

## Chapter 6

# Marrying

*You have told me to tell you of the things I remember from the very beginning. At first I remember this, my daughter, I think I was very small, maybe Zairah's age, maybe a little older, as old as Abida perhaps, my memories start. My fathers were five brothers. One of my father's sons, the oldest father's son, he was my brother [cousin], he played with me a lot. When shade fell across the valley, they would come home from the stable. One of them would pick me up and set me on his knee, then another one would pick me up. Then they would tease me, "you've already become a wife." "I'm not going to," I said, "I'm never going to." In the very beginning, I remember this. Then "she's Istroluk's wife," they'd say, "she's Istroluk's wife" [teasing her about an old and particularly randy man from Chetromagrom]. "I am not," I would say. "When, then, sing a song," they'd say. And I'd sit like this on their knees and sing apparently:*

*khē him, khē him, ónĵa, ne?*

[What will I do (or what will I become), what will I do now?]

*Then they'd all laugh, and cry, "sing again, sing again." So I apparently sang that song, "khē him, khē him, ónĵa, ne?" It went like this until Istroluk died, and then they all said, "oh, her husband has died." My earliest memories are these. "So, her husband has died," all my fathers went on saying.*

—Saras Gula Aya<sup>1</sup>

Although it must have been sixty years since Saras Gula Aya (who was called Pilin Gul before the birth of her daughter, Saras Gul) was a toddler, I can picture her clearly because I have witnessed this familiar

scene over and over again. A little girl, so small that she has started to grow only one tiny sprout of a forehead braid, is held as the cherished center in a circle of men from her patriline—her father and his brothers, her own brothers and male cousins. The men tease her that they have “given her away,” all the while letting her know through their cuddles and smiles and obvious delight that they adore her, that she is theirs. Her beloved “fathers” tell her that she is married, and she exclaims that she is not, will never be—what will she do, what will she do?

In Saras Gula Aya’s earliest memories, she had begun dealing with marriage or, rather what she would *do* about marriage. The right to elope with a man other than the one to whom your parents have “given” you, to go *alaşın* (or to choose not to), is the prototypic act that defines Kalasha women’s freedom—a freedom that must always be balanced against an equally compelling ideal, respect for and devotion to one’s family and patriline. By sorting out what is involved in making and living with this decision, I hope to outline what Kalasha mean when they say “our women are *free*”—to outline, in other words, a specifically Kalasha understanding of women’s agency.

Freedom for Kalasha women is anything but detached from people and consequences. The deceptively simple act of “sitting” or “going” changes the direction of each woman’s life, as well as her understanding of what sort of person she is. Each woman’s decision is affected by many people and affects many more. To demonstrate how complex, difficult, and always contingent marital freedom is, I offer the life stories of two of my closest friends. Although I also draw on stories of many other Kalasha people, I begin and conclude this chapter with Saras Gula Aya’s story. Nested inside her narrative is her daughter-in-law Bayda Aya’s story of her romantic elopement with Saras Gula Aya’s son. Their stories are complicated and rather long (although they were simplified and shortened for me, and I have further clarified them for you). I hope that unpacking them will allow me to provide a more nuanced understanding of women’s agency, while giving you enough ethnographic detail to draw your own conclusions.

In the evenings around the fire, Saras Gula Aya told me stories about her life. She said I should tape them because there were so many words that I would surely forget most of them if I didn’t. Even she had forgotten so much, she said.<sup>2</sup> Her grandchildren crowded around and hushed one another and took turns being my assistant by

running the tape recorder. The next day they would ask if they could listen to the stories again. Saras Gula Aya's four daughters-in-law were also there for most of the recordings—interjecting commentary and reminding her, to her annoyance, of parts of the story that she had forgotten.



When she was small, Pilin Gul was very naughty. She made all the other children cry, she said. She was the oldest among her many cousins and siblings, though only two days older than her cousin (Father's brother's son, or FBS), Mizok. The little girls would be playing at making a belt, and she remembers taking their yarn and tying knots in it. She would go out into the fields and try to grab birds. Once she and her little sister were walking by the river on their way to a festival. A boy her age, now a respected ritual and historical expert, but then *"he was nothing—just a little puff—came along carrying a big stick."* So Pilin Gul *"took that stick from him, took it and wouldn't give it back."* She tossed the stick over his head to her little sister and told her to throw it in the river. The boy tried to grab the stick, fell in himself, and was carried downstream a short way. *"Oh, the water is taking him, I thought."* So she ran away, taking her sister with her. Because Pilin Gul was such a "cunning" child, she knew better than to admit to her family what had happened, so she and her sister sneaked up-valley the back way to the festivities. A little later her mother saw the boy standing naked on the riverbank while his father wrung out his shirt and pants. *"What happened? How did he get so wet?"* Pilin Gul's mother asked innocently. *"What happened? Your own daughter threw him in the river! Whatever else happened! Your daughter threw him in the river and ran away!"* Pilin Gul's mother was angry, *"like one who bitches at evil spirits. 'Well, then I'm going to throw this daughter of mine in, too!'"* she declared. She dragged Pilin Gul to the river and threw her in the water, pulled her out, and then dunked her again. Finally, she was rescued by one of her mother's sisters, who grabbed her mother's dress and pushed her out of the way, then pulled the drenched girl out of the river. Her aunt offered to take her to her house to warm up and change clothes, but Pilin Gul refused—she didn't want to miss the *gul parik* ritual at Sagigor (when infants would be blessed and their mothers' released from the restrictions they had undertaken since giving birth). Pilin

Gul was like that, she remembers—a naughty child, a clever child, a child with endless enthusiasm for singing and dancing and playing. “*They could scold me and scold me, but I wouldn’t obey,*” she explained to me and her grandchildren, who were delighted to hear that their grandmother, who now scolds them for being naughty, was herself a naughty child.



From then on, memories rush in—she goes on growing older, remembering and knowing, she becomes herself. For the next twenty years, what she remembers, what seems memorable enough to tell about, is marriage.

### **How Kalasha Marriages Work**

More specifically, Saras Gula Aya focuses her attention not on *being* married but on the process of marrying or *becoming* married. Marrying is a topic that never tires. It is an arena where values and interest intersect, a point of intrigue and romance and desire, alliance and betrayal and desperation. Jokes about marriage and elopement seem never to wear thin. Rumors about potential elopements sweep the length of one valley and jump the mountain into the next before the truth can catch up. Both men and women scheme and dream on behalf of brothers and sisters, friends and cousins, imagining possible matches and potential futures. It is an arena in which nothing is settled for years and years.

Kalasha marriages are interesting, both to them and to me, because there are so many variations. Some people get married quite young, some late, some once, and a rare few change partners four or five times. Some men have two wives. Some marriages are arranged, and some are elopements (*alaşır*).

One day Gekia Aya and I were talking with her young teenaged daughter Geki and Geki’s girlfriends. Each girl was in a very different marital situation. Geki had been given in marriage when she was quite young, five or six, but had recently eloped with another man. Lilizar, one of her friends, had been promised by her family that she would not be “given” (would not have marriage arranged for her) and that she herself could fall in love and marry whom she pleased. Kosh

Begim, though only about nine years old herself, had been married for two years to Balaman, a man of about twenty-five. Balaman's first wife, with whom he claims to have been passionately in love, eloped with another man. Jam Gulu, who was thirteen years old, was not a wife and exclaimed defiantly that she would never marry (though no one believed her). Asham, also thirteen or fourteen, had just that week been given by her parents to Shah, a handsome young man liked by everyone (except at this point by Asham). Geki mercilessly teased Jam Gulu for saying she would never marry and teased Asham about her new husband. Later Gekia Aya scolded her daughter for teasing the other girls, saying, "This is our custom—we marry in different ways and at different times." Everyone has his or her own story, private and powerful.

Kalasha words for marrying do not refer to the relationship *between* partners but specifically to the transformation of a girl into a wife. When you refer to a woman's marriage, whether she was given by her parents or eloped with her husband, you say she *ja thi áau*, "became a wife." When you refer to a man's marriage you say he *ja kái áau*, "made a wife." The reverse construction, *berú thi áau* or *berú kái áau*, "became a husband" or "made a husband," is understandable but not used (i.e., I could use it and people understood what I meant, but I never heard anyone use it themselves). The act of getting married (for a man) is referred to as *ja nik*, or "taking a wife" (actually *leading* since a woman is an animate object). Parents "give" (*dek*) their daughters in marriage, *ja dek*. If you ask a woman who "gave" her, she will respond with the name of the person she holds responsible, almost always a man, usually her father, but possibly a mother's brother or grandfather or a community elder. Women always speak in the passive voice about their arranged marriages, saying of their husbands, *may aníu*, literally "he took me." In speaking of their elopements, women can choose whether to represent themselves as more active or more passive participants—one can say either *a ałášı̄ŋ páyam* (or *párim*) (I went *ałášı̄ŋ* or I am going *ałášı̄ŋ*) or *may ałášı̄ŋ aníu* (or *níu*) (he led me *ałášı̄ŋ* or he will lead me *ałášı̄ŋ*).

Most Kalasha girls are "given" when they are young, between about six and twelve years old, well before they "know their own choice" (*tása mi čit jhónen*). Often girls are given to men much older than they are, men whose previous wives had eloped with other men. But sometimes the husbands are also children—in a few cases the

children had been promised to one another as infants. Table 7 documents marriage statistics among a sample of eighty-two Kalasha women from Rumbur Valley.

In every case, the boy's relatives "search" (*khójik*) for the girl, never the reverse. Male representatives from his family ask male members of hers to "give" them the girl. Her family member usually represent themselves as passive, coerced into whichever decision is made. If they agree, it is because the boy's family asked them, and—"what could they do?"—to refuse would be an insult. If they refuse, they almost always assert that, while they may be able to give their daughters as children, when she is older she would likely rebel and make her own "choice" anyway—that is, she would go *alaşiq* with another man. Bayda Aya explains:

First they say, "Will you give your daughter to me? I'll give her to my son." Then, if he [the father] likes the idea, he'll say, like, "I'll give her. What can I do? You've asked me, you've gotten under me (*may nōa ata*). I've given you my daughter." If [the father] doesn't like it, he says, "It's her own choice, when she's big she'll go *alaşiq*. It's her mood. I can't give her to someone who is looking for a girl. If I give her, then she'll say later 'you gave me forcefully, you ripped my heart out.'"

As you can imagine, this simple schema has endless convolutions. It is also highly political, since it is not just the future of the girl but the future relations between families on which each potential match pivots. Since every male member of the family—uncles, older brothers, grandfathers, and mother's brothers as well as the girl's father—should be in agreement, underlying currents of division and dissension between male family members are brought to the surface. And, while most women I spoke with readily agreed with the dominant ideology that it is men who make decisions about marrying daughters, in fact women are consulted, and their opinions frequently affect the outcome,<sup>3</sup> either because they persuade male relatives to take their position or because they personally have enough influence to claim for themselves the authority to refuse or accept the proposal (as in the case presented in chapter 5, in which the match between Asham and Shah was delayed until Asham's paternal aunt could be persuaded). The process of negotiating a marriage is often contentious, and these

TABLE 7. Kalasha Marriages

Type	N	Percentage	Menstrual Age <sup>a</sup>	Relative Age of Husband <sup>b</sup>
First marriage				
Given	54 <sup>c</sup>	66.7	-3.17	+11.49
Eloped	24	29.6	+ .9	+4.35
Unclear	2 <sup>d</sup>	2.47	+1.75	+7
Not married	1	1.23	+7	
	81 <sup>e</sup>			
Second marriage				
Given	1 <sup>f</sup>	3.8	+1	+10
Eloped	25 <sup>g</sup>	86	+1.02	+5.04
Widowed (eloped)	1			
(Given to HyB) <sup>h</sup>	2			
	29			

Kalasha women who elope with a second husband: 31% (25 out of 80)

Kalasha women "given" as children who elope later: 42.6% (23 out of 54)

Kalasha women allowed to elope "from their father's house" (*dadas dur alaṣiṅ*) who elope a second time: 8.3% (2 out of 24)

*Note:* In addition, there was one woman who had been married three times and one who had been married four times (although two of those times she was with the man less than one month and bridewealth was not exchanged).

