

## UVU Students Build Cultural Bridges with Kalash

### People

Utah Valley University students had the privilege of meeting Mehak Asad, a promising young filmmaker from Pakistan, at the United Nation International Mountain Day Celebration, Friday, December 2, 2016. Asad offered the students explanation and insight into the culture, language, religion and customs of the Kalash people, a fair-skinned, pagan ethnic group that has lived in the beautiful mountainous Hindu Kush region of Pakistan for centuries. For most, it was the first time to learn about the colorful, ancient culture.



Today, between three and four thousand people still identify as Kalash. They are the last living representatives of the Indo European religion and use an Indo European language in the Indo Aryan branch.

Kalasha is an endangered language as most inhabitants of the region now speak Urdu. Kalash are also known as Nuristani, because they inhabit Nuristan regions southwest of the Kalash Valleys, in the Waygal and middle Pech valleys of Afghanistan's Nuristan Province. The Kalash claim to be the long-lost descendants of Alexander the Great's world-conquering armies, which invaded this region in the fourth century B.C. The Kalash have had little intermingling with other tribes, so many of the Kalasha people are blond haired, and blue eyed, which is somewhat unusual in Pakistan.



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Known as Pakistan's smallest religious group, Kalash have a significantly different outlook on life from the Muslims surrounding them. Possessing a

completely different folklore, which has been compared to that of ancient Greece, the ancient tribe worships gods and goddesses. Nature plays a highly significant, spiritual role. In plain contrast to the culture of Pakistan, they do not separate the sexes or disapprove of contact between men and women of different families. However, women still experience some discriminatory treatment. For example, Kalash still make use of the 'bashelini," a house in the village where menstruating women are sent until they regain purity, and rituals must be performed before she can return to her husband. Further, men are able to sing songs to God, but no one else is allowed to listen. Kalash are also known for their expensive and elaborate funeral processions. Bodies are left exposed and coins are thrown across the bodies by the mourners. Children are then allowed to come and gather the money.

As their numbers are very small the cultures of the people who surround them have had an impact. Many of the Kalash, in the two of the valleys have converted to Islam. Muslim converts still practice many of the traditional aspects of Kalasha life, though the non-converts call them 'sheiks' or kafir. Mehak Asad explained that many Kalash chose to commit suicide rather than convert to Islam.

The Kalash have typically made their living herding goats and farming. Tourism plays a significant part in their lives, with many urban Pakistanis making the journey from the big cities to meet their light colored rustic neighbors, supporting local artisans, by purchasing their handmade crafts and clothing.

Kalasha people are protected by the government of Pakistan, but so far, their future is uncertain. Utah Valley University students enjoyed this rare opportunity to learn more about the beautiful and unique Kalash culture.

***Stella Parwin Przybyla, and Megan Raines, Utah Valley University students***