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# Kalasha (Pakistan) – Language Snapshot

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<b>Language Name:</b>	Kalasha (also Kalashamon)
<b>Language Family:</b>	Indo-European → Indo-Iranian → Indo-Aryan → Dardic
<b>ISO 639-3 Code:</b>	kls
<b>Glottolog Code:</b>	kala1372
<b>Population:</b>	3,000-5,000 speakers
<b>Location:</b>	35.701005, 71.694859 (Bumburet valley, Chitral, Northern Pakistan)
<b>Vitality rating:</b>	EGIDS 6a (Vigorous)

## Summary

Kalasha is an endangered Dardic language spoken by around 3,000-5,000 speakers in the remote valleys (Birir, Bumburet, Jinjiret, Rumbur, and Urtsun) of Chitral, Northern Pakistan. The Kalasha community is multilingual. In addition to Kalasha, the younger generation is fluent in several other languages of the area (Khowar, Kati, Pashto, and Urdu). The language is acquired by children and also taught at local schools in the valleys but there is ongoing language shift to Khowar and other neighboring languages (see Torwali, this volume). The community members are very active in the learning, teaching, and preservation of their language. It is used in day-to-day conversation, marriage and funeral ceremonies, and annual festivals. There are two main dialect clusters of Kalasha: Northern (spoken in Birir, Bumburet, and Rumbur valleys) and Southern (Jinjiret and Urtsun valleys). Recent years have seen an upsurge in the documentation of Kalasha, particularly from a purely linguistic perspective. The authors are involved in the phonetic and phonological documentation of Kalasha dialects spoken in Birir, Bumburet, and Rumbur valleys and developing tools for the automatic segmentation of the stories, narratives, and other spontaneous speech data.

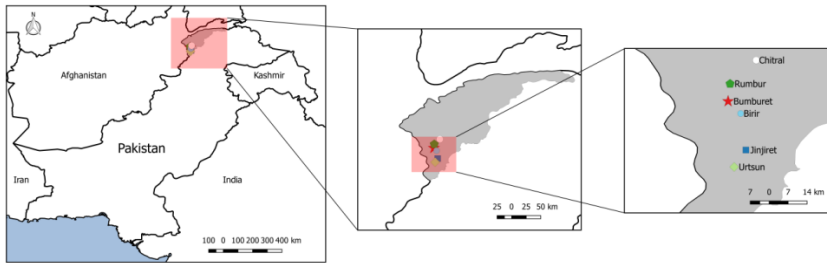


Figure 1. Map of the Kalasha valleys in Chitral (grey area), Northern Pakistan.

For larger map see page 75.

Kalasha valleys are shown in the overview of the map: Birir, Bumburet, Jinjiret, Rumbur, and Urtsun. The main Chitral town is indicated with a white circle. © 2020 by the authors

## 1. Overview

Kalasha is an endangered Dardic language spoken by around 3,000-5,000 speakers in the remote valleys (Birir, Bumburet, Jinjiret, Rumbur, and Urtsun) of Chitral, Northern Pakistan (Bashir 1988; Cooper 2005; Peterson 2015; see Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> There are three main branches of the Indo-Iranian family: Indo-Aryan, Iranian, and Nuristani. Kalasha belongs to the Dardic sub-group of the Indo-Aryan branch. The language is also called Kalashamon.<sup>2</sup> Most of the Kalasha population is concentrated in Bumburet, the largest and most developed among all the Kalasha valleys (Figure 2). According to Simons & Fennig (2017), the vitality rating of Kalasha on the Extended Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS) is 6a ‘vigorous’, while the Endangered Languages Project lists Kalasha as a ‘threatened’ language.<sup>3</sup> Keeping in mind the number of speakers and ongoing language shift to the major languages of the area (Khowar and Pashto, see below), there is no doubt that Kalasha is endangered, even though the language is still acquired by children and taught at local schools in the valleys. Kalasha is written in a Roman script which was developed by community members, with the help of Gregory and Elsa Cooper, who have worked extensively on the language.

<sup>1</sup> Bumburet is also spelled as Bumburate. Local names of Bumburet, Rumbur, and Birir valleys are Mumuret, Rukmu, and Biri, respectively.

