

## Erosion of Kalasha's Religio-Cultural Identity in Northern Pakistan: Context, Causes and Implications

**Aamer Taj**

Institute of Management Sciences, Peshawar

**Sadiq Ali**

Agha Khan Education Services, Chitral

Belief in religion and practice of cultural constructs are critical factors that shape up people's perceptions about their social identity. Religio-cultural identity is a source of recognition, self-actualization, and social acceptance. This paper examines the causal factors that lead to rapid erosion of religio-cultural identity of Kalasha community in Pakistan. A multitude of factors are responsible for this phenomenon. The study reveals that factors such as love marriages, threats from religious extremists, preaching of Islam by clergymen, teaching of Islamic Studies in public schools, extreme levels of poverty, highly expensive customs and rituals inscribed in Kalasha religion, technological development, social interface with surrounding communities, and lack of serious efforts on the part of government and civil society organizations to preserve the Kalasha culture are responsible for social transformation of Kalasha community.

**Keywords:** Kalasha, religio-cultural identity, social exclusion, social transformation, cultural Extinction

Kalasha<sup>1</sup> community is one of the most unique religious and social minority groups in South Asia. They have a history of more than 3000 years of existence and are known to social anthropologists throughout the world for their distinct culture, customs, rituals, and religion based on belief in several deities<sup>2</sup>. They speak a language that belongs to the Dardic group (Jettmar, 1961) and live in the Hindu Kush Mountains of Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province. Three Kalasha valleys are located near District Chitral at a distance of approximately 375 km from Peshawar – the provincial capital. Due to non-existence of written history, the origin of Kalasha is not known and controversies exist among researchers and historians on this matter. Gul (2010) mentions that there are several theories about the origin of Kalasha; some reckon them to be the descendants of Dionysus (the Greek god of wine and son of Zeus) however there is a popular belief among the Kalasha community that they are the decedents of the soldiers of Alexander the Great. Trail (1996) proposes

---

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Aamer Taj, Associate Professor of Public Policy at Institute of Management Sciences, Peshawar, Pakistan. Email: aamer.taj@imsiences.edu.pk

<sup>1</sup> The word 'Kalasha' signifies Kalasha people belonging to a cultural and religious minority; hence 'Kalasha' refers to Kalasha people, religion, and culture in this article.

<sup>2</sup> It is commonly believed that there are a number of deities, semi-gods and spirits worshiped in Kalasha religion however Luke Rehmat – a native Kalasha - claims that the Kalasha peoples believe in a single, creative god, referred to in the Kalasha language as Dezau; a Persian term 'Khudai' is also used for Dezau. Rehmat believes that much of the literature written on the Kalasha religion has incorrectly mentioned that the Kalasha people believe in 12 gods and goddesses. {Source: Rehmat, Luke. (January 29, 2013). 'Do you know the Kalasha tribe of Pakistan?' *The Kalasha Times*. Retrieved from <https://thekalashatimes.wordpress.com/author/thekalashatimes/>}

that Kalasha are indirect descendants of Alexander's troops. According to Davey (2013), most of Kalasha do not accept the theory that refutes their claim; based on the DNA test reports, some archaeologists have concluded that Kalasha are genetically distinct and they might have originated in South Asia.

Some historians believe that Kalasha are indigenous tribes of the neighboring Nuristan area of Afghanistan; they came to this part of the world from 'Tsiyam' in South Asia (Rehman, 2011). In 1895, following the conquest of Nuristan by Amir Abdul Rahman, the forced conversion led to migration of some of the Kalasha community. Professor G. Morgenstierne (1923-1926) presented a theory based on Kalashas' archaic language, religion and their physical features. He states that Kalasha is the only Indo-European Aryan tribe that has been able to preserve an illiterate religion. Based on the physical traits of Kalasha, this theory has also been supported by Khan (1980). The two studies suggest that Kalasha are aboriginals to the Hindu Kush region with a genetic contribution from Aryans and then Macedonian invaders in the region. There is however, no single unanimously agreed upon theory about their origin.

The Religio-cultural identity of this mysterious tribe is under continuous threat lately; Kalasha are rapidly converting into Islam and relinquishing their culture and religion. More than 70 % of the purported ten thousand existing Kalasha have already converted to Islam (Bhutto, 2007). Kalasha are now under serious threat of extinction. Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (Malakand Division) threatened this tribe and another religious minority of the region - the Ismailia. Taliban gave them two options – 'convert to Islam or face death' (Dawn, 2013). Given the gravity of situation, if such forced conversions are not thwarted well in time, it is feared that Kalasha's distinct socio-religious identity will cease to exist in a few years' time.

