Introduction

A Women’s March

There should have been a festival, but there was a war. It was a small war, to be sure, but Rumbur Valley is a small place, so it seemed big to us. I remember feeling disoriented and exhausted and cold. It was the middle of December, and the sharp mountains of the Hindukush cast long, dark shadows over the narrow valley until midday. Usually in the winter we’d pass time over endless cups of too sweet tea, waiting for the few hours of sun before creeping outside. That morning, though, I stood shivering on the roof of the house of our Kalasha family in Kalashagrom village. I watched as men from the valley, both Muslim and Kalasha, streamed up the steep scree slopes to defend the holly oak and cedar forests above Rumbur against a thousand men from the town of Ayun, who had come demanding rights to cut firewood and receive royalties for logging. The Ayuni side of the mountain is barren, and for generations Ayuni people had been taking wood from the forests above the Kalasha valleys. This conflict was the culmination of fifteen costly years of battle in court, as the Kalasha and their Muslim neighbors who share the valleys organized to prevent the dangerous acceleration of logging in their forests. In this place, where wood is scarce yet everything is cooked and heated and built with wood, where the sale of cedar brings untold riches to outside contractors, and where increasing deforestation brings devastating landslides, the forests are worth fighting for. The men from Rumbur carried guns I hadn’t even known they had.

Women were all out of place too, having wrapped up babies and bread and run home to their natal villages to check on brothers and fathers and to gather news. My friend Wasiara Aya, the oldest daughter of our family, came storming into the village. She was crying and
frightened and angry. Wasiara Aya stood on the roof with the other
women who had gathered there, and she shouted at the men. I didn’t
speak Kalasha well yet and couldn’t understand. It didn’t seem appro-
priate to ask. We could hear shots on the ridge just over the village.
Everyone was crying. We saw Saras Gula Aya (Saras Gul’s mother)
heading straight up the mountain. A while later a Kalasha man
captured her and escorted her back. She told us she had heard
the shooting and went to put a stop to it or to help. Her daughter-in-
law, Bayda Aya, seemed pleased that she had made the attempt. “But
what can we do?” she said, “It is men’s work, men’s war.” We went
inside to wait.

We waited for three days. No one knew anything or, rather,
everyone claimed to know a different piece of something. Each day
the dič—the heart of the Chaumos (ćaumós) winter solstice festival—
was postponed. Everything and everyone should have been thor-
oughly washed and ritually purified, houses and roofs swept clean,
and things foreign—including Muslim neighbors—banned from the
villages (Loude and Lievre 1984, 1988; Cacopardo and Cacopardo
1989). Chaumos is a special time out of time, when the Kalasha are as
Kalasha as they imagine they once were, a time when great care is
taken to do everything just right. It should be a week of abandoned
dancing, of endless eating, of laughter and bawdy singing and banter,
and very little sleep. The dič should have begun just as the sun set on
the high pomegranate tree (dāım hūtalā) on the ridge above the valley.
The sun would “sit in its winter house” for seven days before begin-
ing its yearly trek back down-valley. Mushiki, Wasiara Aya’s eighty-
some-year-old aunt, was greatly upset about the delay and said over
and over that nothing would grow and the goats wouldn’t prosper and
there would be illnesses and other terrible misfortunes. Others agreed
with her but were more immediately worried about the gunfire echo-
ing down from the ridge.

The next morning the women in my family told me that soon
women from all over the valley would assemble and march to Kort
Desh, a small hamlet about half a mile down-valley from our village,
where they were to meet with the district commissioner (D.C.). My
husband Steve and I should come along, they said. As always in
those early days of fieldwork, we waited and waited and suddenly
were late. Saras Gula Dada (Saras Gul’s father), Mir Beck, a powerful
and respected Kalasha elder, came bursting in. He exclaimed that I
must represent all the women to the D.C. I should tell him that the women were terrified that their sons and husbands would be killed (this was true), that gunfire had been coming directly into the village (this was not true), and that the D.C. must do something or all the Kalasha in Rumbur would be wiped out and the villages burned (this was likely not true, but it felt true at the time). The D.C. would listen to me because I was American and had pàwa (power), Mir Beck insisted. I said that I was just there to watch. The march had already started, he pointed out. He said there was no time to argue about it, so I must do as he asked. Saras Gula Aya was ready with her shawl and pushed us before her toward the steep shortcut. Lilizar, who was twelve, sprinted ahead. Mir Beck called out that it would be faster to take the regular trail. Husband and wife argued for a while, until, exasperated, she gave in and we all went running down the main path, Mir Beck shouting last minute instructions behind us. When we reached Badtet village, we saw the eighty or so women from the up-valley villages already walking down the road across the river. They all wore their kupás, the elaborate, heavy, cowrie shell and bead-laden headdresses that are saved for festivals and funerals and special occasions and excursions. With them were a couple of Kalasha men and two young boys. “I knew we should have gone the other way,” Saras Gula Aya gasped as we ran to catch up. “I don’t know why I always listen to him.”