<sup>2</sup> Not to be confused with Kalasha-ala, generally used to refer to Waigali, a Nuristani language of Afghanistan (Strand 1973).

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.endangeredlanguages.com/lang/4409> (accessed 2020-05-13)



*Figure 2. Bumburet valley, Chitral, Northern Pakistan. © 2020 by the authors*

Kalasha is used in all domains of life: day-to-day conversation, marriage and funeral ceremonies, and annual festivals. Community members have a very positive attitude towards learning, teaching, and preservation of their language. The Kalasha community has fascinated anthropologists and linguists for a long time because it still practices a polytheistic religion that predates modern Hinduism and Islam; this religion was once practiced throughout the Hindu Kush range, spanning from the modern-day Nuristan province of Afghanistan to Kashmir (Cacopardo 2016; Cacopardo & Cacopardo 2001). The domains of use of Kalasha in the three Northern valleys (Birir, Bumburet, and Rumbur) outnumber those in the two Southern valleys (Jinjiret and Urtsun), where the whole community converted to Islam some generations ago, and Kalasha is mostly used at the level of family-internal interactions and not in public (Mela-Athanasopoulou 2014). The degree of endangerment of Kalasha is tightly linked with rates of conversion to Islam as well as migration to other major cities where children are exposed to the dominant languages, Punjabi, Sindhi, and Siraiki (Cacopardo & Cacopardo 2001, authors' own fieldwork).

Due to their physical appearance and religion, some researchers have speculated that the Kalasha are descended from members of Alexander the

Great's army who crossed through the Gandhara civilization in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE.<sup>4</sup> In other words, it has been claimed that their origins can be traced back to the Ancient Greeks (see Cacopardo 2011 for an overview and recent discussion of this matter). Some DNA studies of South Asian populations suggest that the genetic makeup of the Kalasha community is unique: it does not share traits with Greeks or neighboring South Asian populations of Northern Pakistan (Mansoor *et al.* 2004). Others have claimed that Kalasha speakers are a genetic isolate (Rosenberg *et al.* 2002).

Although a plethora of literature has been published on the origins of the Kalasha community, during our fieldwork, one Kalasha speaker mentioned that his grandparents moved from modern-day Afghanistan. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, it was common for the local communities to migrate in search of grasslands and rich food resources (Cacopardo & Cacopardo 2001). Leitner (1880) interviewed Kalasha speakers on several occasions from 1866-72. Two of his interviewees reported themselves to be from *Mumuret* (Bumburet). This suggests that Kalasha speakers have been living in their current valleys only for the last couple of centuries.

The dialects of Kalasha can be categorized into Northern (Birir, Bumburet, and Rumbur dialects) and Southern (Jinjiret and Urtsun dialects). Figure 1 shows a map of Pakistan with Chitral and the Kalasha valleys highlighted. In terms of dialectal variation, Bumburet and Rumbur valleys have very similar dialects and there are no noticeable differences (Heegård & Mørch 2017). The Birir dialect, though it belongs to the Northern chain, is slightly different from the Bumburet and Rumbur dialects. Decker (1992), based on a Swadesh 210 core vocabulary list, conducted a survey of the Kalasha dialects and noted that Bumburet and Birir have about 89% lexical similarity, while Urtsun shares 76% and 74% lexical items with Bumburet and Birir dialects, respectively. Data from the Rumbur dialect were not reported in the study. Some of the isoglosses differentiating Birir include an overall lower frequency of rhotic (retroflex) vowels as compared to the other two Northern dialects, and presence of retroflex flap /ɽ/, which is absent from the Bumburet and Rumbur dialects.

