

## Chapter 5

# The Kalasha Bashali

The existing anthropological literature about the Kalasha menstrual house assumes that the *bashali* (*bašáli*) is a place where women are restricted, confined, exiled (Schomberg 1938; Siiger 1956; Graziosi 1961; Palwal 1972; see also Robertson 1896). The Italian anthropologist Paolo Graziosi (1961), for example, writes about the *bashali* in this way:

It was said that an image of the goddess Dezalik was kept in the bashali, or women's house; Siiger had heard of it, but it had not been possible for him, or for any of his colleagues who had visited the Kalash valley, to penetrate that building, where women are relegated when they are in a state of impurity . . .

One day during the month of September, 1960, a fortunate circumstance occurred, allowing me to enter a bashali. . . . It was about midday and all its inmates were at work in the fields. We pushed the door of the small building and it gave at once, so we entered the dark room where, upon an altar in a corner we saw the wooden statue of the divinity who protects childbirth. I was thus able to photograph, sketch and measure the statue, draw up a plan of the room, and sketch its scanty furniture . . . (149)

The segregation of women during the menstrual period and at childbirth is of course practiced among many different peoples. The horror felt for their state, considered impure, leads primitive communities to take all the necessary precautions to avoid dangerous contacts between impure women and all other members of the group. (150)

It isn't hard to imagine what a violation Graziosi committed when he trespassed into the *bashali*, knowing that men should never

set foot on *bashali* grounds. But putting aside the potentially devastating cosmological implications of his act (and the sheer rudeness of it as well), Graziosi's account illustrates a naive attitude toward women and "menstrual pollution" that is typical of much of the literature about menstrual houses cross-culturally: women are not cast as agents, participants in the creation of cultural traditions, but as prisoners to rules made by and for men (though indeed the men themselves are seen as irrational "primitives"). Women are actually referred to as "inmates" who are "relegated" to this small "dark room" with "scanty furniture" due to the "horror felt for their state." The male anthropologist *penetrates* (it's hard to believe he really used this all too appropriate word) this exclusively female space not with the aim of understanding the meanings associated with this institution but in order to photograph and measure it. The physical structure is deemed important and worthy of study, not the women themselves.<sup>1</sup> Sentences referring to women's activities are always constructed using passive verbs; women are spoken of as passive objects at the disposal of others. Finally, the horror of menstruation is taken to be so obvious that Graziosi did not find it necessary to back up this statement with supportive ethnographic material.

Kalasha women and men don't talk about their *bashali* in ways that support the implied claims of these early ethnographers. Women are active participants in the creation and maintenance of this institution. Menstruation and childbirth inspire neither horror nor disgust. The *pragata* blood associated with reproduction is entirely women's business, never spoken of in front of men, who are said not to understand anything about it (though women realize that this is a fiction). Women deal with menstruation and childbirth rather matter-of-factly, assuming personal responsibility for the welfare of the entire community by maintaining the separation of *onjesta* and *pragata*—the core principle of Kalasha religion. The menstrual house, as the most *pragata* space and the place where the *pragata* is managed through women's own active agency, is one of the most important Kalasha institutions. Remember the myth from the first chapter in which Nanga Dehar founded Rumbur by shooting two arrows that established the *bashali*, the most *pragata* place, and the altar at Sajigor, the most *onjesta* place? Indeed, on a number of occasions young Kalasha men who had been exposed to Christianity and Islam explained, in English, that their *bashali* was "holy"—as good, if as one-sided, a

translation as “defiled” or “polluting” I suppose (see Keesing 1985 for a discussion of the difficulties in cross-cultural translation). “It is the most holy place for women,” exclaimed Din Mahmat earnestly upon one of my earlier inquiries, “and very important to their lives.”

The importance of the *bashali* in Kalasha women’s lives goes beyond its ritual significance in Kalasha cosmology. Far from being a prison in which women are separated from the rest of Kalasha society and made powerless, the menstrual house is an important center for female culture and community and it enhances women’s agency, both personally and collectively.<sup>2</sup> Further, what happens in the *bashali* has consequences that emanate beyond the *bashali* ground itself.

For example, in the following beloved myth a young woman’s bravery and courage saves the community of *bashali* women, and thus all of Kalasha society, from sure destruction. This woman also founds a lineage to which people still trace their descent (told by Saras Gula Aya):<sup>3</sup>

A long time ago, a man had only one daughter—no son, only one daughter. The girl’s name was Shuragali. He wouldn’t give that one daughter as a bride, saying, “I have only one daughter. How can I give her away?” So he didn’t give Shuragali as a bride, and a hawk came and sat on a rock. The girl saw that there was a hawk sitting over there, and she went to see and found that there were wheat seeds on the rock, so she picked them up and ate them. She ate them, and she became pregnant. She became more and more pregnant until her time was near. Her mother and father noticed and said, “What has happened to you? Who has done this to you?” “I ate some wheat,” Shuragali said, “Some wheat that the hawk left over there on the rock. Nothing else.”

Her parents were distraught because during that time women were being eaten, eaten by a dragon (*tiriwéri*), and no one who went to the *bashali* to have a baby was left.” When “*zánti*” women, women whose time had come, went in the evening to the *bashali* to have their babies, the dragon would stand in the doorway and call, “Should you come here so I can eat you, or should I come in and eat you?” Then the women would say, “Eat me wherever you like. If I go there you’ll eat me, if you come here you’ll eat me. It’s all the same.” Then the dragon would come in and eat the women and the new babies, too. He’d eat them and leave. It happened like that over and over, until there were almost no women left. So,

when Shuragali was ready to leave for the *bashali*, her mother and father were crying, "He'll eat my daughter, my one little daughter, the dragon will eat her. He ate the women all up, and now he'll eat her, too."

But Shuragali said to her father, "Why are you crying, Dada? Bring seven loads of juniper, seven loads of straw, and seven loads of wood. Why are you crying?" So the father went to bring the seven loads of wood from the floodplain, seven loads of straw, and seven loads of juniper. Shuragali's time had come. Her time had come, and she went to the *bashali*, although her mother was crying, "the dragon ate all the other women, and now he'll eat my daughter, too!"

So Shuragali took the wood, brought loads of it, and made a huge fire. Then she took the coals and she dug, dug, dug, dug, dug, dug a huge hole by the door and put the coals in it and covered the hole up with the straw. Then she had her baby, and took him and sat by the fireplace inside the *bashali*. The dragon came to the door, and said, "Shall I come in there or will you come out here?" Shuragali replied, "Before you ate everyone, [so] come on in here. Why should I bother going to you?" So the dragon stepped into the *bashali* and fell into the pit. Scraping and clawing he tried to get out, and he died like that. Shuragali killed the dragon, and then she sat and waited, holding her son.

The next morning, *really* early—at the time the Muslims have their first call to prayer—the girl's mother and father were crying. "Oh my little daughter, the dragon ate her." Suddenly, the daughter was at their door, and she said, "Oh, don't cry, I am alive. For the community of *bashali* women (*jamilishīr*) has been rescued. I killed the dragon. Now the community of women can rest easily. Why are you crying?" Then her parents were really happy. They wished her congratulations on the birth of her son, and she left.

Because of Shuragali, the *bashali* dragon was killed and now women can go to the *bashali*. And from that one daughter a whole lineage was born in Bumboret. Nojoge were born from the son of Shuragali. Shuragali's son's name, now what was it? I don't remember . . .

Of course, women don't ordinarily have much call to slay dragons. Still, the Kalasha *bashali* is a place where women do things that

would be surprising or inappropriate in other contexts. It is a place where women feel free to behave in ways they ordinarily don't. Here they conduct their own purification ceremonies, make their own ritual offerings. They are more open about sexuality and reproduction and talk more candidly about husbands and mothers-in-law. They are more playful and physically rough. Here they can smoke cigarettes, sleep late, take naps, drink endless cups of tea, flirt with passersby, sing and dance simply for the joy of it. When young women elope, the *bashali* is a most common springing off point. It is a place where individual women can escape, at least partially and intermittently, the intensity of social life in a small valley. It is a place, as my friend Asmara Aya so elegantly put it, where *wā šīaw*—where there is “space.” In this chapter, I want to show you the ways in which the *bashali*, far from being a place where women are “confined,” provides women with space from which to act—to be creative and religious; to be part of the *jamilishūr*, the larger community of women from which they are usually divided by family, village, and household; and to make personal decisions about reproduction and marriage away from the intense social pressure of village life.

And yet the *bashali* is also very much a focus of community-wide interest. Far from being separate from the rest of valley life, it is central to it—both culturally and physically. The *bashali* reminds me of a pool that forms behind sheltering rocks in the river, a small, calm spot in the rushing of life. The water streams around it, making it seem separate from the river, but in the same breath it *is* the river—made of the same water and continually circulating. There is a constant flow of people and things into and out of the *bashali*, as everything and everyone—food, firewood, bedding, cooking utensils, goddess figurines, women, Shuragali's seven loads of straw, wood, and juniper—come in from the outside. And of course everyone, men and women alike, is born there and thus brought out from the inside.<sup>4</sup>

### **Building the Bashali**

Testifying to the fact that the *bashali* is of intense local—and international—interest, the *bashali* in Rumbur has been torn down and reconstructed three times in the last thirty years (in comparison, a well-built house in the region could easily last much more than a hundred

years). The first menstrual house anyone remembers was built during the time when the oldest people in the valley were children, probably sixty-five years ago. It was set back further from the main path through the valley, and women claimed that this old menstrual house was haunted by a spirit who would frighten them at night. Old women say that it was small but very warm. "It was nothing fancy," Mushiki recalls, "just a little *kuṭúyak* [a small shelter], but we liked it. In the summer we young girls slept outside. We played and played. We sang songs and told stories. There were no beds, they weren't allowed—but we didn't need beds. We stripped off our dresses and slept on top of them."

When Katarsing, perhaps the most influential man in Rumbur, gave his great *biramór* (the most prestigious merit feast) in 1977, he made a promise to reconstruct this *bashali*, which had fallen into some disrepair (Darling 1979:142), and offered to build it closer to the main path so the women would no longer be frightened and hidden so deep in the woods. "Women are not allowed to eat the meat of male goats," he told me, "so I wanted to give something to them, too." As Darling notes, Katarsing had found the ideal opportunity to ensure that his name would go down in the annals of Kalasha oral history. "Not only was he performing the largest *ónjeṣṭa biramór* in more than fifty years, but during this major accomplishment in the sacred realm, was promising to refurbish the most central symbol of the impure domain, the women's menstrual hut. Both the plan and the timing of its announcement are indicative of Kata Sing's adroitness and ambition" (142–43). Women wax poetic remembering this *bashali*, loved for its new front porch and thick walls.

During her first visit to the Kalasha valleys in 1983, Birgitte Sperber, a Danish geographer who has since come many times to the valleys and has developed deep friendships with many people there, describes being invited to visit a *bashali* in Bumboret. Overcome with "pity" that the poor women had to be secluded during menstruation and delivery, she wanted to "help" by finding a donor to provide money for metal beds for the menstrual houses in all three valleys. Traditional wooden Kalasha beds are considered *onjeṣṭa*, and therefore are not allowed in the *bashali*, but metal beds from outside were deemed acceptable. UNICEF agreed to donate the money, but upon her return the next year Sperber found (to her horror) that the entire

menstrual house (as well as menstrual houses in Birir and Bumboret) had been rebuilt—complete with a metal roof, a toilet, and fireplaces instead of a central fire pit (1992a). The money had been given to a Chitrali contractor, who had demonstrated little concern either for the suitability of the design or the quality of the construction. The walls were poorly made, and the wind whistled through them. The fireplaces did not warm the large building, so women built a fire in the center of the room, causing a ceiling fire that left a gaping hole in the roof. Traditional flat roofs could be repaired by the women themselves (men are not allowed on *bashali* grounds), but this tin roof required special skills and materials. Sperber comments that she was embarrassed and has learned not to interfere.

