

# TIMELESS Travels

December 2020



*Celebrating*  
the Winter Solstice with  
the Kalashi in Pakistan

FOR LOVERS OF TRAVEL, ARCHAEOLOGY AND ART

# Welcome to Kafiristan, the Land of the Unbelievers!

Chaumos, the 14-day Winter Solstice Festival, is the most important event in the year of the Kalashi, an animist minority in northern Pakistan. Purity and purification are the big themes of this festival. Sylvia Furrer and Holger Hoffmann have experienced this festival up close (before the pandemic) and have undergone the necessary cleansing rituals, getting to know the lively and very friendly people.

Text by: Sylvia Furrer  
Photos: Holger Hoffmann

“Welcome to Kafirstan!” is the greeting of Imran Kabir, the village teacher from Bumburet, “You are now in the land of the infidels”. “That’s fine,” I reply, picking up his cynicism, “we’re unbelievers, too”. He smiles at me, and we get along immediately, diving into an animated discussion about the threat to the Kalashi culture and its preservation. Imran is particularly committed to the outstanding teaching of Kalashi children, including learning their own language. Recordings of the written language have started only recently. He also complains that up to date many books have been written about the Kalashi, but never by them.

The Kalashi are an ethnic minority of Pakistan, with an estimated 3,000 to 4,500 people. About 10 years ago there were 10-15,000 people. They have not (yet) converted to Islam, but still follow their traditional beliefs and rites. According to the legend, they are descendants of Alexander the Great’s troops. Recent genetic studies could, however, not prove this, so it remains a mystery. Because of the seclusion of their three idyllic valleys (Rumbur, Bumburet and Birir), the Kalashi have lived largely independently for centuries. Even today, most of them are still farmers who live on the milk, cheese and meat of their goats and cows. The valleys are scattered with terraced fields run through by water channels for irrigation. Along the channels you find small mills in which the women grind grain every day to make fresh flatbread.

For special holidays, they produce walnut bread instead. Women who neither work in the field nor are occupied with preparing bread sit at a loom or a sewing machine. These are hand-operated models just like the ones our grandmothers had. The variety of shapes and

colours the Kalashi women use to decorate their long black dresses and the hems of the pants worn underneath are amazing. With few technical means they have mastered this craft of embroidery. At the moment, floral patterns in all the bright colours; light green, orange, yellow, and pink, are ‘en vogue’. Their headgear consists of different glass bead patterns, with a lighter, more modern style (the S’su’tr) and an older, more traditional style (the Kupas), that is additionally decorated with cowrie shells, buttons, and coins. Men are dressed in the typical Pakistani salwar kameez and usually carry a Pakul on their heads, the typical headwear of the Hindukush.

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Previous pages: Gathering around the fire is part of the Chaumos festival

Above: A Kalashi village with stunning mountain backdrop

Left: The roads are often washed away en route to the Kalashi

### REACHING THE VALLEYS

Getting to the Kalashi is not easy, and demands some courage. First we drive, by car, for at least 12 hours from Islamabad to Chitral. Depending on the security situation, it may take longer due to the numerous police and army checkpoints. Alternatively, you could fly, but 90% of the flights are cancelled due to bad weather. The permit to enter the Kalash Valleys is easily acquired in Chitral. Here we get a policeman assigned to us, who from now on follows our every footstep.

From Chitral we drive for about an hour and a half on spectacular dirt roads, which are regularly washed away by the overflowing streams. However, our local driver coped well with these conditions in his 50-year-old Toyota Land Cruiser. The not very encouraging and mostly outdated travel advice of western foreign administrations also contributes to the fact that only few tourists make their way to the Kalashi. In the wake of the war on terror,

tourism in Pakistan has practically come to a standstill. While there were over 3,000 tourists in the 1990s, today only 10 to 20 percent of that number still visit the Kalashi.

### CHAUMOS – THE WINTER SOLSTICE FESTIVAL

The most important festival of the Kalashi is the 14-day Chaumos, celebrating the winter solstice with numerous ceremonies. Purity and purification are the pivotal themes of this festival. The spiritual world as well as everyday life of the Kalashi are distinguished by the concept of a strict contrast of purity and impurity. For example, when women are menstruating or giving birth they are considered impure and have to stay in a special women’s house. The ritual baths are just one of the ceremonies that the Kalashi perform to prepare themselves for the arrival of Balumain, the messenger of the gods.