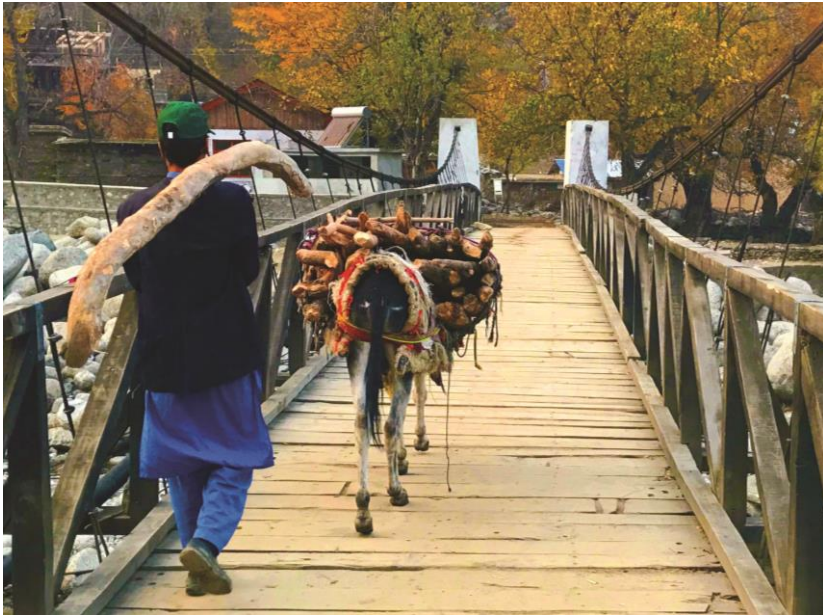
As is the case with most South Asian communities, Kalasha speakers grow up in a multilingual environment. From childhood, speakers are exposed to Khowar (a closely related Dardic language and lingua franca of Chitral), Urdu (a national language of Pakistan), and English (an official language taught as a subject in schools). In addition to these, some Kalasha speakers are also fluent in Kati (known as Bashgali, a Nuristani language) and Pashto (an Iranian language). Those who work in other provinces of Pakistan (e.g., Punjab) can also speak Punjabi. Kalasha speakers are in direct contact with Khowar and

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/world-history/ancient-medieval/alexander-the-great/a/alexander-the-great> (accessed 2020-05-13)

Kati speakers, and a large population of Khowar speakers can be found in all the valleys. Kati speakers currently reside in upper Bumburet and Rumbur valleys. Speakers of Gujari<sup>5</sup> (an Indo-Aryan language of the Rajasthani group), who can be found across various cities in Northern Pakistan, are also in contact with Kalasha speakers. There are differences between males and females in terms of multilingualism. All male community members are multilingual, but females (particularly the older generations) are monolingual and have limited or no fluency in Khowar or any other language of the area. Younger females can speak Khowar and Urdu.

The Kalasha are traditionally pastoralist and agriculturist (Figure 3). Nowadays they are involved in various other professions, and their main source of income is farming, livestock, and tourism. The annual festivals of the Kalasha (e.g., the Joshi festival) attract tourists from all over the world. The remote and isolated valleys have no paved roads, but it is still possible to access them by car or other local transport.



*Figure 3. A Kalasha speaker (Bumburet valley, Chitral, Northern Pakistan) coming back from the forest after collecting firewood. © 2020 by the authors*

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<sup>5</sup> Also spelled as Gojri and in other ways.

Some of the earliest linguistic descriptions of Kalasha are Leitner (1880) and Grierson (1919). Morgenstierne (1973) published the first detailed grammatical sketch, including a list of words. The most recent grammatical sketches include Mela-Athanasopoulou (2014) and Petersen (2015). Descriptions of various aspects of Kalasha can be found in Arsenault (2012), Bashir (1988), Cooper (2005), Decker (1992), Di Carlo (2010a), Heegård & Mørch (2004, 2017), Kochetov et al. (ms), Heegård & Liljegren (2018), and Mørch & Heegård (1997). Trail & Cooper (1998) published the first Kalasha dictionary, containing around 5,000-7,000 words. There is a wide range of ethnographical and cultural studies, including Cacopardo & Cacopardo (1992, 2001), Di Carlo (2007, 2010b), and Morgenstierne (1947). Some of the oldest documentary materials of Kalasha (pictures and audio/video recordings) collected by the eminent Norwegian linguist Georg Morgenstierne during his fieldwork in Chitral in 1929, are available online.<sup>6</sup> For more information about the Kalasha community, a number of videos can be found on Youtube. *Ishpata News*, a local news outlet launched by the Kalasha community, is continuously producing media content.<sup>7</sup> Social media use on mobile phones is very common, particularly in Bumburet valley.

