

## Chapter 2

# The Invisible Landscape

When tourists first enter Kalashadesh, many exclaim that the relaxing atmosphere of the valleys washes over them, as if the welcoming smiles of Kalasha men and women soften the air itself. Yet the landscape here—however inviting—is more complex than these idyllic impressions make it seem.<sup>1</sup> One dripping wet, tearful, confused English tourist was brought to my room one day. The woman said she had seen a group of Kalasha women and their infants outside of a little house across from the Exlant Hotel, where she was staying. She took her camera and went for a visit, not knowing that this was the *bashali* (*bašáli*), or menstrual house, an impure (*prágata*) space from which you can't leave without a thorough washing. The Kalasha women were not friendly and yelled at her. They insisted that she wash with soap in the cold river. She washed with her clothes on, which made them laugh—which made her cry. They even dunked her camera in the water, which made her angry. And she was ashamed, too, because she realized that she had crossed into some place where she wasn't supposed to be. Knowing something about the nature of taboos, she hoped there wouldn't be any supernatural repercussions.

The purpose of this chapter is to describe how the invisible, gendered landscape of the Kalasha valleys works and through this description to provide a concrete example of what Kalasha mean when they say women are free. As I noted earlier, most of the anthropological work done in the community has focused on Kalasha religion and ritual practices. I found, though, that the majority of Kalasha people were singularly uninspired to talk about gods and goddesses and myths, that this specialized knowledge is known only by a few ex-

perts (who are happiest to talk to you if you want to pay them) and a few custom (*dastúr*) enthusiasts (who talk and talk even when you and everyone else wish they wouldn't). But everyone is interested in one pair of cosmological concepts, the *onjesta* (*ónjeṣṭa*) and the *pragata* (*prágata*), which are usually glossed in English as the "pure" and the "impure." The world of Kalashadesh, as the three valleys are called, is divided into things and places that are more or less *onjesta* and those that are more or less *pragata*. There is much concern about the separation of the two and endless discussions about transgressions of the boundaries between them.

It took me a long time to come to an understanding I felt comfortable with about what *onjesta* and *pragata* mean. I spent a lot of time asking about definitions, and my "informants" were not very cooperative. They seemed basically uninterested in the questions I was asking and a little perturbed by my bone-headed persistence. "Why do you keep asking that?" they would say. "You already understand." And then they would patiently recount, you go here, you don't go there, you do this, you don't do that. And I would gasp, "I know all that, but why, why, why?" They would sigh and politely brush me off, saying, "Why don't you go ask *kazí X* [a ritual expert renowned for making up elaborate stories for the benefit of anthropologists]? He'll make something up for you." Or they'd simply say, "Here, cut up this onion."

The most thorough attempt to describe the geography of *onjesta* and *pragata* focused on what I will call the "altitude hypothesis," the idea that "pure" male things and places are located in the mountains, while "impurity" and danger emanate from women and the low-lying places associated with them and their work as the primary agriculturalists (Parkes 1983, 1990b). According to Peter Parkes (1983), the Kalasha place high cultural value on pastoralism and the "ideal" cooperative, social world men achieve while living in the high pastures. Therefore, this pastoral world and the things in it are associated with the *onjesta*, the pure. Women, because they divide the solidarity of the men who compete for them, disrupt this ideal world of unfettered male bonding and so are relegated to (and contained within) the impure, along with Muslims, outsiders, and evil spirits, who are similarly disruptive and dangerous.

While Parkes makes a compelling case, there are three problems with his interpretation for the perspective I want to develop here.

First, it assumes that men are the makers of Kalasha culture and that male values alone determine the entire cosmology that compels and organizes everyone's lives. Second, from my informants' accounts, the geography of *onjesta* and *pragata* is simply far more complex and flexible than the altitude hypothesis would predict. Finally, it is impossible to see such a system being generated by the actions of real people who use it and change it as they navigate their world.

Like the English tourist in the opening anecdote, during my first months in the valleys I also tripped over invisible, seemingly arbitrary boundaries. Determined to learn the rules of this complex, "serious game" (Ortner 1996), I visited every village and summer settlement and mapped out who could go where and when. I found that I could easily predict the broadest outlines of the *onjesta/pragata* landscape using the schema Parkes describes—generally, higher places are more *onjesta* than lower places, ritual altars and stables are *onjesta*, and areas near Muslim settlements are *pragata*, as are the menstrual house and areas where women wash, braid their hair, and so on. But I also found that the "micro" landscape—the world Kalasha people move through as they work their fields, visit their neighbors, mill their grain, wash themselves, and chase after their children—is more complicated, more finely graded, and far less predictable than these general "rules" imply. Further, the *onjesta/pragata* landscape was not static but shifted perceptibly, demonstrably, and frequently. This dynamism is not generated by formal rules or beliefs but through the daily enactment of Kalasha commitment to women's freedom.

Female impurity has often been taken as the antithesis of women's freedom in the sense that it is assumed that this identity and the restrictions that go with it are imposed rather than embraced or selected. Yet for Kalasha women *pragataness* is not a construct of denigration imposed upon them, but a concept shaped by women's own active agency. As I detailed in the previous chapter, Kalasha women's agency, which they conceptualize as being free (*azát*) or having choice (*čít*), runs through many dimensions of their lives.<sup>2</sup> It includes especially freedom of movement within the valley and the right to sometimes choose not to follow certain cultural expectations. Customs relating to *onjesta* and *pragata* are no exception. Rather than being defined by the *pragata* spaces with which they are associated, women define and redefine these spaces as they negotiate their identity as Kalasha women. And, as with other dimensions of Kalasha women's

freedom, here, too, gendered agency is bound up with ethnicity. Attention to boundaries between *onjesta* and *pragata* spaces within the Kalasha community suggests long-standing insecurity about larger ethnic boundaries—particularly the difficult relationship with the larger Muslim world in which the Kalasha are embedded.

### Onjesta and Pragata spaces

Kalasha people have very few myths that are commonly shared (Parkes 1991), but everyone knows this one: when Nanga Dehar—the greatest Kalasha shaman, an amazing *mišári moč* (man mixed with the fairies) who initiated most rituals and taboos and to whose actions you can trace most of the “whys” of Kalasha custom—first directed his people to settle in Rumbur he stood on the high passes that separate the valleys from Afghanistan. Entering a trance, he shot two arrows, one red and one black. Then he directed the Kalasha to find the black arrow and there to make an altar to Sajigor. Also called *déwa dur* (the house of god), this most *onjesta* place could only be entered by men. Where they found the red arrow, they were to make a *bashali*, which would become the most *pragata* place in the valley and would be used only by women and then only when menstruating or giving birth (Sperber 1992b:12).<sup>3</sup>

Men are thus explicitly associated with the *onjesta* and women with the *pragata*. The most fully *onjesta* places include the important ritual altars at all times, the goat stables during the purest time of winter, and the altar to the goddess Jestak located in the back of every family house. Also *onjesta* is the honey from domestic bees and the meat of male goats born in a Kalasha flock. Things that are special or unpredictable are also said to be *onjesta*—a double-headed stalk of wheat or a woman who gives birth to twins.<sup>4</sup> The most *pragata* things or places include death, the *bashali* or menstrual house, and especially menstrual blood and the blood of parturition (a euphemism for both kinds of blood is simply *pragata*). Sexual intercourse itself is not *pragata* unless it happens at an inappropriate time or place. All Muslims are considered *pragata*, and Kalasha people and places are defined as *onjesta* against the Islamic world that surrounds them. The point of most Kalasha rituals and customs is to avoid the “mixing” (*mišári hik*) of *onjesta* and *pragata* things and places since it is the careful separation of the two that fosters

prosperity and fertility. Although blame for unfortunate events is usually only attributed in retrospect, the consequences of mixing are unpredictable and could include the unleashing of nasty spirits, landslides, floods, or a variety of illnesses and possessions.

