Chapter 4

Fashion

Most Pakistanis as well as foreign tourists in Pakistan easily recognize Kalasha women’s dress, although they are likely to know little else about Kalasha culture. The Pakistan Tourism Development Corporation plasters airports, travel agencies, and hotels with pictures of dancing Kalasha women. Everywhere in the country you can buy poor quality postcards showing Kalasha women and even poorer quality imitations of their headdresses. A popular Pakistani pop band recently made a rock video featuring women dressed in Kalasha outfits. The Kalasha themselves recognize that their dresses are strikingly beautiful and original—possibly the most beautiful way of dressing in the world, women often add. I was often told that I should wear my dress in America and charge for pictures. “Don’t just wear it,” Iran once added, “Make a film and charge money if people want to see it. Then later you can make another film and charge them again.” “Don’t be silly,” her mother responded, “everyone would fall in love with her. Think how much trouble that would be.”

The last decade has seen a resurgence of interest in the anthropology of cloth and clothing (cf. March 1983; Schneider 1980; Weiner and Schneider 1989; Schevill et al. 1991; Heath 1992; Tarlo 1996). Within South Asia, the importance of clothes is by no means unique to the Kalasha. Indeed, clothes play such an essential role in South Asian identity politics that Gandhi placed the issue of what to wear at the center of the struggle for Indian independence (cf. Bayly 1986; Bean 1989; Tarlo 1996). Yet outside of museum literature there has been surprisingly little regional academic attention given to the problem of what people wear and why they wear it. In her wonderful book Clothing Matters (1996), Emma Tarlo redresses this gap in the litera-
ture. She suggests that the birth of fieldwork coincided with the marginalization of dress in Indian anthropology “because at the precise moment when anthropologists developed close personal contact with the people they studied, they ceased to pay attention to their clothes” (4). Further, she argues that it is partly because clothes are so obviously important as markers of social and personal identity in India that they have been so little discussed. Since the 1970s, as more women anthropologists have gone to the field, clothes have begun to reappear in ethnographic accounts of South Asian life.

Throughout this chapter, I have chosen not to use the word costume because it carries implications of exotic otherness, of “dressing up” (for Halloween or a play, for example) and of fixed, unchanging, tradition-bound forms (Joyce Flueckiger, personal communication). None of these connotations is appropriate for Kalasha women’s clothing, which is a dynamic and personal expression of both individual and collective identity. Instead, I think that the word fashion (with its connotations of fashioning or making, its associations with self-expression) better captures Kalasha women’s sense of personal investment in the clothes they create and wear.

Susan Bordo has offered a powerful critique of what she has called the “general tyranny of fashion” in the lives of Western women—“perpetual, elusive, and instructing the female body in a pedagogy of personal inadequacy and lack” (1993:254). Kalasha women do not seem to suffer from the sort of body image tyranny that Bordo describes. They are not marketed to, so inspired changes in women’s clothing really do represent a form of “self-fashioning.” Also, one wonderful thing about Kalasha women is that their standards are not impossibly high, so they are relieved of the perpetual inadequacy many Western women feel. Kalasha fashion therefore offers more room for play, for “fashion” in the sense of process, of crafting.

However much fun, the game of Kalasha fashion is also serious. Women’s elaborate clothing and jewelry are central markers of Kalasha ethnicity, both within and beyond the community. While many other aspects of their traditional culture—rules about marriage (see chapter 6), merit feasting (Darling 1979), religious rituals (chapter 2), and so on—seem to be relaxing, women’s dresses are becoming ever more elaborate and central to the Kalasha identity as a unique people. While her clothes may all look the same to outsiders, in fact each woman’s dress is both an important expression of her individual identity and a
manifestation of important cultural values. Her choice of colors, combinations, and patterns, the amount of decoration, and careful attention to detail allow for her creative expression of self. Yet the result is a constellation of features that is also an evocative symbol of the identity of the Kalasha collective. Through their continual attention to and elaboration of their dress, Kalasha women are not simply “wearing” ethnicity but are actively involved in making culture.

Heaven Is in Our Braids: Women’s Clothing and Kalasha Identity

The process of identifying “Kalashaness” with Kalasha women’s clothing begins at birth. Kalasha babies spend the first three months of their lives firmly swaddled because, their mothers say, babies scare themselves with otherwise spontaneous flailing of unorganized arms and legs. Infants are held and talked to continuously and nursed whenever they pucker their tiny mouths into little Os, a sign that they are looking for the breast. Babies’ faces are often decorated with a black paste made of burnt goat’s horn, which protects them from cold in the winter and sun in the summer and is thought beautiful. Cradled in the ample black folds of their mother’s dress, they must see her face, and the faces of the women and children nearest her, their beads and headdress making familiar bold patterns in the flickering firelight against the blackness of the soot-covered ceiling above. As they get a little older, they are released from their swaddling and begin, with both hands and feet, to grasp Mom’s beads while they nurse. A crying baby is distracted by the subtle clicking of the glass beads and jangling jingle bells of a woman’s headdress. A fussy toddler will be given a hank of beads to play with. Kalasha babies were usually happy to let me hold them when I was dressed as a Kalasha woman, yet would cry when confronted with the strangeness of my Western T-shirt or the shalwar kamiz (the long shirt and baggy trousers that are the national dress of Pakistan) I sometimes wore. From the earliest memories of every Kalasha person, beads, headdresses, and black dresses are associated with mother, with women in general, and also perhaps with self and safety and comfort.