In an attempt to explore reasons beyond the obvious, this study examines associated factors for a comprehensive analysis of Kalasha's religio-cultural transformation based on evidence in form of first hand data from perception survey as well as interviews with current and former members (now converted Muslims) of Kalasha community. Review of case specific literature for this study reveals that influence of Muslim clergy is one of the major factors responsible for the mentioned social transformation however the primary data suggests that a multitude of associated factors are responsible for this phenomenon. This paper explains the context, causes and probable implications of Kalasha's religio-cultural erosion.

## **Theoretical Perspectives**

### **Correlation between Religion and Culture**

Culture is a set of shared and enduring meanings, values, and beliefs that characterize national, ethnic, and other social groups and orientate their behavior (Mulholland, 1991). Culture refers to the collective beliefs of social individuals in a society which means that the religious and associated beliefs are part of the broader phenomenon called culture. However, it is believed that religion actually shapes the culture of a society and vice versa. Most of the cultures are intensely influenced by the religion; religion is usually a source of social cohesion also.

Ceremonies at birth, death, and marriages, to name a few, are events wherein religious doctrine is reflected ubiquitously. Eventually, religious principles permeate in social culture to an extent that it becomes almost impossible to draw a dividing line between the values pertaining to culture and religion of that social aggregate; Kalasha epitomizes such inseparable amalgamation. The linkage of Kalasha's culture and religion can be understood by the fact that whenever a member of Kalasha community converts to another religion, it has serious implications for him/her. Conversion

entails excommunication of the convert from Kalasha community for the rest of his/her life. The name 'Kalasha' signifies both religious as well as cultural identity (Sheikh et al. 2014). Due to this peculiar nature of Kalasha's religious and cultural norms, the term Kalasha in this article refers to their religious as well as generic social identity.

### **Cultural Transformation**

Culture determines and guides human behavior and interaction in social life. Enculturation refers to the process whereby a culture is transferred from one generation to the next one and through this process individuals enable themselves to acquire informal membership of the society. There are some internal and external factors such as globalization that influence transfer of culture in a number of ways. Cultural erosion is the systematic decay; at times this phenomenon leads to the corrosion of certain features of culture due to its traits' diffusion with a foreign culture. Cultural erosion has been defined as the lessening of definite characteristics of culture due to external forces (Akinnsaso, 2012). Generally, the impact of such transformation is seen in form of social actors' shunning their outdated religion, cultural practices, and language. It gradually changes their worldviews and the way they perceive social and religious aspects of life.

Theories explaining socio-cultural evolution help researchers determine how cultures and societies have evolved over a period of time. Such discourse provides insights into causes and effects of transformation and help address the 'how' and 'why' questions pertaining to the complexity of social structures and their transformation. Economic development is believed to be associated with inevitable social changes such as gradual deviation from religion, declining narrow-mindedness and drastic cultural changes. Religion and culture lose its essence with increasing economic development (Inglehart, 1989). One can therefore safely assume an inverse relationship between economic development on one hand and adherence to regio-cultural beliefs and practices on the other hand. Another concept that helps construction of theoretical framework for this case study is cultural imperialism.

### **Cultural Imperialism**

Cultural imperialism refers to the practice of encouraging, differentiating, unraveling, and/or exaggerated addition of culture of one society into that of another. It usually happens when the former society is that of a large and economically powerful nation while the later one lags behind in terms of socio-economic indicators and is therefore reckoned as inferior and trivial. Cultural imperialism theory states that Western nations dominate the media around the world; Western world is destroying native culture by imposition of Western culture through print and electronic media (Tomlinson, 1991).

According to Kymalicka (as cited in Downing & Husband, 2005), it is believed that the cultural differences between majority and indigenous people are greater than stateless nations or other ethno-nationals. By and large, the Kalasha community remains socially and economically isolated from the rest of Pakistan; its exposure to Western cultures is a rare phenomenon and the community, with some prominent exceptions, apparently seems less affected by imperialism of Western cultures. This case study examines the impact of cultural invasion from the developed world as part of inevitable globalization process as well as Kalasha's cultural annihilation ostensibly triggered by state's mainstream cultural influence to which the community is conforming helplessly and in the process, lending itself to a traceless extinction.

Lazear (1999) argues that assimilation is more valuable to an individual from a small minority than to one from a large minority group. When a society has a very large majority of individuals from one culture, individuals from minority groups will be assimilated more quickly. Also, when governments protect minority interests directly, incentives to be assimilated into the majority culture are reduced (Lazear, 1999). A group can maintain its peculiar traditions when it is free from outside influence because the moment it accepts the technological advancement and increasing diffusion across boundaries, it will compromise the importance of its imagined space and eventually its cultural identity (Ericksen, 2001).