I had misunderstood or been misinformed that the women were heading for Kort Desh. In fact, they planned to walk all the way to Chitral—a much different matter. Chitral is the seat of the district government, the hub of political and economic activity for the whole region. Most women had never been outside of the valleys before, let alone to Chitral, so walking twenty miles to get there was no empty gesture and took enormous courage. The walk itself was dangerous since we would have to pass right through Ayun, the large village of the men who had invaded the valley. The tension between the two communities was so high that it seemed unlikely that we would pass through without incident. Lilizar, who was very brave at twelve, proclaimed that any Kalasha woman could take on any Ayuni woman since Kalasha women were mezbút, sturdy from work and walking, while Muslim women just sat in their houses getting fat.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the danger, joining the march was important. Over the next year, I would see that Saras Gula Aya
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usually sent her daughters-in-law on errands and necessary social visits around the valley, while she volunteered to watch the grandchildren. But on this day she insisted on going herself. Along the way we saw Sumali, who was sobbing uncontrollably because her mother had forbidden her to go further, saying she was too sickly and wouldn’t make it. Another woman said her heart hurt and was crying as she explained, “I wanted to go along, I thought I could walk, but I can’t.” I put my arms around her and supported her for a while, and then her friends took turns and she was able to continue.

All along the way they prayed. Their prayers were a strange and effective blending of Muslim and Kalasha traditions, a sincere calling out to God but performed so that both their concern and their devotion would be understandable to onlookers. All Kalasha people know that the constitution of Pakistan guarantees the rights of minority groups to freely practice their religion, but since Kalasha religion is so denigrated and misunderstood in the area they “translated” their religion in such a way that Muslim onlookers would see it as a true religious expression. As they walked, they prayed as local Muslims do, holding their palms open as if they were reading from the Koran and stroking their “beards,” crying out, “Oh my God, you know who is in the right! You know that we poor Kalasha are trying to hold our Chaumos for you!” I had never seen Kalasha people pray like this before, and I haven’t since—usually prayers on behalf of the whole community are made by men who offer meat or walnuts or bread at altars, while the area is made pure with the smoke of juniper or hollyoak branches. In places where the road widened, the whole procession paused. The boys who had come along ran to the river to wash their hands, and then they lit juniper branches and purified the area with smoke. Men held up their hands and called out traditional Kalasha prayers. The women, meanwhile, knelt in a large group and continued praying, as if they were reading from the Koran. As we neared the police check post where the river forks, this was repeated more frequently. The police, who had been yelling for us to go back and alternately threatening and cajoling those they knew well, stood at a respectful distance and watched.

When we were in sight of the police check post, all the women hunted around for long sticks, which I assumed were for walking since we had come a few miles and had many more to go. The police were blocking our path, shouting that we had to go back. Steve and I
tried to look invisible but to no avail. The police superintendent marched directly to me, grabbed my arm, and insisted that I come inside and call the district commissioner. I knew better and argued that I had no idea what was going on, that the Kalasha should represent themselves to the D.C., that I was only an anthropologist. Since the superintendent spoke very little English and I spoke little Chitrali or Urdu, my protestations were in vain, and he literally dragged me into the office. I told the D.C. what was going on, and he asked me all sorts of questions designed to make me feel small and stupid. He told me to tell the women to go home, that he would come to visit them later. I said that no one seemed to be taking orders from anyone, let alone me, and that they had come all this way just to talk to him and seemed seriously to be heading for his office. He said to tell them he would be right there.

In the meantime, the marchers had been in no mood to wait. The police had tried to impede their progress and had lowered the gate to barricade the road. Steve, who had been outside the whole time, told me that the women had pushed right up to the gate and begun hitting the police with their sticks—not viciously, but certainly not in jest either. They broke through the roadblock, and the police raised the gate and let them pass. They continued down the road to Ayun, fifteen or twenty policemen trailing behind them, yelling at them to sit down and wait for the D.C., alternately threatening them and offering to make tea. Barzangi and Sarawat Shah, two young Kalasha men, showed up and tried to take control and stop the women too. But Dajela Aya and her friends took their sticks and soundly whacked the presumptuous young men, forcing them to retreat into a cornfield where the women continued throwing rocks at them.