In 1994, the Rumbur *bashali* was rebuilt again, using money donated by Renata Hansmeyer, a wealthy Swiss woman with good intentions but little understanding of the political or social implications of her actions. She visited the *bashali* and proclaimed that the conditions under which the women were living were appalling. “We tried to tell her that we’re fine, but she acted disgusted,” Zarina, who was there during her visit, told me. “It was embarrassing.” The new *bashali* was built by a young Kalasha man, using Nuristani laborers. Its construction fed the factional political divisions within the community and led to widespread disagreements about religious issues and bitter accusations of misappropriation of funds. It has two rooms (Hansmeyer insisted on a separate room for labor and delivery, not understanding that women like to be together, supporting one another through labor and helping to care for the infant after it is born). It has a washroom and a kitchen (something no other Kalasha houses have) as well as a separate toilet (which the women stopped up with paper so that no one would use it, claiming it was too far to the river to haul water). Three separate fires must now be built, rather than one central fire, meaning that three times as much wood is needed, far more than is usually available. It also has a metal roof, and the walls are covered with already chipping concrete. There is a wide front porch. It is painted white with bright blue trim, which women say they think is beautiful, since it looks modern, “like a guesthouse.” Hansmeyer instructed that there be a wall separating the *bashali* from the road so the women would have privacy. Some women like this, while others say it was better when they could chat freely with passersby.

I was worried, at first, that the construction of this new *bashali* would initiate the further erosion of *bashali* culture. I worried that having separate rooms would divide the community, that the cement floor would make it difficult to clean up after childbirth, and that having a tiny kitchen instead of a central fire would mean the social time spent cooking together would become a chore assigned to one or two individuals. But I realize now that I had stumbled into the same blindspot that Graziosi did in 1960—equating the building itself with the institution. Women’s practice of going to the menstrual house, and the community they have built there, are still vital and growing. This new building, for all its flaws, is better than the one that preceded it. Still, I am troubled by all this intense intervention.

The *bashali* is more than a focal point of women’s community; it is an essential part of the entire community. Giving money to build or repair religious structures does nothing to ensure the survival of Kalasha religion. Indeed, it robs the community of an opportunity to come together, as Takat Jan explained quite clearly: “We Kalasha are getting lazy and selfish and spoiled waiting for handouts from *anglis* [Westerners, including Japanese].” He says you can hardly blame them, since if someone is going to give you money why would you do it yourself? “For example, what if Wynne here gave me a bunch of money to build a new Manhandeo (an altar above Grom village)? I’d eat part of the money and do a half-assed job because it really isn’t my money. Then in about ten years, when it started to crumble because it wasn’t built well in the first place, instead of rebuilding it ourselves, we’d just wait around for another Wynne to come along and give us more money. It didn’t used to be like that,” he went on, “before, we were truly poor. Then we built our own Jestak Hans, our own Mahandeos, our own *bashalis*. Building our own *bashali* is not a burden—one goat per family or a couple of kilos of cheese—it is a pleasure.” He continued that building and maintaining their own institutions builds cohesion in the community, as people would get together and discuss every detail. The result was a community building in which people took pride. Individuals who donated money (like Katarsing when he built the previous *bashali*) accrued prestige as well. “But now look at us. Soon Westerners will be showing up offering to give us money to bury our dead. Then, when my family member dies, I’ll wait for the money to come through instead of holding my own funeral rites, and maybe later I’ll have to bury him with a spoon.”<sup>5</sup>

### A Day in the *Bashali*

It's important to emphasize at the outset that *bashali* life isn't idyllic. Not everyone likes it all the time. After I had been in the valleys long enough to ask permission from many women and understood enough Kalasha that I could be sure to do things properly, I went to the *bashali* during my own menstrual periods. It was a case in which participant observation really worked because I think that in the two years that I lived in Rumbur I came to feel about the *bashali* pretty much the way most women do. Sometimes I had to go at inconvenient times, when I had other things I'd rather do, or when there was an important ceremony or a fun festival I would have liked to attend. In the winter, it was really cold, and the thorough ritual washing before departure was almost unbearable. There were times when I was hungry, and no one brought food. Sometimes the fleas and lice were so thick that none of us could sleep. Sometimes it was crowded and smoky and hot and boring. Nights were long, and I wished the babies would stop squalling. I missed my husband, and other women said they missed their families, too. As the months of my fieldwork flew by, it seemed as if I was always in the *bashali*.

But usually I looked forward to going, looked forward to the break in my routine, looked forward to not being able to write field notes for a few days (since paper is one item that cannot be brought back out of the *bashali* once it is taken in). I came to love the companionship as well as the novelty of being around women I didn't get to see often otherwise, the warm welcome on arrival, the excitement of seeing who you would be living with for the next few days. I heard a lot of juicy gossip and learned about things women don't talk about in other contexts. I took naps in the middle of the day, ate a lot, drank lots of tea, and took leisurely walks. I enjoyed learning and telling stories and singing songs and dancing. I smoked a little hashish and a few cigarettes. I felt a special bond with the children I saw born. I went home bearing gossip and stories and greetings for my family members from the other *bashali* women.

I want to reconstruct my first visit to the menstrual house for you as a way of introducing the social life and physical experience of being in the *bashali*. This day was typical, but every day I spent there was different, depending on the season and more importantly the mix of personalities of the other women who were there at the same time. I

have left out certain details of women's practices that seemed to me to be especially private, those that cannot be seen from the road or are strikingly different from rituals performed in other public contexts.<sup>6</sup> As elsewhere in this ethnography, I've used pseudonyms in order to protect privacy.

I was frightened the first time I went to the *bashali*, afraid that I would do something wrong or would be in the way. I was also excited. We had talked about my attending the *bashali*. I explained that it was necessary for my work and that I would write about what I learned there. I told them I wanted to go since everyone else seemed to like it so much. Every Kalasha person I talked to, men and women both, had agreed that I should go. I waited until I could speak Kalasha fairly well, until I had begun to wear Kalasha women's clothing, until I had joined the women in the annual purification ceremony (*šiš aú suček*) at the Chaumos winter solstice festival. I waited through two months of amenorrhea, dismayed that my reliable body was failing me.

Finally, my period came and I went downstairs, careful not to annoy the goddess Jestak by walking on the roof above her head, and announced that I had begun menstruating and that I wanted to go to the *bashali* this time. The women in my family proclaimed that I was too *nazúk*, too delicate and pampered, to enjoy myself there as they did. They proclaimed that I would be cold and hungry and that they had no special food to send with me. They would be judged, they said, by the quality of the food they sent with me. Eventually they relented and agreed that I should go and spend just the last night of my menstrual period there, wash, and come home. I could take walnuts and dried mulberries with me this time, since I wouldn't be there long, and the other women would appreciate the treat. If I liked it, I could go whenever I wished thereafter.

Five days later, after breakfast, my aunt and sisters seemed almost giddy, explaining to me over and over all the *bashali* rules, telling stories of the first time they went there and all the silly things they did. The menstrual house is the most *pragata* place in the valley, and women take great care to separate themselves from the blood that is the source of the *pragata*. "You must never eat without first washing your hands," they explained, "or touch your feet or the bed or the floor without washing your hands afterward." Dishes of food are never set directly on the floor or the bed. Shoes that are taken into the *bashali* are not taken out again, and the same is true for rubber, paper, and

ceramic dishes (though, as with every rule, pragmatic exceptions are readily made). Everything else that goes in is thoroughly washed before being brought out.

There is only one *bashali* in Rumbur, shaped by all the Kalasha women of the valley. Women come from as far as five miles away in the summer. In the winter, when families have returned from their summer lands, everyone lives within a one-mile radius of the *bashali*. Old women say that when they were girls—"Oh, Kalashadesh was soooo *onjesta* then"—they would leave for the *bashali* immediately upon discovering that they had begun menstruating, even if it meant walking by torchlight in the middle of the night. Now most women spend the day in the village, organizing food, knitting, or spinning to bring along, and wait quietly until evening to walk down, taking their nursing toddlers with them.

Lilizar walked with me to carry my shoes, which must be removed as soon as you cross into *pragata* space. Along the path people sang out, "Hey sister! Are you going to the *bashali*?" It was a February afternoon, and the barefoot walk through the snow was excruciating. My frozen feet made the welcome upon entry seem even warmer. I was rushed inside to thaw out, questioned eagerly by the women there about family members and friends who lived in my village of Kalashagrom, and quickly updated on the most exciting turns in Begim's recent elopement. Then Taksina and Lulu, the two youngest women there, grabbed my hands to take me on a tour of the grounds, passing me a pair of pink plastic slippers, *bashali* shoes that women donate when they get a new pair.

Located just across the river from Badtet village, fifteen feet from the only road, and directly across from the Exlant Hotel, the *bashali* sits in the geographical and social center of the valley. The *bashali* grounds are approximately one and a half acres and heavily wooded with large holly oak trees that have gone uncut for centuries. The grounds are bounded by the road in the front, a water channel in back near the river, and fields to either side. The area is littered with candy wrappers and old shoes and other trash that women don't bother to pick up, since it would mean touching the ground and since it can't be taken off grounds anyway. Near the water channel are large pots for boiling water to wash clothing, flat rocks that are ideal for scrubbing, and trees that provide privacy for bathing outdoors in summertime. Each woman hides her own comb and a bar of soap in a tree or under

a rock. Women never share combs, saying that if your hair tangles with someone else's, the two of you will argue. "Is that true?" I would ask. "Who knows?" was the invariable reply, "probably not. But it's what we say." Deep in the holly oak forest is a section of woods that even *bashali* women don't enter readily, the graveyard for women who die in childbirth and infants who are stillborn or die before it is time for them to leave for home.

I was glad that Taksina was there with me, as her forceful personality and genuine good humor and brazenness are a good foil for my tendency to feel shy and withdrawn. She suggested that we wash my clothes so that they would have a chance to dry by the next morning. It was a cold day, but the sun had begun to shine through. We hunted up dry kindling to make a fire to heat water so our hands wouldn't freeze while we did laundry. I changed into a borrowed dress. While I washed my underwear, Taksina grabbed my dress and belt and scrubbed both in the cold canal water, chattering and laughing even as she shivered. Washing clothes in plastic sandals and a thin dress made the weather seem even colder. We made several trips back inside to warm up by the fire.

Later when I complained that Taksina had done all the work, the other women said, "Oh, she's young and has no children to look after, what else should she do?" It is true that compared to their responsibilities at home life in the *bashali* is not arduous. Women informally take turns cooking and washing up, collecting wood for cooking in the summertime, making fires, filling containers of drinking water at the river, and tending the new babies. Young women are expected to offer to do the most difficult chores (though nothing in the *bashali* is really all that strenuous), and when the girls balk older women complain about "girls these days" and remember how enthusiastic they were when they were *moráy*—nubile young women.

Besides the minimal chores that *bashali* women must do to feed themselves and keep warm, there is little work.<sup>7</sup> In fact, in a cross-cultural survey of existing literature on twenty-six menstrual houses throughout the world, the only consistent similarity amid a bewildering array of different customs and beliefs was that during their time in all of these varied menstrual houses women experienced a reprieve from their normal labors (Maggi 1992). In every case, women were relieved of the responsibility of cooking for family members, and, with the notable exception of the Dogon of Mali (Strassmann 1991:105),

women were also freed of their responsibilities in food production. Both Alma Gottlieb and Emily Martin, commenting on the prevalent assumption that menstrual taboos are “oppressive,” note that “prohibitions” against women working could as easily be seen as a boon to women as a form of male dominance (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988:14; Martin 1987, 1988).<sup>8</sup>

After we had finished washing, Taksina and the other teenage, childless girls and I went to sit in the field just above the *bashali*. On the high water canal across the river, fifteen or twenty of the young men from Balanguru village had gathered to play drums and dance in the sunshine. The high valley walls cast a shadow over Balanguru well before early afternoon, so the sunny spot is a favorite gathering place. But as there are lots of other sunny places that don't look down directly on the *bashali* I speculated, “Are those boys dancing for us?” “Whatever else?” Lulu giggled. Little girls, both Kalasha and Muslim, were playing tag all around us. Taksina kept yelling at them to watch what they were doing—if they touched one of us she'd have to throw them in the river. Slowly the shade crept over us, and we retreated inside to shell walnuts for the evening's porridge.