During the gošṭnik ceremony that takes place during the winter solstice festival, boys and girls aged two to three years are dressed for
the first time in traditional Kalasha clothing by their mothers’ brothers. It is an important moment in which children are recognized for the first time as members of the Kalasha community.² The clothing is provided by the mother’s brothers’ (mōa’s) family, and the children are supposed to be dressed by a man in that category (although in many cases the toddlers refuse and are dressed by a female relative instead). Most Kalasha children enjoy lifelong relations of reciprocity and warmth with their mother’s natal family and think of this as a special place where they are loved and supported, given lots of gifts, and disciplined very little. Girls receive beads from aunts, grandmothers, and friends of their parents and wear their headdresses for the first time. Girls are thereafter dressed every day as little replicas of grown Kalasha women. Boys and men, however, are indistinguishable from non-Kalasha men of surrounding communities. Within the last forty years, men have discarded their own distinctive dress (except for special occasions and burials) and now wear shalwar kamiz and Chitrali caps, the regional mens’ dress of northern Pakistan. Men therefore move easily from the valleys into the surrounding world, while women carry all the distinguishing physical markers of Kalasha ethnicity.³

When I first came to the valleys, I tried as best I could to explain to the family I lived with what it was that I was doing. “So much has been written about Kalasha men,” I started, “but I want to write about what Kalasha women do, what they think about.” “Ha,” laughed Lilizar’s father, “I can save you a lot of trouble. Beads. Kalasha women think about beads.” Men love to insist that beads are worthless and women’s desire for them is purely frivolous. Everyone, including Lilizar’s father, laughed as Lilizar’s mother retorted, “Don’t listen to him, sister. Kalasha men like beads, too. Any old average woman, who can do nothing special but manages to string a few beads together, looks really beautiful to men.”

In fact, every Kalasha woman does far more than string a few beads together. Twenty years ago, women wore heavy woolen dresses that they made from the wool of black sheep, carded and spun over the long winters. Older women marvel that while more and more basic materials are bought with cash rather than made by hand the work of making women’s clothing seems to take as much time as ever—it just gets more complicated and elaborate. Currently, women’s dresses are made with eight to ten yards of black cotton cloth, heavily
embroidered with interlocking designs (done with a hand-turned sewing machine) around the neck, sleeves, and bottom with skeins of yarn—neon orange, yellow, pink and blue are the latest rage. The dresses cover women modestly from wrist to ankle, and are drawn up with a thick woolen or yarn belt that wraps three or four times around the woman’s waist. The belt is handwoven and brightly decorated, with long fringes that accentuate the neat pleats of the dress. The excess material from the dress is bunched over the top of the belt, forming a large pouch (wéi) in which all manner of good and useful things can be carried and hidden.

Around their necks women wear as many as fifty hanks of colorful glass beads, each hank consisting of four to eight strands. A woman’s bead collection may weigh as much as fifteen pounds, and she wears it every day. For special occasions, even longer and more elaborate sets of beads may be added. Red is the classic color, but yellow, orange, and white are currently popular also.

Each woman has two headdresses. The small one, called a susūṭr, is a woven circle of black sheep’s wool, which balances on the back of the head, and has a long strip of material that runs down the length of the back. It is heavily beaded with rows of glass beads, buttons, and bells. Circling the crown are two rows of fine cowrie shells divided by small chains and accentuated by beads. The susūṭr is worn all the time, except when a woman is sleeping at night. Women feel naked without their susūṭr and even reach for it when they sit up at night to nurse their babies or stoke the fire. Each susūṭr has a distinctive jingle, and after a short time I could guess who was walking by my window by the sound of the jangling gait.

The larger headdress, called a kupās, balances on top of the susūṭr. It is made of a wider strip of wool, again, the blackest possible, and decorated with five hundred or more cowrie shells, as well as beads, buttons, bells, and medallions. It is topped off with a large pom-pom, which is usually red or, more recently, neon orange. The kupās is worn for special occasions such as festivals and trips to the other valleys. It is also worn when visiting an especially “pure” place, when one is in mourning, or simply to keep the sun off when working in the fields on a hot day.

Every Kalasha woman wears five carefully plaited braids—two in the back, two on each side, and one on her forehead that she tucks into her susūṭr or behind her right ear. Girls start growing a forehead
braid when they are about two years old, add braids in the back at around seven, and begin letting all of their hair grow as they near adolescence (leaving them with a couple of years of unruly hair that sticks up every which way, despite the constant attention inspired by these teenagers’ budding self-consciousness). Beautiful, thick, long braids are much admired, but neatness is the most essential quality. Braids should be precisely divided, tightly plaited, with no hair out of place. Women replait their hair every four or five days in the summer (braids start to get “fuzzy” after several days), spending a relaxing hour at the river washing and stiffening their braids with the resin from Russian olive trees (a precious resource, usually collected by children as gifts for mothers or aunts or grandmothers). In the winter, the whole process waits much longer—even my own vanity waned at the thought of washing in the icy river in February.

