

Our Women Are Free

Gender and Ethnicity in the Hindukush

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men that are not suspected of being sexual in nature]. *Patiua* don't. They can't even go to their own brothers' houses. We Kalasha go *alasyi* (elope) if we don't like our husbands. Those 'shit-eating' [stupid—as in stupid enough to eat shit instead of food] *šek* [Kalasha who have converted to Islam] are very jealous."

This book is an attempt to unwrap what Mushiki meant by "Our women are free" (*hōma istrīza azāt āsan*),²⁹ a refrain that is echoed again and again by Kalasha men and women both. At the time that I noted down this conversation, I hadn't realized that this would become the focus of my work for the next several years. In fact, I remember I almost didn't bother taking notes—the sentiments Mushiki expresses are so common that they had become a cliché to me in a very short time. When I look at them now, after having spent years trying to understand what Kalasha women do and why they do it, I am amazed that Mushiki captured, in a few short sentences, almost everything that I have to say about what I have begun to call an "ethno-theory of Kalasha women's agency."

Throughout this work, I have glossed the Kalasha word *azāt* as the English word *free*. In doing so, I know that I run the risk that readers will carry into this discussion their own cultural associations of *freedom* with lightness, boundlessness, and independence rather than interdependence. I know too that *freedom* conjures up all sorts of unsavory associations with unreflective patriotism or naive feminism. And yet I want to rescue the word and use it, even though it is out of vogue. For one thing, I think *free* really works as a translation for *azāt*, at least for one particular meaning of that word in English. You cannot use the word *azāt* to describe something that is "empty"—as in the English "free from infection," nor can you use it to signify something that doesn't cost anything. However, if you catch a bird in a trap and then release him, he would be *azāt*, free. You are also "freed" from prison. A woman whose husband marries a second wife is *azāt*—she can choose to stay with him if she wants to or she can leave him and her husband then forfeits the bridewealth his family paid hers when they were first married. (In either case, the children are "his," so it's not a decision without consequences.) *azāt* then carries the meaning of the English word *free* as in "released from restriction"—but always within it is the assumption that those restrictions were there, were real. If women are

"free," it is because they *are* also bounded—by traditions and rules, in marriages, by where they should and shouldn't go and what they should and shouldn't wear. Being free for them means being free to step outside the boundaries of those rules—or to choose not to do so—but it doesn't mean that there are no restrictions, no frame, no norms, no expectations, no consequences.

It isn't only that Kalasha women are self-possessed and active. Like all humans, some are and others are less so. Like all of us, most are sometimes but not all the time. I fake for granted that individual Kalasha women have "agency" in this more general sense. They negotiate the nooks and crannies of their world in many and varied ways; they do things, and what they do makes a difference. Rather, women's freedom among Kalasha refers to a particular constellation of rights and abilities that are claimed by Kalasha women as a group—because they are women and, more specifically, because they are Kalasha women.

As Mushiki points out, Kalasha women's freedom involves the ability to travel freely and widely, or at least the ability to think of yourself as being able to travel freely and widely if you really, really want to. It is the freedom to be "seen" in a cultural milieu where women from neighboring cultural groups take pride in being out of sight. It is about the freedom to have relationships with men that are not immediately assumed to be sexual in nature. It is the freedom to make choices about sexuality and marriage, although these decisions are always difficult. It is *not* limitless freedom but rather the freedom to choose, sometimes, to step beyond limits. It is also the freedom to *choose* to live *within* cultural norms, and thus to embrace rules not as something imposed from without but as something that you, too, have played a part in creating.

The women's march to Chitral detailed in the prologue was characterized by Kalasha women as an enactment of this freedom. In these few dramatic hours, many of the assumptions implicit in the trope of women's freedom were made visible, as were the limits on that freedom. First and foremost, by leaving the valleys in the midst of a war, women were exercising what they see as a fundamental right—the right to exit an intolerable situation. That this exit was made by physically walking out of the valleys is important, for freedom almost always involves embodied action. While men may make speeches, give

said, even the government of Pakistan. No one would dare to hurt *anglis*. This isn't true of Kalasha women, who do feel vulnerable outside of their familiar valleys.

In other words, Kalasha women find themselves bounded on all sides by a larger geopolitical world in which their agency is not taken seriously, where they are neither effective nor safe. Chitrali authorities assumed that Steve and I had organized this march, taking for granted that Kalasha were not active, bold, or intelligent enough to take such an action on their own. They also assumed that Steve and I were not so naive as to be ignorant of the fact that foreigners are forbidden to take part in political marches in Pakistan. They were wrong on both counts. The assistant commissioner arrived saying he was worried that Steve or I might be killed, but the women's concerns were roundly dismissed.

The final, anticlimactic dissolution of the march points to another limitation on women's freedom. Individual women usually act alone (indeed, the ability to do so is part of what defines Kalasha women's freedom). The concept of women's freedom is entirely without connotations of women's solidarity. When pressured by the authorities, the group fractured and each woman made up her own mind about whether to go on or go back.