After all the fuss my family had made about food, I had expected dry bread and black tea. But because Silima had recently given birth the *bashali* literally flowed with all good things, brought by Silima's friends and relatives as a way of offering their congratulations. We begin with *işpónyak*, a thick porridge made from wheat flour and topped off with walnut oil. (Walnut oil is pressed by hand out of mashed walnuts. The walnut paste is kneaded, and water is added a drop at a time to extract the oil. It is a very “hot,” rich food, especially good for new mothers.) Wazira Aya took charge of the whole operation, issuing food and commands. Kashkar teased that she was our “mother” and assured me that we would be well provided for. Fifteen minutes later we ate wheat bread with two kinds of cheese, which someone dropped off for Silima. We had just started eating the walnuts and dried mulberries I had brought when Iglas' Aya showed up with a big plate of cooked rice. She said she had made it for me, worried that I would be hungry! (I later learned that when there are no newly delivered babies food in the *bashali* is not so abundant. Everyone brings something with them when they come, and families drop off flour or bread during the week, but sometimes meals resembled a potluck in which everyone assumed everyone else would bring

the main course. When there is little food, everyone eats less, including those who contributed what food there is.)

As dusk fell, speculation began about who would come that evening. Since groups of women tend to be on the same cycle each month, everyone knows who is expected and who is late. Zarina Aya should have been there yesterday or the day before, two women commented. Could she be pregnant again? They sang a favorite *bashali* song:

*khošmas ta wázi gála*  
*andáy kúra bata híu, bašáli*  
*kúra bata híu*

[Khoshmas has [is said to have] washed and gone  
 Who will come here again, *bashali*  
 Who will come again?]

Four other women arrived in quick succession around nightfall, Zarina Aya last of all. After the traditional kissing of hands, cheeks, and braids, each was rushed to the fire and offered bread and cheese while everyone checked up on all the people they shared in common. Altogether there were twelve women, four toddlers, and one newborn baby.

Life in the *bashali* reminded me of an ongoing slumber party. While they are there, women, even the most vain of young women, seem not to worry much about how they look. Belts are loosened or not worn at all. The *bashali* is the only place where women can take off their *ṣuṣútr* headdress, and often the heaviest of their beads, and relax—not worrying that their braids are “fuzzy.” It is the only place where I saw women wander about aimlessly, sleep well past sunrise, or dance and sing purely for the fun of it.

Zarina Aya had brought a little hashish and one cigarette. We all shared it, and, though it didn’t go very far split among twelve women, it set the tone for a relaxed (and slightly naughty) social evening. Zarina Aya does not walk the straight and narrow path of Kalasha morality. She smokes a lot, flirts a lot, and is widely rumored to have lovers. But Kalasha society seems to have a fairly high tolerance for individual variations in behavior. Although she is the subject

of lots of juicy gossip, Zarina Aya is well liked. She is a gentle person, generous with her friends, and a loving and playful mother.

Hours of talking and storytelling commenced. They talked about husbands, and mothers-in-law, about recent elopements, about the political conflicts the people of Rumbur were having with the people of nearby Ayun. The best storytellers were pressed to tell their tales. I told "Jack and the Beanstalk," a story far more meaningful in this place where people can imagine the horror of having a son trade your only cow for a handful of beans. I crept into bed and drifted in and out of elaborate stories about king's sons, fairies, evil step-mothers, and cannibalism.

I closed my eyes for a second and woke to a rousing game of "show us your newly developed breasts." The younger women were all being coerced into revealing their budding breasts. Since Kalasha dresses are so modest, whose breasts were large and whose nonexistent was a surprise to everyone. Girls with small nipples were teased that they had been letting the boys pinch them. Taksina and Lulu began wrestling rambunctiously, trying to pinch one another. Then they grabbed up Zarina Aya's seven-month-old daughter and tried to see who could get the baby to nurse from them. This was slightly illicit. "Oh-bayyy-ohhh," gasped Silima in amused astonishment. Other women shook their heads at the silly antics, but no one put a stop to the game. A little later Taksina started getting out of hand, and she was sharply put down by one of the older women for saying things that were too embarrassing, gossip that was too pointed.

While the central part of the evening's social life was shared by everyone, there were clear differences in interest between the older women and girls who had not yet had children. The girls bolted outside whenever they heard someone on the road, and we could hear them out there giggling with passing boys. Everyone stayed up until well past 11:00, far later than the usual winter bedtime.

One by one, women began to turn in. There were only six beds, and Silima, because she had a new baby, slept in a bed by herself. The rest of us doubled up or tripled up in the narrow beds. A huge bonfire was built in the fire pit, and I was uncomfortably hot through the night. Kashkar wrapped herself around me, tenderly stroking my face. It was hard for me to sleep in the arms of an unfamiliar woman, but I appreciated the relaxed, physically intimate way in which women relate to one

another here. Women woke up in shifts and added wood to the fires. The new baby cried, and Silima called out for Kashkar, "Sister, can you take him for a while?" Kashkar was sound asleep, her arms and legs twisted around me. Zarina Aya got up quietly, moved her own toddler to the center of the bed, and went to pick up Silima's baby. Silima said she hadn't been able to sleep all night and was too tired to care for him. Zarina Aya reswaddled him and rocked and sang softly to him until he fell asleep, then tucked him against his sleeping mother. Around 4:00, three other women got up and swaddled the baby again, talking quietly around the fire for a while. At 6:00, the women who had gone to bed earliest got up and made tea, while everyone else slept well into the morning.

While we waited for the winter sun to come out, we drank tea, ate yesterday's leftover bread and cheese, and talked. Finally, giving up on the sun, Kashkar, Lulu, Taksina, and I all went back to the water channel to finish washing so we could go home. Beads, headdresses, socks, menstrual cloths, dresses, belts, earrings, bracelets, and eventually hair and bodies are all thoroughly scrubbed. Wazira Aya came down and asked Lulu if she were "washing" today, a euphemism for asking if her period was finished so that she could wash and leave the *bashali*. Lulu said she was. "Show me," demanded Wazira Aya. Lulu looked at her in disgust and started to protest, but then she relented and offered proof that she was no longer bleeding—"You see, the *pragata* is finished," she said defiantly. Taksina was not so lucky. "Ohbayooo," Taksina said, disappointed. This was her eighth day in the *bashali*, and she was homesick. Wazira Aya turned to me and explained that young girls (she herself is only twenty-three or twenty-four) sometimes try to go home too soon, so they check one another. She didn't ask Kashkar or me for proof that our periods were finished.

Kashkar and Lulu and I continued, heating up big pots of water and pouring it for one another as we held our breath against the cold and washed under the overcast sky. The transformation complete, we hurried back to the *bashali*. Silima sent Lulu to scrub her feet again (they admittedly hadn't come very clean). "You need to scrape harder," Silima chastised. "People will think you didn't wash well." I remember thinking how beautiful Kashkar and Lulu looked and felt clean and new myself. Zarina Aya teased us that tonight would be our *amatak trómiš*—our evening of becoming impure, hinting that now that we were "*onjesta*" again tonight we would sleep with our husbands.

I was sent home with messages from *bashali* women for sisters, mothers, brothers, and friends in my village—some general greetings, and some more specific instructions such as, “Tell Bibi Nara Aya that I will come in two days, so she should finish my daughter’s headdress.” On the way out, a woman brought us water with which to wash our feet one more time. “Don’t come back for nine months,” the women called out as we left. Everyone I met on the way home asked politely, “Hey, sister, did you wash?”

### A Quantitative Sketch of Women’s Reproductive Lives

I want to pause for a brief quantitative sketch of Kalasha women’s reproductive lives. Understanding women’s reproductive life histories, including the variation between women, is important for understanding the role the *bashali* plays in women’s lives and how the impact of this institution shifts over the course of the life cycle. In the West, most women so regulate their reproductive careers with birth control that it is easy to forget that menstruation is a relatively rare event in natural fertility populations such as the Kalasha. In such populations, menstruating one week out of every month, month after month, is typical only at the beginning and end of a woman’s reproductive life.

Because menstruation is marked religiously, socially, and spatially by the fact that women go to the *bashali*, Kalasha women seem to have remarkable memories of their reproductive histories, and most were interested in recounting them for me. I conducted an extensive “marriage and fertility survey” in which I asked women to detail their reproductive life histories, recalling how long they menstruated before becoming pregnant for the first time, the outcome of each pregnancy, birth spacing, how long each child was breast-fed, the duration of lactational amenorrhea, and, if menopausal, how long after their last pregnancy they had ceased menstruating.

I interviewed eighty-three women and threw out only one interview that seemed unreliable. I talked with all women I was able to make contact with and made an effort to interview women from different villages, of different ages, and from different economic locations. Most women were interested in the questions and were happy to participate. The sample consists of twenty-three menopausal women,

twenty-eight women who were currently menstruating, twenty women in lactational amenorrhea, and eleven pregnant women. There are likely more menstruating women in my sample than in the general population simply because, as I noted in earlier chapters, Kalasha women move around a lot, so the *bashali* was an easy place to locate women with time for an interview.

Table 3 describes the average reproductive career of the twenty-three menopausal women I interviewed. A hypothetical average woman's life in the *bashali* would be shaped like this:

During the first 3.5 years of her reproductive life—the time between her first menstruation and her first pregnancy—she would go to the *bashali* 41.6 times. Given that women report staying in the *bashali* 5 to 6 days each month (some say 5, some say 6, some

TABLE 3. Average Reproductive Career of Menopausal Women

	Average	Range	Comments
Number of years menstruating	22.8	16–28	
Number of pregnancies	8.4	1–16	
Number of years menstruating before first pregnancy	3.5	1–11	
Number of live births	7.3	1–11	All women in this sample had at least one child.
Number of stillbirths	0.3	0–2	17% report stillbirths.
Number of miscarriages ( <i>khóda nás</i> )	0.9	0–6	48% of women had at least one miscarriage.
Number of children who died before one month	1.0	0–5	52% report at least one child died before one month.
Number of (additional) children who died before one year	0.6	0–2	57% report at least one child died between one month and one year.
Number of (additional) children who died before age five	0.7	0–3	47% report at least one child died between one and five years.
Number of surviving children	4.9	0–10	One woman had no surviving children.
Number of months breast-feeding each child	24.5	22.8–31	
Number of months in lactational amenorrhea	15.7	0–31.3	
Number of years between cessation of lactational amenorrhea following last pregnancy and onset of menopause	4.4	1 mo–12 yrs	

report going anywhere from 4 to 10 days), she would spend 229 days in the *bashali* before she became pregnant with her first child. Approximately 18 percent of her total time during this part of her life is spent living in the *bashali*.

During the next 14.9 years of her life, the time between her first pregnancy and the end of lactational amenorrhea after her last pregnancy, this hypothetical average woman will be pregnant for a total of 5.9 years (during her 7.5 completed pregnancies and .91 miscarriages) and will be in lactational amenorrhea for 7.3 years. (I did not record the time in postpartum amenorrhea following a miscarriage, stillbirth, or newborn death.) This leaves only 20.7 months in which she will be menstruating (out of a total possible 178.7 months), which means that she'll spend 114 days in the *bashali* as a menstruating woman. After the delivery of each of her 7.5 completed pregnancies, she will spend an average of 16 days in the *bashali* (the time women spend varies between 12 and 20 days), for a total of 120 days. During this period of her life, she'll spend 234 days in the *bashali*—approximately 4.3 percent of her time.

Our average woman menstruates for 4.4 years between the birth of her last child or pregnancy and the onset of menopause. Kalasha women noted that their cycles became extremely variable just before the onset of menopause (cf. Treloar et al. 1967), but if we assume that they go every month they would be in the *bashali* a total of 292 days, again, 18 percent of their time.

Kalasha women can expect to spend slightly more than two full years in the *bashali* over the course of their reproductive lives. Two-thirds of that time will take place before their first pregnancy and after their last.

I want, however, to compare this average woman with several real women whose lives had quite different reproductive trajectories. There is a lot of variation between women, and this variation has dramatic effect on the amount of time each woman spends in the *bashali* over the course of her life.