A Kalasha woman who converts to Islam immediately cuts her hair and adopts Muslim dress. Guliara Aya’s sister was madly in love with a young ŋek (his father had converted to Islam, so he had been born Muslim). Against the wishes of her family, she converted so that she could marry her lover. Guliara Aya told me that her sister stoically resisted attempts by her family and friends to change her mind and proudly recited the kalimah (“There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet”). But she sobbed as she gave her beads and headdresses to her sisters and friends. Holding the hank of beads her converted sister had given her ten years ago, Guliara Aya said, “When I think about these beads, may neasalak liu (I have no desire to “be”—a phrase that refers to an empty, indefinable state of longing). She said she knew as soon as her sister took them off that she had really become Muslim and that while she only lives a fifteen-minute walk down-valley they would no longer dance together at festivals, travel together to funerals in other valleys, or walk to their father’s summer land to harvest pears.

Women’s dress does more than mark women as either Muslim or Kalasha. There are continual reminders that women’s attire is an important way—perhaps even the most important way—in which the entire Kalasha community marks itself off from surrounding populations (cf. March 1983; Smith 1995). One young woman scandalized the community by posing for photographs in a shalwar kamiz for her Punjabi suitor. Last spring several kazi (religious leaders) tried to forbid women to wear shawls that cover their dresses and headdresses,
Fig. 11. A Kalasha gusāṭr. (Drawing by Ken Hall.) Each woman wears her gusāṭr all the time, hanging it on her bedpost while she sleeps so that she can put it on if she needs to get up in the night.
Fig. 12. A Kalasha *kupás.* (Drawing by Ken Hall.) The *kupás* is worn on top of the *susútr.*
though a shawl is a practical and popular accessory in the cold winter. “We are not Muslim,” explained one ritual elder, “and our women should not cover themselves.” Another striking example happened one day when I stumbled onto a conversation between my neighbors and a local Muslim man who claimed to have talked two Kalasha girls from Bumboret into converting. The subject of conversion led inevitably into a conversation about heaven, since in the view of most of the more fundamentalist Muslims in the vicinity the Kalasha will go straight to hell unless they embrace Islam. “Heaven,” declared an older Kalasha woman, “is in our braids! If it weren’t, why would you all fight over them?” I confessed my confusion, and they explained that local Muslims think that the possession of a converted Kalasha woman’s forehead braid (which is cut when she converts to Islam) guarantees that one will “see heaven.”

Fashion and Agency

It’s easy to fall into the assumption that women’s clothing is a conservative holdover from an exotic past, to see Kalasha men as cultural innovators while women plug the dike against the potential flood of modernity. But you don’t have to live in the Kalasha valleys long to see that this is wrong. Far from being a static, conservative form, women’s dresses are continually evolving—changing so fast, in fact, that my own dress was rather embarrassingly old-fashioned after only two years in the field. Through their continual attention to and elaboration of their dress, Kalasha women are not simply “wearing ethnicity,” not just representing it, but are actively involved in making culture (cf. Douglas and Isherwood 1996; Tarlo 1996). As Janet Berlo suggests for Maya women of highland Guatemala and Chiapas, Mexico,

In many regions, textile work is central to being female. It is the arena where a woman’s individual creativity and technical expertise join to express cultural norms. . . . Cloth makes manifest deeply held cultural values that may otherwise be imperceptible. In fact, it may be women’s very crucial job to translate these ephemeral values into material objects. (1991:440)

Through the ongoing practice of crafting dresses, Kalasha women make manifest three cultural values, each of which marks them off as
distinct from their neighbors. Women construct their clothes in such a way as to heighten their visibility, thus effectively proclaiming their right to be seen in a region where most women embrace the symbolic invisibility of maintaining purdah. Second, the combination of individual women’s creativity and the continual drawing in and reworking of ideas and objects from outside the valleys makes women’s fashion a continuously evolving form, reflecting the dynamic flexibility of Kalasha culture generally. Finally, each woman’s clothes are made of materials and labor given by friends and relatives and so are more than an expression of her identity as Kalasha but also a physical representation of her intimate social world.

But before we get too serious it’s important to remember that most women find the making and wearing of their dresses fun (which is not to say that it is not also a lot of work). Lilizar’s father is right that techniques and strategies for acquiring the necessary beads and shells and cloth are among women’s most passionate topics of conversation. I think many Kalasha women would agree with Elizabeth Wilson that “we consistently search for crevices in culture that open to us moments of freedom. Precisely because fashion is at one level a game . . . it can be played for pleasure (1985:244). Kalasha people love to laugh, dance, and drink wine. Women’s dresses are characterized by this same sort of relaxed exuberance. Women put enormous amounts of creative energy, time, and resources into crafting their clothes. Very little about women’s dress is sensible—it is too heavy, and getting ever heavier, too expensive, and growing more costly every year. They like to take fashion risks, trying out new patterns and colors. Old women as well as young take immense pleasure in being beautiful—not just for festivals but every day.