Theories and concepts related to cultural transformation discussed this section i.e. association between economic development and deviation from culture; cultural imperialism, and cultural assimilation are used as theoretical basis for identification and assessment of causes of Kalasha's cultural transformation in the next section.

### **Erosion of Religio-Cultural Identity: The Case of Kalasha Valleys**

To an extent, Kalasha have been successful in preserving their primitive culture and ancestral religion for thousands of years however their culture and religion are under serious threat lately. The following paragraphs briefly reviews studies conducted on cultural transformation in Kalasha valleys.

Zaidi (2001) identified several reasons for rapid conversion of Kalasha. He mentions influence of Tablighis<sup>3</sup> and Afghan refugees as one of the core reasons. According to him, many Tablighis who routinely carry Kalashnikovs<sup>4</sup> have killed a multitude of Kalasha who refused to convert to Islam. Such atrocious crimes are committed in order to send a clear message to the community so that they are left with no other choice but to convert to Islam. Poverty has been identified as another reason of conversion. According to Zaidi (2001), the government does not give loans to 'Kafirs'<sup>5</sup> therefore the Tablighis remain the only money lenders for them. Because of poverty, the Kafirs (Kalasha) cannot pay back the loan and hence the only option that remains with them is either to convert or to surrender their properties to the money lenders. This argument has also been supported by Nadeem (2013). He argues that many poor Kalasha convert to Islam because they are incentivized by money or a promise of equality in treatment by the Muslims living around them.

Khaliq's articles published in Express Tribune in 2011 and 2013 respectively explain that although Kalasha are in numerical minority in the region, there has never been any violent conflict between Kalasha and the Muslims. Nonetheless, Kalasha face discrimination and are constantly coerced to adopt the culture of majority that surrounds them. He relates that Kalasha children have stopped wearing their traditional outfits and one cannot differentiate between Kalasha children and Muslim children these days. Modern education is another cause; literacy and modernization have had an enormous impact on Kalashas' conversion.

Romance and intimate relationships have also been quoted as major reasons of conversion of Kalasha women. The physical feature of Kalasha women (fair complexion, blue eyes, and long neck) makes them highly attractive and distinguishes them from other women in the region. This is one of the reasons why men get attracted towards Kalasha women. In limited social interaction among Muslims and Kalasha, love affairs usually end up in marriages and eventually Kalasha women have to convert with irreversible consequences (Rana, 2011). The women who marry Muslim men are

---

<sup>3</sup> Preachers of Islam

<sup>4</sup> Automatic Rifle known as AK 47

<sup>5</sup> A term mostly used by the Muslim refers to infidel or a non-believer

obligated to leave their Kalasha community immediately; women are also obligated to abandon wearing their traditional dresses because Islamic values require them to wear clothes that are congruent with Islamic codes. Shalwar Kameez, scarf and 'Chadar' (Sheet) to cover body is reckoned as a humble dress code in Islam.

Khan (2009), explaining vulnerabilities of the Kalasha, mentions that Kalasha face serious constraints when it comes to the practice of their culture. According to him, Kalasha children are ridiculed for their customs and are given sermons about life after death, heaven, and hell in schools by their Muslim teachers. Religious preaching leaves a strong impact on young minds and thus the Islamic doctrine is profoundly inculcated. School going kids eventually end up as converts in later stages of their life. Kalasha language is also under serious threat of extinction as the individuals who convert are discouraged to speak it. In schools, Kalasha children are taught in Urdu and English; this increases their tendency of assimilation into the dominant culture. Kalashamondr<sup>6</sup> - a language sans script - is communicated and passed on from one generation to the other verbally. However, Kalashamondr is on the verge of extinction lately. Loss of language is a strong indicator of cultural erosion; 'a death of language entails death of culture' quotes Khan (2009).

Walsh (2011) also described various factors impacting religio-cultural erosion, such as Muslim settlements surrounding the Kalasha that in turn exert social pressure on the Kalasha to abandon their religion and culture; desire of better economic and social opportunities; and seeking equal treatment in school or at work place. Conway (2011) illustrates four main reasons of Kalasha conversion namely serious threat from Muslim militants (Taliban) across border; the forceful propagation of Islam by the majority society; Kalasha's impractical customs; and lack of teachers and schools for Kalasha specifically. Conway has also identified love affairs as one of the reasons of Kalasha fast conversion trends. Although various researchers, organizations, and anthropologists have done their bits in highlighting the alarming situation of Kalasha's religio-cultural erosion, the vanishing tribe is being continuously overlooked by government, local Muslim population, and civil society organizations. This study is an attempt to 1) unravel factors other than the ones purported by various researchers and 2) corroborate their findings with latest evidence from Kalasha community.