1. *Pilin Gul's Reproductive History.*

Pilin Gul says that her average menstrual cycle lasted 5 to 6 days. Over the course of her life, she spent a total of 1,133 days in the

*bashali*, 3.1 years. She never experienced lactational amenorrhea and says that going to the *bashali* was sometimes difficult because she had to bring her young nursing infants with her. In the winter, when her infants were very young, she would stay at her Muslim neighbor's house so she wouldn't have to carry the babies through snowstorms. Otherwise, she says she always went to the *bashali* and never chose to "stay the night" at her own house.

**TABLE 4. Reproductive History of Pilin Gul (married, cowife, with five adult children; approximate age 53)**

Preg. No.	Child's Name	Menstrual Age <sup>a</sup>	Live/Mis./Still	Months Pregnant	Months Lived	Months Breast-fed	Lact. Amen.	Months in Bashali <sup>b</sup>
		3						
1	W	0.75	l	9		1.5	0	36
2	D	2.5	l	9		2	0	21
3	S	2.25	l	9		2	0	18
4	R	2	l	9		2	0	15
5		2.5	s	10	0			20
6		0.75	m	3				6
7		0.75	m	3				6
8	G	0.75	l	9		2	0	0
9		2.75	l	9	3			24
	(Menopause)	5						60
Total months		276		70			0	206

<sup>a</sup>"Menstrual Age" refers to the length of time a woman has been menstruating. Most Kalasha women do not keep track of how "old" they are but found it quite easy to tell me how many years they menstruated before they became pregnant for the first time, how much time passed between the birth of the first child and the next pregnancy, and so on.

<sup>b</sup>"Months in Bashali" refers to the number of times a woman went to the *bashali* between pregnancies.

## 2. *Khoshma Gul's Reproductive History.*

Like Pilin Gul, Khoshma Gul also raised five children to adulthood (and had one daughter who drowned at age twelve). She says that she, too, went to the *bashali* regularly and stayed there 5 to 6 days. Her reported menstrual career was almost 4 years shorter than Pilin Gul's, and she was in lactational amenorrhea an average of 1.3 years after the birth of each child. As a result, she spent only 450 days in the *bashali* over the course of her reproductive career, about 1.25 years.

TABLE 5. Reproductive History of Khoshma Gul (married, with five adult children; approximate age 48)

Preg. No.	Child's Name	Menstrual Age <sup>a</sup>	Live/Mis./Still	Months Pregnant	Months Lived	Months Breast-fed	Lact. Amen.	Months in Bashali <sup>b</sup>
		2						
1	G	0.75	1	9	12 yrs	2.5	12	24
2	G	3	1	9		2	20	15
3	WJ	2.4	1	9	1.5 yrs	1.5	15	0
4	K	2	1	9		1.5	12	0
5	S	2	1	9		2	0	3
6		1	m	3				9
7	S	0.92	1	9		2	22	2
8	K	3	1	9		4	24	5
	(Menopause)	2						24
Total		229		66			105	82

<sup>a</sup>"Menstrual Age" refers to the length of time a woman has been menstruating. Most Kalasha women do not keep track of how "old" they are but found it quite easy to tell me how many years they menstruated before they became pregnant for the first time, how much time passed between the birth of the first child and the next pregnancy, and so on.

<sup>b</sup>"Months in Bashali" refers to the number of times a woman went to the *bashali* between pregnancies.

### 3. Sawarash's Reproductive History.

Sawarash's reproductive life history is a source of great sorrow to her. Both she and her sister were very "unfortunate," began menstruating well after their age mates, and had difficulty becoming pregnant. She also claims that she menstruated for 9 to 10 days each month, even when she was a young woman. Sawarash is a very careful, pious person and says she never thought about staying at her own house instead of going to the *bashali*. Nevertheless, staying in the *bashali* for so many days, month after month, was clearly a burden rather than a source of pleasure (although she said there were things she enjoyed as well). She cycled longer than most Kalasha women, never experienced lactational amenorrhea, and was pregnant only three times. Calculated at her reported length of stay of 9.5 days per month, she spent a total of 3,135 days in the *bashali*, or about 8 years, 7 months. Though I suspect that some of the figures she quoted me are exaggerated, they clearly reflect her feelings about the *bashali*. She said that she felt as if her work were constantly interrupted, and going to the *bashali* was a continual reminder that she was not pregnant—and she had desperately wished for more children. Sawarash told me, "If you go to the *bashali* a lot, your 'meat is finished' (*mos khul huu*) and you get old fast."

**TABLE 6. Reproductive History of Sawarash (married, with one adult child; approximate age 58)**

Preg. No.	Child's Name	Menstrual Age <sup>a</sup>	Live/Mis./ Still	Months Pregnant	Months Lived	Months Breast-fed	Lact. Amen.	Months in Bashali <sup>b</sup>
		10						
1		0.75	1	9	1		0	120
2		7	1	9	7		0	75
3	D	2	1	9		2	0	15
	(Menopause)	10						120
Total		357		27			0	330

<sup>a</sup>"Menstrual Age" refers to the length of time a woman has been menstruating. Most Kalasha women do not keep track of how "old" they are but found it quite easy to tell me how many years they menstruated before they became pregnant for the first time, how much time passed between the birth of the first child and the next pregnancy, and so on.

<sup>b</sup>"Months in Bashali" refers to the number of times a woman went to the *bashali* between pregnancies.

### The Ritual World of the Bashali

In chapter 1, I demonstrated the ways in which Kalasha women actively participate in the creation and maintenance of the *onjesta* and *pragata* spaces through which their spiritual and physical world is organized. If you imagine "*pragataness*" as a storm that swirls across the landscape of Kalashadesh, the *bashali* is the eye of that storm, central to it and yet serene because it is there that the *pragata* is properly contained and rendered harmless. Going to the *bashali* is itself a religious act, a conscious effort on the part of each woman to do her part to maintain order in the world, ensuring fertility and productivity. It is also more than this. Women's religious expression is most vibrant in the *bashali*, for here women conduct their own rituals and make offerings to and ask for blessing from a goddess, Deزالik, who is all their own. In other words, in the *bashali* women speak with God directly,<sup>9</sup> rather than allowing men to speak to God on their behalf, as happens in most other contexts.

Very little has been written about the ritual or social life of Kalasha women in their *bashali*, although the very inaccessibility of this institution makes it an object of intense speculation for Kalasha men and male anthropologists, who both trivialize and eroticize *bashali* life. Parkes, writing of women's rituals in the *bashali*, comments, "Men know virtually nothing about this private cult (nor do I) except that it involves some seemingly bizarre forms of ritual lesbian-

ism" (1983:196). Kalasha men, too, figuring that I didn't have sense enough not to answer embarrassing questions, often asked me "What do those women do in there? What do they talk about? Do they wear clothes?" In fact, women's rituals are no more (or less) bizarre or exotic or elaborate than men's. They don't overturn or invert the rest of Kalasha religion but refine and extend it by focusing attention on two essential components of Kalasha life: human reproduction and women's community.

### *Dezalik*

At the heart of the *bashali* is the goddess Dezalik, who lives in the menstrual house and protects *bashali* women and their infants, especially during the difficult and dangerous process of childbirth. Although she lives in the *bashali*, the most *pragata* space in the valley, Dezalik is very *onjesta*: menstruating women take care not to touch her unless they have completed their cycle and washed thoroughly, thus becoming more *onjesta* and less *pragata* themselves. Presently she is represented by a wooden, eighteen-inch-tall triangular figure with an indented oval circle at the top and a diamond-shaped hole in the middle. She stands discreetly on a simple shelf against the back wall of the *bashali*, difficult to see because of the dim light, covered with black soot from the fires, her base strewn with the walnut shells of old offerings.<sup>10</sup> I asked Kimat Khana Aya, a jolly, spritely woman and a respected midwife (*súda uṣṭawáú*, lifter of children) what the circle and the hole represented. She leaned toward me and replied, conspiratorially, that the oval was her face, and the hole was her (whispering) *vagina*. This sent her young daughters-in-law rolling to the ground in gales of laughter, swearing that this was not true. "Well, whatever else could it be, crazy (*got!*)!" Kimat Khana Aya exclaimed in mock annoyance at their naïvete.

When a new *bashali* is built, a new figurine is usually also carved by a local Kalasha master woodworker. Old Dezalik figures are thrown beneath the branches of the largest holly oak tree, where they lie unceremoniously. Each one looks a little different—in fact, one resembled the horse heads that are found on the ritual altar of Mahandeo and in the Jestak Han (lineage houses). I didn't believe that this was a Dezalik figure since it was so strikingly different from the others. But older women like Mushiki swear that this was the Dezalik

that was there when they were young girls, adding “the new ones look like nothing, not even a head, only a hole.” “It doesn’t matter what she looks like,” Saras Gula Aya reminded me, “it’s just wood anyway, not *really* Dezalik. We put the figure there to *remind* us of Dezalik.” Dezalik, then, or at least the contemporary understanding of her, is an idea, not an idol.

Like other Kalasha gods and goddesses, Dezalik is (to anthropologists) disappointingly hypo-cognized (Levy 1984; see Parkes 1991 for a discussion of the nature of religious knowledge among the Kalasha). According to Georg Morgenstierne, who conducted extensive linguistic and cultural research in the Kalasha valleys in 1929 (as well as throughout the region during his lifetime), the Kalasha believed Dezalik to be the sister of Dezaú, the god of creation (1951:165; see Palwal 1972 for a discussion of the associations between Kalasha divinities and their counterparts in what was greater Kafiristan). I tried this out with many women, saying, “I read in a book that Dezalik is the sister of Dezaú. Is that right?” “Who knows, sister,” would come the inevitable reply, “You’re the one who can read. Perhaps it’s right.” “But have you heard this,” I would press. No, they would say, they hadn’t heard it, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t true. I could find no woman who claimed to know myths or stories about Dezalik, and she appears not to have a characterizable personality. “Dezalik is our *gaḍérak* [a respected “elder,” a community leader],” the women explained simply on my first trip to the *bashali* and again whenever I asked. “She watches over us. She protects us.” One woman added, “Men are afraid of her. She scares them. If they came in here, they would see her and run away frightened.” Later, Saras Gula Aya elaborated for my tape recorder,

When a new *bashali* is made, a new Dezalik is also made—made just like men make the *gaṇḍáw* [funeral statue] figures. Men make them, and then they are put in the *bashali* and we pray to her. She demands her share; she becomes Dezalik. We give her bread [food], right? We make offerings to her, that’s her share, we call that her share. So the “one who eats her share” sits there; we throw bread to her, pray to her. When we pray to her, God [*khodáy*, the creator of God] sees. We just say we pray to her, and it is God who sees; it is a strange kind of praying. We just *say* Dezalik, we say Dezalik in God’s name, forcefully and easily

[describing the degree of difficulty of each birth], this is God's work, grace (*méher*) comes from God. . . . It is there that we go to pray.

At family and community altars, men make offerings and sacrifices in which they pray for the health of the community, for God's help in protecting them from their enemies, for safety from landslides and floods, for the fertility of crops and livestock. In the *bashali*, women pray and make offerings solely about human reproduction, a domain that is their concern alone. *Bashali* rituals support young women, new mothers, and their infants socially and spiritually as they move through the exciting, frightening, and sometimes dangerous processes of becoming a woman, giving birth, and being born.

#### *First Menstruation*

One day, as I was walking up-valley past the *bashali*, I was surprised to see my young friend Geki. It was Geki's first time in the *bashali*, and she was the first of her age mates to go. She'd been there three days already, she said, and she liked it. She was eating watermelon with the other *bashali* women—watermelon, a special treat, had recently been brought to the bazaar, and Damsi Aya had bought two for the *bashali* women to share. Geki, Lulu, and Geki's cousin Shirin Shat walked off, giggling, their arms around one another's waists. I ran into Geki's mother and aunt later in the day and told them how happy Geki had seemed. "She may be happy now, but she about ate my head [drove me crazy] when she first went," Gekia Aya told me. Geki had cried and cried. She cried all night. She cried the next morning, refusing to get up out of her bed and drink tea. She cried all the way to the *bashali*. It was embarrassing to begin menstruating, they said, since everyone knows and makes comments. Although some girls are married quite young and shuttle back and forth between their natal home and their marital home for years, they are not expected to be sexually active with their husbands until they begin menstruating. Now Geki's husband would begin bothering her to have sex with him and would become increasingly jealous of her interaction with other boys.