<sup>a</sup>Very few Kalasha people know how old they are in years, but they feel comfortable talking about their age in relation to one another and to significant life events. When I initially began asking women how old they were when they first married, most replied, "A year before I started going to the *bashali*," and so on. So instead of estimating each girl's age I have chosen to use the number of years relative to onset of menarche.

<sup>b</sup>"Relative age of husband" is the number of years older or younger each woman thought her husband was.

<sup>c</sup>Four women report being given as infants. These four are not included in age averages, nor are their husbands.

<sup>d</sup>Two women were not able to answer the question, "Were you given in marriage or did you elope?" They both said that they were coerced by their families into going *alaṣiṅ* but that it was not their "own choice." These women are the only ones who reported being "unhappy" after going *alaṣiṅ*.

<sup>e</sup>I surveyed 82 women. One didn't want to talk about her first marriage, so she is not included here. One young woman, Gul, has been menstruating for seven years and is not yet married. She lives in a complex, fragmented family. Her mother left her father when she was young and now lives in a different village and begs for a living. She is the only woman from any of the valleys who lives in this way. Her father's brother's wife died, leaving two small children, whom Gul cares for with the help of her elderly aunt (who is widowed and childless).

<sup>f</sup>This woman was "given" to her father's friend when she was two years old, but no bridewealth was exchanged. When her "husband" eloped with a woman his own age, she was "freed," and her father "gave" her a second time.

<sup>g</sup>The four women who reported having been "given" as infants all eloped with other men.

<sup>h</sup>HyB refers to late husband's younger brother.

decisions are often protracted and difficult (Parkes 1983; cf. Kratz 2000 for an interesting analysis of the agency of different actors as revealed through marriage negotiations among the Okiek).

#### *The Khaltabár Relationship*

After agreement has been reached that the girl will be given in marriage, a date is set when she will be sent to her husband's house. Accompanied by one or two male relatives, she will then be taken—usually kicking and screaming, though sometimes happily—to her in-laws' house. They will make a *marát*, a sacrifice and subsequent feast of an animal for the men who brought her, counted as the first of much bridewealth to follow. In a few days, or sometimes as much as a month or two later, her father will “call” for her, saying he misses his daughter and wants her to come home. This event is the first *khaltabári*, in which the two patrilineages involved will “make *khaltabár*” with one another. All the available men in the girl's clan escort her home, bearing a showy procession of bridewealth—bulls and goats, guns, large assorted aluminum pots and pans, fancy woven coats, sugar and tea, large radio/cassette players, money, and huge basketfuls of walnut bread. Women say that it is always a happy occasion for girls, who love to go home. The girl is given bags of candy, for which little children mob her along the way. This is her only role. Once home, she will likely retreat with her girlfriends, sisters, and cousins to a place away from the men. Her family will have spent the day preparing a feast of bread and cheese and wine to greet their new *khaltabár*. Her husband need not be there. It is a celebration and affirmation of a link between families and lineages and has very little to do with the relationship between the couple itself.

On the day that Takat Jan's lineage made *khaltabári* to celebrate the marriage of Takat Jan's brother to Kosh Begim, Takat Jan asked me what the English word for *khaltabar* was. I told him that my parents call my in-laws “Wynne's in-laws” and have no formal relationship with them. “What a pity,” he said, explaining that in Kalasha the word *khaltabar* comes from the root *khal* (to taste) and *khaltabars* are thought to add sweetness, flavor, to life. Parents of both the bride and groom call each other *khaltabar* (a reciprocal term), and all other relations address one another as *biłahí*. As Takat Jan remarked, they are the sweetest of relations, extending from the closest to the most distant

kin, depending on the situation. People wax poetic on the goodness of the *khaltabar* relationship, the best of all possible worlds—a relative who treats you always as an honored guest. The *khaltabar* relation is highly emotional and all about the desire to pull people into your life, to make a connection through the connection of your children. Calling someone *biḷahí* or *khaltabar* is a gesture of affection, not just a term of address. It is always spoken as a call of welcome, with gusto and delight. Iraka Aya, an opinionated, emotional, funny neighbor, and her daughter Irak were telling me about Irak's elopement from the man her parents had given her to as a child. Iraka Aya is still disappointed about it. Irak insists that her former husband, Pundali, didn't want her, and this is why she left him. "It's not true," exclaims her mother, "He wants to marry his son to your daughter!" Pundali often pushes Irak to say she'll give her daughter Diana (named after Princess Di) to his son Saktiar. He never failed to ask me how his *khaltabar* was. His desire to marry their children was proof to Iraka Aya that her former son-in-law is still in love with her daughter, a sort of second-generation consummation of desire (cf. Trawick 1990).

The alliance between the families of the young husband and wife is also important for pragmatic social and economic reasons: their houses are always open and wine and honey and all good things flow when you visit. As Parkes demonstrates, material and physical "assistance to wife-giving affines invariably outweighs that given to any other kin, irrespective of their relative wealth, their personal relationship of affection or their factional party" (1983:275). You rely on your *khaltabar* to support you, shelter you, welcome you, help you if you need extra labor, and offer any other assistance you might need. Yet this alliance is fragile because it lasts only as long as the marriage itself and therefore depends on the future cooperation of a child who may grow up and sever this relationship by eloping with another man.<sup>4</sup>

Pilin Gul's (Saras Gula Aya's) story continues.



She remembers when they were giving her as a wife. She was about eight years old. She remembers her "fathers" (her father and father's brothers) telling her, "We're giving you as a wife." She was thinking, "they're just saying that." "Then it was evening. When it was evening the men who were 'looking for a girl' came." Her family offered food to the

men. *"We're giving you as a wife,' they said, and they gave them food."* Pilin Gul was crying, crying as if she might break into pieces. Her oldest father told her that they hadn't given her away, her mother's brother had given her. But she didn't believe him. She knew that they had done this to her their own selves. The men ate and went away.

After some days, she was taken to her new in-laws' house. They lived only a few minutes' walk from her mother's brother's house, and so she ran away and went there. The next day her mother's brother took her home again. *"They took me home and my mother gave me food, gave me food, but I didn't eat it, the bread. My mother beat me.<sup>5</sup> She beat me, and I left again; again I went to my moa's [mother's brother's] house."* Her mother told her later, with annoyance, that she was a crazy girl to make so much trouble—if she didn't like her husband she knew she could go *alasıñ* when she was grown.

*"So it went on and on like that [living at her natal house]. On and on as my memories become clearer. How many years was it like that? Maybe until I was as old as Lilizar. That old? Yeah, exactly as old as Lilizar [about twelve]."*

Finally, they really took Pilin Gul to her in-law's house. Her husband, who was a boy then, only two years older than Pilin Gul, is nowhere to be found in her narrative of this time. She formed new friendships with her sisters-in-law, and her mother-in-law was especially kind to her. *"My mother-in-law was so good to me, so good to me. They sought me when I was little—this little—and so my mother-in-law brought so many things to me. When I was older, and they had taken me to her house, she would go to Chet Guru [her husband's family's summer fields, where she would go to work—long before Chet Guru became the tiny, lovely village it is today]. . . . She would make *ǰǰú* [special walnut bread] just for me or come with tomatoes in her hand. When shade fell, she would bring tomatoes to me. Bibi Zar and I were the same age, and Nawshar was littler. So she would bring tomatoes. . . . 'Here,' she'd say, 'steal this away and eat it.' She'd whisper, 'you eat this, eat this yourself, don't show them.' But I'd say, 'those are my sisters-in-law [*ǰómi*], we'll eat it together.' 'No, they're fine over there already, you eat it.' But I'd share it with them. We'd all eat it together."*



For two years, Pilin Gul shuttled back and forth between her father's and husband's houses. Then she started menstruating. For

three more years, she was a nubile young woman (*moráy*), moving between the *bashali*, her fathers' house, and her husband's house.

### *Girls' Agency*

Pilin Gul was typical in her fierce resistance to marriage. It is also typical that her resistance changed nothing. Almost all of the women who told me stories of being "given" as children (two-thirds of all Kalasha girls are married in this way) filled their narratives with brave defiance and narrow escapes. The songs my littlest girlfriends loved best were variations on the theme "my father adores me too much to give me away." Most little girls do not passively accept their parents' decisions—like Pilin Gul, they cry and scream, they run away, they refuse to speak or eat, and in general they behave abominably. Yet, because nothing is expected of them, nothing they do changes anything. Of course, the adults involved are angry—as Pilin Gul's mother was—but ultimately the fact that girls do not happily acquiesce to their parents' plans has few enduring consequences. Little girls are not *expected* to be responsible daughters-in-law, to stay put in their husband's home, or to have any sort of relationship with their husband while they are young (though the pressure does increase as they near adolescence). So the fact that there is no expectation that they will behave in certain ways makes all their running away, all their resistance, ineffective. If, as Knauff (1996) suggests, agency implies having an effect, then girls—for all they may resist—do not have agency. No matter what a young girl does, she is still married. So the *khaltabár* relationship between a girl's parents and her in-laws, which is generated *through* her, is in this sense also independent of her.<sup>6</sup> Girls are thus truly able to be treated as symbols in Lévi-Strauss's sense, as things, like words, which are exchanged as a means to binding others (1969:496).

I don't mean to imply that parents don't love their daughters or think about their future happiness and welfare when agreeing to arrange marriages for them. But, because every girl will have the opportunity to elope later if she is unhappy or in love with someone else, her parents, and especially the men of her family, are able to put the particularities of their *khaltabár* alliances ahead of thinking about what sort of life she will have with this particular husband or family. Thus, the freedom she will have later works against her as a child because her parents are able to disregard her feelings about the marriage by telling

her (and themselves)—as Pilin Gul says her mother insisted—that she can always elope later if she wants to. By deferring effective agency until girls become women, Kalasha families who arrange marriages for young girls thus also defer the problem Lévi-Strauss refers to when he remembers that “insofar as she is defined as a sign, she must also be recognized as a generator of signs” (1969:496). Still, everyone involved is acutely aware that eventually a time will come when she will decide for herself whether to stay or whether to say to her parents, as Mayram put it: “I was little when you gave me away, and so you didn’t ask my opinion. Now I am grown up, and I am telling you that I have different ideas about what I want.” In fact, 43 percent of the women I surveyed who had been “given” as girls did have different ideas and eloped with another man as young women.