According to their faith, Balumain arrives



during the winter solstice, together with his wife Indr from Tsiam, the mythical homeland of the Kalashi. His arrival is often announced by earthquakes. We also experienced three short quakes in the first few days of our visit. This is a good sign for the locals. Balumain walks through the valleys, counting the Kalash people and gathering their prayers, with which he then returns to Tsiam. The highlight of the festival is a secret ceremony in the sanctuary of Balumain, which only selected men may attend and that ends with a final farewell to Balumain.

Although we did not know what to expect from the purifying ceremonies during Chaumos, we willingly entrust ourselves to Yassir, our host in Rumbur, his family and to the local policeman Jamsher. What we experience is stupendous.

On the first day of the festival Jamsher leads us up the valley to the end of the village. There, women and children had already gathered at dawn. After singing and dancing, some young women climb the steep slope above the fields and bring back bundles of parched blades of grass and juniper twigs. As soon as they are back, the bundles are almost torn from their hands. One of the women gets hold of a blade and a twig for me.

Women and children start to move in an exuberant procession, waving the twigs above their heads, towards Jeshtak temple. In wild groups of three or four, children and adults

dance in the temple square. Then, all enter the temple and lay the twigs next to the wooden, richly carved entrance gate. Inside, beans have already been cooking for hours in three huge iron pots placed on a log fire. More and more people are pouring into the sacred space.

The women begin to dance, sing, and beat rhythmically on the tin bowls brought along for the beans. The warm light of the fire reflects off the polished metal. Here I meet 17-year-old Karina for the first time. We again get into conversation only three days later when her younger sister leads us through the upper village and invites us to their home.

At the end of the temple ceremony, everyone's bowl is filled with beans and walnuts. There is a crush, as if there would not be enough for everyone. The beans are carried home and eaten with salt and onions for internal purification. There is a lot of food left, which is why I have no qualms about having the bowl Yassir had given me filled. On the way home, I nibble on the beans. They have a powerful effect on me in combination with the wine and mulberry liquor, which are generously served on every occasion. After a night, most of which I spent on the icy-cold toilet, I am already thoroughly purified.

Today is the first of several days dedicated to the washing of clothes. The sun rises early in the morning, at 8:30 am, behind the snow-covered mountains and disappears four hours



Far left: Women and children waving juniper twigs above their heads as they process to the Jeshtak temple

Left: Beans cooking in three huge iron pots placed on a log fire

Below: Women washing by the river



later behind the opposite mountain range. The women are heading to the river with large bundles of clothes, to wash the whole family's festival dresses. The water is freezing cold. Some women have brought large pots and firewood to heat the water on site. They

hit the laundry with flat wooden clubs. The coloured pearl necklaces and headgear are gently brushed so that everything is shiny for the holidays. Laundry is hung up everywhere to dry, the house cleaned from top to bottom, and the bed sheets changed.



In the evening, in all houses, dough animals are moulded traditionally by the men. The children participate with joy. Full of admiration, we watch an old man work his art. When asked what kind of animal it is, we are told that it is a wild mountain goat. Other popular dough animals include cows, dogs, and rams. Once the dough is used up and all the animals are baked in the fire, they are placed on the shelf above the oven. In doing so, the families ask the gods for the protection of their animals throughout the next year.

During the festival, young people dance every night around a fire in the middle of the village, sometimes until early in the morning. The repetitive songs are accompanied by rhythmic clapping. The women dance close together in their colourful dresses and slowly circle round to the right. The younger men, also part of the circle, sing louder and move more energetically. Individual male and female dancers also twirl and spin around inside the circle. A song lasts between 10 and 15 minutes and due to a certain monotony of the melody, and despite

occasional crescendos, it leads to physical and mental relaxation.

The break-up of the dance group comes all of a sudden, and all immediately flock to the warming fire. After a short break, one group starts another song and everyone joins in once more. Only during the Chaumos do the men and women tease each other with provocative songs, and try to outdo each other. The later the evening, the more exuberant the dancers who twirl around inside the circle. Soon, the square is filled, and the children and other spectators withdraw to the surrounding flat roofs serving as grandstands.

We are impressed by the cordiality of the Kalashi. Again and again, I am greeted by older women like a family member with mutual kissing of the hands or even the cheeks and then invited into their nearby warm homes for a hot tea, or a glass of wine or liquor. Alcohol plays an important part in Kalashi culture. It is meant to contribute to the purification process, explaining its prominence and repeated occurrence during the Chaumos. The next day, the villagers visit the families who have suffered a case of death since the Spring Festival. Everyone brings food, commemorates the deceased, is regaled, and uses the opportunity to socialise. On one of these visits, we meet and talk to Palawan Qazi, the religious leader of the Kalashi. He tells us about the history of his people: times in which their sphere of influence extended from Afghanistan to China, until they were forced back by the ruler of Chitral to these three valleys. Each valley has its leader, he is the eldest.