In accordance with much of the Kalasha ethos, there are few absolutes and lots of gaps and cleavages that are subject to individual interpretation. Places where women never go are completely *onjesta*; the *bashali*, where men never go, is completely *pragata*. Everything and everywhere else falls somewhere in the middle. Villages, for example, are *onjesta* in comparison with the *bashali* grounds but *pragata* in comparison with the high pastures. And while the high pastures are quite *onjesta* they are not completely *onjesta* because Kalasha women go there once a year and female tourists often trek there. *Onjesta* and *pragata* spaces also shift seasonally. During the winter months, stables near villages are very *onjesta*, while during the summer months they are not. Summer lands up-valley are also *onjesta* in winter, so women do not go there then. Women quite plainly state that they are *pragata*, a comment that always implies comparison with men, who are said to be *onjesta*, although there are times when both women and men are more or less *pragata* or *onjesta*. In the menstrual house, women take care not to eat food that has been set on the floor or the beds and therefore might have touched menstrual blood. Even in the most *pragata* place in the valley then, there are still degrees of *pragataness*.

The English glosses “purity” and “impurity” are misleading because these words commonly involve judgments about sexuality, cleanliness, and relative worth in the eyes of God. In Kalasha thought, the concepts do not imply moral judgments, nor are they tied to honor, shame, or prestige. Kalasha do not rank one another, or their patrilineal clans (*kam*) in terms of relative purity. This is strikingly different from descriptions of other South Asian communities, where ideas about purity seem to organize and legitimate caste and class hierarchies.<sup>5</sup> Further, the prestige of individual Kalasha men is not dependent on the purity of the women in their families, in contrast to the way the status or honor of men in many Muslim, Hindu, and Christian communities is directly related to the purity, especially the sexual purity, of their wives and sisters (Rozario 1992).

*Onjesta* and *pragata* are explicitly gendered. But rather than simply providing cultural metacommentary on the natures of men

and women these concepts seem to me to define a common project in which both Kalasha men and women are engaged: the ordering of the world such that little pockets of space are held back from the swirling insecurity and change that pushes in on them from all sides. Although this is a generalization Kalasha people themselves are not willing to make, I believe *pragata* things, including Muslims, introduce unpredictability and change.<sup>6</sup> An *onjesta* Kalashadesh is not one in which there is no *pragata* but rather a place where the *pragata* is managed and contained.

#### *Onjesta and Pragata Spaces and Women's Agency*

Rather than being defined by the *pragata* world with which they are associated, Kalasha women themselves actively redefine the *pragata* spaces in which they live and work.<sup>7</sup> Kalasha men and women experience the landscape differently and have different sorts of responsibilities for maintaining it. Men do not "generate" *onjesta* with their mere presence but through deliberate ritual action. Men have the exclusive privilege (and it does seem like a privilege) of actively attending to *onjesta* spaces by making occasional offerings and sacrifices at *onjesta* ritual altars and goat stables and at special times such as festivals, planting, harvest, or when a major transgression demands a purification. Men and women are both affected by the occasional *pragata* associated with the death of a clan member or spouse, and the observance of *šok* (mourning customs), though inconvenient, is considered a caring sign of respect for the loved one. While men deal with *onjesta* and *pragata* only periodically, women's bodies are inextricably bound up with *pragata*. Women therefore assume the complicated, everyday responsibility for maintaining the boundaries between the *onjesta* and the *pragata*. The presence of any woman in a very *onjesta* place, such as the ritual altar at Sajigor, causes that place to become *pragata*. Each woman avoids other spaces in the valleys depending on the phase of her menstrual and reproductive cycle. Women's agency therefore involves watchful awareness of where they are, what they are doing, and what state they are in.

For men, *onjesta* and *pragata* spaces and the responsibility they take for them are relatively straightforward. Men are involved in the creation or reparation of more *onjesta* spaces through blessings and prayers made with juniper smoke or the blood of a sacrificed animal.

Men can recast the geography of *onjesta/pragata* through ritual action (e.g., by performing a ceremony whereby the *bashali* grounds are moved so that the old *bashali* house can be rebuilt), but the landscape does not change simply by means of their everyday movement in it. In fact, because men move freely through the valley, the always graded landscape of *onjesta/pragata* hardly affects their day to day movements at all. Men purify themselves by washing before performing a sacrifice and are supposed to wash after having sex before they enter the goat stables. Beyond this, there is for them only one absolute: men avoid crossing the invisible boundary onto the *bashali* grounds, although there is no fear or dread about the place, only a vague interest in its secrets and a definite interest in its occupants, who are all the more attractive for their inaccessibility.<sup>8</sup>

Women's experience of *onjesta/pragata* space is fluid, local, individual—tied directly to women's bodily movements about their everyday world. Women physically navigate and organize the shifting gray spaces between these two extremes, paying attention to where they wash their faces and bodies, where they braid their hair, where they go, how they dress, where they urinate, and how they deal with menstruation. The customs women observe vary depending on location and a woman's own reproductive status. For each lifecourse event, there is a different set of spaces to avoid and practices to follow. The *onjesta/pragata* landscape is differently contoured if you are still a premenarchal child, or a menstruating woman, have just had a baby, have had the *ḍak bónyak* (back swaddling) ceremony for your newborn at one month, or have had the *gul parík* (going with/to the flowers) blessing ceremony for your infant at three or more months (which releases women entirely from their association with the intense *pragata* of childbirth), or if you have gone through menopause (see figs. 2–5). Kalasha women now choose whether they will stay in the village when they are menstruating (fig. 6) or live in the *bashali* (fig. 7). The *onjesta/pragata* landscape is quite different for each choice.

These spaces are extremely local and always potentially changeable. Most women know well the land that they move through every day, but they don't necessarily know how space is organized in, say, the next village or across the river. Most men know very little about the intricacies of even their own property. And even women who live together disagree about the exact layout of their land, as boundaries and associated practices are constantly changing as individual

### How *Onjesta/Pragata* Space Works in Chet Guru

The *onjesta-pragata* landscape changes throughout the course of women's lives. Figures 2 through 7 are maps of part of the Chet Guru summer village, comparing spaces avoided by women during various life course events. Chet Guru lies near the river, down-valley from the main Kalasha villages and the *bashali*. The small squares represent individual families' houses (those at the top are stables), and fields are marked out with dotted lines. Women avoid crossing boundaries into areas considered *onjesta* (marked with diagonal lines) or *pragata* (crosshatched). All women, menstruating or not, are careful to avoid the ritual altar (*jač*) above the goat stables and the *onjesta wāo* at the back of each house.