So, while little girls are not agentive in Knauft’s sense of being *effective* in the present, they certainly fit Hobart’s (1990) definition of agency as being “liable to act.” And, while the marital freedom promised girls may work against them by making it easier for their parents to “give” them, it also works *for* them because husbands and in-laws know that they can leave later. Husbands and in-laws are therefore typically kind and generous in an attempt to win the loyalty and affection of their wives and daughters-in-law. Their future freedom means that Kalasha daughters-in-law enjoy a very different situation than young Taiwanese wives, as described by Margery Wolf (1968), or Kalasha stereotypes about the lives of young Chitrali wives, in which girls are under the thumb of their in-laws and there is little or no chance of escaping an unhappy situation. Older husbands of young girls are notoriously generous and kind to their “little wives,” buying them shoes, clothes, beads, and candy or, like Zailun’s first husband (in the upcoming narrative), by not pressuring them to have sexual relations. Pilin Gul remembers that her own mother-in-law slipped her special foods and did her special favors. In other words, although some girls might be “given” as children, the affection and loyalty of the women they will become must be won.



“You forgot to tell her how you went *alaşın!*” Lilizar Aya, the wife of Saras Gula Aya’s (Pilin Gul’s) oldest son, pointed out. Saras Gula Aya replied, “Who is telling this? You? My daughter doesn’t want to hear about

that, that wasn't a 'real' *alaşın* that was just *zit*, just a couple of days, just retribution because I was angry. Bayda Aya can tell her about going *alaşın*, going *alaşın* with Bayda Dada." Saras Gul Aya told with a twinkle how her son, Miramin (who is now called Bayda Dada since the birth of his first daughter), had come to her three times, exclaiming that he was going to get married to this or that woman. The first one turned out to be a relative. "She's too close," she told her son, "don't take that one. Besides, she's lazy." The next time he said, "Mother, shall I show you my lover/friend? Shall I take this one?" She told him not to take that one either, because "she's weak and sickly." Then, at a funeral for which many people from the other two Kalasha valleys had come to dance, Miramin said to his mother, "Mother, shall I show you my friend/lover? This time you had better not say anything—one girlfriend is lazy, the next sickly—You won't let me marry anyone!" She only glimpsed Bayda Aya (then called Zailun before the birth of her first daughter, Bayda) across the dance field briefly, but she said okay, you take that one. But it was four years before her son could bring the then Zailun to Rumbur as his wife.



A few days later I asked Bayda Aya and her husband's brother's wife, Nizara Aya to explain slowly, and in detail, how marriages are negotiated and the sequence of bridewealth prestations. As often happened, they quickly broke from the general to the particularities of their own lives. They began by explaining that girls cry when they first go to their new in-laws house, going *bring-brang* (making a ruckus).



"I was like that myself when I was sought and given (*khóji dáyani*). I was sought and given when I was my daughter's age [9]." Zailun had sobbed and sobbed. Her grandfather, then already an old man, said to her, "No, my grandchild, that man was so in love with you, he was in love, so I gave you to him—I like that man so much. Later, you'll see, you'll also not be able to go anywhere [you also will be in love, and so won't want to go *alaşın*]. I am your grandfather, I've used my wisdom for you." Zailun's grandfather told her that her husband was a good man, and from a good family, and that Zailun should respect her grandfather and do as

he said. But Zailun was a little girl—what did she know about wisdom? *“I’m not going!”* she proclaimed. Two years later, her own grandfather led her to her husband’s house, and they made a *marát*, a sacrifice in her grandfather’s honor. *“I was there, what, ten days or so, and again I cried, ‘I’m leaving!’ Every day I cried—‘I’m leaving, I can’t stay here.’ My mother’s brother’s house was close. Every day I’d cry. Everyone said to me, ‘Your husband is a good person. You sit there. He won’t try to sleep with you.’”* Bayda Aya laughed and continued. *“‘You’re little still. You sit there.’ That was right, sister. I was little, and he never tried to sleep in the bed. In his house, there was only one bed—he was only one single person. I slept on the bed, and he slept on the floor—until I was a young woman it was like that. He never touched me. As long as I was there as his wife, he never slept with me. So now I think, maybe I was wicked (gunagár háwis), I think. He, I never let him—how could he have slept [a euphemism for sex] with me? Even when I was a mature girl (moráy) I wouldn’t let him. ‘Don’t ever let him sleep with me already!’ I thought. My heart was not warm for him—I was given to him forcefully. . . . Maybe he thought, ‘if I don’t force her, she won’t go aláşıŋ.’ I was afraid, afraid to sleep in his house, but he never asserted himself (wes ne árau). . . . I kept thinking, if only they hadn’t given me to this man. My grandfather said to me, ‘you sit, you sit, you sit’—urging me repeatedly to stay. It wasn’t my fortune, maybe. I went aláşıŋ with Bayda Dada.”*

After she had been at her first husband’s house only a few days, her father called for her to come back home, saying he missed her, saying his heart was breaking for her. Her husband and his lineage brought her back home, along with *“lots of bridewealth—seven goats, whatever, whatever bridewealth. It was like that. I spent most of my time at my father’s house, only a little time at my husband’s house. It was like that until I went aláşıŋ,”* Bayda Aya concluded.



### *Bridewealth*

Let me pause here for a moment to talk about bridewealth because understanding how bridewealth works in the Kalasha valleys is an important key to understanding Bayda Aya’s and Saras Gula Aya’s stories. The particular constellation of Kalasha bridewealth practices frame cultural understandings of women’s marital freedom, as these

“rules” simultaneously extend and limit women’s opportunities to make economic choices and choices about marriage partners and sexuality.

Kalasha fit the economic and social profile of most bridewealth societies, which, as Bossen generalizes, typically

have low levels of economic specialization and stratification, and sexual divisions of labor that assign the major part of agricultural production to women. They have the capacity to accumulate wealth, as evinced by the material transfers at marriage, but generally do not have highly concentrated or uneven distributions of private property, particularly in land. . . . Bridewealth is also associated with patrilineal decent and patrilocal residence after marriage. (1988:132; see also Goody 1973:50)

Bridewealth is also associated with polygyny and the exclusion of daughters from patrilineal inheritance (*ibid.*), and this, too, is true for the Kalasha. For all that is common, Kalasha bridewealth practices in their details, and these unique aspects are important for understanding gender relations.

Existing interpretations of Kalasha bridewealth are typical of anthropological literature on bridewealth generally. One gets the impression that women are sold into wifhood and that through this transaction men gain access to women’s productive and reproductive labor and forge alliances between groups. Yet, as Laurel Bossen has wondered, such interpretations spark the question. “What are the advantages and disadvantages to women?” (1988:133). Before answering this question, let me detail what Kalasha bridewealth is and how it works.

Bridewealth is known simply as *mal*, or “property,” and consists of a mix of ceremonial wealth objects and livestock (including grain and cheese and more recently sugar, tea, and biscuits). Major ceremonial wealth objects include some antique items such as large cauldrons that were manufactured at the end of the last century by a specialist caste of Tajik blacksmiths and among an offshoot of this caste living in the Shishi-Kuh Valley; precious metal cups; large, wrought iron tripods, which are much larger than those used in households for everyday cooking (these are used to support caldrons in which meat is cooked at feasts); guns, including antique firearms

that no longer work as well as modern weapons; and gowns and woolen cloaks (Parkes 1983:535). Other bridewealth objects are very large, usually aluminum, cooking pots, plates, and vessels. Recent exchanges have also included large portable radios, tape recorders, and cash. Generally not much livestock is given as bridewealth, but each object and food item has a traditional value in goats. This becomes important in the event of an elopement, when many objects must be repaid in livestock "seized by the neck" (living animals).

The first few objects are given when the husband's party formally "seeks" the girl (at which point they have already ascertained that her family will agree to their request). The first time the wife is taken to her husband's house, his family will sacrifice an animal in their honor and perhaps offer one small object to each of the men who accompanied her. But the majority of the bridewealth, and the largest celebration of *khaltabarı*, takes place not when the girl is *given* but when she *returns* to her natal family's home after living for a short time at her new husband's house. The transfer of bridewealth is orchestrated so that there is never a direct exchange of girl for wealth and both parties can appear to be giving freely.

If a girl who has never been married before goes "*alaşın* from her father's house," meaning that the young couple elopes without the prior arrangement of their parents, a large *khaltabarı* will take place after both families have agreed to the marriage.

It is considered shameful for fathers to demand a certain amount of bridewealth, although everyone acknowledges that some unscrupulous men do "point out bridewealth." Mir Beck explained to me that most men do not like to place heavy demands on future sons-in-law: "It's the husband's own choice. He'll give as much as he is able to round up." Parkes notes that in the late 1970s the normal expectation was that at least sixty articles (*sóren*) would be given during the early stages of marriage, a third of which should be major wealth objects (1983:535). There does not appear to have been much inflation in this, as my friends agreed that this is still standard. However, a gift of cash is now common as well, usually around Rs 3,000 (U.S.\$100). The husband's immediate household (and at this time in their life cycle of the household assets are still usually collective rather than divided among the brothers) is usually responsible for the major wealth objects. His mother's brothers are expected to give something equal in value to a cow (mother's brothers also receive a cow from their sisters' daughters' marriages). The other households in his patrilineage give

the rest of the articles, and some (usually smaller items) are given by his maternal relatives.

Also potentially countable as bridewealth are animals slaughtered to feast a visiting member of the wife's lineage; food items given to the wife's household or households of her lineage in the event of a funeral; gifts of grain, cheese, grass, and livestock that are given to households of the wife's lineage; and items of bridewealth that are requested by distant affines (usually with the aim of collecting bridewealth for their own sons) (Parkes 1983:538). Additional bridewealth is given for each child born of the union in the form of an animal sacrificed for a celebratory feast for the woman's relatives and perhaps a few wealth articles as well. All this is silently noted by everyone involved (and, as you can see, almost everyone is involved). If the girl later goes *aḷaṣiṅ* with another man, the bridewealth given will be counted and her second husband (and his lineage) will return an amount double that which her father received from her first husband.<sup>7</sup>

Below is a list of the bridewealth that Kashdil (and his relatives) gave Sailun's ex-husband when the couple went *aḷaṣiṅ* (so this amount is roughly double what her first husband gave to her father). According to Kashdil's older brothers, most of the money and food items were borrowed from a friend's store. The wealth objects were borrowed from Sherzada Khan, a lineage mate, whose own wife had gone *aḷaṣiṅ* three months earlier.

- Rs 6,500 cash
- Rs 2,600 worth of sugar, biscuits, and candy
- 20 *batií* (1 *batií* = 2.5 kilograms) of wheat
- 10 *batií* of walnuts
- 20 *batií* of wine (totalling Rs 7,000 as they had to purchase it)
- 9 female goats
- 7 sheep
- 5 bulls (3 young bulls and 2 fully grown)
- A total of 300 assorted bridewealth objects, including
  - 12 *šoká* big woolen robes)
  - 4 fancy shawls
  - 8 guns

Altogether, they estimate that the bridewealth was worth about Rs 100,000 (\$3,300), which is three times the yearly salary of a school-teacher.

The basic rules are these:

- If a man divorces his wife (*ja hístik*), he forfeits any claim to the bridewealth given for her.
- If a married woman goes *alašín*, her new husband (and his agnates) must compensate the ex-husband with double the amount of bridewealth her former husband (and his agnates) gave to her natal household.
- If she goes *alašín* a second time, the amount given to the second husband is triple the original amount.
- If a married woman goes *alašín* with a Muslim man, the woman's new husband must repay the original bridewealth (but the amount is *not* doubled). If one of the partners converts without remarriage, there is some ambiguity about what should happen to the bridewealth. Usually, if the husband converts and his wife won't, he simply loses the bridewealth he gave for her and she is free to marry someone else. If the wife converts and her husband does not, her family usually gives back the bridewealth her husband gave for her.
- If a woman's husband brings in a second wife, the first wife is "free" to leave him (if she chooses to) and he receives no compensation for the bridewealth his family gave to hers. But the first wife's children belong to and remain with her former husband and his family.
- It is possible for a father to return an equal amount of bridewealth to his son-in-law (and the son-in-law's family) in exchange for his daughter's "freedom." Although this is often threatened, it is exceptionally rare.
- After the marriage is well established, fathers often give *jhés* to their daughters and their husbands. *jhés* is a form of dowry. All items given by her father are subtracted from the amount of bridewealth given by her husband's family. Theoretically, if a woman went *alašín* after her father had given *jhés*, her new husband would pay less compensatory bridewealth to her ex-husband.

