



children of a lesser god

DEEP IN THE MOUNTAINS OF PAKISTAN'S NORTHWEST FRONTIER

province live the Kalash people. Only some 3,000 remain, tucked away in three isolated valleys of the Hindu Kush, whose watersheds form the border with Afghanistan. They are a vulnerable island of pagans in a sea of Islam, and their origins have long puzzled ethnologists. Their discovery by the West came with the exploration of British India's remote frontiers. In the 19th century they were known as 'Kafir's', or infidels, and their land was Kafiristan. Today's Kalash are descended from these people. Their numbers have dwindled throughout the 20th century; they are poor and opportunities are few. While there is no forced conversion in Pakistan, some Kalasha feel they can only prosper by adopting Islam



OPPOSITE PAGE FAR LEFT TO RIGHT: while the Kalash are pagans within a strongly Islamic region, women with bare heads are frowned upon; The Kalash valleys of Bombarot, Rumbur and Birir are short and narrow, irrigation channels contour the hillsides near the valley floors, while their steep slopes are covered with holm and holly oak, cedar and fir trees; Rivers flow down each of the three valleys. Logs for building are often hauled or floated downstream

THIS PAGE: a young girl wears traditional Kalash dress. All women wear a black dress colourfully embroidered at the neck, sleeves and hem. They also wear a two-foot high, a woven band around the head on top of which sits the pomponned *kapus*

FAR LEFT: a woman carries her child on her back. The rights of men and women within the community are largely linked to purity. This division permeates the culture to the extent that 'impure' menstruating women and those in childbirth must stay at a special house called a *boshali*. No women are allowed near religious sanctuaries

Photostory: Amar Grover

Alexander Gardiner, an eccentric explorer, was among the first Westerners to visit the Kalash in the 1820s. More expeditions in the 1880s inspired Kipling's *The Man Who Would be King* in which innocent villagers are bewitched by adventurers. Today, tourists represent an alien world of consumerism and wealth



LEFT: carved horse heads, symbolising the presence of a deity, loom over the sanctuary to Mahadeo, high above Grom village in Rumbur. Shamanistic ceremonies incorporate burning juniper and the slaughter of goats

RIGHT: these carvings are of goats' heads. Goats are considered 'pure' and have long been associated with fertility rites. Women occasionally wear make-up depicting horns curving above their eyes. During harvest festivals a chosen herdsman 'disguises' himself as a goat and dances before women, symbolically impregnating them with his horns



FAR LEFT: a woman brews tea over a fire

LEFT: Kalash homes are usually built of rocks and timber beams, the latter's flexibility ensuring some protection from tremors which often shake the Hindu Kush



LEFT: In some villages, wheat is ground with a water-powered mill. Grooved logs channel streams beneath a stone hut in which flour is produced

RIGHT: clothes are decorated with buttons, beads, tiny bells and cowrie shells

FAR RIGHT: some older women dab sesame seeds on their faces—a natural cosmetic



TOP: today's Kalash are descendants of the Kafirs of the 19th-century land of Kafiristan. At that time, the Raj in British India sought a stable Afghanistan to act as a buffer against the Russians. Kafiristan was partitioned in 1893 along the Durand line (which still defines much of the northeast Afghan border with Pakistan). Much of the land went to Afghans who renamed it Nuristan and attacked the Kafirs. Had the land not been divided, the Kalash people may not have survived

ABOVE: symbols of the solar wheel are often seen carved on doors or coffins