



Absence of Scripture, Oral Faith, and Unwritten Language: An Ethnographic Study of the Kalasha's Conversion to Islam

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.71145/rjsp.v3i4.437>

Abstract

The small indigenous and religious minority group, Kalasha, residing in the hilly and mountainous area of Kalash, Chitral, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The community is known for its distinct culture, beliefs, and traditions. Due to rapid conversion towards the religion of Islam, the Kalasha community is on the verge of decline. This study aims to explore the reasons behind religious change and conversion of the Kalasha minority. The unwritten structure of the Kalasha language is one of the core reasons for decline, which makes it harder for the Kalasha to preserve their knowledge, culture, traditions, and religion. Henceforth, other factors include oral transformation of the Kalasha religion through stories and practices, and without any written scripture to guide the community and protect the religion formally in written form. The Kalasha faith lacks a holy text/divine book, leaving it vulnerable to decline in comparison to the religion of Islam, which has the divine book Quran, to guide followers and provide solid support for its survival. The researcher uses a qualitative ethnographic research design, which focuses on people's lived experiences and stories. A total of 31 respondents were selected through purposive and convenience sampling techniques to reach the saturation point. For data collection interview guide is used as a tool allowing respondents to share their thoughts openly. The responses are analyzed through the use of the thematic analysis technique by identifying common themes and subthemes in the data. The study highlights the challenges of preserving Kalasha culture and religion, including the absenteeism and unavailability of the Kalasha language in written form, how oral transmission of faith weakened Kalasha religious traditions and rituals, and the absence of holy scripture are reasons for the decline of Kalasha religion and key drivers of conversion towards the religion of Islam. This study also highlights the importance of protecting and documenting the Kalasha faith and language. Additionally, the research aims to add to the understanding of religious change and cultural survival in minority communities.

Keywords: Kalasha, Scripture, Divine, Book, Oral, Faith, Language, Conversion, Islam

Introduction: Kalasha in Historical Perspective

Choudary, Park, and Golden (2017) and Hussain & Mielke (2020) elaborated that Kalasha are an ethno-religious and indigenous minority community residing in Kalash Valley, Chitral, Northern Pakistan, with a distinct belief system and unique culture found exclusively in Chitral, Pakistan. Ali (2024) and Cacopardo (2010) describe that the Kalasha believed in a pantheon of Gods and Spirits, making them ancient animistic and polytheistic believers. Hussian (2021) elaborated that the Kalasha are the last tribe of the *Kafirs* (Infidel) of the Hindukush region, Chitral, Northern Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. Kalasha, with a thousand-years-old history, is one of the ancient and distinct cultural practices. The researchers demonstrate that the Kalasha are descendants of Alexander the Great and of Greek origin. Singh (2023) explains that the indigenous people, Kalasha, are of Aryan ancestry with polytheist beliefs, and in the Hindu Scripture Rigveda, the word Kalasha is clearly mentioned. Shah (2012) describes that the Kalasha are Ghandhari people who migrated from *Tsyam* (an Unknown place in Afghanistan) and reside in the Kalash valley, Chitral. Amayreh (2022) elaborated that with a 300-year-old history of existence Kalasha are closely related to Buddhism and Vedic Hinduism, having a polytheist and animist belief system. However, Lines (2008) demonstrates that the Kalasha currently deny that they are polytheist believers and believe in monotheistic faith known as “*Dezau*” (the creator) God in their own language. The researchers thus believe and understand that the current transition in faith of Kalasha is the influence and outcome of the nearby Muslims residing in the region.

Kalasha and their Conversion Towards Religion Islam

Torwali (2023) specified that the original population of Kalasha was more than one lac in 1896, which significantly declined to five thousand after rapid conversion to Islam and the mortality rate. According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (2019) report, the population of the Kalasha people in 2013 was 4100, which is approximately 14.5 percent of the total population of the Union Council Ayun in lower Chitral. However, this population declined to 3,872 in 2017 due to rapid conversion to Islam. Anwar (2023) demonstrated that Taleem Kalasha, a local researcher, points out that 7,775 Kalasha have converted and accepted the message of Islam in the past decade. Gul (2016) elaborated that in 2015, the Kalasha population in Birir (Sub-valley in Kalash) was 26 percent of the total population, which significantly declined to 14 percent in 2017, showing the alarming rate of Kalasha community conversion and acceptance of Islam. Bhutto (2007) describes that 70 percent of the existing Kalasha have already converted and embraced Islam. Younus, Farhat, and Ahmad (2023) and Hussain and Mielke (2020) state that the community is organized in Bumburet, Birir, and Rumbur sub valleys of the Kalash valley and maintain and preserve their culture in somewhat ways by oral lore, ritual practices, traditional festivals, and social norms despite socio-economic marginalization, language shift, and influence of Islamic culture.

