in which their agency is not taken seriously, where they are neither effective nor safe. Chitrali authorities assumed that Steve and I had organized this march, taking for granted that Kalasha were not active, bold, or intelligent enough to take such an action on their own. They also assumed that Steve and I were not so naive as to be ignorant of the fact that foreigners are forbidden to take part in political marches in Pakistan. They were wrong on both counts. The assistant commissioner arrived saying he was worried that Steve or I might be killed, but the women's concerns were roundly dismissed.

The final, anticlimactic dissolution of the march points to another limitation on women's freedom. Individual women usually act alone (indeed, the ability to do so is part of what defines Kalasha women's freedom). The concept of women's freedom is entirely without connotations of women's solidarity. When pressured by the authorities, the group fractured and each woman made up her own mind about whether to go on or go back.

Implicit in all these freedoms, as you can see in Mushiki's remarks, is a specific comparison with women from surrounding Islamic communities. The ability to make these choices and do these things is therefore an important—I would even claim that it is the most important—ethnic marker. I want to make it clear that I know (and Kalasha women know, too) that neighboring Muslim women have agency—that is, they work to define their lives in active ways, they resist or actively embrace the structures they live in, they have affairs, use veiling to their advantage, influence choices about their weddings, and travel about. The difference is this: Kalasha women think of themselves as people who move about, and claim the right to do so, whether they take advantage of it or not. Chitrali women think of themselves as people who stay put, while in fact they move around an awful lot. Kalasha women think of themselves as being free to make decisions about marriage, although they recognize that in fact situations are often defined for them and there is sometimes little latitude. Chitrali women think of themselves as having marriages that are arranged, while in fact girls have a lot of say in who they are given to (while

Kalasha girls do not). Kalasha women think of themselves as people who are seen, although many also value privacy. Chitrali women value the strict purdah they keep, although they, too, find ways of making themselves visible. In other words, discourse about women's agency is moral discourse in which definitions of gender come to define the claims of ethnic superiority or difference.³⁰ And in the case of the Kalasha the claim that women's freedom is what makes Kalasha different from Muslims helps to shore up women's freedom when it is challenged.

And it often *is* challenged. When my colleague, Joyce Flueckiger, first read a draft of one of my early chapters, she said that she liked it but she didn't *believe* it—as someone who grew up in and writes about and studies South Asia, it sounded too romantic. For a while, I didn't get it. I believed that I had described women's lives as “truly” as I was able. Since then, I realize that I often do the same thing Kalasha women do—assert their freedom, their ability to make choices, without explaining the background of undeniable male privilege and authority (in a region where male privilege is taken as God given) against which women's freedom is configured.

In scoring the Sherpas on a scale of gender inequality across world cultures, Sherry Ortner has recently pronounced them “pretty good,” noting that it is “notoriously difficult to assign a score of degree of gender equality or inequality in a particular society” (1996:186). Following her lead, I would also score the Kalasha as “pretty good” in comparison with other world cultures and “really quite good” on a scale of gender inequality in the conservative milieu of northern Pakistan. Kalasha women enjoy a great deal of respect from men in everyday interactions. They make major economic contributions to their families, and their contributions are acknowledged. Kalasha men are not “macho,” and women are not sexually preyed upon. But Kalasha culture is certainly not egalitarian. Kalasha culture accords all positions of formal political and religious authority to men. Men own all the land and animals. They have the right to demand deference from women. They are served first, they eat more and better, and if there is only one chair a man will usually sit in it. Men's names are remembered through the generations. I don't think any Kalasha person would claim that men and women are “equal,” and it seems to me that men clearly have the lion's share of overt power and prestige.

Yet Kalasha culture accords women the right to interrupt this

flow of male privilege. Kalasha women's freedom involves the structural freedom to resist—it doesn't mean that there is no need to resist. It is not some decontextualized freedom from male influence that an abstract and idealized notion of freedom might suggest. But it is freedom nonetheless. And this freedom matters, and changes things, for men and women both.

Freedom and Agency

In many ways, Kalasha people's concern with women's freedom complements the emerging theoretical orientation in the 1980s and 1990s toward issues of "agency." Sherry Ortner has outlined a clear (but diverse) trend across the social sciences toward theories and methods that foreground "practice"—that is, toward increased theoretical interest in action and interaction, in the people doing the acting and interacting, and on the (intended and unintended) effects of all this action on the reproduction of or changes in "the system" (1984, 1996). Although theories of practice are multistranded, they are linked in the understanding that concern with agency is a necessary counterpart (and not an alternative) to the study of systems or structure.

Within anthropology, attention to agency has followed several paths to its position as a current node of theoretical discourse. The British sociologist Anthony Giddens has developed and promoted an approach to understanding the interplay between structure and agency (1977, 1979, 1984). Giddens has stated simply that "agency refers to doing" (1984:10), and he has been especially interested in the unintended consequences of social action (Knauff 1996:108).

At the same time that Giddens's earliest works on agency emerged, Pierre Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977) was revised and translated into English. Bourdieu's theory of practice uses a Marxist critique to analyze (and criticize) the structures of inequality, both material and symbolic, that organize the subjective world of actors. Bourdieu emphasizes that this order "played itself out in real practices and real time to create real inequalities among real people" (Knauff 1996:112).