The first time a girl goes to the *bashali*, she is ushered in enthusiastically by the other women there, who are of course surprised to see

her. A woman who is almost finished with her period, and who characteristically stays in the menstrual house only five or six days (rather than someone with a history of long menstrual periods) makes an offering (*tuşulék*) of three cracked walnuts, throwing them in Deزالik's face. "Make it finish quickly," the goddess is instructed. Walnuts are unambiguous symbols of fertility and sexuality, and walnuts themselves are loved by everyone, making everything from sauces to breads to dried fruits taste rich and sweet. Two or three days later, women from the girl's father's family will bring *zánti aú*, the same thick, wheat bread brought to honor a woman who has just given birth. The goddess will be offered her "share" of the bread, and again one of the women will request that she see that the girl will "finish quickly." After that, girls in her age group from all over the valley will come in turns to the edge of the menstrual house grounds to visit their friend, bringing with them gifts of food. For many of them, it is the first of many "grown-up" social calls they will pay to the *bashali* over the course of their lives as they are drawn into the communitywide responsibility women take for one another. On the sixth day, the new menstruator prepares to go home. This first time, she doesn't wash her own clothes or beads but is attended to by the other *bashali* women, who wash both her and her things before sending her home.

The average Kalasha girl will attend the *bashali* forty-two times (spending approximately 229 days there), until, as Saras Gula Aya says, "later, later, she will become pregnant, pregnant she will become *zánti*—her time to give birth will come."

### *Childbirth*

The *bashali* is the only place where women talk openly about childbirth. Here young women can learn from watching others give birth, and laboring mothers can endure pain and intensity of childbirth in a place where they are supported physically, socially, and spiritually. While I was in the valleys, I attended three births. Two of these took place on the path en route to the *bashali*, so the emphasis was on rapid and discreet delivery rather than religious ceremony. The third birth I watched was a very easy delivery with no need to request help from the goddess. My descriptions of some rituals surrounding birth are therefore drawn from interviews rather than direct observation. Some

details of rituals seemed especially private, so I haven't written about them here.

In my own culture, pregnancy and birth are public matters. I was pregnant when I began writing this chapter and was amazed daily that perfect strangers reached out to rub my belly and offer unsolicited advice, telling me stories about especially painful and long labors or miscarriages and birth defects. By contrast, Kalasha women's fear of the pain and many dangers of childbirth are private matters. Outside of the *bashali*, I rarely heard it discussed, except as the subject of rare whispered conversations between trusted friends. I remember my surprise at hearing Shaizara Aya, who had seemed to me to be supremely confident and relaxed, confide to her father-in-law's brother's wife that her fear of dying in childbirth had increased with every child. When she was younger, she hadn't realized that such terrible things could happen. In the *bashali*, however, conversations such as these are commonplace. Women who have just given birth are asked to tell and retell their birth stories to visiting women. Young girls (and young anthropologists) ask how much it hurts: "Less than having a tooth pulled without anesthetic," Bayda Aya once explained to me.

When Kalasha women realize they are in labor, they ideally wait quietly through the early contractions, notifying their family only when the pain becomes very intense. Mira Aya was so controlled that I didn't realize that she was in labor, though I had been having tea and talking with her and her family for hours. In retrospect, she did seem unusually quiet. She sat by her youngest son until he fell asleep and then announced to her husband that he'd better call the midwife and find someone to organize the necessary supplies—walnuts to offer to Deزالik, wheat and walnut oil for porridge, butter for the baby and to massage into the perineum. Mira Dada must have been taken off guard also because he scurried around frantically. He and I and the midwife (who in this case was Saras Gula Aya) had to run to catch up with his wife as she grabbed a torch and took off single-mindedly down the steep wooded slope to the river and then on up the road to the *bashali*.

Laboring women are usually accompanied to the *bashali* by one or two female relatives or friends. The women support the mother-to-be through the contractions, urge her to walk despite the pain, warn away men, and "catch" the baby if the urge to push becomes overwhelming. In the night, as Mira Dada did, men usually accompany

their wives, lighting the way from a safe distance, so that they can neither see nor hear the laboring woman clearly. As I described in chapter 2, the presence of a man is intensely disconcerting and embarrassing to the women. For their part, Mira Dada and the other men I saw in his position all seemed concerned and unsettled by their helplessness, their lack of any role in this drama. Upon reaching the *bashali*, the women duck inside and the men go across the street to one of the hotels or to a friend's house to wait for word about the birth.

Inside the *bashali*, the women said that they had wondered if Mira Aya would come that evening. It was close to her time. As we came through the door, everyone got up to greet us with the traditional round of kisses to hands, cheeks, and braids. Kashkar arranged a bed for Mira Aya to lie on while Pirdausa Aya started a fire. Women took turns sitting on the bed with Mira Aya, stroking her face and telling her how good it was that she wasn't crying out. The other *bashali* women chatted and tended the fire. During the second, pushing stage, we all took turns supporting her by sitting and facing her as she squatted, stroking her face and hair and whispering encouragement. Saras Gula Aya checked her progress from behind, massaging her perineum with butter. God had blessed her with an easy labor, all the women commented, as a big baby boy slipped out after only fifteen minutes or so. There had been no need to pray for help. If the labor had been difficult, offerings would have been made to Dezalik, as Saras Gula Aya explained later:

When *zánti* women [women whose time has come] go to the *bashali*, they bring some walnuts. Look, when we went with Taraki Bibia Aya we brought walnuts, but then she had the baby on the path—if she'd had it in the *bashali*, you would have seen it. If there is any difficulty, if the baby doesn't come quickly, at first they break one walnut—like this, they break one walnut and they pray like this—'Oh, my Dezalik of the *bashali*, make her deliver quickly, bring the new flower into her arms, don't make things difficult, your eating and drinking [for your sustenance].' We say that, breaking one walnut and throwing it to Dezalik. Then, if there is more difficulty, if she doesn't become *zánti* quickly, someone will call, "Oh, make an offering, make an offering, dear." Then one woman will go there and break three wal-

nuts, break three walnuts like this, and like this all the women together will say, “Oh, my Dezalik of the *bashali*, one has come under your care [?]. Bring health, set the flower in her arms, your eating and drinking.” So we say, “bring health, bring health” we say, and then throw the three walnuts to her. Then if she doesn’t quickly become *zánti*, again they call, “make an offering, dear.” Again one woman goes there and breaks walnuts, breaks seven walnuts, and everyone, *everyone all together*, prays, “Oh, my Dezalik of the *bashali*, one has come under your care (?), bring health, set the flower in her arms, your eating and drinking.” [If there is still more trouble, they begin again, first offering one walnut, then three, then seven.] They go on like that. Then she becomes *zánti*.

Saras Gula Aya explained that if the birth is unexpectedly difficult a hank of the laboring mother’s beads will be placed around Dezalik. After the child is born, after the *ačhám̄bi* festival, the beads will be placed again on the mother’s neck. If the baby is a girl, these beads will be given to her when she grows up. If it is a boy, they will be given to his wife.

The cord is tied off with a fringe broken from one of the women’s belts and cut between pieces of sharp shale. Some *anglís* (probably UNICEF) donated scissors and other supplies for cutting the cord, Kashkar said, but they had disappeared very quickly. In the morning, the afterbirth is buried under the big holly oak tree. Immediately after the baby is born, the new mother will lie down and go directly to sleep while the other *bashali* women clean and swaddle the newborn. No matter what time it is, they also begin making the traditional thick wheat porridge topped with rich butter or walnut oil. This porridge is the original Kalasha comfort food—the first food introduced to babies and made when people are sick or simply feeling a little low. Before even tasting the porridge to see if it is salty enough, a bit of porridge is always offered to Dezalik. Then, hungry or not, the meal will be shared by everyone, and the new mother will be awakened and urged to eat. Later, the baby will be put to her breast, and the two will settle in for twelve to twenty days of resting (until the postpartum bleeding has stopped completely), during which they will be cared for continuously by the other *bashali* women.

Many of the customs that directly followed the birth of a baby

were dropped twelve to fourteen years ago, as I discussed in more detail in chapter 2. I want to describe these former customs here because I can imagine them being of great interest to future Kalasha women and because older Kalasha women take great delight in recollecting them. The quotations are again from a taped interview with Saras Gula Aya, who vividly acted out her descriptions for me, to the amusement of her daughters-in-law and granddaughters, who fell off their stools and rolled on the floor in laughter.

Before, in our time, we used to take rocks and cut the cord, cut it and tie it off with a string. And then, we call it [a secret word], the afterbirth that comes with the child. If it doesn't come out, if the afterbirth doesn't come out from the mother quickly, then we try all sorts of things—stick chicken feathers in her mouth, crush walnuts and put them like this on her head, we do this and then it comes out. Then we leave it until dawn. At dawn we go outside and look, women go out and look, look for men. "Men aren't walking around, come, come on," they say. So then a woman runs runs runs to the hollyoak tree, digs a hole, and buries it, buries the afterbirth under the ground.

After she has the baby, she takes everything off, everything—beads, bracelets, earrings, even strings to tie her braids—eeevvverything she undoes. These things are put far away. Then the next day, early, really early, they get up and look for birds. One woman, two women, go outside. The woman, she sits there naked, holding her baby, the *zánti* woman. That mother is naked—completelyyyyy naked. Then at dawn, they take one cloth for wrapping the baby (*boniátyak*) and cover the baby, and then she sits there like this, like this, crouching, crouching and holding her baby. Then the women go outside to look for birds. Soon they hear one: "tchcht, tchcht," it says. Then they go inside and call out, "The birds have sung, the birds have sung, put your dress on," they say. Then they sit there. Then she again runs runs runs, puts her dress far away, and runs to the place where they buried the afterbirth. She urinates there, urinates and then comes back to the *bashali*. There they put water in her hand—on the way out they put water in her hand, too. Three times, three times they put water in her hand, and she washes her hands like this. Like this, she washes her hands, and then she comes back through the

door and sits down. For six days they do this, our old custom, every dawn—the time Muslims say “arzan”—[and every evening] for six days. In our time, it was like this, like this my daughter. Now, no, now just a little.

The *zánti* woman didn’t touch the menstruating women. They would give her water far away, holding it out for her like this and pouring it into her hands. They wouldn’t touch her. If she were chewing tobacco, like this, they would drop it into her hand. If you touch her, you wash your hands. You wouldn’t sit down—you would wash your hands right away. For six days, this is our custom. Before our custom was like this. The clothes that were used to swaddle the child for the first six days, these are called *pragáta bóniyak*. We tied them up with one of the belts used to tie the swaddling and hung them in the holly tree—you can still see some hanging there. We’d hold them out like this and tie them in the tree.

Before there were so many customs, many, many customs, now not anymore. Now they don’t keep the customs—beads they leave around their neck, at dawn they don’t go outside and look for birds, if they touch her they no longer wash their hands. Now nothing, nothing. They only do *ačhám̄bi*. “Third-day bread” they also do. In our time, there was so much culture, all these customs.

All of the discontinued customs were symbolic ways of creating space between the extremely *pragata* state just following childbirth (when the postpartum bleeding is at its heaviest) and the other women in the *bashali*. It is interesting to me that these old customs all involve personal inconvenience on the part of the new mother, so that when one woman asserted her right to “choose” not to follow them they very quickly fell out of fashion. The new jeep road brings cargo jeeps to and from Chitral, tourists, visitors from other valleys, and lots of foot traffic. Because the *bashali* lies next to the road, many of these customs, especially those that involve being naked, are hopelessly embarrassing for these very modest women. In fact, though, most women do observe the spirit of these customs, taking off most of their beads, leaving their dress unbelted, and staying inside for the first six days after the birth, going outside only in the early morning and late evening to urinate. These are days of complete rest for the

new mother and baby. At the same time, all the elements that depend on communal effort—such as making porridge after a birth and performing the *ačhám̐bi* ceremony, are still very much intact.