## 2. Current research

Recent years have seen an upsurge in the documentation of Kalasha, particularly from a purely linguistic perspective. The authors are involved in phonetic and phonological documentation of Kalasha dialects spoken in Birir, Bumburet, and Rumbur valleys, and are developing tools for the automatic segmentation of stories, narratives, and other spontaneous speech data.<sup>8</sup> The phonological system of Kalasha is rather distinct from neighboring languages, and contrasts typologically-marked rhotic vowels with plain vowels (Maddieson 1984). The first author conducted fieldwork in Kalasha valleys during 2017 and 2018, collecting a large amount of instrumental-phonetic and spontaneous speech data. Our project has made possible the investigation of the rhotic vowels and rich laryngeal contrasts of Kalasha with ultrasound-imaging and aerodynamic tools (Hussain & Mielke 2018, 2019, 2020, ms; see also ongoing work by Alexei Kochetov and colleagues). All the data collected during this project will be archived in PARADISEC in Australia.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nb.no/baser/morgenstierne/english/language.html> (accessed 2020-05-13)

<sup>7</sup> The content is mainly in Kalasha and Urdu:  
<https://www.youtube.com/user/voiceofkalash/videos> (accessed 2020-05-13)

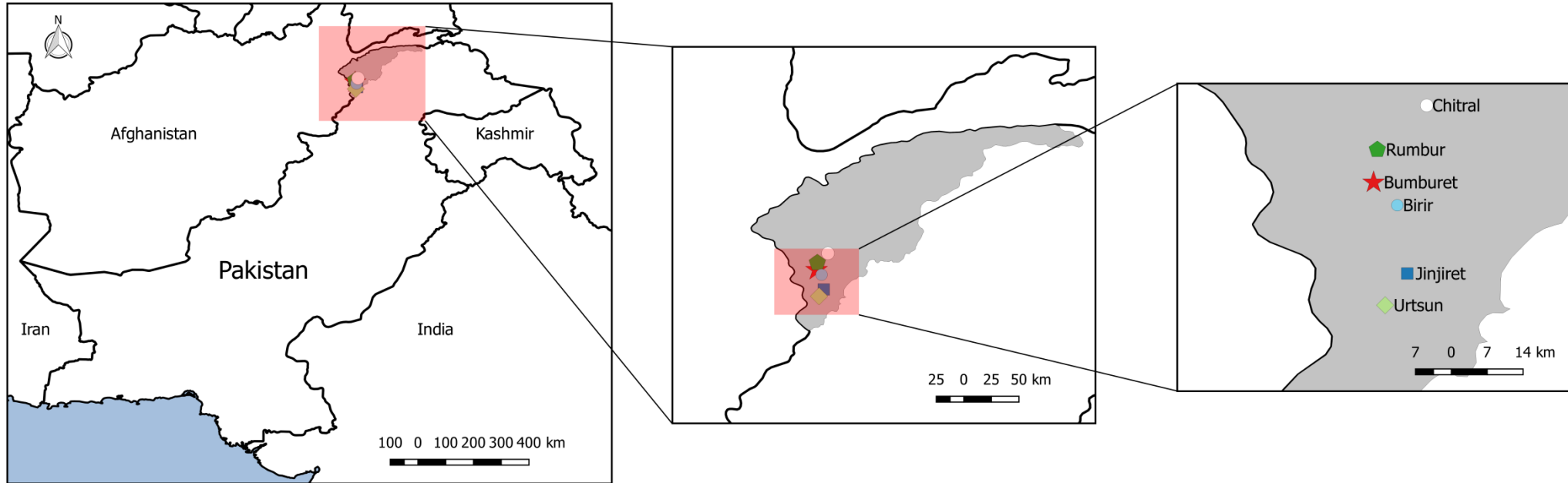
<sup>8</sup> The current project was funded by a Documenting Endangered Languages grant (BCS-1562134) from the US National Science Foundation and the Department of English, North Carolina State University.

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*Figure 1. Map of the Kalasha valleys in Chitral (grey area), Northern Pakistan.*

See in text on page 67.

Kalasha valleys are shown in the overview of the map: Birir, Bumburet, Jinjiret, Rumbur, and Urtsun. The main Chitral town is indicated with a white circle. © 2020 by the authors