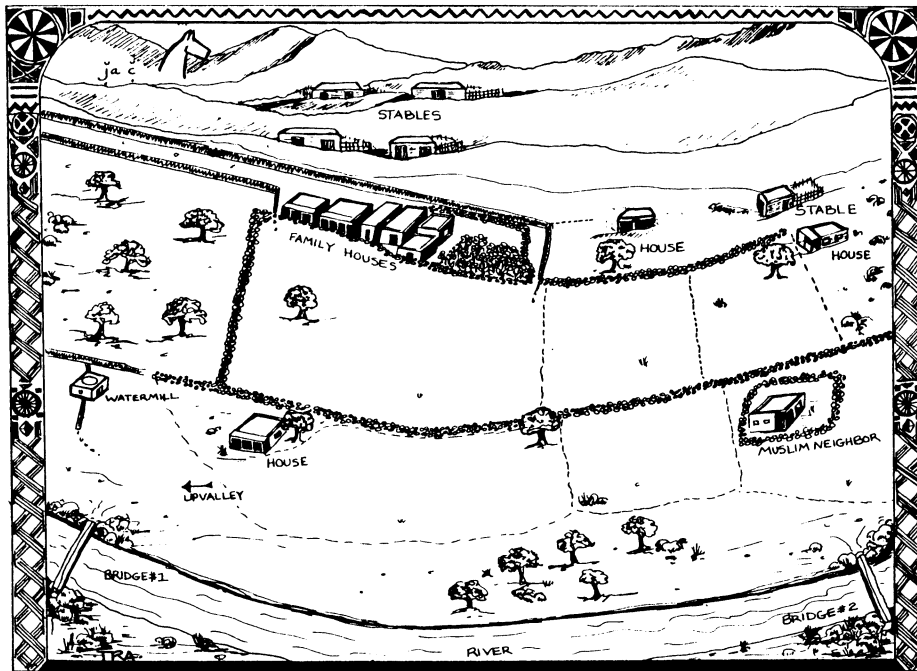


Fig. 2. Men. Men move freely about Chet Guru without having to think about which places are more or less *onjesta*.



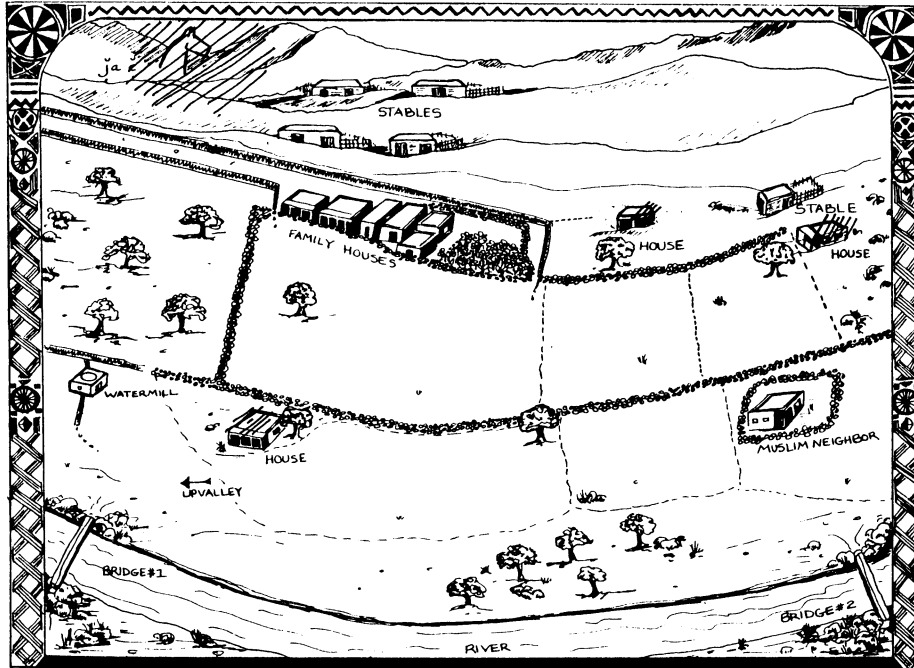


Fig. 3. Nonmenstruating women. Women who are not menstruating avoid walking above the ritual altar on the hillside (*jač*) and do not step across the *ónješta wāo* at the back of each house. All women avoid entering the goat stables above the family houses until the *istām sáras* ritual in late March, when the goddess Goshedoi (who presides over milk and the birth of baby goats) replaces Surisan (who protects the stables during the *onješta* time from Chaumos until spring).

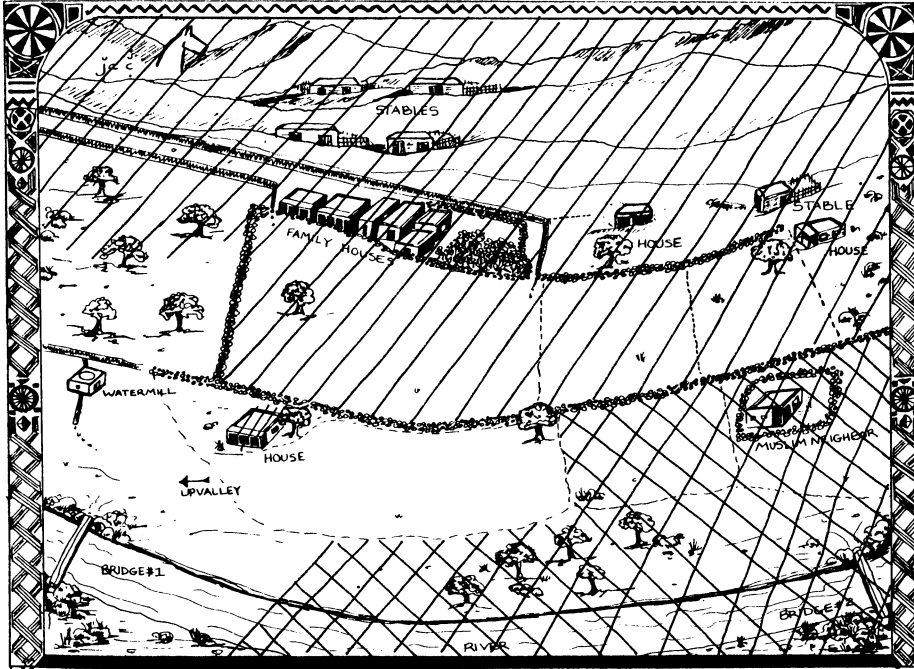


Fig. 4. Before the *dhak bonyak* ceremony. Childbirth is very *pragata*, so immediately following the birth of a child women are careful to remain in *pragata* spaces. Women stay in the *bashali* with their newborns for twelve to twenty days. Then, after both mother and child have washed thoroughly and had a blessing ceremony in the *Jestak han* (lineage altar house), they can return home. But some places (Chet Guru is one) are still considered too *onjesta* (indicated with diagonal lines). When a woman from Chet Guru has left the *bashali* after the birth of her child, she usually stays at Khoshia Aya's house (the lowest house on the map) and does not return to the other houses in the settlement until after her baby has had the *dhak bonyak* ceremony (at about one month, babies are swaddled loosely around their backs and given their first taste of bread and butter). Although they stay at her house, these women are careful not to walk on Khoshia Aya's roof. They also avoid areas considered extremely *pragata* (indicated with crosshatching).