**Visibility**

During my fieldwork, I won the Louis Dupree Prize for promising fieldwork in Central Asia. In an effort to share the reward with the members of my family, my husband and I rented a jeep and took five of my Kalasha sisters, two brothers, Lilizar, and a collection of toddlers to a nearby valley that was renowned for its hot springs. I was surprised at my impulse to hustle my friends into a private hotel to avoid what Doris Lessing has called “that long, hard, dark stare” of local Pakistani men (1987). But the women didn’t seem to mind at all.
They marched boldly into the bazaar, joking with and demanding price reductions from the merchants and stopping along the way to scamper up trees looking for Russian olive tree resin, while their husbands and I trailed sheepishly behind them. A crowd of perhaps fifty men gathered to watch, but the women would not be persuaded to turn back. They found a cool spot under some trees and sat down, in the midst of their entourage of onlookers, to eat plums. “Look, sister,” they laughed, “see how surprised all those men are? They must never have seen anything like us! Maybe they think we come from the moon!”

Textile work is also an important medium of expression for neighboring Chitrali women, but Chitralis tend to put their energy into decorating their houses with beautiful embroidered tablecloths and cushions. I often thought that perhaps Chitrali women’s sense of self is projected into the family compounds in which they spend so much of their time. Kalasha houses, by contrast, are quite simple, and Kalasha women seem to direct all their creative efforts into decorating their bodies. Through this attention to dress, they emphasize the visibility of women, their insistence that women can—even should—be seen. Kalasha women stand out. Black dresses form the ideal backdrop to show off a stunning display of color and design that can be easily spotted from clear across the valley. Subtlety isn’t much valued, but boldness is. Whereas Muslim women hide from strangers, turning their backs and veiling at the threat of a passing jeep, Kalasha women stand up and look to see who it is.

Dynamism

Having read much of the existing work about Kalasha, I came to the valleys half expecting to find a world frozen in time, the “Land of the Lost” of my childhood cartoon days. While much has been written about the distinctiveness of Kalasha culture, most of the existing literature was written with the purpose of bringing “to light many aspects of the pre-Islamic culture” of the region (Aug. Cacopardo 1991:311). For many researchers, the Kalasha are most interesting for what their “archaic” religious practices can tell us about the larger cultural region of Nuristan, whose inhabitants are now all converted (and thus no longer interesting?). Jettmar, for example, states that “the fact is that [the Kalasha] can still be studied as a traditional pagan or non-Islamic
community” and thus contribute to our understanding of pre-Islamic culture (1986:8; see also 1961). And Parkes laments that the “intriguing ‘lost world’ of the Kafirs was tragically destroyed before it could be further documented.” As the Kalasha have escaped this fate, Parkes sees in the study of Kalasha culture an opportunity to study “a ‘pastoral religion’ that appears to have been characteristic of many other herding societies in the Hindu Kush prior to the arrival of Islam” (1990b:639). I myself came to the valleys looking for holdovers from an exotic past in my particular determination to study menstrual houses. But such scholarship tends to treat Kalasha culture as frozen. Tourist literature feeds and elaborates on this fantasy, promising visitors glimpses of “exotic pagans,” “primitive tribesmen” tenaciously clinging to the old while the rest of the world rushes ahead.

I was therefore unprepared for the cultural world into which I arrived, a dynamic, flexible world in which the new is easily embraced and the old sometimes carelessly discarded and sometimes reverently resurrected. At first, my own Western ethnocentrism led me to lament how quickly things seemed to be changing and worry that the Kalasha would be yet another example of a culture that had “survived” tremendous pressure for hundreds, even thousands, of years only to unravel after a few decades of exposure to “us.” But the longer I was there the more I sensed that an important aspect of Kalasha resilience was to be found in their very flexibility, their delight in innovation, and their dynamic ethos, which allows them to continually make and remake culture while maintaining a sense that their community is distinct and their traditions valuable.

Names are a delightful example. There is a baby Akiko, named after the Japanese woman who has married into the community. Princess Di’s visit to Chitral (wearing a very short skirt by all reports) inspired a baby Diana. There is an Engineer, a Commander, and a Driver. There is Election Bibi and Pharansisi (France). Anthropologists Peter Parkes, Gillian Darling, and Vivian Lievre have left their legacy in children named Peter, Gillian, and Bibi Han. For a few weeks, there was a baby Wynne, but her continual crying demonstrated that she didn’t like her name, and so it was changed. Borrowing from their Chitrali and Pathan neighbors, there are also lots of Mohammeds and Khans. After the Gulf War, three Kalasha babies received the name “Saddam Hussein.” “Don’t you realize,” I said to one of the mothers, “that Saddam Hussein is a big Muslim hero?”
“Oh, well,” she replied, “it’s a nice name.” There are also many traditional Kalasha names such as Mashar Beck, Buda, and Mushiki. With the names they give their children, Kalasha pull in the world around them and make it their own.

Even during the short time I was in the valleys, many traditional practices were resurrected. Last summer, Kalasha in Rumbur began keeping den again by selecting young men to patrol the length of the valley to see that fall grapes, corn, walnuts, pears, and pumpkins were not eaten until after the Uchau harvest festival at the end of August. This practice was once widespread in Nuristan (Jones 1974), and it has continued to be important in the Birir Valley, but it had not been practiced in Rumbur for some time. Gillian Darling documented a “cultural revival” that took place in 1975, when Katarsing offered a biramôr, a huge merit feast the likes of which had not taken place in at least thirty years (Darling 1979). In this feast, and in a previous wedding feast (sariêk) that Katarsing had offered for his oldest daughter a few years earlier, he revived many traditional practices but also proudly added innovative elements of his own, which were admired and later copied by others (see Klimburg 1995).