### Method

This study examines causes and implications of Kalasha's religio-cultural transformation. Keeping in view the nature of the research, methodological triangulation was adopted for the study in order to reduce methodological bias. Uncertainty of findings can be reduced when a proposition is confirmed by two or more independent measurement processes (Webb et al., 1996). Quantitative and qualitative data was collected through survey questionnaire and in-depth interviews respectively. The study was focused on three Kalasha Valleys (Bumburet, Rumbur, and Berir) of Chitral. The sample for the survey consisted of 75 Kalasha and 75 converted Muslims (total 150 respondents) from all three valleys, including 50% female respondents. Out of the total surveyed, 12 people (4 from each valley) were purposively selected for in-depth interview. The data collected through questionnaire was recorded and analyzed through computer software package - SPSS - using simple percentages and cross tabulation to see respondents' responses to each question.

---

<sup>6</sup> Language that Kalasha speak is known as Kalashamondr

**Table 1***Number of Research Participants*

Characteristics	Variables	Frequencies	Percentage
Gender	Male	74	49 %
	Female	76	51 %
	Total	150	100 %
Valleys	Bumburet	50	33.33 %
	Rumbur	50	33.33 %
	Berir	50	33.33 %
Religion	Kalasha	75	50 %
	Converted Muslims	75	50 %

Out of the total respondents, 50% were in the age group 18-35 years. As revealed by educational status, almost 29% of the total respondents were uneducated, 10 % had completed or were currently enrolled in undergraduate or Master Degree Programs in different universities and post graduate colleges. The remaining had primary education (10%), middle school (19%), secondary school certification (18%), and higher secondary school certification (14%).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical code of conduct provides the basis for and legitimizes the process of social research. It involves respect and protection of the people consenting to be studied. Numerous moral codes are designed and updated by the research communities and research regulating bodies in order to make research ethically considerate and socially accountable. This study was conducted, keeping in view, the ethical considerations associated with it. At the onset of conversations (survey and interviews), respondents were comprehensively informed about purpose of the study and probable implications of their involvement. They were told and reminded about their right to withdraw from the study as and when they desired. They were also assured that their participation in survey and interview is completely voluntary and that their response will be recorded, analyzed and published with anonymity so that the information they share cannot be traced back to them for privacy and security reasons. Interviews and survey was conducted in local languages – Khwar and Urdu. The data was transcribed in English later.

### **Empirical Enquiry: Quantitative Analysis**

**Table 2***Simple Frequencies*

No.	Questions	Responses		Percentage	
		Yes	No	Yes	No
1	Do you think that Kalasha adopt Islam because Kalasha religious rituals/ ceremonies and funerals are expensive to perform?	112	37	75%	25%
2	Do you think Kalasha religious rituals are expensive as compared to rituals of other religions?	119	31	79%	21%
3	Does conversion to Islam offer better social, economic and political opportunities?	106	44	71%	29%
4	Do you think Kalasha religious beliefs and practices are old fashioned and impractical to be practiced in current era and modernized society?	85	65	56%	44%
5	Do you think Kalasha culture is vanishing with increasing pace of development and modernization?	102	48	68%	32%

6	Do Kalasha face any threat from Taliban for conversion?	139	11	93%	7%
7	Has the recent threat from Taliban accelerated the process of conversion?	36	114	24%	76%
8	Are Kalasha people terrified after receiving the recent threat from Taliban?	109	41	73%	27%
9	Do Kalasha receive threats from across border from Taliban in Afghanistan area?	148	2	99%	1%
10	Do you experience discrimination from other religious community? (Only Kalasha would answer)	38	37	51%	49%
11	Are you in favour of love marriage?	140	9	93%	7%
12	Do you think of religion as a barrier in love marriage?	48	102	32%	68%
13	Will you consider getting married to a person who is believer of another religion and not yours if you fall in love with him or her?	128	21	85%	14%
14	Can a Kalasha follow his/her own religion after getting married to a person of a different religion?	17	132	11%	89%
15	Do you think love marriage is a cause of Kalasha conversion?	126	24	84%	16%
16	Kalasha belong to a unique religious minority in the entire world. Do you think this is the reason why it is difficult for them to integrate with the other community living around them??	110	28	80%	20%
17	Are you satisfied with government and NGOs interventions for preservation and protection of Kalasha community and their culture?	71	79	47%	53%
18	Are there any constraints in preservation of Kalasha culture?	62	88	41%	49%
19	Do you think Islamic way of life is better as compared to your way of living? (only Kalasha would answer)	22	53	29%	71%

About 75% of the respondents believed that Kalasha rituals are very expensive to perform. 79% of the respondents believed that Kalasha rituals are costly as compared to the required rituals of other religions. More than two third of the respondents were of the opinion that conversion to Islam entails better economic, social, and political opportunities while less than one third responded negatively to the same question. Almost 56% of the respondents believed that Kalasha's beliefs and practices are obsolete and impractical to continue with in contemporary times. Likewise, approximately 93% of the respondents agreed that Kalasha face threat from Taliban for conversion however 76% of the respondents opined that threats have not accelerated the conversion rate. 73 % expressed their apprehension because of the threats. 99% of the respondents thought that Kalasha receive cross border threats from Afghanistan. In responses to the question on discrimination experienced by Kalasha, half of the respondents said that they face discrimination; the other half did not agree.