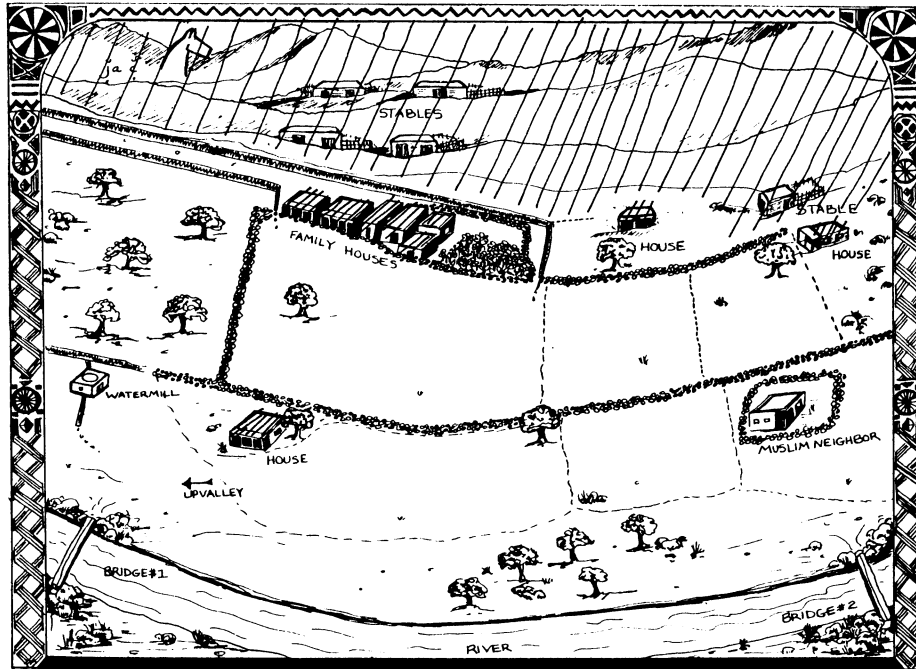


Fig. 5. After the *ḍhak bónyak* ceremony but before the *gul parík* ceremony. After the *ḍak bónyak* ceremony, women from houses in Chet Guru can return to their homes. They do not walk on the roofs of their houses, and they do not cross over the water channel that runs between the houses and the goat stables above. At about three months, baby and mother have their *gul parík* (going with the flowers) ceremony. Babies and mothers are blessed with bread and smoke. Mothers wear their special *kupás* headdresses. After the ceremony, women are freed of their association with the *pragata* of childbirth and return to the relatively unstructured *onjestalpragata* landscape of nonmenstruating women.

## How Menstruating Women Navigate the *Onjesta/Pragata* Landscape

Local spaces become more complicated when women are menstruating. Spaces considered *onjesta* and *pragata* change depending on whether one is menstruating or not and whether one chooses to go to the *bashali* during one's menstrual period or remain at home.

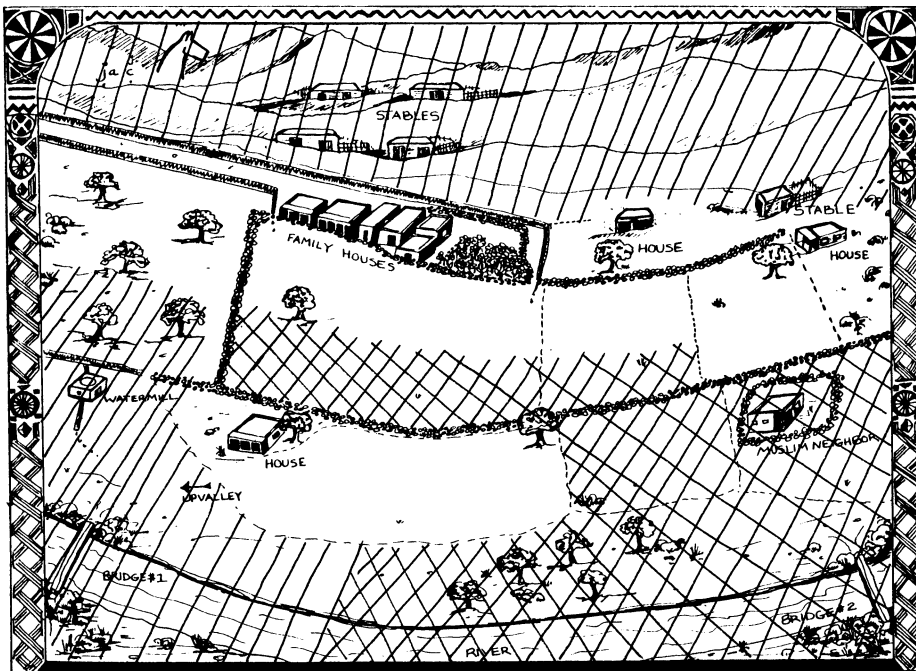


Fig. 6. Menstruating women staying at Chet Guru rather than living in the *bashali*. Women who remain at home in Chet Guru while they are menstruating are careful to avoid crossing the invisible boundaries into areas that are extremely *onjesta* (indicated with diagonal lines). They do not cross the water channel to the hillside above their houses or walk into the boulder field near the water mill (this area is vulnerable to landslides and is treated as *onjesta* as a way of protecting it), and they also take care not to walk on the roofs of their houses. They also avoid spaces thought to be extremely *pragata* (indicated with crosshatching) such as the fields beneath and down-valley from their houses and the houses of their Muslim neighbors. They move freely through unmarked areas.

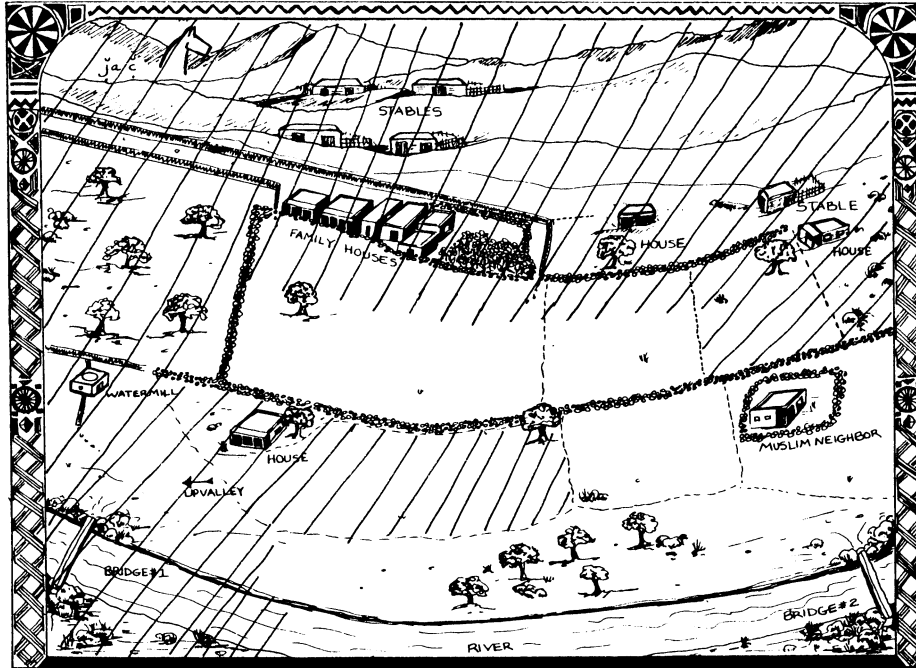


Fig. 7. Menstruating women living in the *bashali*. The *onjesta/ragata* landscape is different for women who choose to go to the *bashali* when they are menstruating (as most women do). Women staying in the *bashali* can visit or work in the unmarked fields. To get there, they walk down to the lower bridge near the mosque and near Muslim neighbor's houses (since the bridge upstream would lead into *onjesta* space and *bashali* women stay in *ragata* areas). The strip of field above Khoshia Aya's house and beneath the other houses in Chet Guru is disputed territory. Some women treat it as *onjesta*; others do not. For *bashali* women, the houses and fields marked with diagonal lines are relatively *onjesta* and they won't cross into this area until their period is finished and they have washed and left the *bashali*.

women reassess their relationships and responsibilities, especially as they review their desires to assert traditional Kalashaness (which is associated with careful attention to *onjesta/pragata* divisions) over the pull to “modernize.”<sup>9</sup>

When women decide not to follow a certain custom, they often say simply *may čit* (my choice). The freedom women claim in other areas of their lives—in particular the right to disregard a custom or disobey an authority—is also respected here (albeit often grudgingly and with a lot of gossip). This doesn’t mean that women are constantly making up the world—the broad outlines of the invisible landscape are respected by everyone, men and women alike—but it does give each woman a certain latitude in deciding for herself how far she is willing to go along with accepted norms. Rules about where one can and cannot go are not ultimately enforced by men or other women, although I can imagine extreme cases in which they probably would be. Moreover, most women say that to the extent that they do embrace customs they are “choosing” to do so.

