

Connecting Mountain Cultures during the 2016 International Mountain Day Commemoration



Ms. Mehak Asad from Pakistan demonstrates traditional Kalash dress

During the International Mountain Day celebration on December 2, 2016 at Utah Valley University I was able to listen to Mehak Asad, a young Pakistani woman talk about the Kalash culture. The Kalash people reside in the mountains of Northern Pakistan. The culture itself is pagan as they worship several gods. Some of them also are followers of Islam or are a spinoff of Islam. The culture itself is a bit rigid in the way it functions. You either do or die. There is no in

between. The people are labeled pure or impure. When women are menstruating they are considered impure at this time and need to go reside in separate quarters, Bashaleni, and give an offering to the gods' to regain their pureness before returning back home to their family. Girls are free to choose their life partner. They are also free to divorce. Divorce doesn't have quite the stigma as it does here and they are free to get married as many times as they want. Here they call it wife elopement. Women tend to marry at a very young age where the husband pays a price for her. However, if the wife finds herself unhappy in a marriage and another man catches her eye she is free to write him a letter of proposal to tell him how much her current husband paid for her and if he would accept her hand in marriage. The new husband may pay double for her if he wants her. This the new husband would buy her off from her previous husband.

The main goal in life for the Kalash people is to get married and make kids. The people tend to be very poor there, uneducated and often going to jobs such as trucking and shepherding (I believe this is what Mehak said during her presentation. It was some kind of farming). Even though the people are poor they will shelve out quite a bit of money for the dead ceremony since this is considered very important to them.

The Kalash are very fond of music and dancing. Songs are very passionate and are a part of different festivals in Kalash. However, songs can be considered very private as an individual will keep it as something sacred not for every ear.

I found this conference to be really insightful. I particularly found the concept of marriage elopement interesting since it goes against most other cultures. Also, since Kalash seems to have Islam in its mix it would seem to go against regular Islamic customs in the Middle East. In the Middle East Muslim men can marry four women. However, a woman cannot divorce her husband unless he is doing something drastic such as abusing her. But in Kalash culture it's celebrated to have a woman divorce her husband for another one. In Western culture it's more taboo for a woman to get around or to have been divorced than it is for a man. A man can sleep around and he is seen as an alpha male where a woman is considered a slut. There's double standards here in the man's favor. In Kalash society a woman dissatisfied who wants a different husband is celebrated.

The second aspect I found interesting was how women went off to a different place when they were menstruating to which they are considered unclean. With such a high emphasis of state of pure and impure in their culture it's interesting to see how a woman going off with a second

husband is smiled upon while a woman going through a basic biology function of menstruation is considered impure and must take a sacrifice to the gods. Here it's frowned upon if a woman gets around and she is often considered impure in many religious practices. Some values seem to be universal while others seem to be ambiguous throughout different cultures. In India it's considered to be immodest to show your ankles; yet, showing your stomach is fine. Here we see girls in dresses to their knees entering holy temples in the Mormon religion, but banishing girls and calling them immodest for showing their stomach. There's a lot of values that seem to be relative as you go from culture to culture.

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