No one stopped, but in the confusion the coherence of the group broke down, and the story begins to come to an anticlimactic ending. Some women thought they should wait for the D.C. Others said that he was lying and they should continue. The marchers straggled along for a couple of miles, when finally, just as we reached the outskirts of Ayun, an official representing the D.C. showed up. He singled out Bibi Shan, one of only two Kalasha girls who had received any high school education, and talked exclusively with her. Bibi Shan happily assumed a position of authority and agreed with the official that she should be the only one to go to Chitral and represent the other women to the D.C. Of course, she said, Steve and I should come
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along also. We refused. Finally, just as Bibi Shan was preparing to get into the official’s jeep, one old woman stepped up and asked her who had made her their gadérak (the term for respected Kalasha male elders who mediate in disputes). After this, the official offered to take ten women. I stood back, a little disappointed in their civil disobedience tactics, knowing that the official’s offer to take representatives was only an attempt to diffuse the energy of the marchers, and that only solidarity would be effective, but I held my tongue. Everyone became indecisive, and the group broke down entirely, with some women waiting to go to Chitral, some walking on, some turning back.

Just then the assistant commissioner (A.C.), second in command under the D.C., whipped up in his sporty red Toyota, and everyone came rushing back. He stormed out of his jeep, sought out Steve and me, and began berating us in English. He was very angry that we were involved in all this, he said. Didn’t we know how dangerous this was? What if we were killed? If one of these “subjects” were killed, it would be a “normal” death and they could deal with it, but if we were hurt it would be very serious and our government and theirs would be really upset. We begged him to listen to the women who had come so far to plead their case. We asked him to speak in Khowar (the language of Chitral in which all Kalasha are bilingual) or at least to speak with Bibi Shan. He said he was there because of us, not because of them. I felt embarrassed later when I had to tell my friends what he had said.

Takat Jan, the elected representative of the Kalasha, was with the A.C. Takat Jan told the women that the war was over, and that the Ayunis had gone home, and anyway their going on would serve no useful purpose since the D.C. spoke no Khowar. He himself would have to translate for them, and he had already told the D.C. of their views. Everyone turned back and started the long uphill walk home, splitting into little groups of two or three.

Over the next several weeks, more police would be posted in Rumbur. While there was still considerable tension, the battle over firewood and logging rights continued in the courts rather than with guns. Chaumos was late and the celebration subdued. Some women commented that all their efforts had been for nothing. Some said that at least the D.C. would know that they were seriously concerned. I didn’t know what to make of the disheartening truncation of what had seemed to me a brave and important effort. Perhaps, I thought, it had all been for nothing.
But over the course of the next two years, when my friends would illustrate for me why and how it was that Kalasha women were “free” (azâhl)—and this was a favorite topic of conversation, mine as well as theirs—they would remind me of this walk.

And so I open with this story because it is where I began and because I kept being brought back to it. It happened early in my fieldwork, when the theme of women’s “freedom” had not yet begun to crystallize. Later this theme would help to guide me through women’s stories and through the complex unfoldings of everyday life in the valleys. With time, and now distance, too, I have finally come to understand why my Kalasha friends spoke of this march as an enactment of women’s freedom. At first I saw only the tangled knots of ethnic conflict, the translation of Kalasha rituals into gestures more likely to be understood by Muslims as “religious,” my own bumbling participation, the conflicts between men and women, and especially the eventual anticlimactic dissolution of the whole march. I found it hard to detect much that resonated with what I thought of as free. Slowly, I began to see that complications, context, restrictions, resistances, possibilities, and consequences are all braided into the trope of women’s freedom. This book is about what it means to Kalasha women to be free and what women’s freedom means to being Kalasha.

In the following chapters, I follow the concepts of Kalasha women’s freedom and “choice” across several diverse arenas, attending especially to the ways in which these concepts are experienced and used by women.

Chapter 1, “Getting There,” introduces the historical and cultural “ethnoscape” (Appadurai 1990) in which the Kalashi live and describes the way in which women’s freedom acts as a central ethnic marker for the entire Kalasha community. In this chapter, I unpack the women’s march to Chitral, which illustrates both the power of and limitations on Kalasha women’s freedom. Finally, I locate the concept of Kalasha women’s freedom within anthropological theories of agency.