Complicating this is the fact that the customs pertaining to *onjesta/pragata* spaces are considered the most meaningful aspect of Kalasha religion and therefore central to Kalasha identity. There is widely shared sentiment that keeping these customs well is the key to remaining Kalasha, a topic of constant concern. Kalasha men therefore find themselves in the vulnerable position of depending on women to maintain customs that are thought to keep the valleys safe and uphold Kalasha ethnicity. Men’s agency involves the right to command women to keep customs, but they do not have the authority to enforce their mandates for long, nor the ability to oversee women in the first place.

The gendering of space in the whole valley is reproduced in miniature in every Kalasha household. Every house has a simple altar dedicated to Jestak, the goddess of home and family life, on the mantel on the far back wall of the house behind the fireplace. This space is called the *ónjesta wāo*, the “pure place.”<sup>10</sup> The *ónjesta wāo* is adorned with juniper or holly oak and sprinkled with the blood of a sacrificed goat. This same blessing is performed annually and again whenever there is a family crisis. Women never sit on or cross over the space just in front of the mantel<sup>11</sup> because, they say, laughing, “You don’t want to offend the old woman!” (By “old woman,” they are referring to the goddess Jestak, although this is a play on words since it could also

refer to mothers-in-law, who tend—with a few notable exceptions—to take these things much more seriously than do members of the younger generation.) This means that, while Kalasha houses, which are single rooms with a fireplace or stove in the center, are circular in shape for men and children, they are U-shaped for women, who must walk around the fireplace to reach a cooking pot or salt just on the other side. (This is very convenient for naughty children, who tauntingly skip across the line to evade an angry mother, who then has to go all the way around to catch the little beast.)

Kalasha people's relationship to the spaces in which they live seems strikingly different from Bourdieu's description of the unreflective *habitus* of a Kabyle house. Like the Kabyle house, a Kalasha house is rich with gendered oppositions and "principles which organize practices and representations" and point toward "procedures to follow, paths to take" (Bourdieu 1990:53). But, perhaps because the Kalasha are constantly reminded of how different they are from everyone else in the world, their customs do not appear to them as "necessary, even natural." They are quite aware of the constructedness of the space they live in and continually ask questions about how other people do things, say, in India, Germany, or America. There is a constant running conversation about how things should be done, how they used to be done, and how they are changing. A person dedicated to performing Kalasha customs well, like someone who works hard and plans for the future, is called *kušuši*, a "try-er." Houses are considered to be more or less *onjesta* depending on the degree to which women respect the *onjesta wāo*, and this differs from household to household. The effect is that customs do not become absorbed into an unreflected habitus but are a meaningful set of traditions that must be *mindfully* practiced and therefore are conscious statements about an individual's identity in relation to the group.

In fact, most women I talked to are inclined to agree that ironically the most *onjesta* household in the whole valley is run by a Kalasha *šek* (Kalasha who have converted to Islam are called *šek*) called Engineera Aya—a woman who converted to Islam over fifteen years ago. "For me, it doesn't matter," she says, "I am Muslim, and I follow my new religion faithfully, praying often and wearing my *dupatta*. But my grandchildren and children are Kalasha, and they must do their religion fully as well, or what is the point?" Engineera Aya's four Kalasha daughters-in-law join with her in taking pride in the purity of

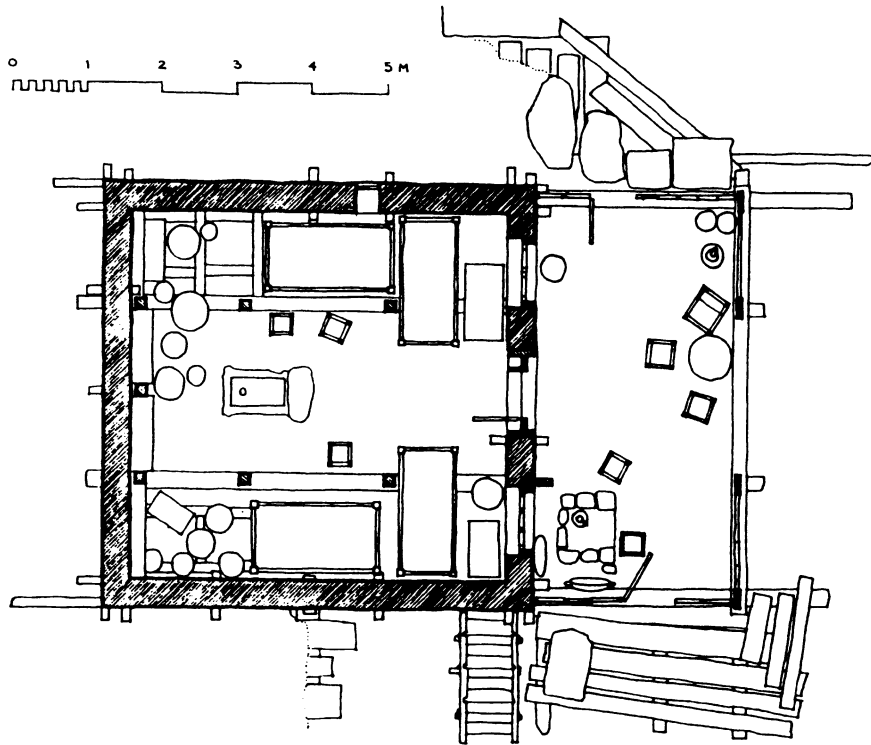


Fig. 8. Floor plan of a Kalasha house. (Drawing by John Harrison, 1995.) A typical Kalasha house. In the center of the room is a fire pit or wood-burning stove. The *onjesta wāo* is an invisible line connecting the stove to the back wall of the house, where there is always a shelf. Women can reach across this invisible line, but they never step across it. Small stools (*hānyak*) are placed around the stove, and beds line the walls of the house. A door opens from the main house onto an open porch, where most family living takes place except in the heart of winter. There is also a fire pit on the porch, where meals are cooked in spring, summer, and fall.

their household, although they complain about it sometimes as well. The household in which the *onjesta wāo* is least attended to probably belongs to a Japanese woman who is married to a Kalasha man. "These old traditions," she told me many times, "are oppressive and difficult for women." She had her husband build their house with the fireplace against the far wall so that there would be no *onjesta wāo*. Both extremes are tolerated, "What can we do? It's her own choice," is a phrase heard over and over again.

Women are quite explicit in their assertion that *onjesta* places are



not forbidden to them. “We just *don’t* go there,” Kalasha women insist, always using active verbs.<sup>12</sup> The very fact that women choose to what extent to follow Kalasha *dastúr*, or “custom,” means that these practices become meaningful expressions of their identity as Kalasha women, providing a moral framework and a source of pride.

#### *How Pragata Spaces Feel and Change*

Understanding the affective associations women have for the place they live in, and their responsibility for it, goes a long way toward explaining why space changes when it does. *Onjesta* and *pragata* are not abstract “structuring principles” but deeply felt.