There are two essential points to abstract from these details. First, the exchange of bridewealth is spread across time and space—given and received by many different people over the course of years. In

other words, the “exchange” is never direct. Second, there is never a point at which a Kalasha man can be *certain* that his wife is *his* because she can *always* choose to go *alaṣiṅ*. It is also true that after the birth of children the probability that a woman will stay with her husband increases exponentially. Women in Rumbur were able to remember only seven cases in which women left their children with a former husband and eloped with another man (one of these seven left a second set of children with her second husband and eloped with a third man). But the *idea* that she might elope, even after having children, is still in the realm of the thinkable. So, the exchange is never complete. Ironically, instead of “securing” a wife, the particular configuration of Kalasha bridewealth puts men in a position of vulnerability and is seen as limiting the choices *they* can make about marriage. At the same time, as I’ll explain in the following paragraphs, bride-wealth affords women security for themselves and their children, greater sexual and expressive freedom (at least in comparison with neighboring Muslims), and the latitude to make choices that affect their economic and social positions.

Being married is a precondition to having what Saras Gula Aya, later in her story, terms a “purposeful life” (*maksát zindagi*). For both men and women, children, connection to place, authority, respect in the community, and future security all presuppose a successful marriage. The bridewealth system all but ensures each woman that, once married, the chance that her husband will divorce her (*ja hístik*, literally “to throw away the wife”) is quite small and after she has had children almost unthinkable. In Parkes’s sample, fewer than one in twenty marriages ended when men threw away their wives (1983:358). In looking through my own data, at first I could find no case of a woman who said she had been thrown away. Then I realized that the women whom I talked to were using a different word than Parkes’s (presumably male) informants had. Men said they had thrown away their wives, but women said they had been “freed.” In my sample, three out of eighty-two women acknowledged that their first marriage ended in this sort of “divorce.”<sup>8</sup>

Before I understood how things worked, I worried about my friend Jan Bibia Aya. She had come *alaṣiṅ* from her father’s house (*dādas dur alaṣiṅ*) with a young man she barely knew. Jan Bibia Dada, her husband, had been angry with his father for not allowing him to bring

*alaşın* another woman with whom he was deeply in love (since she was the wife of one of his father's political supporters). One of his brothers said he knew of a beautiful unmarried girl from Bumboret, so "without thinking" he brought Jan Bibia Aya *alaşın* instead. She was young and impulsive, too, and he was very handsome and wealthy. But within a month of her arrival, the couple had stopped speaking entirely (her sisters-in-law told me how shocked they were at his behavior—he didn't even ask her to wash his laundry, the quintessential wife's responsibility). And she was already pregnant. By the time the baby was a year old, Jan Bibia Dada started talking incessantly about how he would either throw her away or take a second wife (knowing that Jan Bibia Aya would probably leave him if he did so). What would happen to her? Finally, when I asked whether his threats were real, I was roundly laughed at. "Who would let him do that?" his brothers and their wives reassured me. "Who would give him the bridewealth again? It's better to have a wife you don't like than no wife at all." If she didn't go *alaşın* (and she swore she would never do that, as she'd have to leave her baby, too), then he had no recourse.

Kalasha bridewealth is so expensive (and many of the necessary traditional wealth objects so rare) that no man can afford a wife without the contributions of other lineage households, friends, neighbors, and maternal relatives. As I mentioned earlier, a woman coming into a new household comes as a person valued not only by or for her husband but as an important contributing member of the community. One says *bumbarák* (congratulations) not only to a new husband but to every member of his extended family. Because so many others have "invested" in her, both emotionally and financially (and in many ways bridewealth does represent an investment since the wealth is doubled if she goes *alaşın*), to throw away (or set free) a wife is also to throw away the wealth of your family and friends, and this seriously jeopardizes a man's chances of remarrying. In fact, no one could recall a case in which a woman with children had ever been thrown away.<sup>9</sup> In Parkes's sample as well as my own, the only male-initiated divorces that did occur happened in the earliest stages of marriage. As there is no stigma against divorcees and no value placed on virginity, the girls were free to marry other partners.

Just as the exchanged bridewealth ensures a secure place for a wife in her husband's household, it also ensures that any children she bears will be legitimate members of her husband's lineage. Whom-

ever a woman is married to at the time she gives birth is the child's father—even if he and everyone else knows that he is not the biological father. “Bastards” (*jarōa*), children who were reputedly born of adulterous affairs, are plentiful in Kalashadesh.<sup>10</sup> My friends liked to point out children who were conceived while their fathers were away at the high pastures or perhaps down-country in Peshawar. One man reportedly returned from three years in Peshawar to find he had a one-year-old son. But, while he will be a target for gossip, this boy “belongs” to his father as much as any of his brothers and will inherit his equal share of property and responsibility. It is certainly not the case that there are no consequences of adultery or that it is encouraged. Women do risk being beaten. Hitting your wife if you suspect her of adultery is acceptable, though beating her severely is not. They certainly risk marital discord. They may gain a “bad” reputation. But they don't risk their lives or the security of their children. Because neither she nor her children risk being thrown away if a woman takes lovers (let alone killed, as she would among some neighboring groups [Keiser 1986]), Kalasha women enjoy sexual freedom as well—if such freedom is defined as the ability to make choices about *whether or not* to take lovers.<sup>11</sup>

It is my impression that this freedom extends into other areas of expression. The security of women's marital situations means that women don't *have* to work hard to endear themselves to their husbands and in-laws (it is rather the other way around). Young Kalasha women thus worry little about pleasing their husbands. For example, Kosh Begim, the girl in the last chapter who performed the *bashali* purification ritual, didn't think twice about asking her husband's permission—though he clearly would not have approved. I also witnessed one particularly tense (and particularly telling) argument between my friend Kosh Gul and her husband. As their disagreement escalated, the husband shouted, “Just leave. Go back to your brother's house.” “You leave,” she retorted, “This is my house. I have sons.” “Fine,” he said, and left (though only for a few hours, returning as if nothing had happened).

Bridewealth also has economic and social advantages for women. Women know, and seem to be proud of, the amount of bridewealth they command—although to speak of it directly is considered crass. In some ways, it does seem to be a measure of their value. In lullabies, singers pay tribute to little girls as bringers of wealth, sentimentally

seeing the family's storehouses filling with priceless wealth objects and imagining a stream of livestock that fills the valley in a daughter's wake. The wealth she brings to her natal family entitles each woman to her "share" of the special bread that is baked on ritual occasions, to a share of fruit and meat, to take refuge in her father's house when she is angry with her husband, and to think of her natal house as home even after she has begun living continuously in her husband's house.

As Bossen noted for the women of Toj Nam, bridewealth, rather than limiting women's agency, also affords women the opportunity to make choices about economic and social position that aren't possible for men. Kalasha men are born into one family and remain in that household their entire lives. Their economic fate is more or less anchored to that of their natal family, as they will inherit land, house, and livestock from their parents. Women, on the other hand, are well aware that in marrying (in the case of *alaşın* marriages anyway) they are choosing an economic position as well as a spouse. Lilizar's family, as mentioned earlier, has decided to allow her to go *alaşın* on her own rather than choosing a husband for her. In weighing her suitors, she invariably cited their families' relative wealth, which for her included the quality, beauty, and accessibility (after all, she didn't want to spend her life with aching knees, she'd add) of their land, houses, and summer fields. Although I haven't the data to document this empirically, it appears that women who go *alaşın* almost invariably marry into wealthier families, wealthy enough, at least, to pay twice the bridewealth their first husbands gave.

Zailun's story is a good example. In leaving her first husband, Zailun left a man with no parents and no brothers (and hence no sisters-in-law either) to share the workload and eloped with a man who had been blessed with a wealthy family and many siblings. I asked her if she had thought about this when she fell in love with Miramin. "Of course not," she laughed, "I was young. Young people are crazy (*got*), they don't think about land and goats, only love." Then, dropping her voice, she pulled me toward her and whispered, "Well, maybe a little. Certainly I thought about that a little."

I have described how this particular constellation of bridewealth practices offers Kalasha women a secure base from which to make a number of economic and sexual decisions as well as the ultimate defining freedom of being able to exchange one husband for another.

And yet these same practices also limit the extent of their agency in precisely these areas. The limitations are different for each woman and vary especially depending on when she becomes pregnant and how much bridewealth her husband's family was able to give.

Marilyn Strathern has argued that in many bridewealth societies things come to be equated with persons or, more precisely with aspects of personhood that are thought to be split off, detachable (1985:197–200; see also 1984b). Among Kalasha, the most obvious aspect of female personhood that is split off and offered up in marriage (either by the woman herself, in the case of an elopement, or by her family in an arranged marriage) are rights to the children she bears. The children of a woman who goes *alaşın* belong to her husband: he paid for them, no matter how much or little bridewealth was given. Once Talimzar, angry with her husband for an alleged affair, lamented to me that her uncle once had eaten a goat sacrificed in his honor by her husband. Talimzar and her husband have an unusual marital situation in that her family never officially acknowledged her elopement and bridewealth had not been formally exchanged although the couple had been together for eight years. She explained that if only her uncle hadn't eaten that goat she would be free to leave him and take the children. As it was, if she left her husband she would lose her children utterly. The eating of this one goat, on this one occasion, constituted an exchange of bridewealth, and since bridewealth had been exchanged her children belonged to his family. She reminded me of Sherbek's mother, who eloped with the man next door when her son was three. Sherbek's father built a wall between their houses and refused to let her speak to the boy, refused to let him call her mother. Most women are bound to their husbands because of their devotion to their children.

This creates interesting marital politics for young couples. Perhaps you'll remember Geki, who in the last chapter began crying when she discovered that she had begun to menstruate. Her aunt and mother explained that it meant her husband would begin pressuring her to have intercourse with him. Yet, like other young men in his situation, Geki's husband walked a precarious line. A woman's husband at the time of birth of her baby is considered the baby's father, regardless of who her husband was at the time of conception. If Geki were to have a baby, the odds would be high that she would stay with her husband rather than leave the child. But if he pressured her to

have sex against her will, she would be angry and unhappy, and thus likely to elope with someone else (even if she were already pregnant). (This is why, Zailun reasoned, her first husband never “touched” her: “*Maybe he thought, ‘if I don’t force her, she won’t go *alaşın*.’*”) Older women claim that “girls these days” are foolish, that they have sex with their husbands and lovers too easily and too young. Mushiki claims that she and her girlfriends put men off for years and that way they could see what kind of men they were before they were bound to them with children. They would then have more time to decide whether they wanted to remain in the marriage or go *alaşın* with another man.