The mother's husband's family brings *zánti aú* three times. The first morning after the baby is born the women in this family bake this bread, called "child's bread," and bring it to the *bashali* along with some especially good cheese that the family has hoarded to celebrate the birth of the child. The new mother won't go outside to greet her family, but the other *bashali* women will come out to receive the bread and visit about every detail of the birth and the health of mother and baby. A bit of bread is offered to Deزالik before the bread is shared by all the *bashali* women. A round of bread is also sent to the midwife on this first day. The child will have a special relationship with his or her mother's midwife the rest of his or her life, calling her *gáda āya* (big mother).

The family brings *zánti aú* again on the third day after the birth, this time called "third-day bread." Meanwhile, word of the new baby will have spread to relatives and friends across the valleys, who will have been flocking to the family's house to offer their congratulations: *bumbarák bo!* (Congratulations!) if the baby is a boy, *šaydár bo!* (You have something precious!) if she is a girl. Mira Dada had saved a big tin of his best cheese for the occasion. He dug it up it from beneath the water channel near his house where it had been safely hidden from the mice. The whole neighborhood was involved in cooking bread and making tea for the visitors.

Despite the safe birth and the celebration of the family, this story has a sad ending. Mira Aya left the *bashali* after only thirteen days, insisting that she had been there long enough, that her postpartum bleeding had stopped flowing, and that times had changed so that now it was unnecessary to stay such a long time. Although she was urged, scolded, and cajoled to stay longer, as the only woman of her house she felt she needed to get back to her fieldwork and her other children. The next week, she said that she had seen a red monster when she had gone to the boulder field near her house to urinate. A few days later her baby fell ill. I said it was pneumonia, but everyone agreed that we had to wait until his father came home to take him to the hospital in Chitral. I was holding him when he died. His sweet face haunts me still. A woman across the river divined (*istēink kárik*—to divine using a bracelet dangled from a thread) that the child had

died because his mother had left the *bashali* too soon, that the monster she had seen was evidence that she had still been in a *pragata* state. Mira Aya crumpled to the ground in despair and was sharply scolded by the usually kind women in my family. She was young and would have more children, they said. She needed to get up and take care of the ones she already had. The baby was gently swaddled in a white cloth and buried without a funeral in the graveyard. Friends and relatives returned to offer condolences.

### *ačhámbi*

Finally, on the sixth morning, the family brings *ačhámbi aú* (*ačhámbi* bread) and prepares to perform the *ačhámbi* ceremony in which the new baby will be brought outside for the first time, washed, blessed, and introduced to the community. After the *bashali* women have made an offering to Deزالik, one of the *zánti aú* will be set aside. Later that day, two women accompany the new mother, and the three of them take this bread and perform a special ritual near the big holly oak tree. Then they go down to the water, where the new mother will wash for the first time since the birth of her baby. In the winter, all three women wash their feet and hands. In the summer, they'll take a much longed for bath. Then the women will wash their faces and return to the *bashali*.

The *ačhámbi* day tends to be exciting for everyone. The new mother is tired of staying inside in the dark *bashali*, husbands, friends and relatives look forward to seeing the baby for the first time, and little girls begin early getting wound up for their central role in this ritual. In the evening, one woman from the new father's family will round up all the female children who haven't yet begun to menstruate but are old enough to make the trek and head toward the *bashali*. Little girls from other settlements will stream in behind them. When we went to do *ačhámbi* for Gulabia Aya, the littlest girls were lined up and ready to go to the *bashali* at 10:00 A.M., though everyone told them it wouldn't happen for six or seven hours. They jumped about all day, pretending to purify one another and begging to be allowed to light fires. The girls bring new clothes and swaddling material for the baby, resin-soaked wood to make a fire, a cup to hold water, holly oak branches, and a big batch of bread and cheese.

When they reach the *bashali*, the girls will give the baby clothes and

five or seven *tasili* breads to the *bashali* women, make a fire on the hill near the *bashali*, and sit down together to feast on the remaining bread and cheese. The *bashali* women take the bread and set it on the mantel for Deزالik—"It's *ačhámbi* bread," they tell her. Then one woman takes the baby and begins washing the child, swaddling it in the new, clean clothes. The new mother goes with another woman to the water channel, and again she washes her feet, hands, and face. If the baby is a girl, she collects five or seven little stones; for a boy, she gathers a piece of holly. Returning to the *bashali*, she asks, "Have you all washed my child?" "We've washed her," comes the response. The mother gathers her baby in her arms and hides it beneath a shawl, taking a large needle in one hand.

The new mother steps up to the boundary of the *bashali* territory, where the pack of little girls is waiting. Since the children are conducting the ritual, there is always a great deal of amusing confusion. One girl pours water into a second girl's hands. The second girl washes her hands, and then holds them out again. Her cupped palms are filled with water, which she then pours onto the outstretched hands of the new mother. The second girl takes a piece of holly, lights it, and circles it over her head before throwing it behind her. This should be repeated three times, although the kids often lose count, performing the blessing four or five times. When the ceremony is finished, the girls are the first in the community to get a peek at the new baby. Then they each grab a piece of resin-soaked wood, light it on fire, and charge up the mountain to the Jestak Han altar, where they pile up the wood and take turns jumping over the fire, shouting "*ačhámbi*-a-a-a-a" and shrieking with excitement at their own bravery. Now the new mother is free to come outside during the day to talk with visitors and sit in the sunshine. She can take a more thorough bath and braid her hair—a treat after six days.

I was often struck by the playful attitude women take toward their *bashali* rituals. While important and necessary, they are conducted with an air that is anything but somber. Once, for example, while waiting for Gazi Khana Aya to get ready for her *ačhámbi* ceremony, Nazibula Aya wrapped up her two year old and stepped up to the waiting girls. They acted out the whole ritual and were offered a glimpse of the new "baby"—who, spying her older cousin in the crowd, sprang up and squealed, "Hey, sister!" I never participated in male-only rituals at Sajigor or Mahandeo altars, but my husband tells

me that, while often casual in their approach, men's rituals tend to be far more down to business.

*Purification of the Bashali*

Twice each spring the *bashali* itself is blessed and purified (*suček*), once by the girls who live in the upper part of the valley and once by the girls who live down-valley. This, too, is a big event organized by the oldest girls who have not yet begun to menstruate. The girls go door to door the day before the blessing, asking that each household contribute wheat or corn to their cause. They sell the corn to buy things that the *bashali* women need—teapots or cups or plates or blankets. In the last fifteen years, Westerners and government officials and NGOs have been interested in donating beds, blankets, lanterns, and utensils for use in the *bashali*, “but when we were girls,” explained Gazi Khana Aya, a serious woman of about forty, “it wasn’t like that. We felt like the things we bought really mattered.” The girls spend the morning grinding wheat at the water mill and have a party making baskets full of bread in several adjoining houses. The purification ceremony itself is exciting and funny because it involves having two girls run around the *bashali* naked, purifying it with burning holly oak branches. The day I saw them they argued and giggled the whole way about who would go in. One of the girls was Kosh Begim, a coy little nine year old who is the child bride of my friend Balaman. Balaman had just told me the day before that he would never allow his young wife to do this, but of course she never gave a thought to asking him. The group of about twenty girls ranged in age from about five to seventeen. They all proceeded to the *bashali*, where they discovered that they had forgotten the resin-soaked wood and were chastised for being so scatterbrained. It took them a good while to round some up. Then the two chosen girls undressed, one at a time, with lots of giggling as they attempted to get naked modestly behind the shawls the other girls held up to shield them (and occasionally lifted, revealing them to shrieks of laughter). All the men in the vicinity, including my husband, had been sharply chased away earlier. Finally naked, the two girls grabbed the burning wood and holly branches and streaked lightning fast into the *bashali* house, where they blessed it with the burning holly. They then peeked out the door and shouted that someone should throw them their underwear. Kosh Begim

donned her pants, while the other girl wrapped up in a shawl, and they were sent running around the outside of the *bashali*, while everyone looked on laughing. Then the *bashali* women helped the girls onto the tin roof, where they giggled in embarrassment. They huddled together beneath the shawl and crept to each corner of the roof, shrieking each time they thought their “bottoms” might be “known.” They were lowered off the roof and rushed back inside to warm up. The rest of the girls dispersed. The two girls would bathe and then be free to leave, not returning for five or six years when they would become menstruating women themselves.

### **The Social World of the Bashali**

Although I knew better theoretically, having critiqued other anthropologists for the same thing in graduate seminars, I came to the valleys with this unexamined assumption tucked under my arm: I assumed that individual Kalasha women would see themselves as members of a community of women, defining itself against men and bound together by their shared experience of male dominance (for critiques, see hooks 1991; Mohanty 1985; John 1989; and Moore 1985). I tried in vain to encourage my friends to make generalizations about men and asked about men’s work habits, sexuality, and how they treated their wives and children. “Some men were one way, and some another,” was the inevitable reply—couldn’t I see that for myself? Most men aren’t interested in babies, but Sherdan even wipes the snot from their noses. Many men have affairs, but Khoshdina Dada never has. Some husbands are strict, some stingy, some indulgent. Gula Dada has loved to work since he was a toddler. His mother tells that when he was a child he liked to dig up little tree seedlings and replant them (he pretended to do this “for his wife”). Khan spends all his time drinking tea and playing cards in the bazaar. And the same was true of women—some were one way, some another. My friend and sometime assistant Wasiara Aya constantly made fun of my incessant survey taking (much to my annoyance, she often did this in front of other people). Not impressed with my explanation of sampling methods, she insisted that the differences between people were so great that I couldn’t possibly learn anything by following the activities of only a few. My friends’ reluctance to make comparisons that too

simplistically swallow up the differences between individuals was a valuable lesson to me, one that I continually struggle to incorporate into my social science.

And yet there are times and places, set outside the context of the interdependence of everyday life, in which men and women set themselves in opposition and women *do* see themselves as women. The Chaumos winter solstice festival is one such time, a time when Rumbur Valley is at its most *onjesta*, a time when men and women achieve the idealized separation that is not possible in day to day life. The *bashali*, a place set outside of everyday places, as Chaumos is a time set outside of ordinary time, echoes this perfect separation of men and women. The *bashali* offers space for women to think of themselves as a community. Like all communities, *bashali* women are people of diverse opinions and positions, each with other allegiances and obligations. They are nonetheless bound together in this context by shared knowledge, work, space, and bodies. In this section, I want to delineate the ways in which the structure of the *bashali* contributes to the maintenance of *jamilishír*, the sisterhood of women, and comment on the ways in which this identity reinforces women's claims to freedom.

In societies that have "men's houses," separate buildings where only men congregate, ethnographers have inevitably been fascinated by the various ways in which these diverse institutions offer opportunities for social cohesion and socialization (Bateson 1958; Barth 1959; Mayberry-Lewis 1967; Hogbin 1970; Herdt 1987) and provide a dynamic repository for ritual knowledge in which cosmologies are not simply transmitted but "made" (Barth 1987). In *Gendered Spaces*, Daphne Spain argues that it is precisely the exclusive and secret nature of men's houses that make them so powerful (1992:67–79). As I noted earlier, "women's houses" have generally been thought of as places that mark the relative disempowerment of women. But in fact the Kalasha *bashali* offers an opportunity to women that is roughly analogous to what men's houses offer to men. The *bashali* is a space that is off limits to men, and knowledge about what goes on there is not discussed with them. As Georg Simmel noted, sometimes "secrecy is its own sociological purpose," that is, by the very act of sharing secrets "those who know form a community" (Wolff 1950:355). Women delight in the privacy afforded by their *bashali* and take it seriously, never discussing with Kalasha men the details of rituals, childbearing, or

menstruation—to do so would be embarrassing, as these things are entirely “women’s work.”