Many of the customs are quite onerous for women. Women go far away from villages and summer houses to wash their bodies or clothes or braid their hair because these are *pragata* activities and the villages are relatively *onjesta* places. In the winter, outside by the river, your hands freeze during the hour or so it takes to plait the five long braids every Kalasha woman wears. In summertime, many women have to walk miles from their summer houses and fields just to wash their faces, sticky from working in the hot sun. Once one of my older friends refused to clean out a festering wound on her foot because she was unable to walk to an appropriate location for washing. Women in the throes of childbirth walk over steep trails to get to a distant menstrual house, even in the dead of night. Women recognize that these customs are difficult and commented all the time to me about what a hard culture they have, how easy things are for me and *pátua* (their word for surrounding Muslim populations). Yet, one of my most touching memories is of watching my “aunt” wash after helping one of her daughters-in-law deliver a baby in the menstrual house. There had been a storm in the night, and a fierce wind was whipping up spirals of fallen snow. Under the circumstances, a quick splash would have sufficed. But Saras Gula Aya sat barefoot on the icy edge of a water channel, slowly and prayerfully washing every part of herself. It is hard to resist the conclusion that the very difficulty of Kalasha traditions is one thing that makes them intensely meaningful.

And yet I don’t want to paint too perfect a picture. Once, when I was lamenting the demise of especially exotic *bashali* customs, my friend Gulabia Aya stopped my romanticizing. “Look, Wynne, if you

like all that so much, after you have a baby, you sit naked on a rock waiting for a bird to chirp before you go outside to pee, and I'll go back to America with your husband and ride around in your car." Even though everyone would readily agree that keeping *onjesta* and *pragata* clearly separated is good (*pruṣṭ*) and indeed necessary (*zarúri*), not everyone is valiantly community-minded all the time. The fact is that these customs *are* difficult and often seem old-fashioned and impractical. When women decide not to follow them anymore, they'll often assert inconvenience as the first reason or simply say they felt too lazy (*may khalí del*). Their decisions have communitywide implications.

Because *onjesta* and *pragata* spaces are defined by what women do and where they go every day, as individual women change the way they act the way that spaces are used and marked by others changes also. This creates tension between men and women because men also have a stake in the purity of the valley but have little control over the details of women's behavior, especially regarding menstruation and childbirth. Men struggle with their desire to have more control over women, and older men especially complain bitterly, blaming every storm on women's carelessness. At the same time, most men say that they are proud of the cultural value of the freedom with which Kalasha women move in comparison with their Muslim neighbors. There is constant pushing, pulling, and reexamining, and the landscape changes accordingly.

Often, women simply change their minds about where they can and can't go, and as soon as one person breaks with convention others are quick to follow. Yasinga Aya, for example, an impish, animated woman of about fifty, decided in the winter of 1994 that it was too much trouble to move from her summer house up-valley to her winter house in the village—even though the upper part of the valley is made *onjesta* late in the fall and so should be avoided by women. Everyone was angry with her, but she held her ground. "What can we do, it's her choice" (*khē kárik, ása čit*), they all said. The next winter, four other households (among them people who had been fiercely critical of Yasing's mother) were planning to stay up-valley over the winter also, so a once-*onjesta* place would become *pragata*.

Even individual women don't cling to a particular position in the relationship with *onjesta/pragata* customs. Mayram is one of my favorite people. Her wide, easy smile makes everyone feel at ease, and her beauty is striking; she thinks so, too, and goes to great lengths to

braid her hair and wash often. After her grandfather died, she ignored the instructions of older family members to wait until the next day to braid her hair. "That's crazy (*got*)," she said defiantly, "there's no reason why women should have to be dirty." She took off for the river, with four or five other women trailing behind her, shrugging their shoulders and saying, "Well, if Mayram's doing it . . ." Mayram often stayed home instead of going to the *bashali*, saying that it was too difficult, too far away. But that very winter Mayram's infant daughter died, and Mayram herself was sick continually. A few months later, I saw her in the *bashali*. She said that before she hadn't believed in these "old-fashioned" (*şumber-âu*) things, but after she had endured so much loss and illness, she began to listen to her uncle—a person she used to think was too zealous to be taken seriously. He convinced her that she was becoming weak because she wasn't following Kalasha traditions. And it was true, she insisted. As soon as she started going to the *bashali*, she felt much better. Now she was committed to it, she said.

When women do adhere strongly to their traditions, they are usually motivated either by intensely felt embarrassment for things out of place or the undeniable pride they take in protecting the landscape and people. The separation of *onjesta* from *pragata* spaces also generates a separation between men's and women's knowledge. Men are to know nothing whatsoever about women's reproductive cycles or the process of giving birth. It is not that these things are "shameful" or "dirty." As long as they are kept in proper *pragata* places, they are topics of lively conversations and joking and speculation among women. But for a man to hear about, or, heaven forbid, see, menstrual blood or childbirth is cause for excruciating embarrassment for things out of place, not done correctly—for the puncture in the separation between men's and women's worlds.

I was with my friend Taraki Bibia Aya when she went into labor with her sixth child. I was very excited. Not only was it the first Kalasha birth I would get to see, but it was the first birth I had ever seen. Thinking it would surely be a girl (and thus slower to be born), Taraki Bibia Aya waited until after her mother-in-law got the children organized in the morning before telling anyone it was time to go to the *bashali*. By then, it was too late. To her mortification, she had the baby on the path near the village, still in an *onjesta* place and, worse, a place where men might see. I didn't, in fact, get to see much of the

birth at all, as I was sharply posted as a lookout to warn away stray men who might chance to wander by. As she walked through the village and everyone knew that she had had a baby out of place, her embarrassment was intense, seemingly more dramatic than the pain of childbirth. When we got to the *bashali*, the first question that all women asked, even before inquiring about the health of mother and baby, was whether or not any men might have seen.

But it is not only embarrassment that compels women to embrace difficult traditions involving space. Most women also take great pride in the important role they play in protecting the purity of their landscape. *Onjesta* places are vulnerable places, needing special care by men, who make offerings and prayers there, but also by women, who must go out of their way to do everything less casually than they otherwise might. Besides ritual altars, other locations are often discovered to be *onjesta* because they are particularly vulnerable to natural disasters and therefore in need of special protection. About five years ago, Khoshia Aya (Khoshi's mother) chose a large, convenient tree in the *daro* (a boulder-covered hillside that was the site of a long-ago flood) to urinate under when she was menstruating. Other women in the neighborhood followed her lead. But in the next storm a huge boulder rolled down the mountain, past this place and landed precariously on her rooftop. The whole family realized that the place must be *onjesta* and therefore in need of special attention. So Khoshia Dada (Khoshi's father) sacrificed a small goat and purified the area with juniper smoke. Not only did the women have to find another "pee plot," but the places where they could walk when menstruating or after childbirth changed dramatically.