As I explained in the last section, a woman’s freedom to elope is contingent on her ability to find someone to elope *with*. And the more bridewealth given the less likely it is that another man, however much in love with her he might be, will be able to round up the necessary double bridewealth payment. I once walked in on a conspiratorial conversation between two of the younger men in my village. Khan’s wife had just converted to Islam. She had moved into her uncle’s house. Because Khan did not choose to convert also, the marriage was dissolved and his bridewealth was returned. Khan and his lineage mate, Jamardin, were dreaming of prospective wives. They started pumping me for details about Geki. How much did she like her husband? Had I ever heard her mention either of them? Did I think she would go *alaşın* with Khan? How about with Jamardin? I told them that they were both crazy, that they knew she had already gone *alaşın* with her present husband. But that precisely, it seemed, was the beauty of their plan. “That’s right,” Khan exclaimed, “and I will pay three times for her, and then no one, ever, will be able to take her from me.” Their plan came to nothing (resting as it did on Geki, who wasn’t interested), but their logic explicitly underlies all bride-wealth transactions. Bridewealth doesn’t make women less free, since they are always *potentially* able to elope, but it does limit the ability of other men to pay the exorbitant compensation demanded by the first husband. Therefore, women are also *effectively* limited.

In addition to the exchange of bridewealth, most women receive a form of dowry (*jhes*) from their natal families. *jhes* seems to be expected, but it is certainly not required. It is given only once. The ceremony takes place after the birth of at least one child (sometimes after the birth of several children), when the marriage is securely

established. Natal families organize the ceremony and a small feast and call their daughter and her relatives to come. It is a way of honoring beloved daughters and establishing equality between in-laws.<sup>12</sup> It also contributes to women's independence in important emotional and material ways.

Parkes (1983:543) noted that the normal quantity of *jhes* given in 1979 was:

- 5 to 10 sheep
- 15 to 20 *muti* (one-year-old goats)
- 1 to 2 cows or bulls (the *mōa gak*—given by the maternal uncles)
- Several woven, goat's hair rugs, which are used on beds
- 1 trunk (*tohón*)
- 1 valuable metal cup

Some wealthy families sometimes also give their daughters one or two walnut trees—the produce of which will make her life richer, both culinarily and materially (since she will be able to sell the walnuts and keep the money herself). This amount of *jhes* was still typical during my fieldwork (although I didn't see valuable cups given). Additionally, women usually received a new set of clothes—usually complete with expensive Power brand tennis shoes—and the trunk is filled with dishes and other small household items.

The ceremony in which *jhes* is given is touchingly sentimental. One the day on which my family gave *jhes* to Gumbas, the whole extended family had been preparing all morning for her arrival—cooking and collecting and displaying the items to be given to her. She finally arrived wearing her beautiful *kupás* headdress and carrying her newborn son, her older son in tow, accompanied by an entourage of men from her husband's lineage. There was a flurry of kissing as Gumbas greeted each of her family members in turn. Mir Beck stood up and offered her the small *hányak* stool he had been sitting on. Never before or since have I seen this man, arguably the most powerful and respected person in the valleys, offer his chair to a woman! There was a feast of bread and cheese and wine, and after everyone was pleasantly stuffed and slightly drunk the speeches began. In turn, each of Gumbas's brothers and cousins gave her *múti* (one-year-old goats) from their own herds. She knelt and kissed each goat's forehead, and as she did so she began weeping. I looked around and

saw that all the other women were weeping, too, as were the more sentimental men. Later I was told that the goats are a token of the affection of her “brothers” for her, that women weep for joy, but it is a bittersweet joy, since the giving of *jhes* also symbolically marks the end of her childhood (during which she will shuttle back and forth between her husband’s and father’s houses, not quite belonging in either place) and the beginning of her life as an adult woman with her own nuclear family.

*jhes* gives women an important measure of economic independence from her in-laws (and indeed her husband). While the *jhes* given by each woman’s family accounts for only a fraction of the bridewealth given by her husband’s family, it is significant because it is usually the first productive property that is owned by her and her husband *as a couple*. The livestock forms the core of her husband’s stock before he inherits his father’s herd. Women have the right to request that these animals, and those born from them, be used for special sacrifices, to assist her family, or to make purchases she deems necessary. The other items given also symbolically provision her and her nuclear family for a life of their own—dishes, rugs for their family’s beds, and especially the large trunk for storing her private things, the key to which she will hang from her beads.

There is another aspect of *jhes* that is equally important to a woman: the items given are deducted directly from the bridewealth originally paid for her should she choose to go *alaşın*. “Ah ha!” I exclaimed to Mir Beck, who had gone to some trouble to explain the ins and outs of bridewealth and dowry to me, “So you give *jhes* in order to make your daughters more free?” “Phhh. That’s ridiculous,” he said. “We give *jhes* to help our son-in-law.” He reminded me that fathers give *jhes* to their daughters after they have had children, when there is little chance that women will go *alaşın*. Bayda Aya piped in, “*tu ta sahı mon des, bāba*. You’re right sister. *jhes* does make us a little freer.” Even though women rarely go *alaşın* after *jhes* has been given, it makes it more thinkable. “And also,” she continued, “after our family gives *jhes* we can say to our husbands when they try to ‘stand above’ us, ‘You think you’re the only one who gave property (*mal*)? My family also gave property.’”

Let’s go back to Bayda Aya’s (Zailun’s) story, where she is falling in love with her second husband, Miramin, and about to go *alaşın* with him. Like most *alaşın* stories, Bayda Aya’s is filled with intrigue,

danger, desire, humor, and some sadness. Her elopement is the point around which her life pivoted, a moment in time when she committed an irrevocable act that changed her future and the futures of those closest to her.



Zailun first saw Miramin at that funeral in Rumbur. They were both “heartstruck.” Miramin would come to Bumboret and camp out along the river for days, just to get a glimpse of her sitting on the high porch at her parents’ summer house. *“From the time I was small I was so in love. . . . He came all the time to Bumboret, we saw one another and fell in love<sup>13</sup>—just like you say—love at first sight. For three or four years we made love—not bad works [they were not sexually involved], no, only with words. We would look at one another and become happy. He’d bring me little gifts. In love. So, if I saw him far away, I would get so happy. My heart would bloom like a flower—I’ve seen my friend! He never asked to sleep [have sex] with me. He said to other people, ‘I’ll lead that girl [elope with her].”* Miramin’s friends started approaching Zailun, telling her that he was talking of bringing her *alaşın*. She would say, “Well, good. Later I’ll see.” Every twenty days or so, his friends would come back, urging her to “give straight words,” telling her that Miramin liked her so much that he was becoming crazy, urging her to agree to elope with him. She also liked him, but she would say, “I’ll see later. Now I can’t come. I am a man’s wife. One year later, two years later, three years later, we’ll see.” *“It was like that, sister. We were in love for four years. Then, finally, I came with him.”*

Or rather she came to him with a friend of his, came over the mountain that divides Bumboret Valley from Rumbur Valley in the middle of the night, scrambling up steep scree slopes to the meadows and cedar forests above and descending, finally, in Rawelik, where Miramin and his friends were waiting for her. Miramin couldn’t come for her himself, as the road was being watched. Zailun was being guarded, both by her husband and by a third man who was crazy in love with her (and hoped to bring her *alaşın* himself).

Ten days earlier, there had been a failed attempt. Mujika Dada, Khana Dada, and several friends, brothers, and other relatives of Miramin had come to Bumboret for her. It was night. They planned to go all the way to Ayun and then climb up the steep pass to Arigich—

*"maybe they'd have to carry me on their backs!"* noted Bayda Aya—and drop directly into Kalashagrom, Miramin's village. So they came to Bumboret and instructed Peshawar Khan, a friend of theirs, to tell Zailun of the plan. But Peshawar Khan's brother, the other man who was in love with Zailun, overheard. He had been after her for one or two years, pressuring her, following her. *"He had been saying, 'You absolutely have to be my wife. If you're not my wife [he already had a wife and two daughters]. . . . You absolutely come with me. You don't go with anyone else—If you go with anyone else, I'll kill myself.' I said, 'I can't come with you. I am a man's wife. If I go, I'll go far away. I can't come with you. Anyway, you have a wife, she'll get angry. And besides, my heart—even if your heart is stuck to mine, mine isn't stuck to yours. I am in love with someone else.'"* So when this man heard of the planned elopement he sent word to his friends to come, saying, *"the girl is going to run away tonight. You all come for me. Wait on the road and grab her and we'll take her for me."* So surrounding her father's house that night were ten or fifteen men, two groups, one waiting to lead Bayda Aya to her love, the other hoping to take her from them. *"I, well, I never even woke up from my sleep,"* Bayda Aya laughed.

*"Then later, ten days later, I came alaşın."* It was late summer, when nights are filled with "night dancing," an ongoing celebration leading up to the fall harvest festival, Uchau. Long nights of dancing to sweet love songs encourage the crops to mature. They are also a time when everyone is out of place, up until all hours, sleeping at friends' houses. Zailun took her little brother and cuddled with him in a bed on the porch of their house. No one was watching out for her, as everyone was dancing. When her brother fell asleep, she slipped away with two men from Rumbur and climbed over the mountain.

Zailun's grandfather was so angry. *"Bring her back as fast as spit,"* he said to her father. Her father's younger brother also held fast to the man to whom they had given her. *"You sit with him, you sit with him,"* he insisted. They had given her to a man of their choice, and now she should honor them, she should obey them and stay. *"What could I do? My heart was not warm for him. Going alaşın in love, I became another man's wife."* Her grandfather and her father's youngest brother fought with her father, accusing him of sending her alaşın himself. *"You sent her, you!"* her youngest uncle said, and he cut his brother with a knife, so that even today he has a scar on his nose. (No one told Zailun, knowing that this would make her *wam*—unable to move or respond

because she would be so inconsolable.) For two years, her former husband and her grandfather refused to accept the bridewealth payment, as they were so angry. Her grandfather said that he would kill Miramin and his father. So Zailun could not visit her home for two years, and Miramin couldn't go near Bumboret or he'd be beaten by his wife's former husband and his friends. Finally, someone convinced them, saying "Are you Muslims that you fight like this? No, we're Kalasha, we exchange bridewealth and resolve our differences." Only ten days before they accepted the double bridewealth for Zailun, her grandfather died. "What could I do? I wasn't able to go, and he died before, or I would have talked him into forgiving me. Even now my little father [her father's younger brother] doesn't speak nicely with me—fine, fine—but not loving words. Even now it's like that—if you're sought and given away, it's like that, sister."



"Going *alaṣiṅ*" turns Kalasha girls into women. One reason why young girls' resistance to marriage doesn't often work is that girls are not yet able to effectively organize social relations. The only way in which a girl can be free of one husband is to elope with another—and only when she is older will she be able to coordinate and inspire the actions of others. When, like Zailun, young women "go *alaṣiṅ*," they not only *agree* to elope but they always play an active role in planning and executing the elopement. They can (and often do) change their minds at any point. Going *alaṣiṅ* is physical. It is dangerous—or at least it always feels dangerous. And it has enduring consequences. When girls go *alaṣiṅ*, their actions have repercussions that ripple through the community. The people closest to them, parents, grandparents, in-laws, are most affected. But the act reverberates through the three Kalasha valleys as well. The choices women make about marriage are painful and real. By choosing to reject the marriage her grandfather made for her, Zailun jeopardized the warm and supportive relationship she had had with him. Her choice ended the *khaltabár* relationship her grandfather and father and uncles had cultivated, serving the economic and emotional bond they had built with her former husband and his family. Even now, more than ten years after Zailun came *alaṣiṅ* with Miramin, she still weeps when she thinks of the pain and anger she caused her grandfather.