Unwritten Language and Conversion

The importance of written language and documentation cannot be undervalued for preserving culture and traditions from one generation to the next. The unwritten structure of language and oral faith transformation results in the decline of culture and religion as it passes from one generation to the next. Fishman (1991) argues that the unwritten language becomes vulnerable to erosion as oral traditions weaken while transferring from one generation to the next. Goody (1986) explains that without a written language, it is tough and impossible to institutionalize religious text, literature, and education. This process makes communities more vulnerable to adopting leading and central languages and religions. Street (2014) elaborates that written language acts as a safeguard for the transmission of religious sacred text. Without a written structure of language, local and indigenous belief systems often lead to decline compared with religions that have organized and written scriptures. Ong (1982) stated that countless

indigenous cultures and religions experienced decline and conversion due to their oral traditions could not compete with the textual stability of Islam or Christianity. Crystal (2000) mentions that due to unwritten language, external groups reshape narratives and make it difficult for indigenous communities to preserve their religious rituals, culture, and historical knowledge. Wasi and Ali (2025) and Taj and Ali (2018) explore that the Kalasha are facing serious challenges in maintaining their culture and religious beliefs. Their language is under threat from the dominance Khowar language in education and public spaces, Kalasha culture and religious identity are eroding due to Muslim Cultural Influence in the locality, and younger generations are caught between traditions and change.

Absence of Scripture and Conversion

Various researchers and scholars have debated the concept of religion and the role of scripture in maintaining religious identity. Grafton (2014) highlights that early Arab Christians with lack written scripture, struggled to maintain their distinct identity, making them vulnerable and compelling them to accept Islamic traditions. Snow and Machalek (1984) and Rambo (1993) elaborated that textual foundations helped in preserving religious identity, while their absence leads to a lack of fixed doctrine and vulnerability to conversion. Sutton (2021) describes that the absence of written scripture results in decline and weakening religious traditions, often easing the process of conversion into the dominant faith with decisively recognized and written religious scripture.

Oral Faith and Conversion

Oral faith is the main way to practice religion in many traditional societies. Nowadays, due to globalization, modernization, and education, indigenous communities and societies with oral faith are facing significant challenges in maintaining their identity, which often leads to religious change, conversion, and decline of traditional faith. Wilson (1996) identified that the power of religion is reduced due to modernization in life, science, education, and institutional growth. As a result, oral faith has been declining because the younger generation prepares global media, formal schools, and written text. Followers from oral traditions were inclined towards the dominant religion with written text, principles, and global acceptance. Goody (1986) explains that written structure helps to preserve religious doctrine and teachings over time. However, in oral faith, there is an evident chance of forgetting or changing rituals, leading to the decline of religion. Fasipe (2023) demonstrated that without written records, it is impossible to preserve religion and its teachings and rituals in exact forms. People in modern societies find oral teachings less convenient by preferring written texts, undermining and devaluing oral tradition; thus, it is harder to maintain religious beliefs with oral traditions, leading to decline and conversion into a religion with a written structure and wider acceptability across the globe.

The Problem Statement

The Kalasha community is one of the last remaining non-Muslims infidel and indigenous communities residing in northern Pakistan. The Kalasha community, with a distinct culture and uniqueness, is deeply rooted in ancestral practices, seasonal rituals, and oral traditions. Kalasha does not possess organized doctrines, sacred texts, and written scripture that could provide a stable foundation for the transmission of beliefs from one generation to the next. Their religious practices and knowledge were passed through religious Qazi (Imam/priest) and community elders orally in festivals and religious gatherings. Due to external pressure such as Islamic proselytization, modernization, and globalization make the Kalasha's orally transmitted religion is vulnerable. The Kalasha are facing difficulties and challenges in preserving their religious identity due to the absence of a divine book and an unwritten structure of language. The major Islamic faith, which is based on written text and the divine book "Quran," attracts

Kalasha, most specifically their younger generation, towards Islam. As they perceive their oral traditions are less authentic compared to the textualized faith of Islam, this often leads to erosion of the Kalasha cultural and religious identity. This vulnerability of the indigenous community Kalasha has significantly contributed to rapid adaptation to the Islamic faith and doctrine. The Kalasha faith not only devalues due to a lack of codified scripture but also weakens in its legality among the adherents. Kalasha oral traditions struggle to compete with written Islamic theological doctrine and framework in the region. Local Islamic missionaries and religious scholars frequently highlight the absence of a holy and divine book as a deficiency in the Kalasha religion. These Muslim missionaries and religious scholars persuaded the Kalasha to Islam by explaining well-codified and organized written scripture and the divine book for followers of Islam. Thus, the absence of divine text and reliance on oral transmission hastens the decline of the Kalasha faith and supports the drive and thrust towards Islamization. The preservation of cultural heritage and the unique religious identity of the indigenous Kalasha minority is under threat due to the transformation of their faith orally, unwritten language, and the absence of a holy divine book. This situation needs urgent scholarly consideration to address and understand the changing aspects of this religious transformation of the Kalasha minority towards Islam.