Farms on steep hillsides with fragile soil, land near the river liable to be destroyed by floods, or settlements located in delicate alluvial plains vulnerable to the frequent landslides are all made pure and livable by the occasional blessings of men and the continual consideration of women. Women who live in these *onjesta* places take pride in the role they play in protecting their landscape, even vying with one another over whose land is the most *onjesta* and therefore whose lives are the most difficult. Sher Wali Khan's mother told me, "Our Dundulat (a summer settlement located in a flood plain and adjacent to a haunted forest known for scary monsters) is very *onjesta*. It is no place to be careless. My daughters-in-law and I must do everything right. If we weren't so conscientious, our summer houses, our fields,



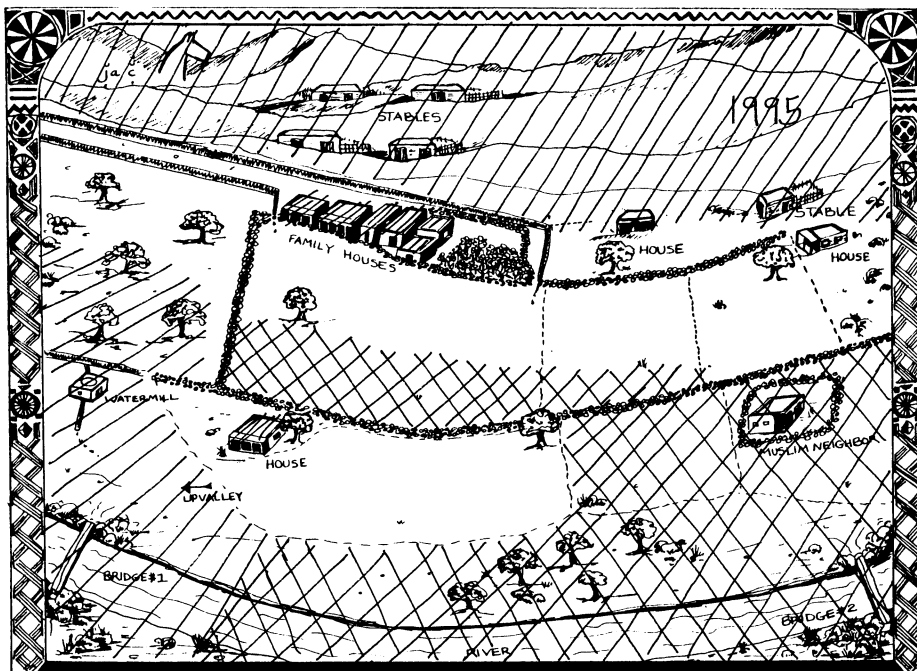


Fig. 10. Menstruating women staying at home in 1995

everything would be destroyed.” “You think that is something,” replied Mayer’s mother, “you should see all we must do at our *onjesta* Damika [their summer home].”

So the reconfiguration of the landscape is not at present a one-way process of women giving up traditions and becoming less and less concerned with their role in maintaining the separation between *onjesta* and *pragata*. It is rather a constant ebb and flow between relaxing and reinforcing these standards.

### Internal Boundaries

About twelve years ago, the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) built a new (unsolicited) *bashali* for the women of Rumbur, with a fancy metal roof and a toilet. Although there was nothing about the structure of the new building that necessitated changes in women’s ritual culture, some women took this opportunity to rethink *bashali* practices. The most significant change was that women stopped thinking that they were obligated to go to the *bashali* every time they menstruated and instead began to “stay the night” (*bas hik*) in their own homes at times when leaving their children and work seemed inconvenient.

According to Sher Wazira Aya, one of several women who claimed to be the first to “throw off customs” (*dastúr hístik*),<sup>13</sup> the new *bashali* marked Kalasha women’s entrance into a new, more modern (*onjáaw*) world. The changes were not uncontested. There was friction between men and women, according to Wasiara Aya, and also between more traditional women and the women who wanted to throw off customs, a struggle that continues today. “Some women must have started staying in the villages, and then other women followed,” Wasiara Aya explained. “Men complained that women were causing floods and giving them toothaches and headaches. Men didn’t say, ‘now you don’t have to go if you don’t want to,’ they said (and still say) ‘*dastúr káři!* (Do the customs!). But *istríža hóma dastúr púra ne káři* (we women don’t do our customs fully). Sometimes our customs are very hard on women—if she is sick, or if her child is sick, or if there is a lot of work to do and there are no other women in her house who can help her, or if she has her period for a long time, or very often, it is much easier if she can stay in her house! *khě káři* (what can we do)?”

In fact, almost all the women I surveyed say they like staying in the menstrual house, the most *pragata* part of the Kalasha landscape (see chapter 5). Most women still choose to stay in the *bashali* during most of their periods, although they no longer have to do so. It is convenient and relaxing, because menstrual blood spilled out of place is intensely embarrassing, so staying at home requires constant vigilance and great care with menstrual rags. But it is more than just a place to deal with the *pragata*. The *bashali* is also the focus of intense female community, a chance to get away from home responsibilities for a few days, to visit friends and relatives, rest, drink tea, tell your side of the story. Still, staying home is an option many women value.

Older women say that when they were young they left immediately for the menstrual house, even in the middle of the night, at the first sign that their periods had started. The option of “staying the night” at home represents a radical departure from previous customs. Though dramatic, this change did not signify women’s rejection of their responsibility for the *pragata*, only a rearticulation of it. New compensatory rules, far more complicated, popped up—not walking on the roof, for example, or eating meat from birds or animals from the high pastures and urinating in special places. These and other new customs illustrate an increasingly nuanced understanding and observance of *onjesta* and *pragata* space.

Had I been doing research before this change, perhaps I would have thought that women themselves were considered “impure” and thus, as “conveyors of impurity,” had to stay in impure spaces, especially during menstruation, an “impure time.” The new rules women established for themselves that allow them to stay in the village indicate quite clearly that what they are concerned with is keeping the world in balance by avoiding the transgression of *boundaries* between differently valenced spaces. The emphasis is on the invisible lines that divide *onjesta* from *pragata* spaces, rather than on the spaces themselves. As long as a menstruating woman is in the village and stays entirely within the boundaries of *onjesta* spaces, she is *onjesta*—though not as *onjesta* as nonmenstruating women (who remember, are still *pragata* in comparison with men). A menstruating woman, therefore, occupies a sort of middle ground and takes care to stay within the boundaries of places that are neither very *onjesta* nor very *pragata*.

She continues to touch other people, cook for them, and take care



of her children and fieldwork. In fact, by following a series of complex paths it is possible to go most places in the valley. She avoids more *onjesta* spaces—such as the areas near goat stables or altars or, like Khoshia Aya’s “pee plot” in the earlier example, places that have been proven especially vulnerable. She is even more vigilant in avoiding the boundaries that mark off *pragata* spaces. In this case, *pragata* space is explicitly defined as those places where women who *are* staying in the *bashali* are allowed to go. If a menstruating woman crosses one of these boundaries, she immediately becomes *pragata* and must go straight to the *bashali* instead of home. Muslim neighbors and their houses are also off limits to menstruating women who are “staying the night” at home. *Bashali* women, on the other hand, freely visit Muslim neighbors and relatives who live in accessible parts of the valley.

When a menstruating woman staying the night at home has finished her period, she crosses the boundary to the *pragata* and heads to the river, or to the menstrual house, to wash—just as women do who are staying in the *bashali*. As soon as she crosses the line, she is *pragata* and no longer touches children or other people who are still *onjesta*. She’ll wash her body thoroughly, braid her hair, and wash all her clothes. She’ll either wait for her clothes to dry or put on clean clothes that someone else has brought down to her (she can’t touch them until she has washed or they’ll become *pragata*). She is still *pragata* (and can hang out with women in the *bashali*, talking and eating) until she either crosses the boundary into more *onjesta* territory or touches someone who is not in the *bashali*. Then she returns to a landscape in which she has to be far less careful. The only places that she will avoid are the *bashali* grounds themselves, ritual altars, and goat stables.

Because the lines dividing *onjesta* and *pragata* space are so complicated, and so local, and because they change depending on whether women choose to respect them or not, these boundaries are the subject of almost daily discussion. Saras Gula Aya ranted on and on about the irresponsibility of our neighbor, who allowed her new daughter-in-law (who didn’t yet know the intricate spatial patterns of our summer lands) to pass from *onjesta* to *pragata* to *onjesta* to *pragata* space on her way to the *bashali*. Surely the unseasonable rain was evidence of her reckless behavior.