The responses show that 140/149 were in favor of love marriage. Majority of the respondents (102/150) did not consider religion as a barrier to love marriage. About 85% of the respondents would prefer getting married to a person of different religion if he/she falls in love with him/her. 89% thought that a Kalasha man or woman cannot follow their religion after getting married to a person of different religion. Response to question 15 reveals that 84% of the respondents consider love marriage as a cause of Kalasha conversion. Approximately 80 % of the respondents believed that Kalasha being a unique religious minority makes it quite difficult for them to integrate with the dominant communities. Almost half (79/150) of respondents were not satisfied with the governments' and civil society organizations' interventions for preservation and protection of Kalasha culture. Surprisingly, 49% did not believe that there are any constraints in preservation of Kalasha

culture. Most of the respondents (71%) did not believe that Islamic way of life is better than Kalasha way of life.

**Table 3***Cross Tabulation*

No.		Responses	Kalasha	Muslim Converts
1	Do the religious majority around you avail and enjoy better economic opportunities?	Yes	55 (73%)	18 (24%)
		No	20 (27%)	57 (76%)
2	Do you think Kalasha religious beliefs and practices are obsolete and impractical to be practiced in the current developed and modernized society?	Yes	32 (43%)	53 (70%)
		No	43 (57%)	22 (29%)
3	Are you in favour of teaching Islamiyat (Islamic Studies) to Kalasha children in schools?	Yes	15 (20%)	58 (77%)
		No	60 (80%)	17 (23%)
4	Should there be any other religious subject (their own) instead of Islamiyat for Kalasha students?	Yes	58 (77%)	15 (20%)
		No	15 (20%)	60 (80%)
5	Should there be any other religious subject (their own) along with Islamiyat for Kalasha student?	Yes	65 (87%)	70 (93%)
		No	10 (13%)	05 (7%)
6	Do you think Kalasha culture/religion should be preserved?	Yes	74 (99%)	41 (55%)
		No	01 (1.3%)	34 (45%)
7	Do you interact with Muslim clergy more often?	Yes	65 (87%)	70 (93%)
		No	10 (13%)	05 (7%)
8	If answer to previous question is 'yes', do they preach Islam to you?	Yes	60 (80%)	69 (92%)
		No	15 (20%)	06 (8%)
9	Do you listen to Islamic preaching on Television, Radio or any other media source?	Yes	27 (36%)	68 (91%)
		No	48 (64%)	7 (9%)
10	Do you read Islamic literature?	Yes	27 (36%)	54 (72%)
		No	48 (64%)	21 (28%)

73% Kalasha respondents thought that the majority around them enjoys better socio-economic and political opportunities for progression while 24 % Muslim converts also thought that they enjoy better socio-economic opportunities as compared to Kalasha. Most of the Kalasha (43/75) did not think that their religious beliefs and practices were obsolete and impractical to follow however 53 out of 75 Muslim converts thought that Kalasha beliefs and practices are obsolete. Most of the Kalasha (80%) did not approve Islamic teachings to their children in school while 58/75 Muslims favored teaching of Islamiyat to Kalasha children. 58/75 Kalasha thought that there should be a separate subject of their own for Kalasha children instead of Islamiyat while majority (60/75) of the Muslims converts rejected the idea. In response to subsequent question, 87% of Kalasha and 93% of Muslim converts favored the idea that Kalasha should have in the curriculum, a subject of their own region/culture 'along with' Islamiyat.

Almost every Kalasha (74 out of 75 responses) respondent believed that their culture must be preserved while in case of Muslims, only 41/75 favored this proposition. A great majority (87%) of the Kalasha respondents and 93 % Muslims converts interacted with the Muslim clergymen; clergymen preached Islam to 60 out of 75 Kalasha and 69/75 converts surveyed. 27 out of 75 Kalasha



held that they had read and listened to Islamic preaching while majority of the Muslims 68/75 said they did the same. Likewise, 27/75 Kalasha had to read Islamic literature while 54/75 Muslim converts mentioned that they had read Islamic literature.