An indigenous commitment to attention to action and agency developed within anthropology in what was called transactionalism. Fredrik Barth (1966, 1981b, 1987, 1993, 1994), for example, has long been developing generative models through which the structures of

social life are revealed as emerging through the practices (and interpretations of these practices) of people “who have multiple simultaneous purposes and know that so do their fellow villagers” (1993:156). Barth stresses, “I am in no way arguing that formal organization is irrelevant to what is happening—only that formal organization is not *what* is happening” (157).

Recently, Sherry Ortner has offered up what she calls a “new and improved brand of practice theory”—a “Feminist, Minority, Postcolonial, Subaltern, etc., Theory of Practice.” She suggests that it is useful to replace the focus on structures with the looser concept of “serious games” and argues that:

If we take the methodological unit of practice as the game, rather than the “agent,” we can never lose sight of the mutual determination(s) of agents and structures: of the fact that players are “agents,” skilled and intense strategizers who constantly stretch the game even as they enact it, and the simultaneous fact that players are defined and constructed (though never wholly contained) by the game. (1996:19–20)

In other words, embedded in working theories of agency, from Bourdieu’s conception of “habitus,” to Barth’s generative models of social life, to Ortner’s “serious games,” to the Kalasha conception of “freedom,” are understandings of the limits to and constraints on that agency. Kalasha suffer no delusions that they can make the world anew, or destroy it. Yet there is general understanding that individual women have the capacity to significantly rearrange their physical, ritual, and social worlds in specific ways.

Feminist anthropologists have made specific and important contributions to broader understandings of gendered agency (Kratz 2000; Finn 1995; Moore 1994; Ortner 1996; MacLeod 1992; Ahearn 1994). As Henrietta Moore has noted, there is an “established link between gender difference and types of agency” (1994:50) and an understanding that in non-Western cultures gender and agency do not necessarily link up in the expected “male is to female as active is to passive” (Gardiner 1995:2). Sherry Ortner has further developed this linkage in the introduction to *Making Gender* (1996), in which she addresses the question of how to think about women’s relationship to a masculinist social order. She stresses that it is important to look at women as

agents without assuming *either* that women identify wholly with the hegemony (and thus their agency is effaced) *or* that women are engaged in wholly different projects (and thus are not affected by the social world they live in) (16).

I agree with Ortner that it is important to avoid stumbling into these either/or traps—indeed, throughout this work I have attempted to find the very balance she proposes. Yet I think she would agree that what she is suggesting is not new, though the language needed to talk about what we are doing may be. Ethnographic approaches that looked seriously at women’s lived experience and action in the world, as well as the constraints on and effects of women’s action, were common well before agency jargon spread throughout the discipline.³¹ Indeed, Louise Lamphere insists that one of the original impulses for *Woman, Culture, and Society* (1974), perhaps the pioneering feminist anthology, was to “delineate the ways in which women are actors even in situations of subordination” (1995:96).³²

Among Kalasha, both women and men are hyper-aware of women’s agentive power—within a society that is clearly dominated by men in many respects. The understanding that Kalasha women are “active” (following Hobart 1990, in which he defines *active* as not necessarily rushing about but “liable to act”) significantly undercuts and indeed defines men’s (and familial) authority over women. Women’s freedom also influences the “ethos” of Kalasha social life. Finally, most Kalasha women have a sense that their lives have become what they are through the series of choices and commitments they themselves have made (although there is also a complicated mix of fatalism involved that counters this claim).

I have already addressed the way in which women’s freedom extends beyond women’s personal relationships and self-concepts to become a central marker of Kalasha ethnicity for both men and women.³³ In this small world, where ethnic boundaries loom so large, gender and agency are inextricably and explicitly bound up with ethnicity. It is impossible to talk about one concept without drawing in the others. Women’s claims to freedom are strengthened through their ties with Kalasha ethnicity: since men see women’s freedom as a marker of their own ethnic identity, they often feel compelled to support it even as they sometimes also resent the concomitant insecurity and lack of control that women’s freedom brings into men’s lives.

Finally, while the concept of agency has become increasingly nuanced and analytically powerful in recent works (Ortner 1984, 1996; Karp 1995; Mannheim 1995; Gardiner 1995; Hornsby 1993; Sangari 1993, among others), much theoretical literature on agency is terribly dry and distant. Recent ethnographies have begun to breathe life back into theoretical abstractions by focusing on the way agency is experienced by individuals at specific times and places.³⁴ In particular, I think careful ethnography can detail the culturally specific ways agency is always structurally rooted. More importantly, sensitive ethnography can show us what it *means*, how it *feels*, to live in a particular place, situation, and time and with particular others. In this book, I follow the concept that “our women are free,” a compelling concern (Wikan 1990, 1992) of Kalasha people that cuts through many dimensions of their lives. In so doing, I offer a specifically Kalasha understanding of women’s agency, women’s freedom—freedom constrained by cultural assumptions of male privilege, by deeply felt commitments to others that make acting only for oneself impossible, and by their location in a larger geopolitical world that does not take Kalasha women’s agency seriously. But Kalasha women’s freedom, limited though it is, holds open a path of resistance, prevents closure, and, through this creative and constant turning over of things, contributes to the dynamism and flexibility of Kalasha culture.