Yet much of the concern over boundaries is more lighthearted than this. A favorite joke played by almost everyone is what I came to

think of as the “pushing the boundaries” game. The *bashali* in Rumbur is located right in the center of the valley, on the only road, directly across from the Exlant Hotel. Boys, men, and nonmenstruating women are continually passing by and looking in to see who is there. *Bashali* women dare them to cross over, and other people make lots of playful, hesitant starts in that direction. *Bashali* women are constantly calling out to people on the road, “Come on down and drink tea with us, we’ve saved some for you” or “Here, have some cheese?” Often *bashali* women tease passersby by threatening to touch them (which would mean that they would become *pragata*, like the unfortunate English woman who wandered in at the beginning of this chapter, and they would have to take a bath before going up-valley again). Men often tease toddlers who are staying at the *bashali* with their mothers by calling to them and then stepping quickly away before the child can reach them.

There is, then, a running conversation about boundaries in the Kalasha valleys, sometimes serious, sometimes in fun. The constant joking about crossing boundaries marks them off as volitional—which means that the power of these imaginary, shifting lines is not only as a “rule” that has to be respected but as an option with real consequences. What makes boundaries here so powerful is not that crossing them is utterly unthinkable but that it is so completely possible.

### Cultural Survival and External Boundaries

I think the attention to internal boundaries between *onjesta* and *pragata* space is in large part motivated by deeply felt concern over societal boundaries between the Kalasha and their Muslim neighbors. As I described more fully in chapter 1, the Kalasha are perhaps the most ethnically marginal people in northern Pakistan. The Islamic world has threatened to pour into the Kalasha valleys for the last five hundred years, so each conversion is magnified by a long history of fear of cultural annihilation. Today, as a tiny ethnic and religious minority in a sea of Islamic peoples who, despite their own deep divisions and differences, celebrate a common faith in Islam, the Kalasha are everybody’s Other. The problem of how to secure their community from further encroachment is part of everyday discussions.

There are two reasons why ethnic boundaries are such a problem

for the Kalasha. First, the edges of their culture are so near, so always visible. The Kalasha don't blend subtly into surrounding populations. You either are Kalasha, or you have said the *kalima* and you are Muslim, and there is nothing in the middle.<sup>14</sup> Second, ethnic boundaries are brittle, or rather they are permeable in only one direction. Conversion is a one-way street. You can leave the group and convert to Islam, but you can never return (because you would be killed by Muslim neighbors), and no Islamic person could ever convert to Kalasha (although I recently read a newspaper article claiming that a Spanish photographer has "become Kalasha"). Every conversion is thought to make Kalashadesh a little less *onjesta*.

Muslims occupy a telling structural position in Kalasha cosmology, being unambiguously *pragata*. Muslims are said to be *pragata* specifically because Muslim women don't take proper care during menstruation and also have their babies in their houses instead of going to the menstrual house.<sup>15</sup> As far back as anyone can remember, Muslim houses could be used as a substitute *bashali* if a woman were sick or if deep winter snow made walking impractical. *Onjesta* and *pragata* spaces are therefore defined around Muslim settlements within the valley, with the central bazaar and far lower part of the valley, where more Muslims live, being more *pragata* as well as the uppermost part of the valley where the Nuristani village is located. In preparation for the coming of Balumain during the winter solstice festival, Chaumos, men purify the whole valley with juniper and hold purification ceremonies for themselves (*istóngas*) and women (*šiš áu suček*). Kalasha *šek* (Kalasha who have converted to Islam and their descendants) are asked to leave the villages. If you touch a Muslim or a Muslim dwelling or a mosque during this time, or leave the valley, you become *amátok*, forbidden to participate in the festival.<sup>16</sup>

Given the position Muslims are assigned in Kalasha cosmology, I had long suspected that ethnic tension between Muslim and Kalasha lent emotional force to the understanding of the world as divided between the *onjesta* and the *pragata*. Like other things that are *pragata* (menstrual blood, birth, death), Muslims introduce insecurity and disorder into the Kalasha world; but because Muslims are not motivated to control the *pragata* or strive for an *onjesta* landscape it is a *pragata* that is doubly dangerous. Kalasha women then take on symbolic responsibility for all impurity, managing their own bodies because they care about Kalasha culture, and so the unpredictability of

the *pragata* is reined in, brought in line. Maintaining an *onjesta* Kalashadesh becomes a way of maintaining Kalashaness itself. However much women may resist the considerable burden of “doing Kalasha custom,” it becomes meaningful and worth doing when ethnic boundaries are threatened.

When I returned to Rumbur in the summer of 1995, my friend Wasiara Aya told me that she was really angry. There had been a small rush of four or five conversions from Kalasha to Islam over the winter. Moreover, the goats in the valley had been producing very little milk. Everyone was concerned, and the men who were *kazí* (Kalasha historians and ritual experts), who are rarely motivated to collective action, had been stirred to hold meetings and issue a bevy of proclamations in order to save their culture from extinction. The *kazís* declared that the reason why things were going so horribly wrong was that people, especially women, were no longer keeping the old traditions: the valleys were becoming *pragata*. They decreed that this should stop. Women would go to the menstrual house every time they had their periods; women would stay twenty full days in the menstrual house after having a baby (they had been staying only twelve or thirteen days); women would not go up-valley or to the other Kalasha valleys without wearing their special *kupás* headdresses; and people would stop keeping chickens (which are associated with Muslims and traditionally avoided by Kalasha, though recently many women had begun keeping chickens to sell, so this was another decree that was directed only at them). Wasiara Aya was annoyed that she would have to start going to the menstrual house again, because she is a *kawalíak istriža*, the only woman in her house, and so has no one to take up the slack for her when she is away. And she was angry that she had to give up her chickens, an important source of income for her. “So you don’t think it’s all a good idea?” I asked her. Wasiara Aya, who always thinks both ways about everything, replied, “Of course it is. If we don’t keep our Kalasha customs, we’ll be lost. It’s necessary.” It wasn’t so much the sacrifices she minded, she said, but rather the fact that all the responsibility fell on women’s heads. “Oh well,” she told me later, “things won’t stay this way for long.”

Doreen Massey has cleanly described space as “social relations ‘stretched out’” (1994:2), a phrase that reminds me of the constantly shifting goat paths in the Kalasha valleys, which lace their way up the

steep scree slopes to the holly oak forests above. Kalasha people's paths, too, are cut in scree, not in granite, and people know that they have shifted and will shift again. In large part, the invisible landscape here is volatile because of the shifting relations of power between men and women and the different gendered agencies exercised by each group. Men act on the landscape by issuing proclamations and performing rituals. Women act on the landscape by means of their physical movement through it, by the care (or lack of care) they give it. But, as this example—and indeed every other example in this chapter—illustrates, both men's and women's agencies, are, as Ivan Karp has written, "composed of elements that are contradictory, paradoxical and often conflicting" (1995). Men may make the world *onjesta* with their words and prayers, but they depend on women to maintain this *onjestaness*, and men know they have little control over women's behavior—indeed, their cultural commitment to women's freedom explicitly involves a lack of absolute control of women's behavior. Women, even as they claim the right to make individual choices, know that they never act solely for themselves because each woman's freedom (in this case her right to make choices about her commitment to "doing custom") has a tangible and lasting effect on the physical as well as the social and religious worlds of Kalashadesh.

In the next chapter, I will argue that this freedom is supported by women's valuable contributions to subsistence and the necessary freedom of movement required to get their work done.