### **Qualitative Analysis**

In addition to the quantitative survey, key informant interviews were also conducted in order to delve deep into the underlying causes of Kalasha's rapid religio-social conversions. A thematic approach has been adopted in order to elaborate the perceptions of key informants. Questions for interviews were based on the same themes/factors/variables as discussed in the survey. Interviews were conducted with the following rationale in mind. 1) To authenticate and corroborate findings of the survey data and 2) to unveil the reasons that shape up respondents' perception and subsequent behavior.

#### **a) Islamic Preaching and Religious Extremism**

The research participants considered teaching of Islamiyat (Islamic Studies) in schools as a major reason for Kalasha's cultural transformation. A respondent offered an explanation for this as follows

*Kalasha children are taught Islamiyat in schools. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, Kalasha don't have their own religious book and secondly, they have to appear in board [Board of Secondary Education] examination in grade 9 and 10 where they are required to take Islamiyat exam; this makes it inevitable for them to study Islamiyat right from the beginning in order to pass the secondary school exam.*

Naturally, the convert respondents were in favor of teaching Islamiyat to Kalasha children. According to one of them, 'teaching of Islamic studies to Kalasha children is right because this provides them with the true knowledge of Islam and they will come to know about Islam as a superior religion than Kalasha.' However, by and large, Kalasha people expressed their dissent against the teaching of Islamiyat to Kalasha children.

Islamic preaching was identified by many respondents as a spur for conversion. One interviewee mentioned, *Muslim teachers in Schools tell our kids that Kalasha religion is inferior to Islam. One day, my youngest son (student of grade 6) asked me about hellfire. Having investigated the matter, I came to know that his teachers had sermonized him about hell and cautioned him that if he doesn't convert, he will be burnt in hellfire in life after death.*

Once converted, the newly converted Muslims, charged with a zeal for salvation of mankind, consider preaching as their utmost moral obligation. One respondent who was a convert shared his opinion as follows,

*As a Muslim it's my religious and moral obligation to preach Islam - The only right path - to all the others who are following the wrong path. They are misguided; they are following a wrong way. I will try my best to convert as many Kalasha as possible. I thank my friends (preachers) for showing me the right path.*

Tablighis (Muslim Clergymen/ missionaries) visit Kalasha valleys quite frequently in pursuit of their mission to spread Islam and orientate people with 'the only true religion of the world'. Thousands of Tablighis organize their preaching missions around the year and travel from place to place in pursuit of their mission however their target audience is usually Muslim population. Other religious minorities groups in Pakistan such as Christians and Hindus are usually not contacted by

Tablighis. The case of Kalasha Valley is an anomaly. Perhaps the reasons for this are Kalasha's vulnerability and likelihood of succumbing to the socio-religious pressures as well as their economic susceptibility.

Conversations with interviewees revealed that Kalasha faced serious threats from the Muslim militant groups. This apprehension was expressed implicitly and explicitly with the interviewer. One of the Kalasha respondents said, 'Yes! Indeed we all are terrified after receiving such kind of threats. Conversions have already started as a result of such threats and five to six people in Birir valley have been reported to have converted recently.' Proximity of Kalasha Valley to Nuristan Province of Afghanistan makes this region a soft target for militant groups who frequently infiltrate into these valleys and escape to their safe havens once they are done with loot, plunder and carnage.

#### **b) Impact of Globalization on Kalasha's Cultural Heritage**

With increasing development and globalization, Kalasha community members are becoming more familiar with how other people live in societies around them. National and global cultures are no more alien to them and this is gradually changing the religious and social perceptions of Kalasha. Consequently, Kalasha are changing their ways of life particularly some features of their culture such as the traditional houses and clothing. A graduate Kalasha responding to a question on adaptation of modern values said

*Modernization surely has a negative effect on our culture and religion. Through television and other technologies, the dominant cultures are undermining the minority cultures. Our people have started dressing like TV stars; our house [construction] style is changing from traditional to modern. The traditional names are being replaced by the modern names such as those of Bollywood or Hollywood stars.*

On the contrary however, some of the Kalasha thought that modernization has a positive impact on Kalasha culture. 'Development has a positive impact on Kalasha culture. With increasing development the people are becoming wealthier, they are getting educated and they become more aware of the worth [uniqueness] of their culture and religion', said one of the Kalasha interviewee.

#### **c) Intrinsic Issues in Practice of Kalasha Religion**

People of Kalasha community are miserably poor however they lead a highly expensive social life when it comes to performing religious rituals. It was learnt that when a Kalasha dies, the body is kept in the house for three days; during this time the deceased's family is obligated to slaughter numerous animals for feast. People from all around the valley gather at the deceased's house. They eat (meat, cheese, and bread), drink local wine, beat drums, dance and celebrate for three days while the deceased's immediate family mourns. The funeral ends on the third day with an approximate cost of three to four hundred thousand Pakistani Rupees incurred by the family of deceased. Most of the people are poor and cannot afford performance of this particular religious ritual. This is one of the reasons, why they prefer to convert to Islam where they are no longer obligated to spend money on such rituals. Comparing Islam with Kalasha religion, one Muslim convert respondent argued that 'Islam is an economically viable religion. It offers better economic opportunity in a sense that it relieves us from [incurring] the funeral and ceremonial costs that we used to incur when we were followers of Kalasha.'