It is not just that women’s solidarity is created by the act of sharing knowledge. The structure of the institution organizes the way knowledge is transmitted, and this shapes the tenor of community life itself (cf. Barth 1987). Kalasha men’s rituals always have a leader. Larger, more important rituals are directed by *kazis*, men who keep complex historical and ritual knowledge on behalf of the community. Smaller rituals are directed by elders in the family. But the membership of women in the *bashali* is constantly shifting, so that it is necessary that everyone understands *bashali* rules and be able to conduct *bashali* rituals. Women’s community in the *bashali* (though not, of course, in everyday life, when women are acting as mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law and aunts and grandmothers) is therefore less hierarchical than men’s.

Beyond shared understandings of rituals and reproduction, the *bashali* is a place where women’s lives intersect physically and temporally, where women share property and purpose. Part of what Asmara Aya meant when she said that in the *bashali wā šīaw* is that there is space and time to get to know one another. Women often call the *bashali bašāli dur* or *bashali* house—*dur* in Kalasha connoting not only the physical structure but the people living there (*durāy moč*, or “house people,” is another word for family). Inside the *bashali*, women interact as families do, sharing resources and work and responsibility for children. While men share ritual altars and high pastures and the little bazaar that has become the center of men’s social life, the *bashali* is the only space in the valley that belongs in common to all women. I am reminded of a development project that provided land on which Kalasha women were encouraged to jointly grow vegetables for sale. The project failed utterly because in their daily lives women have their own families to take care of, their own work to do, and little incentive to act as a collective. But the *bashali* is a place where every woman comes, regardless of village or family or clan. Inside the *bashali*, women who otherwise have little in common work together, boiling and scrubbing the heavy cotton blankets, gathering wood for fires, cooking, and getting up at night to comfort an infant who is no relation. I noted earlier how girls jointly provision the *bashali* with the needed cups and pots and women donate worn-out shoes that are used by everyone.

I don't want to make the mistake of leading you to believe that women always achieve mystic solidarity simply by virtue of sharing time in the menstrual house. "It's terrible when none of your friends are there, *da ne ka'riu* (it doesn't make one content)," complained teenaged Jalat Bibi, a sentiment I heard echoed many times. Yet one of the delightful things, for me at least, is that for a few days women whose paths otherwise rarely cross find things in common. I heard one dramatic example: Shah's mother and Geki's aunt had been angry with one another for years, and their feud came to a head when Shah wanted to marry Geki's younger sister and Geki's aunt refused to give her blessing. Although the marriage could have proceeded anyway, Geki's father said he wouldn't arrange the union unless his only sister could be persuaded. The two landed in the *bashali* at the same time. I was told that they didn't speak to one another for two days, but eventually the familiarity of eating together and sleeping in the same room thawed their mutual anger. Geki's aunt agreed to accept Shah's mother's apology along with some small gifts, and the marriage could go forward.

The privacy and free time afforded by staying in the *bashali* allow for an environment in which women behave differently than they do in the village.<sup>11</sup> It is of course a matter of degree, but inside the *bashali* grounds women related to one another more physically and playfully. Although Kalasha women tend to be affectionate to friends and relatives anyway, in everyday life touching is generally confined to greetings and goodbyes. In the *bashali*, women sleep wrapped around one another, stroll about arm in arm and hand in hand, and spend evenings huddled together around the fire. I noticed a lot more physical humor as well—pinching and slapping, for example—which otherwise was commonly only to young teenaged girls. Parcha Bibi once tackled me out of nowhere and wrestled me to the ground. Everyone but me seemed to find it particularly funny. I once stumbled across three women who were squatting in a circle in the woods behind the *bashali*, chatting and laughing about whose shit was the blackest—a result of eating charcoal, which women say is a "bad habit" but a very common one, especially in the *bashali*. This scene seemed especially funny since the four three-year old girls in my family had recently taken to holding hands and sitting in a circle for their morning pee. Perhaps the *bashali* is a place where women can recapture some of the unselfconsciousness of childhood. The *bashali* is the only place where

women commonly sing and dance outside of a festival occasion. Almost every night the *bashali* is filled with song, and women encourage one another (and even coerce those who are shy) to dance in the center of a circle of clapping and laughter.

This extra physicality extends into an interest in sex, a subject I almost never heard women discuss seriously outside of this context. Given that the Kalasha are so sexualized by outsiders, and given my assumption that Kalasha women's claims to sexual freedom would correspond to an openness about discussions of sexuality, I came to the valleys expecting to find women willing to talk about sex. For the most part, they weren't. Before I learned better manners, I asked inappropriate and indiscreet questions that met with awkward, embarrassed silences. And so my first couple of times in the *bashali* I was surprised to receive a barrage of even more embarrassing and blunt questions about my own sex life and my husband's anatomy. Was it true that *anglis* had sex standing up? And how often did my husband like to have sex? Irak proclaimed that her husband could have sex five times in one night. I confessed that once or twice was enough for us. "Oh ho," cried Kashkar, "he must be very weak if he can only have sex one time in a night!" I was instructed to send him to the high pastures where he would grow more vital. Irak asked what Steve would bring me when he returned from Islamabad and could she share it? "Perhaps he'll bring her a big penis," suggested Gishen Bibi. "Would Irak like to share that?" I asked, as women fell off their stools and rolled on the ground laughing. Whenever firewood was low or the cookies or tea ran out, someone would comment that we should find a man and flirt with him so that he would bring more supplies. In addition, many women enjoyed homoerotic joking, a genre of humor I heard nowhere else. Women would comment that another woman was looking hard at her bottom ("Let her look, her husband has been up in the high pastures for such a long time, what else does she have to look at?"), joked about sleeping together like husband and wife ("I won't sleep in your bed, you'll make me pregnant!" "How would I make you pregnant, I don't have a penis"), and on and on. Erotic joking is an important part of the environment of intimacy and fun in the *bashali*. My questions about whether this same-sex erotic humor ever extended into physical, sexual relationships between women were received with blank incomprehension.<sup>12</sup>

Conversations also took more a more serious cast. In the privacy

of the menstrual house, young women would discuss whether or not they had been sleeping with their husbands. I heard Matrik's mother-in-law (half) jokingly tell Matrik in front of other women that she should sleep with her son more. I heard other older women instruct young girls to wait to have sex until they were older, as pregnancy would trap them in marriage (see chapter 6). Young girls asked how much sex hurt. Women compared strategies for dealing with "pesky" husbands.

The openness about sexuality and the tendency toward more physical relationships with one another point to the most important, and perhaps most obvious, connection facilitating Kalasha women's community in the *bashali*: their shared embodiedness as female, as people who menstruate, miscarry, and give birth to children—some of whom live, and some of whom don't.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the details of their reproductive lives are what bring them together as a community in the *bashali* in the first place. The *bashali* is a place of intense physical intimacy, where women share knowledge about their bodies that would be unthinkable in everyday life. Whereas birth for us is intensely personal, shared only with intimates and managed by medical professionals, every woman present at the *bashali* when someone comes to give birth is expected to participate, and the experience is private only to the extent that men are excluded. No Kalasha woman would think to be embarrassed about being seen by another woman—even someone she hardly knew—because the messiness, danger, and joy of birth is something women share with one another. Women compare the duration and amount of their menstrual flows and other details of their reproductive lives. The data I gathered about women's fertility histories were very interesting to my Kalasha friends. I found that women remembered accurately the details of other women's reproductive histories. The *bashali* is a place where none of the details of reproductive biology need be hidden—though I want to underscore that they are not romanticized either. One day Gulua, a woman in her early forties, came to the *bashali* for the first time in a couple of months. She went out back to the woods, complaining of a stomach ache. A while later she returned bearing a small, flat piece of slate. "Look what came out of me," she called, holding up a little piece of bloody tissue about the size of an index finger. A miscarriage, it was declared. One woman picked up a stick and began poking around, looking for the head. Standing in a circle, the women examined the aborted fetus, and then Gulua

tossed it unceremoniously in the garbage pit next to the graveyard where women who die in childbirth are buried.

As these examples illustrate, Kalasha women have a fundamentally different relationship to reproduction, and to their reproductive bodies, than most contemporary American women. Emily Martin has shown how metaphors of failed production and alienation pervade American women's images of their bodies, how reproductive lives are given over to medical specialists and thus many experience the processes of menstruating and giving birth as frightening, disempowering, shameful, and fragmenting (1987). Kalasha women's experience of their reproductive selves is very different. It is certainly true, as I highlighted in the last chapter, that menstrual blood and the blood of parturition are explicitly *pragata* and that if not properly cared for this blood could have potentially disastrous effects. I had expected (hoped, even, I'll admit) that the cosmological significance of the blood that issues from women's bodies would be reversed in the menstrual house. But this isn't true either, at least not exactly. Rather, the menstrual house is a place where reproduction is demystified, approached with curiosity. In the *bashali*, menstrual blood and the blood of parturition are as normal as, say, a runny nose—a little inconvenient and messy, maybe, but certainly ordinary, even interesting. Of course, giving birth is still frightening and powerful, but each woman trusts that whoever is in the *bashali* when her "time" comes will know what to do and will take care of her. Each birth generates a community of memory and shared experience among the women present. Their association extends beyond the space and time of the birth in the *bashali*. They are connected by the children born into this community, who will call the midwife "great mother" (*gáda āya*); who may have nursed from another woman's breast, and thus will call her "milk mother" (*čhir āa*); and who will affectionately call other children born around the same time *barabár* (equal) or *burubér* (equal, affectionate). Because each woman stays in the *bashali* two to three weeks after the birth of a child, each child will have been held in its infancy by half to two-thirds of the menstruating women in the valley. This act of being enfolded and cherished within a circle of women will be reenacted again after death, when the deceased is encircled by mourning women who lovingly sing his or her praises.

The details of their reproductive lives form a body of knowledge and practice controlled entirely by women. While men may have

something to say about almost everything else, in this arena they stand helplessly on the sidelines—looking on from a distance like Mira Dada or calling from the road to enquire politely about when this or that woman will wash. Men don't even have the words to ask directly about human reproduction since the names of women's reproductive organs and processes are the greatest secret of all.<sup>14</sup>

### The Bashali Also Allows for Personal Space

The menstrual house offers women a space for an expanded social life, but it also serves as a place to briefly evade the thick tangle of social relations in the village and household. It was near Chaumos, a time when everyone in the valley is engaged in singing irreverent and pointed songs about everyone else. Begim and Zamin Khan had staged a botched elopement. Caught en route to their hiding place by her husband and uncles, she'd been dragged home struggling and crying, and Zamin Khan had been beaten by her husband's friends. The next morning, even before the valley burst into songs making fun of the whole affair, Begim took off for the *bashali*. I knew that she had been in the *bashali* just two weeks before, but when I asked if she were menstruating she snapped (uncharacteristically, for she is an unusually boisterous and jovial person), "Of course I am, why else would I be here?" Bayda Aya, who had come to the bazaar with me, pulled me close and whispered, "Why else would she be there? Of course, she's not menstruating again. She's embarrassed. She came here to wait for a few days until everyone thinks of something else to sing about." This was the first time I understood that the *bashali* is a place where women go not just because they *have* to but because they *can*. There were many examples. Retreating from the flurry of gossip and anger that follows an elopement (successful or not) was a common pattern.

And women would sometimes go to the *bashali* just to get away from home for a few days. One afternoon I passed Bronzik Gul, who was sitting near the river behind the *bashali*. She called out, asking why I hadn't come to the *bashali* the previous night. "There were so many women there, more than twenty." There weren't beds enough for everyone, so they built a fire outside and stayed up all night singing and telling stories. She said I should come just for one night. "Come even if it's not your 'time,'" she urged. "It's so much fun with

so many women around. Lots of women come even when they aren't menstruating—Sumali is there right now, and she isn't menstruating." Later older women confirmed that it is common for young women to go to the *bashali* when they aren't menstruating or to stay a couple of extra days after their menstrual flow has stopped. One mother-in-law, angry that her daughter-in-law had been at the *bashali* eight days when she typically "washed" after five, sighed, "What can I do? Only she knows if she is ready to wash or not."