In the 1970s, the Pakistani government was still trying to maintain political dialogue with them, however today the leaders are primarily responsible for the preservation of cultural and religious issues. Relations with Muslim neighbors in Afghanistan are not good as they repeatedly stole animals from their alpine pastures and killed two shepherds in 2016. Besides that they are fine, the Gods mean very well by them. The valleys give them enough to live on, and from the mountains comes enough water to irrigate their fields. In the past, they hardly ever left the valleys and had no idea about the outside world.

Left: The making and burning of dough animals

Right top: The villagers gather in the temple which is illuminated by a small fire in the middle

Right: Everybody lights three scales of wood, which creates a poignant atmosphere in the temple





Left: Making walnut bread

Right: The women's heads are circled with burning juniper branches

Right, bottom: The purification ritual of the men

Now the Kalashi are going to other cities, such as Chitral, Peshawar, Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi, for education and work, so their sources of income are also changing.

In the afternoon, the village community gathers again in front of the Jeshtak temple. The women bring baskets of dried mulberries, walnuts, apples, mandarins, pomegranates, and as a specialty: sweet pumpkin baked in a bowl. The basket with the pumpkin halves is placed on the temple's outer wall, so that the spirits of their ancestors can nourish themselves. In front of the entrance, a man is busy laying small wooden sticks into an airy pyramid. Beside him, men hack wood in order to produce many thin billets. These are distributed among all those present, so that each villager can hold some scales of wood in their hands.

The temple is illuminated by a small fire in the middle, directly under the roof opening. Suddenly there is an agitation among the attendants: outside, the wooden pyramid is lit. It is a call to the deceased and a request to accept their offerings. All of a sudden, the temple gate is closed and the whole temple falls silent. Even the children become reverent. Everybody lights three scales of wood, which creates a poignant atmosphere: all commemorate their deceased loved ones. After these moving minutes, the gate is opened again, I step into the fresh air with tears in my eyes. To answer Yassir's question, if the smoke made me cry, I honestly answer that emotions are also to blame for my tears.

#### PURIFICATION RITUALS

In the coming days we have many rules and taboos to consider:

The purification ceremonies begin with the washing of the body and the wearing of fresh clothes. So that everyone in the village can see that I am also pure, and that they are allowed to touch me, Yassir's family provides me with a colourful, freshly washed woman's dress, including a matching belt and headdress embroidered with glass beads.

Couples are required to sleep in separate beds for one week. Unlike goats and sheep, chickens and cows are considered unclean, which is why all their products are taboo, including the usual milk tea, omelette for breakfast, or our otherwise appreciated Swiss chocolate.

Any objects that are impure should not be touched, such as all vehicles, and houses belonging to Muslims. Even shopping in Muslim shops proves to be difficult. No physical contact is allowed. Pakistani tourists are politely ushered out of the village. When I accidentally step on the flat roof of a house that is inhabited by Muslims, they all flinch. I immediately realize that I have broken a rule of purity and ask Jamsher to splash some wine onto my face. Everyone laughs and rejoices because they see that I seem to know about the customs and respect their rules.

The women's purification day starts with men baking dozens of walnut breads for their families. Most men go to the temple early in the morning, mix freshly ground flour with water



into a dough and fill the fast-formed cones with salt and minced walnuts. Then the flatbreads are placed on a stone plate over the fire and are baked on both sides to be finally placed directly in the embers, where they continue to rise. The finished breads are stored on juniper branches. Throughout the process, the man must not touch anything else, his hands must remain pure.

Sunlight falls in rays through the roof opening and the temple is filled with smoke that envelops the room in a misty, eye and respiratory irritating, dim atmosphere. After dark, all female family members, freshly washed and dressed, place themselves in a semicircle around the bread baker. From a small water kettle, he pours water onto the hands of each woman, who holds them out as if in prayer. From now on she must not touch anything that is impure. Then every female is given five walnut breads. Finally, the woman's head, slightly bent forward, is circled by the man with burning juniper branches. After the ceremony, the consecrated breads are carried home in a basket.

The purification ritual of the men takes place the following day. In bright weather, the men from all parts of the village come together with 15 goats to the Sajigor cult site. It is located half an hour upstream surrounded by a wall, amidst a grove. In the centre, near a large tree, is a stone altar, on which long twigs are piled up.