After a girl has gone *alaṣiṅ*, she is taken seriously. As happens after every *alaṣiṅ*, Zailun's father (it could be any other close male relative) came to her new house and asked if she had chosen to go *alaṣiṅ* of her own will. "Did someone trick you, my daughter?" he asked. "Did he lie to you? Do you want to come back home?" "No," Zailun replied, "Coming with Miramin was my own choice. I want to stay here." Sometimes (as you'll see in Saras Gula Aya's story) girls are beaten and dragged back home by irate male relatives. But Kalasha girls know that if they are persistent they will have their way—in large part because marriage, both whom you marry and how you marry, is at the heart of "Kalasha *dastúr*," Kalasha custom.

### **Marrying and Being Kalasha**

Like me, many of my Kalasha friends are fascinated with the details of other marriage systems. They often asked me questions about how Americans marry and whom and who decides and how old the bride and groom should be and who pays bridewealth (it is a common rumor that *anglís* women give bridewealth for the men they marry—why else would my husband do my laundry?). We spent long, cold, winter mornings trading stories and eating up the last evening's leftovers. The women in my family would tell me about their "customs" and how their community differed from neighboring Muslim communities. They would ask me to tell tales about marriage and divorce and polygamy in America—and in India, Japan, France, Canada, and the Punjab. They already knew all about Princess Diana's saga and told me how she had come from a poor family and married a prince (I said that I doubted Earl Spencer was all that poor, but they insisted he was). Diana had left Charles because he'd been unfaithful. She had the kids, and he was thinking of taking another wife, but the women all speculated that Diana wouldn't let that happen because she has a lot of *pawa* (power). Good anthropologists themselves, my friends felt that sorting through marriage systems was a way of classifying peoples, of understanding who's who and who values what and what kinds of agency are claimed by whom.

Through marriage, Kalasha set themselves apart from their Muslim neighbors in two ways—in whom they marry and how they marry. One of the few myths that are very widely shared (there are

many known only to the *kazí*) explains the original split between Kalasha and Muslims.

Adam and Bibi Awa had seven boys and seven girls, born together on the same day in pairs. They didn't know how to marry them, so God told them they should marry the first boy to the last girl, and so on. But the youngest daughter was very beautiful, and her own twin wouldn't give her up. They were cast out and became the first Muslims.

This myth is one of the only stories I heard in which Kalasha claim to be God's chosen people—testifying to the fact that marriage strikes at the very heart of their ethnic identity. In few other circumstances, neither in songs nor stories nor conversations, are most Kalasha willing to speculate that they are right and Muslims wrong. Rather, they say simply, as Khana Dada often remarked, "Who has been to heaven and back to tell us if we are right or they are? Perhaps God is big enough for all of us. We'll each know in time."

Unlike their Muslim neighbors, Kalasha consider marriages between cousins, men and women born in the same patriline, or those clearly related through their mothers<sup>14</sup> to be incestuous or *máka*. In the time before the Nuristanis were forcibly converted to Islam, couples who violated similar marriage taboos automatically became *bara*, nonlandowning slaves to and craftsmen for the "true Kafirs" (Jones 1974). It does not seem that the Kalasha, who appear to have been the gentler and poorer neighbors of the Kafiristanis, ever had such a stratified system. But violation of the incest taboos has similar repercussions: young people sometimes do fall in love with a forbidden other, and the couple is automatically cast from the community and converted to Islam. Jan Bibi told me that when she and Rakmat Khan, distantly related members of the same patriline and therefore "brother and sister" to one another, fell in love and eloped together, the furor of their families lasted more than a year. Rakmat Khan's father immediately divided his land, giving his now Muslim son a place to build a house far from their home village near a group of other Muslim families. For months no one talked to them, but now they are reintegrated into their families, though of course as *šek*, converted Kalasha. "We knew what we were doing and what would happen," she told me, "but our love was too strong."

It is more than simply the practice of patrilineal exogamy that makes Kalasha marriage regionally unique, but especially the fact that young people have a culturally sanctioned pathway to escape the marriages their parents arrange for them. As I have said, the act of going *alaṣiṅ* is the prototypic act that defines women's freedom, and women's freedom is one of the central markers of Kalasha ethnicity. It is certainly not the case that neighboring Muslim women fail to assert agency or choice regarding marriage partners (cf. Tapper 1990). Indeed, my Chitrali friends loved to tell and retell stories of Chitrali women who had risked everything—security, status, connections to family, life itself—for the sake of love. And “love marriages”—marriages in which young women and men know and express an interest in one another before marriage—are becoming more common even in this conservative area of Pakistan. But the Kalasha are unique in this region in that women have a culturally acknowledged *right* to elope with another man.

When a young Kalasha couple goes *alaṣiṅ*, it always causes scandal and disorder. But no matter how great the opposition to the marriage of the young lovers, their act always elicits the comment, “Well, what can we do, this is Kalasha *dastúr*, Kalasha custom.” And this “custom” is backed up by the very real threat that if young people are not allowed to make their own choices about marriage they can (and often do) convert to Islam (*šek thi an*). The neighboring Muslim community is eager to embrace—at least initially—converted Kalasha. By converting, the couple would escape the authority of their parents, and, although they would now be bound in a new moral community, they would be married by a mullah. As you'll see in Saras Gula Aya's story, her in-laws allowed her husband, Mir Beck, to take a second wife when he, their only son, threatened to convert. Converting to Islam is a desperate act because it is irrevocable—but for this very reason it is an effective threat that gives young lovers powerful leverage in these emotionally charged situations.

It is also Kalasha custom that disputes over marriages are settled through the exchange of bridewealth rather than deadly violence. When Kalasha women go *alaṣiṅ*, they risk the disappointment and disapproval of their families (although this itself is considerable), but they know that they are not risking their lives or endangering the lives of people they love. Zailun's male relatives, furious over her elopement with Miramin, were finally convinced to accept the double

bridewealth payment customary after elopement after hearing, “*Are you Muslims that you fight like this? No, we’re Kalasha, we exchange bridewealth and resolve our differences.*” It is a point of pride, an aspect of Kalashaness, that elopements do not develop into the deadly blood feuds characteristic of this region. As Keiser notes, among the nearby Kohistani communities, “accepting such indemnity would be unthinkable. . . . Incidents like these require an instant exchange of gunfire. The passion for revenge aroused in the cuckolded husband demands that he at least attempt to kill his wife’s lover” (1986:494–95; cf. Lindholm 1981). Kalasha women (and the young men who elope with them) can more boldly exercise their agency with regard to marriage decisions because the consequences, while certainly serious, are not lethal.

#### *The Politics of Elopement*

Going *aḷaṣiṅ* was the defining moment in Zailun’s (Bayda Aya’s) life, the point around which all her relationships turn. When I first came to Rumbur, I was attracted to stories of dramatic elopements like Zailun’s. I thought bold women, women who chose “freedom” and took their lives into their own hands, made the decision to elope. But I came slowly to see that women’s freedom involves more than that, that the decision *not* to elope, but to *stay*, is powerful and important as well. Saras Gula Aya could have gone *aḷaṣiṅ* many times—she had streams of men who were in love with her, according to her daughters-in-law. But, although she was “free” to go, she stayed. It is around her decision to stay that she narrates the story of her life. As well as illustrating many of the points I’ve already discussed, Saras Gula Aya’s story (intertwined as it is with the stories of those closest to her) also offers a glimpse of the larger political ground on which elopements are enacted.



After Pilin Gul had been living in her in-laws’ house for a couple of years as a young menstruating woman, her husband’s sister (who had become Pilin Gul’s good friend), Bibi Zar, went *aḷaṣiṅ* with Pilin Gul’s cousin (FBS) Mizok (cousins are called *baya* [brother] or *baba* [sister] in Kalasha, and as children grow up in extended patrilocal

families these relationships are especially close and siblinglike). Bibi Zar had been Gazi's wife, promised to him in her infancy although he was already a grown man. When Bibi Zar was only a tiny baby, Gazi had said, apparently, "I will make that one my wife." *"And he [Gazi] waited for her. And waiting and waiting, Bibi Zar grew up. She grew up and was a young woman. But when she was a young woman, Mizok led her alaşın."* Pilin Gul herself had been a matchmaker, "running words" between her cousin and Bibi Zar. On that same day, Pilin Gul's husband, Mir Beck, led one of Pilin Gul's own cousins (mother's brother's daughter, or MBD), a girl from Bumboret Valley, *alaşın*. Although no one had seen them yet or knew where the two were staying, it appeared that her husband was bringing a second wife in on top of her head. *"I'm going, to my father's house I am going,"* Pilin Gul said, angrily. But her mother-in-law said, *"If you go, I will die. I will jump from a cliff and die. I will throw myself in a river and die."* So Pilin Gul stayed.

Later that day, Pilin Gul went down to Badtet to braid her hair by the bridge. She kept a small wooden comb hidden there, halfway between her husband's house and her father's house. From her semi-hidden spot, Pilin Gul saw her father-in-law, Zada, storm down to the grassy area in the center of the village, where a small crowd had gathered. Apparently he had returned home from his work in the stable to find that both his son and daughter had been flagrantly disobedient. Furious, he swung his gun, shooting it off above the heads of the gathered people. *"In front of their faces, he shot the gun. 'I'll kill them [his son and daughter]. I'll also kill the matchmaker. I'll also kill myself. My son was persuaded to do this because of my daughter-in-law. They weren't able to take my daughter-in-law, so they persuaded my son.'"* The nephew of Zada's greatest rival in the valley, Mashara Shah, had long been in love with Pilin Gul. He once locked her in a storeroom until she swore she'd marry him. *"Of course I didn't do it. I just said the words so he would let me out,"* Pilin Gul explained. *"They persuaded my son—Mashara Shah and Nurjan Khan's father—they did it. 'I'll kill them. I'll kill my own self,' he said, swinging his gun around."* Zada felt that his rival, Nurjan Khan's father, had convinced his son Mir Beck to bring in a second wife without his father's blessing so that his family relations, and especially his relations with his *khaltabár* (Pilin Gul's natal family) would be disrupted. He turned toward Nurjan Khan's father, ready to fight with him, but Nurjan Khan's father said, *"Oh my [categorical] father-in-law—Your own daughter has gone, and your son has led a woman."*

*Why are you running around all angry now? In the beginning you must teach your children to behave."* Zada glared at him. *"You did this, you [You told him to do this, told him it was right.]" "About that you will have to produce evidence,"* Nurjan Khan's father said, *"If you can produce evidence, then . . ."*



At this point in her story, Pilin Gul has been married to Mir Beck for seven years. She has grown up shuttling back and forth between her in-laws' house and her natal house and has developed intimate relationships with her sisters-in-law and an affectionate tie with her mother-in-law and father-in-law. She glows when she talks about the romance between Bibi Zar and Mizok, and she herself facilitated their elopement by "running words" back and forth between the two young lovers. The very day on which Mizok and Bibi Zar first went *alaşın* Pilin Gul discovers that her own young husband is attempting to bring a second wife in "on her head." She is angry with him. (To this day, she becomes angry when she tells this story.) Knowing that his action has made her "free" to leave (and that her husband's family will forfeit the bridewealth they paid to her family if she does so), she declares that she is going. Her mother-in-law's desperate threat of suicide compels her to stay, at least for a while.