Rumbur is a small world. It is a place where every relationship has layers of history and multiple connections, a place where everyone knows what everyone else is doing. When I asked women questions about the strict *purdah* that is kept by their Muslim neighbors, they always noted that they appreciated the "privacy" that walls and doors and veils allow. In comparison, Kalasha social life is open. Doors are never closed—or at least a closed door does not mean to stay away. Kalasha build their villages up the sides of mountains, where they can see and be seen, instead of nestled near river bottoms as Chitralis prefer. Lives are lived outside. We'd sit on our front porch and watch the people in the village across the river, commenting on who was home, who was away and why, who had company, who was beginning to cook dinner—and I'm sure they did the same. When Asmara Aya said that the *bashali* is a place where *wā šīaw*, where there is space, she meant this in particular: in the *bashali*, there are fewer eyes on you. When you enter the *bashali* ground, you step into a world where the people you interact with every day—husbands, neighbors, in-laws, parents—can't influence you directly. They can't talk to you unless you want them to, and they can't touch you at all.

This is important, especially for young women, because it means that the *bashali* serves as a place where women can, and do, exercise the freedoms they claim for themselves. Their *bashali* provides a space where women can go to make personal decisions about reproduction and marriage away from the social scrutiny and pressure of village life.

In her two-and-a-half-year study of menstrual houses among the Dogon of Mali, West Africa, Beverly Strassmann tested her hypothesis that menstrual taboos, and especially menstrual houses, evolved as "anticuckoldry devices." By advertising female reproductive status, menstrual houses would help a man assess paternity, avoid marrying a pregnant woman, and avoid investing his resources in a child

not his own. She found menstrual house attendance to be singularly reliable evidence of menstruation. No woman gave birth to a child either early or later than nine months, and so Strassmann infers that no women in her study “faked” a menstrual period. Dogon men, she concludes, would be able to predict, as Strassmann herself could, when a woman had become pregnant and thus could avoid being cuckolded (Strassmann 1991). Among the Dogon, menstrual houses thus apparently limit women’s ability to make reproductive decisions by making public what would otherwise be hidden (at least for a while). But the situation for the Kalasha seems to be quite different. It is true that a trip to the *bashali* does advertise female reproductive status but not reliably (although I must note that I did not replicate Strassmann’s meticulous quantitative study, and so what I offer are qualitative observations that might inspire further inquiry).

Kalasha people, men as well as women, do pay attention to who goes to the *bashali* or observes the rules for staying in the house while menstruating. Women who are only three or four days late are barraged with suggestions that they are pregnant. A village elder once asked me if his factional rival’s daughter had indeed gone to the *bashali* for the first time in three months and then shouted gleefully, “Ha, I knew it, she’s miscarried a bastard child!” Women reported openly that if someone were to get pregnant by a lover while her husband was away, she would continue going to the *bashali* for a couple months until her husband returned (of course, each woman said that she wouldn’t do that but knew others who had). Far from being an institution that helps Kalasha men assess their wives’ reproductive status, the fact that women can and do go there when they are not menstruating means that it is further obscured.<sup>15</sup> And, while Kalasha women claim not to have knowledge of effective methods for inducing abortion (though they try eating lots of salt and jumping from high places), they report that women who are desperate sometimes do ask for medicine from nearby Gujar women. The ability to hide their pregnancy for a couple of months would give them time to make reproductive decisions without involving the entire household. (This, of course, is sheer speculation on my part, since no woman in my study admitted that she had done this—again, they knew others who knew others who had.)

When Kalasha people say that their women are free, they mean primarily that they do not live under the *ultimate* authority of their

husbands: They are free to resist. But this isn't always easy, since along with this culturally acknowledged right is an equally strong sense that women *should* obey their husbands. In the *bashali*, this balance tips in favor of women. Parcha Bibi and I were nearly always in the *bashali* at the same time. She was young and wild, always flirting with passersby. She had been given to her husband, Bandara, by her father when she was quite young. He was much older, and quite strange, and while he tended to grow on you after awhile he hadn't yet grown on Parcha Bibi (though my friends now write that they are quite happy together and expecting their first child). He would follow her around the valley, alternately cajoling her with promises of trips to exotic places and berating her for her unwifely behavior. But when she went to the *bashali* she could escape him totally. Each time he'd stand for a while on the edge of the *bashali* grounds, begging her to come and talk with him and bribing other women to talk her into coming out. And each time she would refuse, emerging only after he'd left in an exasperated huff.

Bibi Shan is one of only two Kalasha girls who have completed their high school education. (Now she is in Peshawar learning to be the first female Pakistani pilot—but that's another story.) While I was in the valleys, an English woman started a "guide program." Young Kalasha people who could speak a little bit of English would serve as guides for the tourists who come to the valleys in the summertime. Bibi Shan asked to be a guide and was chosen for the position. Her young husband forbade her to participate, saying that he didn't want her "running around" so much, associating with so many strangers. Bibi Shan left that evening for the *bashali*, slipping out the next morning before he could prevent her from going to Chitral for training.

Women have apparently been using their *bashali* as a place to escape angry husbands for a long time. A. Raziq Palwal writes that he witnessed the following scene in the Kalasha valleys in 1970:

A man came and yelled at his wife who was inside the Seclusion House. She came out, crossed the river water by jumping over it from rock to rock and reached her husband. They took positions of about one to two meters apart from one another. They talked but did not reach any agreement on their mutual problem. She finally walked away, but the man rushed in front of her and tried to stop her. As he was not allowed to hold, push or pull her, she

continued toward him. The man, probably instinctively, grabbed a stick and started brandishing it before her to keep her away. The woman continued walking toward him and forcing the man to retreat. Neither he nor his weapon was tabu-proof and the result of his endeavors was a failure. (1972:47)

Young women also use the *bashali* as a place where they can resist being coerced into marriages. When Taksina was seventeen or so, her family gave her as a wife to her dead sister's husband, Mirshadin. Her sister had died in childbirth, leaving an infant daughter and a grieving husband, so this match solved problems for everyone—everyone but Taksina. Because the entire community was in favor of this marriage, Taksina received little support, though she claimed Mirshadin hit her and constantly compared her to her dead sister. When she had exhausted other means of protest to this marriage—refusing to talk, running away to her natal family at every chance, flirting openly with other men—she finally retreated to the *bashali* for ten days. Mirshadin was beside himself. "I'll become Muslim," he told me, "I swear I will. At least my wife couldn't leave me." One night, Mirshadin, claiming that he saw Taksina flirting with the Pakhtun hotel manager (right across the street from the *bashali*), burst onto the *bashali* grounds and began hitting and shaking her. The other women finally persuaded him to leave. Mirshadin's act was shocking, and most women said they could remember no other case of a Kalasha man violating *bashali* boundaries. Later he would have to make expensive offerings at Sajigor in reparation. Taksina's father took her to Chitral, where X rays confirmed a cracked rib, and her father and mother finally agreed that the marriage should be dissolved. They would give Mirshadin's bridewealth back, and Taksina would be free. "What is one cracked rib," Taksina told me later, "I am free of him."

By far the most dramatic use of the *bashali* is as a stage from which elopements are launched. Chapter 6 will discuss elopement (*alaṣiṅ*) in more detail: going *alaṣiṅ* is the prototypical act symbolizing Kalasha women's freedom. The *bashali* is the place where these dangerous, complicated, romantic events are often organized and executed. Fredrik Barth told me that a woman eloped with her lover from the *bashali* while he was on a brief visit to Rumbur Valley in the 1950s. Of three successful elopements that took place during my fieldwork, two

were initiated from the *bashali*. One of these women “fled” right from the bed I was sharing with her, while I, the intrepid anthropologist, slept through the whole thing.

Begim, the young woman who suffered the embarrassing failed elopement attempt described earlier, left before sunup with Zamin Khan. They’d spent the whole week planning her departure. Zamin Khan’s friends came by again and again, hoping for the chance to talk to Begim alone. Finally, they all met by the river in back of the *bashali* grounds, and she agreed that they would try again that night. She seemed excited but not appreciably more giddy than usual, and I was surprised that she wasn’t more nervous in the face of the life change she was about to undergo. She told me that they had come for her the night before, too, but she hadn’t awakened. Begim’s husband, Aktar Shah, and his friends were also circling around, having been tipped off that she was going to elope. Two nights in a row they stood on the road and threw rocks that clattered down on the metal roof of the *bashali* until Begim and her friends came out to yell at them. “Go ahead and go,” Aktar Shah dared, “and we’ll kill you and him and burn your house down.” “Burn it already,” retorted Begim. The next day, Begim announced that it was time for her to wash, and she washed all her clothes and braided her hair. Later in the afternoon, she came into the *bashali* house sighing that she had “started again” and would have to stay at least another night. That afternoon her mother showed up in a fury and attracted a crowd. She begged Begim not to elope, and instructed her to wash and come straight to her natal home, where they would work this out. Begim told me, and the other women in the *bashali*, that she would cancel her elopement plans since her mother was so upset—how could she disobey her own mother? We believed her. At least I did. And this was important to the success of her escape. While it is true that in the *bashali* there is less pressure and more room to maneuver, the *bashali* community is part of the larger one, and this necessarily divided their loyalties. Aktar Shah’s mother’s sister’s daughter was there, as well as two other women who were relatives and friends. On Begim’s side, Zar Gul (whose husband, Tarsing, is one of Zamin Khan’s clan mates and the key organizer of the elopement) and Talimzar (who is Begim’s father’s brother’s wife and one of her closest friends) provided her with cover and logistical and moral support.

That night the dogs started barking again. Talimzar went out to see what was going on. There was a pause, and then we heard her shout, “You boys stop teasing those dogs!” The next morning, the dogs barked again, and Talimzar went outside again. After she returned, Begim is said to have mumbled that she needed to urinate (I was sleeping at this point). Later Talimzar said that she had arranged everything, instructing Zamin Khan to come back at dawn, when no one would suspect anything, and throw a rock at the dog so that she would wake up and be able to rouse the notoriously sound sleeper, Begim. Begim had gone outside, put on her clean clothes, and sneaked up the back path to Balanguru with Zamin Khan, two of his friends, and her girlfriend, Lulu.

While the village raged with news of the elopement, the two lovers hid at Zamin Khan’s mother’s brother’s house. When I visited them there, Begim told me that the *bashali* was the only place in the village where she was not being watched by her former husband and his friends. And it was the only place where she was not constantly lobbied by her natal family and her husband’s family to stay or encouraged by her new husband’s friends and relatives to go. She said that in the *bashali* she had decided for herself what she wanted.

### A Space for Agency

One goes into the room—but the resources of the English  
language would be much put to the stretch, and whole  
flights of words would need to wing their way  
illegitimately into existence before a woman could say  
what happens when she goes into a room.

—Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*  
(cited in Probyn 1993:166)

In very concrete ways, for each Kalasha woman, the *bashali* is a room of one’s own, a place at the same time set outside the pushing and pulling of everyday valley life and very much central to it. Far from being a prison where women are confined, the *bashali*, as Asmara Aya notes, is a place where *wā šīaw*, where there is space. The *bashali* is a place where women do things, say things, that would be difficult or inappropriate in other contexts, and the things they do here have consequences that emanate beyond the *bashali* ground itself.

- Here they relate directly with the goddess Dezalik and through their attention to her ensure the safe reproduction of the Kalasha community.
- Here women live as *jamilishír*, a community of Kalasha women with a common purpose. In the *bashali*, there is the opportunity to reconnect with women from other parts of the valley, women who otherwise would be known only superficially. Perhaps collective life inside the *bashali* serves as a basis for women's collective action in other contexts. Saras Gula Aya once told me, "You know, young men are like that—they don't listen to just one woman. If you want them to do what you want, you have to join together."
- Here young women escape the constant scrutiny of in-laws, parents, and anxious young husbands and have the opportunity to make reproductive and marital decisions away from the intense social pressure of the village.
- Here women receive a respite from day to day work at home and in their fields.
- Here there is space for laughter, affection, long lazy naps, extra cups of tea.
- Here they deliver babies and slay a few dragons.

In other words, the *bashali* is a space where women experience an expanded sense of themselves as effective agents, as free people.