Seemingly timeless and remarkably uniform, Kalasha women’s clothes appear at first glance to epitomize the fierce, conservative nature of a people who cling to tradition against the odds. Yet one doesn’t have to be around long to realize that the world of Kalasha fashion embodies the dynamic ethos that pervades Kalasha culture generally. One of the great joys of doing fieldwork in such a small community was being able to see “culture in the making,” to trace patterns of change to the individuals who initiated them.

Guided by an embodied aesthetic sense, women understand which elements are essential, which color and form combinations are most beautiful: they know what works. But there is also enough latitude for choice that each woman’s dress, headdress, and beads become powerful expressions of her self-identity. Her choice of colors, combinations, pattern, amount of decoration, careful attention to detail, or a more relaxed attitude are all ways of pronouncing who she is. Wasiara Aya’s penchant for old-fashioned beads and her insistence that her susîtr incorporate woven decoration instead of being entirely covered with beads (it’s much lighter that way, but slightly geeky) marks her as someone who is practical, active, and not vain, while her meticulously pleated skirt attests to her careful nature. Because
Wasiara Aya helped me to assemble my own dress, I ended up looking a lot like her and so discovered much later that I was making statements about myself that I had not intended. Taksina, on the other hand, wears the widest, heaviest šusītr possible, the latest colors of beads (orange and yellow—strung in solids rather than patterns for the most striking effect), and the newest, most elaborately decorated dress. Her dress and jewelry testify to her youth, her cutting-edge sense of style, her skill as a craftswoman, and her ability to garner the necessary resources to put together such an expensive outfit. A few women, both old and young, reject entirely this evolutionary “peacock’s tail” of design and material and hold fast to traditional woolen dresses with a minimum of decoration.

Women’s clothes have probably always formed important connections to the world outside the valley. Cowrie shells are an evocative example, linking Kalasha women to oceans and people they have never seen. Cowrie shells are the most essential decorative element in women’s headdresses, the one item for which there is no appropriate substitute. Mark Kenoyer, a South Asian archaeologist with a special interest in beads, told me that cowrie shells are symbolic of powerful female sexuality, representing a “denticular vagina.” My friends found this uproariously funny. The species used by the Kalasha, Cypraea moneta, is found only off the Maldives. These shells were once widely traded throughout South and Central Asia and used as small currency. They are currently in very short supply and terribly expensive (two rupees per shell), and women go to great lengths locate them for their young daughters’ headdresses. (A thinner, more brittle species of cowrie is less expensive and used to make cheap replicas of Kalasha headdresses to sell to tourists.)

Beads and bells came to the valleys via trade routes from all over South and Central Asia and the Middle East. Kalasha women once wore small black beads around their throats, and this was thought to be both beautiful and a way of protecting oneself against goiters. “Before,” explained Saras Gula Aya for my tape recorder, “we put black beads right around our necks, below that we put all kinds of beads.”

There were white ones. There were red ones, yellow, blue, green. These different beads we put lower down. We also took these different kinds of beads and strung them into a gadulāy, and those
we wore beneath the black beads. Women said if you put red beads right at your neck, you would get a goiter. Later, they stopped bringing black beads—sometimes, sometimes, somewhere they would bring them but not often, not all the time. There were no black beads, so women sometimes put red beads near their throat. Also white, yellow, those they use. Our throats don’t swell up. You can see that that was just talk . . . just old-fashioned words. (June 28, 1994)

She explained how Kalasha women learned from pastoral Gujar women, who were beginning to settle in the region, to make *kapabán* chokers out of multiple strands of colorful beads and dividers carved from cow bones. “If this throat could be seen, we would die [of embarrassment]. It’s not beautiful like this, look, look! Now, no, where do they bring the black beads? Or even now women would put them there.”

Women’s clothes reflect shifts in the global marketplace, so that in a very real sense women’s dresses and jewelry can be partially read as a map of connections that reach far beyond the valleys themselves. Beads are brought into the valleys by traders, who try to guess at what will appeal to the quite discriminating women. Vivid orange and yellow glass beads from Czechoslovakia were an immediate hit, and light blue was slowly growing in popularity. Red oblong beads from Iran (and their more modern transformations into yellow, white, and orange) are always sought after. I saw a sad sack of pale green beads roundly rejected by everyone. Also highly popular are military coat buttons and airline pins (some women’s *kupás*, the most conservative element of Kalasha women’s clothes, now proudly proclaim, “Fly Delta”).

The most dramatic recent change in women’s clothing came in the late 1970s when a group of young Kalasha women was taken to Karachi to dance in a folk festival. Wasiara Aya, then a young girl, was along on the trip. The girls claimed (perhaps with some exaggeration) that they nearly died of heatstroke in their heavy woolen dresses. So Wasiara Aya tells that they bought black cotton cloth and sewed replicas out of the lighter material. So much more comfortable were these newfangled dresses that upon their return they continued to wear them, holding fast against the gales of laughter and communitywide sentiment that the new cotton dresses were hideously ugly. Soon,
though, everyone was making them. Presently, only two or three women in all of Kalashadesh, admired for “keeping up custom,” continue to wear woolen dresses.