But beyond the immediacy of desire, rejection, anger, action, and intrigue felt by the young people themselves is a realm of politics and power in which these elopements, indeed all Kalasha elopements, are embedded. In his excellent dissertation, Peter Parkes (1993) argues convincingly that orchestrating elopements is the primary way in which important lineage elders garner power and prestige for themselves. From the perspective of male political leaders, the politics of elopement serve as public contests in which lineage elders demonstrate their relative power and influence through dishonoring political rivals and finessing the wealth and support needed to settle bride-wealth compensation. Further, mediating or arbitrating elopement conflicts is the main occasion for elders to act as political leaders. "Indeed," Parkes notes, "without such hostilities to resolve, it is difficult to imagine what political leadership might entail in Kalasha society" (1983:591). In Parkes's construction—which I believe fairly represents the viewpoint of important male elders—women (and indeed

young men, though Parkes does not comment on this) are seen as mere pawns in the political games played by older men.

From her semihidden spot near the river, Pilin Gul also glimpses this other level on which the elopement attempts of her husband, and of her cousin and sister-in-law, are being played out. She sees her father-in-law, Zada, enraged to find that on the same day his daughter has left the man to whom he “gave” her *and* his son is attempting to bring another woman *alaṣiṅ* (and both of these events jeopardize the *khaltabár* relationships he has cultivated over the years). His gunshots and threats of murder and suicide demonstrate both his anger and his self-control. They show that he could kill, that he is angry enough to do so, but since he is Kalasha he won’t. Rather than ascribing intentionality and blame to his children, he sees them as having been tricked, “persuaded,” by his political rivals—“*You did this, you!*”—especially Nurjan Khan’s father, as a way of disgracing Zada himself. Indeed, Nurjan Khan’s father’s pointed jab, “*Why are you running around all angry now? In the beginning you must teach your children to behave,*” is intended to slight the leadership abilities of the important and politically powerful Zada by suggesting that he can’t even control the actions of his own children. I asked Saras Gula Aya (Pilin Gul) if it were true that these elopements were encouraged by Nurjan Khan’s faction to humiliate Zada and break up his established *khaltabár* relationships. “Whatever else?” she replied. “But I thought that *women* made the choice of whether to go *alaṣiṅ* or not,” I pressed. “That’s right,” she said, “It is women’s choice.”

Once again, I seem to have a harder time than Saras Gula Aya and my other Kalasha friends in believing that two seemingly contradictory things can be true at once. The question I wrestle with is this: does the fact that elopements are orchestrated by politically powerful older men as a way of garnering prestige for themselves and “pulling the pants down” (*bhut níhúji*) (Parkes 1983:584) on their rivals negate the conception that Kalasha women are free to make their own decisions about marriage? I think, finally, that Saras Gula Aya is right. Not only are both things true, but each makes it possible for the other to be true.

As Ivan Karp argues, “We really only ‘know’ agency when it fails—that is when it has to face it’s own limits” (1995:7). Women’s freedom, the fact that women are ultimately responsible for the decision to stay or go, defines the outer limits of elder men’s political

agency (which for them is the ability to coordinate the actions and mobilize the resources of others toward their own ends). Women disrupt the best-laid plans of fathers and lineage elders by saying, as Mayram put it earlier in this chapter, “Now I am grown and I have other ideas about what I want.” Women are not simply traded. Elopements always involve the active collaboration of the women involved (and thus Parkes’s use of the term *capture marriage* and his reference to the eloping husband as the “abductor” seem inappropriate). And, once married, women do not always stay put. Orchestrating marriages or facilitating elopements thus takes considerable finesse, charisma, material resources, more than a little luck, and a keen ability to respond immediately and decisively to shifting situations. It is exactly the fact that women are *not* the puppets of big men that makes marriage and elopement an interesting and appropriate ground for demonstrating men’s political astuteness.

At the same time, the realm of politics defines the field in which women exercise their choices about marriage. I realize that in this chapter I have underplayed the importance of the ongoing “war of position” of lineage elders, partly because it is not where my own interest lies but also because I have been following the narratives of women, who are remembering what they saw and felt when they were barely more than children. But it is clear, to them and to me, that the choices they make about whether and with whom to elope are “loosely structured” (Ortner 1989:198; see also Ahearn 1994:40–41) by kinship and politics. As Karp, again, says, “agency itself can never simply mean the exercise of choice, or the carrying out of intentions. Choice itself is structured and is also exercised on people and matter” (1995:8). Freedom, for Kalasha women, does not mean limitless choice but crafting a “meaningful life” (*maksát zindagí*) out of present possibilities.

### A Meaningful Life



A few days later, Pilin Gul again went to braid her hair, this time to her natal village of Maledesh. One of her fathers (father’s brother, FB) called her to come to the house, to his house, which sat directly above her own, so that her roof formed his balcony. “Let’s go. Let’s go to

*Rawelik [their summer land]. What else should you do, [now that] your husband has made a wife?" he said. Pilin Gul told him that her mother-in-law had said she would kill herself if she left. "Let her kill herself already. Let her jump into the river. Your husband took a wife." So then Pilin Gul left with her father (FB), left for Rawelik with her littlest father (father's younger brother, FyB). He had in mind that she would marry someone else, a friend of his, and it is this story of how she almost went *alaşın* that she refuses to tell despite all the pestering of her daughters-in-law. Her own father was there already. Bibi Zar and Mizok were also there [since Mizok is Pilin Gul's cousin, Rawelik is also his summer land], hiding in a small out of the way hut until Zada's wrath cooled. They had planned to cross the mountain into Bumboret in the morning, but that very evening Zada and his younger brother came to take Bibi Zar home. They forced Bibi Zar to accompany them back to her natal home, saying that she should stay with the man they had given her to.*

Meanwhile, Mir Beck apparently had brought his new bride to his father's house, but Zada had not allowed them inside, so they had gone back to Bumboret. Thus, Mir Beck's first attempt to bring a second wife failed. His father, Zada, had said, apparently, *"I won't give him that one. She is the wife of one of my lineage members. Someone overpowered him and convinced him to do this. I won't give her to him."* Then Zada and one of Pilin Gul's mother's brothers came to Rawelik with a bull, a big bull (an important item of bridewealth and an apology for the insult of his son trying to take a second wife). Pilin Gul's father said to them, *"Go on back. My father was a simple, straightforward man, and he left, up the water channel up-valley he left. So it was like that, and I was there for a while."*

*"Then she went again, Bibi Zar, went *alaşın* [a second time]." Her father sent his brother, a convert to Islam (*šek*) after her, saying apparently, *"Go brother, Bibi Zar has gone again. That šek old man said to Bibi Zar, 'Let's go, my daughter.'"* But this time she didn't agree, so he came back home along with one of Mizok's grandfathers. Zada is said to have asked, *"Why didn't you bring her home?"* And Mizok's grandfather is said to have answered, *"My grandson went nowhere looking for a woman. Your daughter came here herself, looking for a man—those were bad words he had. He came there to say those words apparently, 'My grandson didn't go there looking for a woman, to your place. Your little daughter came herself—she's become a woman who looks for men!' My father-in-law was**

*enraged. Enraged, he went and beat Bibi Zar, her beads on her kupás, he grabbed a stick and beat her, scattering the beads everywhere. Then he brought her home. Brought that one home, and then they brought me, too. Brought me here again. Brought me here and then Bibi Zar also. It must have been six or seven years she was here at our own house."*



### *Desire*

In this segment of Saras Gula Aya's narrative, her father-in-law, Zada, is enraged to hear that his own daughter, Bibi Zar, has become "a woman who looks for men." According to Mizok's grandfather, Bibi Zar came to Mizok on her own initiative rather than waiting for him to come for her. In so doing, she violated the fundamental way in which desire is constructed in Kalasha society: men desire women and make advances and proposals to them. Kalasha women *choose* among the men who desire them, but they don't make the first move. Once, for example, Katie, one of the English schoolteachers who work in Chitral, was visiting, and I translated as she related a story about one of her friend's mothers who had fallen in love with another man and divorced her first husband after twenty-five years of marriage. Always fascinated with the details of marriage in other cultures, the women in my family listened attentively. Then Saras Gula Aya said the whole thing seemed very strange to her—especially the part about an old woman falling in love and pursuing a man. "Women don't fall in love with men here," she said. "We never go looking for them. Men fall in love with us, and they come looking for us." This construction carries over into many aspects of courtship (and ritual life—as I'll elaborate in the concluding chapter). Families of boys come "looking for a girl," never the other way around. Women wait to go *alaşín* with their lovers rather than simply walking down the road to his house.

And yet, familiar as this construction might sound—women as objects of men's desire—Kalasha women's position of "being desired" is not passive but rather powerful and demanding and efficacious. Kalasha girls begin early finding that being desired demands an active response and a sometimes painful choice. One afternoon I accompanied my friend Shakar Shah as he went to retrieve his daughter Nisa Gul, aged three and a half, from her maternal grandparents'

house. After we had tea, Shakar Shah told Nisa Gul that we were ready to go home. Her grandmother and aunts fawned over her and jokingly pleaded with her not to go. "Of course, you should come with me," said Shakar Shah, "You belong with your father." "Don't go," they countered, "Haven't we been taking care of you? Don't we love you? Don't you love us? Where will you go—there? Or will you stay here with us just a few more days. . . . If you go, Nisa, we will have no desire to live. Okay, go then, we don't like you any more!" Meanwhile, Shakar Shah kept coaxing her to come with him. Nisa, for her part, looked as if she wasn't sure how to respond. "I'm going," she said finally and began sobbing. Her aunts laughed and told her to give them all kisses goodbye. On the way home, I asked Shakar Shah if he didn't think that was too much pressure for a little girl. "Of course not!" he said, "It will make her happy to feel so wanted."

In only a couple of years, Nisa Gul will have learned how to respond appropriately to so much being wanted. By the time she was five years old, Gulsambar had mastered the kind of flirting discourse in which men and women constantly engage: women desired and aloof, men bearing gifts and compliments. In this short conversation, Pundali (a thirty-year-old male friend and neighbor whose sister is married to Gulsambar's uncle) has been trying to talk Gulsambar into coming over to his house:

*P:* Come over, my daughter! Why do you never come over? I'll give you sugar . . .

*G:* Go away, don't give me ashes! Don't give it to me! What do I need with your sugar? I have my own house. There is sugar at my own house.

*P:* But I'll give you lots of sugar, as much as you want! (starts tickling her)

*G:* You'll give me ashes, ashes! Ayo, aaaaaayooooo (Momm-mmmmy)—

Adult Kalasha women experience being desired as a powerful position, a position in which there is more room to negotiate. When my census of Balanguru village showed that there were forty more men than women, one woman said—to the amusement of her friends—"Great, if we don't like our husband, we'll just toss him away and there will be another waiting." They are quite explicit that

not being in love with their husbands gives them the upper hand in the relationship. Bayda Aya explained that because she came *alaşın* with her husband she can no longer say to him (when she wants him to do something special for her or to agree to a request), "What, do you think I stay here because I am in love with you?" Likewise, her family's decision to let Lilizar go *alaşın* instead of giving her to a man of their choice, according to Nizara Aya, puts Lilizar in a position in which they (her natal family) are above her (*hóma lilizára pi tára*). If they choose a husband for her, she can say, "Look how unhappy I am! My husband is no good!" and her natal family will have to find a way to make her situation better. But if she chooses her own husband her natal family will be "above her" (i.e., they will be in the easier situation) because if she complains or is unhappy (unless of course her husband is violent, in which case they would act on her behalf) they will say, "What can we do? It was your own choice. You yourself went *alaşın* with that man."

For her part, Lilizar, now thirteen, is experiencing how demanding it is for a Kalasha woman to be desired. When I left the valleys, four different men were interested in her. She felt barraged by their persistent (though indirect) proposals. The men sent their female relatives to talk to her and asked me to slip cookies to her. One especially lovesick suitor rode his bicycle (the only bicycle in the valley) back and forth on the road in front of her house. Every advance demanded a reply, whether in the form of a brush-off or an indignant no. "I wish I were a boy," Lilizar lamented to me, "Then everyone would leave me alone."