15 young men undergo the ritual. They stand behind the altar with their hands washed and lifted to heaven. One goat after another is led to the sacrificial site by older men that stand opposite the young men. One of the elder men sits on a stone and takes the animal on his lap. It stays calm until the shaman severs the carotid with a sharp knife. The blood gushing from the neck is caught by hand and sprayed alternately to the altar and into the fire. Then the young men bless the walnut breads

they brought with them in the smoke over the fire. The ceremony ends with all attendants kneeling down for prayer, asking for health, well-being of man and beast, a good harvest, and protection from the elements and enemies. This ceremony is repeated in the afternoon in the small circle of male family members in front of their stables located above the village. Then only one or two goats are sacrificed, but each family member is purified by spraying the goat's blood into his face.

**INITIATION RITES**

The next day, the initiation rite of the 7 to 10-year-old boys, who are seen as the purest creatures in the Kalash culture, also takes place in the Sajigor cult site, again in exclusion of the women. The boys are dressed up, wearing traditional pants with gaiters, a white turban, and many coloured ribbons across their shoulders. They have brought bundles of long willow twigs, which they hurl simultaneously at the altar on the command of a shaman circling around the boys with a burning juniper branch. Again, the ceremony ends with a prayer to Balumain after the boys have blessed the bread over the fire.

In the meanwhile, as on the previous day, the women stay in the village and dance for the entertainment of Balumain. Among them, Karina stands out as an enthusiastic individual dancer. After the return of the men, the whole village heads towards the Jeshtak temple. On the forecourt, men and women start a serpent dance that moves in ever-narrowing circles to demonstrate the solidarity and unity of the Kalashi. Wazir Zada, dressed in a gold brocade

coat, also participates in all the rituals. He is the first member of the Kalashi elected as a minority representative to the provincial parliament. In an interview, he eloquently and optimistically outlines his political goals: better roads, more tourism, and affiliation of the three Kalash valleys under the protection of UNESCO. For the Kalashi Wazir Zada is obviously a bearer of hope.

On one of the holidays, all 5-year-olds are specially celebrated, including Jamsher's daughter. First, the girl is freshly dressed by her uncle and grandfather. Her joyful radiance touches all present relatives. All sit around the warming stove, in front of them are baskets filled with dried mulberries, walnuts, apples, tangerines, pomegranates and sweets. Guests come and go and are served with either red or white wine, mulberry or apricot schnapps, and with walnuts and apricot kernels. The 5-year-olds receive small bills as gifts, and after the relatives have tasted the fruits, the remainder are distributed to the jolly singing crowd of children moving from house to house.

Below: The initiation of the 7 to 10-year-old boys, who are seen as the purest creatures in the Kalash culture

Right, top : Kalashi youngsters dressed for the festival

Right, below: The torchbearers have 2-5 metre long torches

Overleaf: The age-old torch procession





#### TORCHLIGHT PROCESSION

One of the highlights of Chaumos is the nocturnal torchlight procession to bid Balumain farewell. Across the village and in surrounding villages torchbearers gather with 2 to 5-meter-long, wire-bound wooden torches.

The processions to the temple create strings of lights from all sides of the valley. On the upper path walk the men and on the lower one, a little better developed, the women. At the end, everyone gathers in the square in front of the temple, where a big fire is already burning, which is further fuelled by the remains of the torches.

The men form a snake dance, holding each other by the shoulders, and all those present are locked in the large circle. The big fire develops a heat that makes me flee. I break out of the circle at a looser area and watch the festive community from a nearby roof. I become more and more aware that these rituals consolidate and internalize the togetherness of the Kalash community. For a culture that is endangered, this seems to me not only understandable, but also makes practical sense.

### FESTIVAL'S FINAL DAY

The final day of celebrations is the day after the winter solstice. For the Kalashi, this is the first day of the new solar year. It is celebrated only in Bumburet, which means that all day long the residents from the other two valleys, Rumbur and Birir, arrive here to celebrate. Today, Muslims are allowed as spectators for the first time. They also come in masses, often from Peshawar or Islamabad, and populate the roof terraces surrounding the dancing ground. In addition, several Pakistani television and radio stations have sent their reporters to the festival. The interest of the Pakistani people in such a different culture is still strong.