The most frequent changes in fashion, however, have little to do with culture contact but with the creativity of individual Kalasha women. My friend Huran and her sister-in-law, Dina Aya, both from the larger valley of Bumboret, have set themselves up on the cutting edge of Kalashadesh fashion. In 1993 at the spring festival, Joshi, the two claim to have been the first to decorate the hems of their dresses with a solid ten inches or so of čot (decoration). Their new design requires first sewing a solid background color and then a geometric or floral design on top of the background. It takes a lot more yarn and so bears testimony to a woman’s wealth as well as her skill and creativity. At first, says Huran, everyone said, “How strange, and how wasteful! Look how much thread it takes!” But by the winter solstice festival, only eight months later, “everyone” was sewing dresses like theirs, and by the next spring the fashion had penetrated Rumbur Valley as well. The next year, Huran thought of making a checkered šusùtr. She said that she had designed a similar wristband for her daughter, and this gave her the idea. She and Dina Aya rebeaded their šusùtr in orange and white checkerboards, again, just in time for Joshi. Initially, even I thought it looked silly, as I had been there long enough to adopt at least a little aesthetic sense. But, again, although the new design was originally thought strange, the idea was picked up and spread rapidly through the valleys until little girls everywhere were begging their mothers to rebead their headdresses and adult women began to make them for themselves as well. “Now everyone says ‘the women of your house are so clever,’ ” proclaimed Dina Aya happily. The two told me they are already thinking about what they will do for Joshi next year. Meanwhile, the new beading technique seems to have sparked a little efflorescence of design possibilities, with arrows and triangles and zigzags springing up where formerly there were only solid bands of colored beads.

*Having, Being, and Interbeing*

As Georg Simmel noted, “Inasmuch as adornment is also an object of considerable value, it is a synthesis of the individual’s having and being” (1950:340). Kalasha women’s clothing is extraordinarily
Our Women Are Free

valuable. Women go to great lengths to procure the money and materials necessary to dress themselves and their daughters, so each woman’s clothes and jewelry bear testimony not only to her individual creativity but also her resourcefulness. Although Simmel goes on to say that this connection between having and being is not true of ordinary dress, in the case of the Kalasha the ordinary is extraordinary. The sheer expense and effort involved in fashioning women’s clothing links what women have, what they wear every day, to who they are and by extension to who the whole Kalasha community is. Further, because beads and shells, bells and buttons, and skill and labor are recycled and continually exchanged, women’s dresses come to represent more than having and being (wealth and social position) but also “interbeing”—a lifetime of affections and connections, a symbolic binding together of women’s networks that are otherwise fragmented through time and space.

The French ethnographers Jean-Yves Loude and Vivian Lievre have written of Kalasha women’s beads that “The prestige of a father or husband is judged, among other things, by the number of necklaces piled up on a woman’s breast” (1988:42). I didn’t notice this to be the case. Rather, women tend to see beads as a representation of the wealth of the woman herself—whether she procures it through her own labor or her social network. As Saras Gula Aya explains (again for the tape recorder),

If there are only a few beads, they say ga ačık [bare-necked, an insult]. She wasn’t able to buy beads. She doesn’t have any money, they would say. Or she has lots of beads, lots of beads, she is wealthy (paysadár). She made lots of beads. Lots of money. Bought, bought, bought, bought beads, wears so many.

Saras Gula Aya, and indeed most Kalasha women, talk in terms of a woman’s personal wealth and prestige, not that of her husband’s or father’s. Women painstakingly squeeze juice out of grapes that drop to the ground to make a few precious bottles of wine to sell (at Rs 100 to 150 per bottle). Others keep chickens, selling the eggs and pullets to neighbors who are visited by unexpected company. More recently, women have begun making handicraft items to sell to tourists, although most have little opportunity to market their goods since they speak neither English nor Urdu. Other women sell excess
beans or dried mulberries or apricots, and some sell off a goat or sheep every so often. The cash a woman makes from her enterprises is her own, kept under lock and key in her private box. Although I assume it must happen sometimes, I have never seen a woman beg her husband for bead money. Women sometimes send men to Chitral to buy beads, shells, or material, but more often they buy these things themselves from the traders who pass through, claiming that men aren’t discriminating enough.

This is not to say that men don’t contribute significantly to the outfitting of the women closest to them, only that they don’t seem to have to—their contributions are seen as gifts rather than obligations, and these gifts testify to the quality of their relationship with wives and daughters rather than to the mere fact of it. Annette Weiner and Jane Schneider have noted that the tendency for clothing to be an emotive symbol of attachment is common across many diverse cultures. A characteristic of cloth, they write, “is how readily its appearance and that of its constituent fibers can evoke ideas of connectedness or tying” (1989:2). Each Kalasha woman’s clothing can be read as a map of her significant relationships across the valleys and across her lifetime—material manifestations of enduring ties with friends, bonds with natal family, acceptance into the community of women in her marital home, and reminders of her courtship with her husband and other lovers (cf. Cohn 1989; Werbner 1990; Tarlo 1996).

At their gostnik ceremony, when mother’s brothers hold children on their laps and dress them for the first time in traditional Kalasha clothing, three-year-old girls receive gifts of beads from aunts, grandmothers, and their mother’s special friends. Girls are taught to remember which necklaces came from whom. As she grows up, these beads form the foundation upon which newer necklaces will be piled. Although lots of beads are lost in the rough play of growing up, most women still have some special gostnik māık, gostnik beads, which have been carefully restrung many times.

