

"From discourse markers to Heaven"

A journey in Kalasha language and culture

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Settled in three small valleys at the center of the Hindu Kush/Karakorum range, in the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Province of Pakistan, the Kalasha people have come to be considered a little historical wonder. Culturally, they are the last practitioners of a polytheistic religion of likely pre-Vedic ascent in the vast Muslim ocean of Central Asia, and this makes them “the last Kafirs of the Hindu Kush” (“kafir” is Arabic for “infidel”). Linguistically, the special place occupied by Kalashamon within Neo Indo-Aryan is best hinted by recalling that, like some other North-West (or Dardic) Neo Indo-Aryan languages, it still retains the Old Indo-Aryan three-way distinction for sibilants – i.e. dental (/s/), palatal (/ʃ/), and retroflex (/ʂ/) – and is the only Indo-Aryan language that still preserves the OIA prefixed *a-* (the “augment”) as a productive past tense marker. These cultural and linguistic features all speak of a remarkable degree of retention and archaism, which finds further suggestive parallels in the Kalasha residential patterns, women’s clothing, and ritual practices.

The study presented is based on the materials collected in 2006-2007 for my PhD, i.e. a fieldwork in the lesser-known among the three Kalasha valleys, namely Birir, to document and analyze a 5-day ritual peculiar to that valley that had not been properly studied before. I recorded about 30 hours of verbal art performances and about 5 hours of daily verbal interactions. When I started dealing with discourse markers – the most prominent of which in Kalashamon are *-ta* and *-o*, respectively topic and focus marker – I gradually realized that their distribution in both poetic and daily discourse could be made sense of only taking into consideration some essential aspects of traditional Kalasha eschatology.

In this talk my goal will be to have this culture-grammar-discourse connection emerge as clearly as possible. In order to do so it will be necessary to give elements of Kalasha culture, society, and language, therefore taking a journey, that is, in the wonderful and currently threatened world of the Kalasha of Chitral.