

Utah Valley University Students Host Guest From Pakistan

On December 2, 2016, the United Nations International Mountain Day Celebration at Utah Valley University (UVU) brought a very special guest, Ms. Mehak Asad from Pakistan. I say special because what she was going to share with all of us at UVU, was not about current situations in Pakistan, but something very important to her that is part of her country: something about the culture and traditions of the Kalash tribe which lives high in the mountains of Pakistan. Frankly speaking, I knew nothing about Kalash people, and in fact it was the first time I heard about them so everything that Mehak shared with us was very informative. I realized as a Political Science student that it was very important not only listen to what Mehak said to us, but to also analyze the situation the Kalash people have been living in for centuries.



Ms. Mehak Asad wears traditional Kalash dress

Among all the amazing things she shared with us about Kalash people, a couple of specific details and features caught my attention. During the presentation Mehak wore the very colorful and beautiful traditional dress of the Kalash women. She went further on through small details of the tribal culture and traditions of the community located in the Nuristan regions. Kalash people are known as the smallest religious group in Pakistan, which provides them with certain pros and cons. First, this small group of people has cultural and religious traditions completely different from most of the population in Pakistan who are the followers of Islam. This makes their life harder: Muslims do not tolerate their traditions and think that what they worship is a sin. This put Kalash people in danger.

I was very surprised to know that when someone among the Kalash people pass away, the funeral, especially for men, is the most expensive event of their culture. As an important aspect performed during the funeral, they leave the body exposed openly on air without burial so people can throw money to them that later can be collected by the children. It is an important and special occasion for them. The second aspect that caught my attention for Kalash women is a “bashelini,” a still strongly followed tradition, when women in a state of impurity are sent to a special place in the house without any contact with the rest of the family. There are two cases for this situation: when women give birth, which makes them impure for 3 months, or when they are menstruating, they are isolated for 10 days or until the menstruation ends. This is something unacceptable in modern society but in Kalash culture, this is very important and respected. I also found it very interesting how Kalash women actually have freedom called “Elopement,” which means that girls and women are free to choose their life partners and have the right to divorce.

Usually the husband pays an amount of money to the girl, so if she wants to get marry with someone else, the future husband is informed of the amount of money paid before so he must double it before marrying her. It is very normal in Kalash culture.



Ms. Mehak Asad (First from Right) with members of UIMF

Alongside this as myself and audience at UVU found out, the Kalash culture is currently in danger, and that was the main message which Mehak came to share with us: first, Kalash culture is not in danger because of terrorism, or because of Muslims and extremists across the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan, who allegedly could try to kill Kalash culture. It is because of their traditions, because there is no written scripture, and when it comes to education of children they experience many problems, since most of school are Muslim schools that makes Kalash children believe they will go to hell if they will attend those schools. This and other interesting and important facts about Kalash culture, like for example drinking wine, which is a sin for the majority Pakistani people

Mehak shared during her presentation. I was glad to be able to listen to her, to expand my knowledge about one more mountain community and get to know something about a culture that was completely out of my knowledge, especially when everything nowadays is focused on terrorism.

I felt grateful indeed to the efforts of the Mountain Partnership, UIMF and UVU students that always put together events highlighting mountain livelihoods and communities, like the celebrations of the International Mountain Days, that I am able to attend and contribute with, not only to grow academically but to raise my personal awareness as well about importance of the promotion of the sustainable development among mountain communities globally and in my native country, Colombia in particular.

Daniela Moncada, President, Model of the United Nations Club at UVU