When women marry, they receive sets of beads from each of the women in the new marital family—husband’s sisters and husband’s brothers’ wives, close cousins, and special beads from her new mother-in-law. Often women will take beads from their own necks to welcome the new bride. Again, she will remember which beads came from whom. If the marriage fails, her former in-laws may ask that the beads be returned, but usually they don’t, and the beads remain a
reminder of this important event in the girl’s life. When May Gul left Hyatt after three years of living with his family, his mother told me that she was so angry she asked for all the beads back. May Gul cried and cried, begging that she be allowed to keep the necklaces. She had come to the family with nothing, explained Hyatt’s mother. “If I had taken her beads, she would have been gai achok. She’d worn those beads for three years, how could I take them from her? I decided to let them be,” she concluded.

Beads and bracelets are also exchanged between women as a peace offering to right wrongs. If a woman finds that another woman has been having an affair with her husband, the offending woman, at her own initiative, will offer rumiš to her lover’s wife, a gift of jewelry meant as both apology and compensation. Pilin Gul still wears the brass bracelet given to her by Siaphat some thirty-five years ago, when Siaphat, then eight months pregnant with Pilin Gul’s husband’s child, came into the family as a second wife (see chapter 6 for a detailed account of Pilin Gul’s marital history). I imagine that the bracelet, prominently worn all these years, was an everyday reminder to both women of the hard-won truce that allowed them to live together, sharing household and husband.

Besides these more formal occasions for the giving of jewelry, there is a constant exchange of small gifts of beads and special buttons, bracelets, rings, and cloth between friends and relatives. Most women carry with them small bags or tins of stray beads, which they freely give out to anyone needing a particular color or type to finish a design. Lovers often slip small gifts to their beloveds, which are cherished but usually not worn openly. Husbands and fathers, brothers and uncles and grandfathers bring cloth, yarn, shoes, socks, and jewelry to the women closest to them. Many men earn enough money to outfit their entire family with a new spring wardrobe by selling the morel mushrooms they find in the mountains.

In addition to the continual exchange of materials, there is also a constant flow of work and skill between friends and relatives who live in distant villages and valleys. Among the first questions women ask one another when they haven’t been in touch for a while is, “Who made that belt for you? Who sewed your dress? Who put the beads on your susţir?” Women take special care of their mothers and grandmothers, remaking and updating their headdresses and dresses. Friends often offer to sew or weave for women who have new babies or a lot of fieldwork or simply as a favor. Nieces sew for aunts, and
vice versa, sisters for sisters, and childhood friends for their girlfriends who have long since moved far away from their natal homes. The recipient will send the unfinished yarn or cloth to her friend, tucking a small gift inside—a few handfuls of walnuts, some fruit, or some precious resin for her hair. Although Lader Bibi hadn’t been home to her natal village in Bumboret Valley for three years, she saw her favorite sister’s daughter at a funeral. Her niece offered to sew dresses for all four of Lader Bibi’s daughters. Every day the girls would watch for passing jeeps hoping that one of the men from Bumboret might bring their dresses. It was very exciting, since the dresses could be delivered by almost anyone. And of course along with the dresses came greetings and updates from Lader Bibi’s entire family in Bumboret. Men live in one place their whole lives, but women’s networks span valleys and decades. The constant give and take of labor and materials allows women a way of maintaining physical connections with loved ones over long distances. A woman’s dress and beads are therefore more than expressions of her individual identity, more than a symbol of her “Kalashaness.” In a very real way, women wear their hearts on their sleeves, their intimate social networks woven into the very fabric of the clothes they wear everyday.

Fashion and the Limits of Women’s Agency

Yet while Kalasha women create and wear clothing as active interpretations of collective and personal values, there is a disjuncture between the meaning of women’s clothes within the Kalasha community and the way women’s dress is “read” by outsiders—both Pakistani and foreigners. This problem of miscommunication through dress is, of course, by no means unique to the Kalasha (cf. Tarlo 1996; Lurie [1981] 1992; Hoffman 1984). But among Kalasha the schism between their own understanding of their dress and the way it is read by others could hardly be wider. The very code that for Kalasha people symbolizes their personal freedom and visibility, their connectedness to community and to the larger world, is received as proof that they are backward, exotic, and sexually available. Perhaps because their clothing is so radically different from anything worn in the region Kalasha become a blank slate onto which outsiders can project all sorts of fantasies about them.

One fantasy, which is complicated because it does merge into the
edges of rhetoric to which the Kalasha themselves cling, is the idea that women’s clothing—especially the fact that they do not veil—is evidence of “women’s liberation.” It is true that in the rest of northwestern Pakistan Western women (and perhaps Western men, too) experience tension that is generated by the constant vigilance necessary to keep the sexes separated. Most female tourists feel a bit harressed by the time they arrive in Kalashadesh. Constantly being stared at and misjudged for what you are wearing is tiring and after a while extremely annoying. Westerners entering the Kalasha valleys sense immediately that things are different. Foreigners are as ready to embrace Kalasha women as kindred spirits as the Kalasha are ready to identify with Westerners. Given that many Westerners misunderstand Islam and are predisposed to identify this cultural form as oppressive to women, they jump on the notion that the Kalasha are our feminist “ancestors,” autochthonous people who live in a “natural” way, and that the rest of the region is in the grip of some hegemonic perversion against which the Kalasha have held out.