Among Kalasha, the fact that women are desired, and that they make active, unpredictable choices about what to do, is powerful and efficacious. It changes the world in important ways. Parkes, for example, notes correctly that Kalasha do not have detailed ideas about the biology of conception. But he does say that the male "seed" (*bi*) is thought to "congeal" (*şınjik*) with the mother's blood in the same way that milk is congealed by rennet to make cheese (1983:443). A better gloss of *congeal*, however, is *tru'ik*, with the derived adjective *trúna* meaning "congealed" or "jelled." *şınjik*, on the other hand, means to persuade, convince, or apologize so as to bring the other person around to your way of thinking. It is then the active agreeing of women's blood with the persuasive sperm that makes a child. It is the active agreeing to go *alaşın* that changes not only a woman's own life

but the social and economic relations of so many others in the community. And, as we'll see in the last chapter, the desire generated by women's ritual leaving of the valley (even as the men try to persuade them to stay) even changes the weather, bringing back spring after the interminably long winter.



Then finally, seven years later, Bibi Zar went *alaşın* with Mizok again. This time, Mashara Shah (a clan mate of Gazi, the man Bibi Zar was married to as a young child) led the wife of one of Pilin Gul's brothers (who was of course also one of Mizok's cousins) *alaşın*. So Mizok led Bibi Zar. Instead of counting and exchanging bridewealth, the two lineages just said, "*We're even.*" So then she was that one's wife, and she was that one's wife. And after that, I [Pilin Gul] was his [Mir Beck's] wife, and I stayed right here."



#### *Negative Agency?*

I'd like to interrupt Pilin Gul's story one last time, and then I will let her finish this chapter herself. In her essay on Okiek marriage arrangement, Corrine Kratz introduces helpful theoretical refinements of the concept of agency (2000). Of particular interest here is her claim that young Okiek brides have "negative agency." At their weddings, in a rare public moment of power, Okiek brides are asked to decide whether they will "follow" or "refuse" the husband their families have chosen for them. "Her right of choice recognizes her adult agency, her ability to affect many others and responsibility for those effects" (166). Yet a young Okiek bride's agency is "negative" because she is accorded only the power to *disrupt* the plans of her family and future husband. "Full recognition of adult capacity and responsibility is accorded to young women in marriage as blame, imputing to them the negative effects of their action and decisions. Credit for their positive effects of young women's actions is shared with the families who arranged the match and with her husband" (166).

Kalasha women's freedom resonates in interesting ways with the "negative agency" Katz describes for Okiek brides. Kalasha women

clearly have the power to disrupt the best-laid plans of their elders, and, like Okiek brides, young Kalasha wives cannot create marriages themselves—as is evidenced by the violent squelching of Bibi Zar’s second elopement attempt. What is clearly different about Kalasha women’s agency is their understanding that positive choices, such as Pilin Gul’s decision to stay with Mir Beck, are thought to be meaningful, to have consequences, and to contribute as much to a person’s sense of individual identity as negative choices. Among Kalasha, deciding not to act is active, too, and not mere passive acceptance of authority, as we are often led to believe in our current theoretical “romance” with resistance (Abu-Lughod 1990). The story of Pilin Gul’s life climaxes with a description of her wrenching decision to stay with Mir Beck after he makes another—and this time successful—attempt to bring in a second wife. Although Pilin Gul was free to leave, she consented to stay.<sup>15</sup> As you’ll see, for Pilin Gul staying with Mir Beck was anything but a passive decision; rather it was a conscious act that transformed both her own life and the lives of those around her. It was a decision that had far-reaching economic consequences, consequences for which she herself assumes responsibility. It was a decision that transformed her sense of self—she became a person who is patient, who is not selfish, a person who has endured and has been rewarded with an abundant and purposeful life.

I asked Mir Beck about his marriages. Why did he feel compelled to have two wives in a community where polygamy is both exceptional and exceptionally difficult? Was it a way of demonstrating his political power, of displaying his wealth, of freeing himself of the authority of his powerful, respected father (who foiled his first elopement attempt and unsuccessfully tried to forbid the second)? Was he in love with Siaphat, his second wife? Once Siaphat told me that she had been in love with Mir Beck since she was a young girl and that now, as an “old” woman (of about forty-five), her heart still jumps a little when she sees him coming home. Mir Beck himself would never talk to me about his wives, saying simply that everything happened a long time ago. He would tell me, if I wanted to get my tape recorder out, about the merit feasts he has given or about how his father killed a snow leopard. This story, then, comes through Saras Gula Aya, and you should know that both Mir Beck and Siaphat would tell it differently, if they would tell it at all.



*"I staaaaayed here. And my daughter, Saras Gul, was born. My son Sherayat was born. When he was Mirzada's size—no, a little bigger than that, as big as Gulabi perhaps—that's right, we were saying it was time to have his goştník ceremony [initiation/blessing ceremony] at Chaumos—then he [Mir Beck], so, he led Barayata Aya. He brought that other one as a wife."* Barayata Aya (Siaphat) is ten years younger than Pilin Gul. She had been Tajikia Dada's wife. At first, Zada again refused to allow his son to take a second wife. Mir Beck and Siaphat lived for a couple of months at a distant relative's house. Finally, with Siaphat eight months pregnant, Mir Beck is said to have threatened to convert to Islam if his father didn't accept his second marriage and pay the double bridewealth as compensation to Tajikia Dada. Zada refused still, but Saras Gula Aya said that her mother-in-law wept and said that, although she was angry, too, she couldn't bear to lose her only son. A date was set to exchange bridewealth. And Saras Gula Aya was free. *"I'm leaving,"* she said.

The story of her life spins now, as it must have then, through all the advice she received. Because he had brought in another wife, Saras Gula Aya was free to leave Mir Beck, and he was not entitled to repayment of the bridewealth his family had given for her. But their two children were "his" and would stay with his family.

Everyone had an opinion about what Pilin Gul should do. Her fathers (father and father's brother) and brothers and cousins were furious and said that she should come home. She was young, they reasoned, and would have plenty of other children. Her father came to try to persuade her, but she didn't leave. Her brothers came, but she didn't leave. They came two or three times, but still she didn't leave, still she couldn't decide.

Finally, it was time for them to exchange bridewealth, and men from Birir Valley had come to help count, along with Siaphat's father and brothers and her former husband and all his clan mates and all the men from Mir Beck's clan as well. They began to count the bridewealth, and Pilin Gul saw that her own bull, a bull given by her father, was among the animals to be given as bridewealth. *"I'm going,"* she said. *"I said, 'I'm going,' and I went upstairs and talked to my aunt [one of her aunts had married her father-in-law's brother]. I went to her, and I said, 'I'm going, Aunt, they're counting bridewealth. They're*

exchanging bridewealth and I'm leaving.' 'Oh, my daughter, go ahead. It's time for your son's *gostnik* ceremony. You've been saying you'll do *gostnik* for him. It's a tragedy. Everyone's thoughts, everyone's plans, everyone's hopes—lost. Go.' Those were my Kabuli aunt's words, 'Everyone's thoughts, everyone's plans, everyone's hopes lost. Go.' What can I do? I see those two little packages [the two children] sitting around the hearth, and my heart breaks," she said. "Then I stayed. So then the *šek* old man [her father-in-law's younger brother, who had converted to Islam] said, 'Oh my *jan* [body/flesh—a sweet endearment], I can't say go, and I can't say stay. My tongue is tied. Which words could I say to you?' 'Then I'm going,' I said. Then my father-in-law came—he came and got on his knees in the dirt, rubbing ashes on his body, he crawled toward me. . . ." On three separate occasions, Saras Gula Aya got down on the ground and demonstrated for me how her father-in-law, one of the most respected men in the valley, in the three valleys, had fallen to the ground before her, before his friends and relatives, and rubbed ashes on his face and clothes. He begged her to stay. "He crawled toward me, saying 'You don't go. You. You are the one I sought. You don't go. That's just his own choice of a wife.' Everyone—oh, there were so many people there, a congregation of people, so [in front of them] my father-in-law said, 'My act [Zada's decision to choose Pilin Gul as Mir Beck's wife], he, my son, didn't appreciate it/like it. My, this grandson [Sherayat], to him I will give everything. Chet Guru, everything. You people are witnesses. To him [Mir Beck], I'll give one field. One field I'll give to him and his wife. The rest, everything—I have stables, I have much. Everything I have made is for my grandson, Sherayat, my son's son.' My father-in-law said [that] to all those people. So it was like that, and they gave a bull for Barayata Aya, and he [Mir Beck] made her [his wife]. That's all. . . . So I also stayed. He made a wife and I stayed."

A short while later, Pilin Gul's father-in-law, Zada, brought a Patua (Chitrali) man to the house because this man knew how to write. Saras Gula Aya's cousin (father's brother's son, FBS) Mizok came to get her so that she would also be there when the man wrote down Zada's promise to give everything to her son and only one field to Mir Beck and his new wife. Mizok said to the man, "'You write this down: my father-in-law said everything is hers—the stables are hers, the lower house is hers, Chet Guru is hers. My father-in-law gave all this to her, to her son. You write it down.' Then I said, 'It's done already, it's done. How would paper make it any different?' I didn't let them write it onto that paper. So Mizok got mad and left—'You didn't let this be written on paper.' If I

*hadn't grabbed that Patua's finger, if I had told him to write, Barayata Aya would have nothing today, would be nothing, they would have nothing—one field, that's all my father-in-law gave to them—one field. 'Don't do that,' I said, 'don't do that.'"*

"But," I interjected, "weren't you angry? Weren't you jealous?" Bayda Aya offered that she must *not* have been in love with Mir Beck or she wouldn't have stayed. If she had loved him, the jealousy would have been unbearable. Of course, she was angry, Saras Gula Aya acknowledged, and for a long time she wouldn't let him sleep in her bed, saying to him, "*What work do you have with me, now? Go crawl in your own wife's bed.*" But by and by she realized that she had made her "choice." She had stayed, and he was her husband. She had three more sons and a daughter who died in infancy. "*Fifteen grandchildren because I endured, I was patient. I sat there, as if I was dumb. I staaaayyyed, my daughter. I didn't even argue with the woman. I stayed, stayed, stayed, and God did well by me.*" She looked around, and she said, "*What is there, only a little bit in the world?*" By this, I think she means that the world is an abundant place, not a place to be stingy. "*Maybe that was his agreement, his fate. One single son, my father-in-law, and much riches. He [Mir Beck] wasn't able to fulfill his lust for fun—he made a wife, he went to Peshawar, he did one thing and another. Maybe there was an agreement that he should have another wife. . . . I was patient, my daughter. I was patient and agreed to it all—sat, sat, sat. Patua say, 'If you are patient, you will find results.' You are patient, quiet, don't say a thing, don't start a fight, you be still—Patua, that's what Patua say. So I was patient. Thanks be to God. Look around here, my full life—my patience has been rewarded. širín-šarân zindagí, a sweet life. . . . God saw my patience, and for me cooked aluá [a sweet, comforting pudding made out of slightly fermented wheat]. Who else in the world has more than this? Whose life has more meaning/purpose (maksat) than this, what, my daughter, among us humans. . . . So Yasira Awas sang a song for me, 'Saras Gula Aya's life has meaning/purpose,' she goes. That's right, it's like that."*