Some of the Kalasha respondents opined that there are several inherent issues in Kalasha religion and culture that can be reckoned as self-terminating reasons for Kalasha culture and religion.

A converted Muslim admitted. 'It looks strange! Where in the world would you find people who celebrate deaths?' Another respondent targeted the Bhashaleni<sup>7</sup> and said:

*'A Kalasha girl is not allowed to live in her house during menstruation period and at the time of childbirth. God forbid, if a woman dies while giving birth to a child, Kalasha tradition doesn't allow its members to touch the dead body and they would abandon the child till his/her death too. A few years ago, a Kalasha woman died in Bhashaleni while giving birth to a child. The woman's life could have been easily saved had she been taken to the hospital. After this incident, many Kalasha women are worried and that is why several women embraced Islam. This is one of the reasons why Kalasha girls prefer to get married to Muslim men.'*

### **Conclusion**

Kalasha community has somehow survived and was able to retain their unique social identity however their numerical strength has decreased drastically in the near past; the total population shrunk from approximately 10,000 about a decade ago to less than 3500 lately. The significant decrease is a harbinger of extinction of Kalasha's religio-cultural identity. A multitude of reasons for this rapid erosion were explored during the course of this study. It was revealed that factors such as love marriages, threats from religious extremists, preaching of Islam by Tablighis, teaching of Islamiat in public schools, extreme levels of poverty, costly customs and rituals inscribed in Kalasha religion, technological development, increasing cultural invasion from international and regional majority communities, and lack of serious efforts on the part of government and civil society organizations to preserve Kalasha are responsible for cultural extinction of Kalasha community.

Preliminary investigation of the dilemma in question allows no room for a firm conclusive stance on the matter. On the one hand, this peculiar case epitomizes a vanishing race whose religious and cultural values are constantly undermined by those of dominant social aggregates. The community and their social legacy is nothing less than a highly valuable cultural heritage that needs to be preserved by all means. On the other hand however, the evidence also unveils that not all the reasons for the transformation of Kalasha are coercive and exogenous in nature. Tenets of Kalasha religion and culture are instilled with irrational principles and demand practices that are obsolete, impractical, expensive to perform, and extremely primitive in nature. Besides, some of Kalasha's customs can be reckoned inhumane such as denial of healthcare provision to pregnant women in case of an emergency.

Evidence suggests that Kalasha's cultural transformation is partly owed to influence from globalized culture (spearheaded by developed Western States) that seeps into their way of life through electronic media and some highly-educated eminent Kalasha community members however a great deal of Kalasha's religio-cultural deterioration is instigated by enormous pressure for conformity by Muslim communities. The case study of Kalasha offers a slightly different explanation to the premise that assumes a positive correlation between acquired economic development and deviation from cultural values. It is Kalasha's desperate 'need' for economic development that coerces them to relinquish their social identity. In other words, abject poverty diminishes the survival prospects of a minority group's unique culture.

---

<sup>7</sup> Bhashaleni is a building for Kalasha women where they live during the menstruation period and while giving birth to a child.

Although social pressures and extreme coercive campaigning such as life threatening anti-social behavior from clergymen is alarming and needs to be seriously taken care of by the law enforcement agencies, Kalashas' voluntary conversions also need considerable attention. As evidently observed in the study, a great deal of former Kalasha men and women have converted in order to have access to better social, political and most important of all, economic opportunities. Many of them might have converted because the choice of conversion was a rational choice for them. However by and large, it appears that the minority vulnerable community has succumbed to the social pressure from dominant majority communities that surround them. An oversimplified verdict on this issue, it is believed, would be a biased and hasty perspective. Kalasha need protection and facilitation in case they want to adhere to their religion and traditional way of life as long as their customs do not violate basic human rights. This is however an extremely difficult proposition keeping in view, the religious intolerance levels in the region. It is anticipated that due to an evident indifferent attitude from pertinent government agencies, religio-cultural identity of Kalasha community will cease to exist in near future.