Implicit in all these freedoms, as you can see in Mushiki's remarks, is a specific comparison with women from surrounding Islamic communities. The ability to make these choices and do these things is therefore an important—I would even claim that it is the most important—ethnic marker. I want to make it clear that I know (and Kalasha women know, too) that neighboring Muslim women have agency—that is, they work to define their lives in active ways, they resist or actively embrace the structures they live in, they have affairs, use veiling to their advantage, influence choices about their weddings, and travel about. The difference is this: Kalasha women think of themselves as people who move about, and claim the right to do so, whether they take advantage of it or not. Chitrali women think of themselves as people who stay put, while in fact they move around an awful lot. Kalasha women think of themselves as being free to make decisions about marriage, although they recognize that in fact situations are often defined for them and there is sometimes little latitude. Chitrali women think of themselves as having marriages that are arranged, while in fact girls have a lot of say in who they are given to (while

Kalasha girls do not). Kalasha women think of themselves as people who are seen, although many also value privacy. Chitrali women value the strict *purdah* they keep, although they, too, find ways of making themselves visible. In other words, discourse about women's agency is moral discourse in which definitions of gender come to define the claims of ethnic superiority or difference.³⁰ And in the case of the Kalasha the claim that women's freedom is what makes Kalasha different from Muslims helps to shore up women's freedom when it is challenged.

And it often is challenged. When my colleague, Joyce Flueckiger, first read a draft of one of my early chapters, she said that she liked it but she didn't *believe* it—as someone who grew up in and writes about and studies South Asia, it sounded too romantic. For a while, I didn't get it. I believed that I had described women's lives as "truly" as I was able. Since then, I realize that I often do the same thing Kalasha women do—assert their freedom, their ability to make choices, without explaining the background of undeniable male privilege and authority (in a region where male privilege is taken as God given) against which women's freedom is configured.

In scoring the Sherpas on a scale of gender inequality across world cultures, Sherry Ortner has recently pronounced them "pretty good," noting that it is "notoriously difficult to assign a score of degree of gender equality or inequality in a particular society" (1996:186). Following her lead, I would also score the Kalasha as "pretty good" in comparison with other world cultures and "really quite good" on a scale of gender inequality in the conservative milieu of northern Pakistan. Kalasha women enjoy a great deal of respect from men in everyday interactions. They make major economic contributions to their families, and their contributions are acknowledged. Kalasha men are not "macho," and women are not sexually preyed upon. But Kalasha culture is certainly not egalitarian. Kalasha culture accords all positions of formal political and religious authority to men. Men own all the land and animals. They have the right to demand deference from women. They are served first, they eat more and better, and if there is only one chair a man will usually sit in it. Men's names are remembered through the generations. I don't think any Kalasha person would claim that men and women are "equal," and it seems to me that men clearly have the lion's share of overt power and prestige.

Yet Kalasha culture accords women the right to interrupt this

agents without assuming *either* that women identify wholly with the hegemony (and thus their agency is effaced) *or* that women are engaged in wholly different projects (and thus are not affected by the social world they live in) (16).

I agree with Ortner that it is important to avoid stumbling into these either/or traps—indeed, throughout this work I have attempted to find the very balance she proposes. Yet I think she would agree that what she is suggesting is not new, though the language needed to talk about what we are doing may be. Ethnographic approaches that looked seriously at women's lived experience and action in the world, as well as the constraints on and effects of women's action, were common well before agency jargon spread throughout the discipline.³¹ Indeed, Louise Lamphere insists that one of the original impulses for *Woman, Culture, and Society* (1974), perhaps the pioneering feminist anthology, was to "delineate the ways in which women are actors even in situations of subordination" (1995:96).³²

Among Kalasha, both women and men are hyper-aware of women's agentive power—within a society that is clearly dominated by men in many respects. The understanding that Kalasha women are "active" (following Hobart 1990, in which he defines *active* as not necessarily rushing about but "liable to act") significantly undercuts and indeed defines men's (and familial) authority over women. Women's freedom also influences the "ethos" of Kalasha social life. Finally, most Kalasha women have a sense that their lives have become what they are through the series of choices and commitments they themselves have made (although there is also a complicated mix of fatalism involved that counters this claim).

I have already addressed the way in which women's freedom extends beyond women's personal relationships and self-concepts to become a central marker of Kalasha ethnicity for both men and women.³³ In this small world, where ethnic boundaries loom so large, gender and agency are inextricably and explicitly bound up with ethnicity. It is impossible to talk about one concept without drawing in the others. Women's claims to freedom are strengthened through their ties with Kalasha ethnicity: since men see women's freedom as a marker of their own ethnic identity, they often feel compelled to support it even as they sometimes also resent the concomitant insecurity and lack of control that women's freedom brings into men's lives.

Finally, while the concept of agency has become increasingly nuanced and analytically powerful in recent works (Ortner 1984, 1996; Karp 1995; Mannheim 1995; Gardiner 1995; Hornsby 1993; Sangari 1993, among others), much theoretical literature on agency is terribly dry and distant. Recent ethnographies have begun to breathe life back into theoretical abstractions by focusing on the way agency is experienced by individuals at specific times and places.³⁴ In particular, I think careful ethnography can detail the culturally specific ways agency is always structurally rooted. More importantly, sensitive ethnography can show us what it *means*, how it *feels*, to live in a particular place, situation, and time and with particular others. In this book, I follow the concept that "our women are free," a compelling concern (Wikan 1990, 1992) of Kalasha people that cuts through many dimensions of their lives. In so doing, I offer a specifically Kalasha understanding of women's agency, women's freedom—freedom constrained by cultural assumptions of male privilege, by deeply felt commitments to others that make acting only for oneself impossible, and by their location in a larger geopolitical world that does not take Kalasha women's agency seriously. But Kalasha women's freedom, limited though it is, holds open a path of resistance, prevents closure, and, through this creative and constant turning over of things, contributes to the dynamism and flexibility of Kalasha culture.