Chapter 2 offers a demonstration of how Kalasha women’s freedom “works” through an examination of how women actively participate in shaping the landscape they move through and live in. Central to Kalasha cosmology are the concepts of onjesta (ónješta) and pragata (prágata), which have been glossed in English as “pure” and “im-pure.” The world of Kalashadesh is divided into things and places
that are onjesta and those that are *pragata*, and there is much concern about the separation of the two and endless discussions about the transgressions of the boundaries between them. Women are associated with and responsible for the *pragata* and men with the *onjesta*.

While female “impurity” has often been taken as the antithesis of women’s freedom, I argue that *pragataness* is not a construct of denigration imposed upon them but is shaped by women’s active agency. Rather than being defined by the *pragata* spaces with which they are associated, women define and redefine these spaces as they negotiate their identity as Kalasha women. Finally, I suggest that the attention paid to boundaries between *onjesta* and *pragata* spaces within the Kalasha community suggests long-standing insecurity about larger ethnic boundaries—particularly the difficult relationship with the larger Muslim world in which they are embedded.

In chapter 3, “Women and Work,” I describe the ways in which the kind of work Kalasha women do, the responsibilities they undertake in terms of production and distribution, their movement through and creative shaping of the landscape they live in, underpin (and limit) the agency women claim in other arenas of their lives. Kalasha men and women do very different kinds of work—work that takes them in different directions, requires different skills, and encourages different sorts of sociality. In turn, what Kalasha women (and men, too, of course) are thought to be able to do is in large part understood through what they do do.

Although land is “owned” by men, and passed to sons through their fathers, women organize and perform most of the work on the land, while men are primarily responsible for herding animals. Women often describe places in the valleys by listing the women who worked there in the past and the improvements each made to the land. A family’s fortune depends on the resourcefulness and dedication and effort of adult women (all of whom marry into the family). Much of what supports women’s claims of “choice” in other spheres of their lives comes from their substantial contributions to subsistence and the freedom of movement they need to get their work done.

The fourth chapter describes how the continually evolving forms of Kalasha women’s fashion function as a material symbol of women’s agency. Women’s elaborate costumes are central markers of Kalasha ethnicity, both within and beyond the Kalasha community. While many other aspects of traditional Kalasha culture—rules about mar-
riage, merit feasting, religious rites, and so on—seem to be waning, women’s dresses are becoming, if anything, ever more elaborate and central to the Kalasha identity as a unique people. While the clothing may look the same to outsiders, in fact each woman’s dress is an important expression of her individual identity. Her choice of colors, combinations, patterns, and the amount of decoration and her careful attention to detail allow for her creative expression of self—yet the result is a constellation of features that is also an evocative symbol of the identity of the Kalasha collective. Through their continual attention to and elaboration of their dress, Kalasha women are not simply “wearing” ethnicity but are actively involved in making culture.

Chapter 5 focuses on women’s community and culture within their bashali (bašáli), or menstrual house. Once a widespread feature of many different cultures, menstrual houses were among the first institutions that many native peoples relinquished upon contact with outsiders from the West. As a result, there is surprisingly little documentation of the range of structures and meanings through which menstrual houses must have been organized. This study of the Kalasha bashali offers a rare ethnographic account of women’s lived experience in a particular menstrual house. It is clear to me that speculation about menstrual houses as oppressive institutions designed by men could not be further from the truth (at least in this case).

The bashali, as the most pragata space in the valleys, and the place where the pragata is managed through women’s own active agency, is one of the most important Kalasha institutions. The importance of the bashali in women’s lives goes beyond its ritual significance in Kalasha cosmology. In this chapter, I argue that the bashali is an important center for female culture and community. Far from being a prison in which women are separated from the community and rendered powerless to act, the structure of the institution itself contributes to women’s agency, both personally and collectively. Specifically, the bashali provides women with space from which to act—to be creative and religious, to be part of the larger community of women, and to make personal decisions about marriage and reproduction away from the intense social pressure of village life.

The right to elope with a man other than the one to whom your parents have “given” you—to go alasíŋ (or to choose not to)—is the prototypic act that defines Kalasha women’s “freedom.” This freedom is always configured against the ground of an equally compelling
discourse: respect for and devotion to one’s family and partriline. Chapter 6 is structured around two of my friends’ stories of their own experiences of marrying. Interrupting their narratives are theoretical and ethnographic sections that unwrap the simultaneous constraints on and possibilities for women’s agency (following Ahearn 1994) that are implicit in their stories.

In the concluding chapter, I weave together common themes from previous chapters through an analysis of the Hawyashi (hawyäšī) ritual—a women’s march that every year brings spring back after the seemingly interminable winter. In so doing, I offer an interpretation of what Kalasha mean when they say “our women are free,” suggesting a specifically Kalasha understanding of women’s agency.