### References

- Akinnaso, N. (2012, August 28). Cultural Erosion. *The Punch*. Retrieved from [www.punchng.com](http://www.punchng.com) [March 6th, 2013]
- Bhutto, F. (2007, May 31). ChilimJusht. *The Kalasha Times*. Retrieved from [www.thekalashatimes.wordpress.com/2007/05/31/170/](http://www.thekalashatimes.wordpress.com/2007/05/31/170/)
- Conway, R. (2011, Oct 20). Conversions Threaten Pakistan's 'Macedonian' Tribe. *Reuters*. Retrieved from <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-kalash-idUSTRE79J0TE20111020>
- Davey, S. (2013). The Happy Valleys. *Geographical*. 85(3). Brentford: Circle Publishing Ltd.
- Dawn (2013, 13 Feb). Pakistani Taliban Threaten Kalash Tribe, Ismailis in Chitral. *Dawn*. Retrieved from <http://www.dawn.com/news/1086564>
- Downing, J. D. H. & Husband, C. (2005). *Representing Race Racisms, Ethnicity and the Media*. London: Sage Publications.
- Ericksen, T.H. (2001). Ethnic Identity, National Identity and Intergroup Conflict: The significance of Personal Experiences. In R. D. Ashmore, L. Jussim, & D. Wilder (Eds.), *Social identity, Intergroup Conflict and Conflict Reduction* (pp. 42–68). New York: Oxford University Press
- Gul, F. (2010, August 6). Saving Kalash Valleys. *The Friday Times*. pp. 28-29. Retrieved from <http://unesco.org.pk/documents/SavingKalashValleys.pdf>
- Inglehart, R. (1989). *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Sheikh, I., Chaudhry, H., & Mohyuddin (2014). Religion as a Space for Kalash Identity: A Case Study of Village Bumburetin Kalash Valley, District Chitral. *World Applied Sciences Journal*. 29 (3): 426-432.
- Jettmar, K. (1961). Ethnological Research in Dardistan. *American Philosophical Society*. 105(1), 79-97.
- Khaliq, F. (2011, July 18). Ignoring Traditions: Modernisation Threatening Unique Kalasha Culture. *The Express Tribune*. Retrieved from [www.tribune.com.pk](http://www.tribune.com.pk)
- Khaliq, F. (2013, August 18). A Different Shade: The Fading Colours of Kalash. *The Express Tribune*. Retrieved from [www.tribune.com.pk](http://www.tribune.com.pk)
- Khan, M. A. (1980). *Chitral and Kafiristan*. Peshawar: Printing Corporation of Frontier Ltd. (Original work published in 1975).
- Khan, T. (2009). *Kalash Valleys: A Call for Indigenous Cultural Survival*. (Master's Thesis, Central European University, Budapest, Hungary). Retrieved from [www.etd.ceu.hu/2010/khan\\_taj.pdf](http://www.etd.ceu.hu/2010/khan_taj.pdf)
- Lazear, L. P. (1999). Culture and Language. *Journal of Political Economy*. 107(S6), 95-126.
- Morgenstierne, G. (1926). *Report on the Activities of the Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture: In the Years 1923/26*, Oslo Norway: H Aschehoug & Company.

- Mulholland, J. (1991). *The Language of Negotiation*. London: Routledge.
- Nadeem, M. (2013, May 13). The Kalash - A Tribe Fighting for its Life. Retrieved from <https://mahnaznadeem.wordpress.com/2013/05/03/the-kalash-a-tribe-fighting-for-its-life/>
- Rana, S. (2011, April 19). Kalash Struggle to Preserve Their Culture. *The Express Tribune*. Retrieved from <http://tribune.com.pk/story/152253/the-kalash-struggle-to-preserve-their-culture>
- Rehman, O. (2011, June 26). Kalash: Culture Shock. Retrieved from [http://kalashapeople.blogspot.com/2011/06/kalash-culture-shock\\_1101.html](http://kalashapeople.blogspot.com/2011/06/kalash-culture-shock_1101.html)
- Tomlinson, J. (1991). *Cultural Imperialism: A Critical Introduction*. London: Pinter.
- Trail, G. H. (1996). *Tysam Revisited: A Study of Kalasha Origins*. Karachi: Oxford University Press.
- Walsh, D. (2011, October 17). Taliban Threat Closes in on Isolated Kalash Tribe. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/oct/17/taliban-kalash-pakistan-afghanistan>
- Webb, E. J., Campbell, D. T., Schwartz, R. D., & Sechrest, L. (1966). *Unobtrusive Measures: Nonreactive Measures in the Social Sciences*. Chicago: Rand McNally
- Zaidi, A. (2001). Ethnic Cleansing of Kafirs in Pakistan. In T. J. Hubschman (Ed), *The Best of Gowanus: New Writing from Africa, Asia and the Caribbean* (pp.13-18). New York: Gowanus Books.

Received: Oct 20<sup>th</sup>, 2017

Revisions Received: Nov 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2018