In the early morning, young men start foxhunting in the hills above the village. The direction the fox would run is interpreted as a good or less favourable omen for the coming year. But no fox can be spotted this morning around Bumburet. Instead, a performance is being staged by young people above the stables. Five boys wrapped in sheep and goat skins lie motionless on the ground. Their faces are bloodied. A shepherd is harassed by adult men and beaten with a stick. The story behind it: the punished shepherd did not guard his flock well from the fox, and so the animals were torn to pieces. Now he shall be punished. This should stand as a lesson for all shepherd boys. All of sudden, the 'dead' animals jump up and mix in between the dancing women. After a few wild capers, they disappear and the dances continue undisturbed. Today, the parade of dancers is enormous, in some cases men disguised as women and vice versa, and for the last time people dance until dawn.

For the last dinner before our departure we are invited into the house of our host family. The dinner consists of a thick flour soup, boiled lamb, and walnut bread. Goat cheese, apricots, and a glass of red wine top off the meal. While dining, our hosts discuss how many young couples have eloped by now. It is an old tradition to announce their engagement this way during Chaumos. Although marriages are often arranged by the families, adult women and men can choose their partner themselves. The families have to accept their decision, whether they like it or not.

However, the options for a spouse are very limited. A marriage is only permitted from the 7th degree of kinship. Anyone who violates this rule has to leave the valley, except if a woman marries a Muslim. Then she irreversibly converts to Islam and inherits its values and rules. Thus, love is one of the greatest threats to the future existence of the Kalash culture. Yassir received word of eight engagements this year. One of the run-away couples has just returned to the parent's house next door. When we enter their house, the room is already filled with well-wishers. The mood is cheerful, the future bride is shy, and the groom busy entertaining the guests.

Saifullah Jan, Yassir's 61-year-old father, told us shortly before our departure how he was politically active in the 80s and 90s. He successfully fought together with others against the rigorous cutting down of the cedar forests and the less sustainable new construction of concrete irrigation canals by NGOs unfamiliar with the area. The price he paid was high: he was jailed twice and his brother was killed in a bomb attack. In the meantime, the Kalashi have become more self-confident and realize that they should not sell their land and centuries-old walnut trees to shrewd Chitral businessmen.



Below: A happy new groom dances

Right: All the Kalashi residents get together on the last day of the festival



Many of the highly acclaimed NGO projects have proven unsustainable and have mostly brought only financial benefits to those who already had good relations with the authorities in Chitral. The economic opening expresses itself in the changing architecture of the houses. Especially in Bumburet, more and more unfinished concrete buildings with corrugated iron roofs dominate the village scape instead of traditional, earthquake-resistant houses with flat roofs. This does not make the Kalash villages more attractive to tourists.

However, today most of them are domestic tourists. To Saifullah Jan, the romanticised portrayal of the Kalashi as an Alexander-derived minority enclave, does not bring them any advantages. They are first and foremost farmers who need not to fear comparison with their Muslim neighbours and who are not dependent on the money or technology from NGOs, but deserve respect for their culture and legal protection by the state.

### THE KALASHI FUTURE

On our way back to Islamabad, we are still concerned with the question of whether the Kalash culture will survive long term. Geographically, they are surrounded on all sides by Muslims. The Taliban has been threatening the Kalashi since the 1970s, most recently in a 2014 video message they declared a jihad and the Kalashi were warned against continuing to produce wine and brandy. This is nothing new, as at the end of the 19th century, the Afghan Kalashi in Nuristan were violently Islamized.

On the other hand, the Pakistani government has repeatedly stated publicly that it will do everything to preserve this unique culture and to take its protection seriously. As a result, it has built schools where, however, only Muslim teachers teach, health care is still practically non-existent, and the roads are in an indescribably bad condition. The transport to Chitral is firmly in the hands of Muslims, as are the shops and hotels in the Kalash villages. **TT**

### About the Contributors



**Sylvia Furrer**, a Swiss lawyer/economist, and **Holger Hoffmann**, a psychiatrist, have traveled together on more than 75 trips and visited over 60 countries outside Europe. Having published over 200 academic papers, in 2012 they decided to publish travel reports to share their impressions with a broader community of travellers.

Holger's photos have been finalists in many photography competitions and in 2018 he won the Concours Photographes Voyageurs competition, and in 2019 was the winner of KLM's Holland Herald Photo Competition. You can contact them at: [info@chaostours.ch](mailto:info@chaostours.ch), or find out more at: [www.chaostours.ch](http://www.chaostours.ch)

This article first appeared on the  
Timeless Travels magazine website  
in December 2020  
with the kind permission of the authors



FPE MEDIA

Timeless Travels Magazine is published by FPE Media Ltd

[www.timeless-travels.co.uk](http://www.timeless-travels.co.uk)

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