Once, for example, a photographer came to Rumbur. She had a copy of a *Time* magazine article about “Women and Purdah.” There were pictures of women in all sorts of different *burkas* and veils. She wanted to photograph Wasiara Aya (who, because she and her husband have worked with many anthropologists, is probably the most photographed of all Kalasha women) looking at the magazine with a horrified expression on her face. She said that she would try to sell the picture back to the magazine, along with a short story about how Kalasha women were holding out against the oppressive institution of veiling throughout the rest of the region. The photographer told Wasiara Aya’s husband that she would pay him if he would let her photograph his wife and would send more money to him later if *Time* bought the piece. (It never ceases to amaze me that Westerners can so easily treat Kalasha women as symbols of original liberated women and at the same time unthinkingly assume that they are the property of their husbands.) Wasiara Aya was slightly annoyed and proclaimed that if the woman wanted her photograph she should pay her, not her husband. The photographer tried to show Wasiara Aya how to sit and hold the magazine, so that the light cut through the door to her veranda in an artistic way and demonstrated how she should screw up her face in an expression of shock. Wasiara Aya looked at the magazine. She said that she thought the pictures were interesting.
She said that she hadn’t known there were so many different kinds of *burkas*, and she asked where each type was worn. She thought that the silky material of one in particular would make a nice dress. But she didn’t think they were horrifying. The photographer asked me to pose, to show Wasiara Aya what to do. She took several pictures of me, an American dressed up like a Kalasha woman, pretending to be outraged by pictures of Muslim women. Wasiara Aya kept making me laugh. Wasiara Aya posed too, but she never really succeeded in generating the appropriate expression of indignation about women in purdah. The woman never sent the money, and so far neither of us has turned up in *Time*.

Certainly both Kalasha men and women make a point of asserting that their women do not practice purdah. Their clothes and their actions are meaningful precisely because they are a way of defining themselves as “not Muslim.” But for the Kalasha I think this is simply an assertion of difference and an assertion of their right to remain different. It shouldn’t be read it as a statement of moral and cultural superiority.

Women’s clothing is also read by outsiders, both foreign and Pakistani, as evidence that Kalasha women are sexually available, despite the fact that Kalasha women think of themselves as people who are extremely modest. During the summer, when the valleys are flowing with tourists, Kalasha women suffer from frequent harassment and unwanted propositions from outsiders. One of the most common questions people asked of me—the Punjabi wives of Chitrali officials, Pakistani men who work for aid organizations in Chitral, male and female Pakistani tourists, and foreigners from several different countries—was “What do they wear under their dresses?” I never heard anyone wonder what Muslim women wear under their *shalwar kamiz*. Yet women’s dresses could hardly be more concealing, wrapped head to toe as they are in some eight yards of thick black cloth. Their dresses are meant to cover them thoroughly, and thin material that allows light to shine through in the sunshine is thought to be terribly inappropriate and embarrassing. There is even a whole minigenre of stories about what happens when there is an earthquake, and women, in their fear, run outside “naked”—which means that they are wearing the long underwear and sweater they wear to bed.

Finally, women’s elaborate “costumes” are read as proof of their exotic otherness and evidence that they are unchanged primitive
ancestors of us all. Greek tour groups, for example, come to the Kalasha valleys in large caravans searching for their cultural heritage and passing out little vials of perfume in bottles decorated like Greek vases and coins sporting Alexander the Great’s head.

So while Kalasha women’s clothes do serve as a material metaphor for women’s agency—an active, embodied manifestation of changing cultural and personal values and ideas—women’s dress also marks the limits of that agency. Fashion is a powerful, creative vehicle for expressing identity. Yet women’s clothes also limit the very freedom and dynamism they represent because Kalasha women’s clothing is so marked that it is impossible to escape the boundaries of their small cultural world—at least without discarding the dress that is so important to them. As well as being misread by people from the outside, women’s dresses prevent them from traveling freely throughout their nation. As we saw in the last chapter, an essential component of the idea of women’s “freedom” involves the ability to travel openly. As more and more tourists come to the Kalasha valleys, and as better roads and more traffic have made travel to Chitral and beyond relatively simple, many women say they long to see and learn about the world beyond the valley walls. Bayda Aya, echoing a remark Wasiara Aya had made earlier, told me she had never been jealous of anything before, but when she sees anglis women she feels jealousy in her heart, thinking, “If only I could walk about the world as they do!” I told her she should go or that I would take her and we would go together. “How can I go?” she asked, gesturing at her dress and pulling on her braids. “What do you mean?” I said, “You are beautiful! Go just as you are.” “No, sister,” she shook her head, “Here I am beautiful. There, I am only strange.” While some Kalasha women have visited Peshawar, Karachi, and Islamabad, when they do they adopt Muslim dress and are dependent on male escorts. Bayda Aya said she wanted to walk about as I do, she didn’t want to stay in a hotel room all day, hide beneath a burka, or stick with fear to her husband’s side. As on the women’s march detailed in the preface, the effectiveness of Kalasha women’s agency screeches to a halt at the borders of their community, as the very vehicle that empowers them within Kalashadesh also stigmatizes them without, marking them as forever outside the larger Pakistani society.