Objectives of the Study

1. To know about the lack of written language among the Kalasha community leads to erosion of their traditional beliefs and conversion towards Islam
2. To investigate the unavailability of the divine book in the Kalasha religion, supporting conversion towards Islam, and the decline of the Kalasha faith
3. To pinpoint the oral transformation of the Kalasha faith leading to the decline of their religion and conversion to Islam

Research Questions

1. How the absence of written language leads to conversion towards Islam and the decline of the Kalasha faith
2. How does the lack of a divine book lead to the decline of the Kalasha faith and attract people towards Islam
3. How oral traditions and transformation weaken the Kalasha religion and encourage conversion towards Islam

Methodology

This research is framed under ethnographic qualitative research methodology, which is well-suited to inspect and observe features such as oral transmission, absence of a divine book, and unwritten language, leading to conversion to Islam among the Kalasha community. An ethnographic research design allowed researchers to spend extended time among the Kalasha community by observing everyday religious practices, rituals, storytelling, and the use of language. All these elements are not accessible through quantitative means and require an in-depth understanding of the phenomena, making ethnographic qualitative research design the most suitable method for this study. Barbaro & Hundtoft (2020) elaborated that to understand oral traditions, moral and cosmological knowledge in the form of myth, rituals, and songs can best be understood in a natural environment. Thus, make ethnographic research design the most suitable method for this study. Additionally, Schniter *et al.* (2017) demonstrate that storytellers in indigenous societies serve as a living record of traditions, but these systems are fragile and under pressure from schooling, literacy, media influence, and the influence of external religion. Thus, it makes the Kalasha religion vulnerable and under the influence of the written and codified doctrine of Islam.

Moreover, the ethnographic method permits the researcher to assemble in-depth tales of individuals who accepted Islam and converted. It helps the researcher to know how reliance on oral traditions and the unavailability of sacred scripture (divine book) affect their sense of identity and help them in accepting Islam. Such as the work of Ali, Chawla & Shabbir (2020) highlights how Kalasha cultural heritage becomes supple under pressure from schooling, extremism, and changing religious identity and authority. Their work highlights that many converts argue that how religious texts in the significant religion of Muslims provide a stable platform for their conversion, specifically when oral traditions are under strain. In short ethnographic qualitative research method gives you both emic (insider) perspectives and thick description, and an etic view (outsider's description). The emic perspective shows how oral transmission, the absence of a divine book, and unwritten language resulted in the conversion of the Kalasha community towards Islam. The etic view explains and highlights how the influence of major religion, written structure, and the divine book with solid evidence attracts Kalasha towards Islam.

Sampling Techniques

The researcher selected respondents through purposive and convenience sampling techniques from the entire population of converted and non-converted Kalasha. According to Patton (2007) and Nikolopoulou (2022), purposive sampling is suitable because it gives the researcher freedom to select respondents who have been directly affected by the phenomena and have knowledge of the real situation. Qualitative research procedures advocate that purposive sampling is appropriate when the study aims to acquire detailed and rich data from specific cases (Palinkas et al., 2015). In addition, the purpose of using convenience sampling is to allow the researcher to reach participants from the Kalasha community who were easily available and keen to share their narratives. Etikan *et al.*, (2016) mention that in ethnographic research, investigators often rely on participants who are reachable in real-life settings to collect in-depth insight into the phenomena. Domyei (2007) stated that convenience sampling helps the researcher to save time and resources.

Tool of Data Collection

The researchers have used an interview guide as a tool of data collection for this study. The in-depth interviews have been conducted with 31 participants, including both non-converted and converted Kalasha, to know about the dynamics of changing faith and conversion of the Kalasha minority to Islam. The saturation point was decided through “new information threshold” proposed by Guest, Namey, and Chen (2020). Kallio, Pietila, Johnson, and Kangasniemi (2016) argue that using an interview guide in ethnographic research provides flexibility and keeps consistency in questions.

Data Analysis

In this study, Braun and Clarke's (2006 & 2019) six-step thematic analysis model has been followed, which allowed familiarization with data, identification of codes, development of themes, and writing a report. Several themes have been identified through the application of such a method, which are thematically analyzed considering both the literary data and empirical information. The themes are predominantly supported with relevant literature and experts from the interview data. By using thematic analysis, all the themes explain why the conversion of the Kalasha minority is taking place and what kind of social, cultural, and individual choices are associated with conversion.

Results and Discussion

The results and discussion section highlights how Kalasha community is facing changes in their religion and culture, leading people to accept Islam. This section consists of the detailed

analysis of the collected data through interview method and analyzed through thematic analysis. Each theme is separately presented and supported with verbatim and secondary data to enhance the understanding of the readers and researchers. This section highlights how and why the lack of a written tradition, formalized practices, and lack of a divine book left the Kalasha community vulnerable and exposed them to religious and cultural transformation. Additionally, pseudonyms are used for the purpose of ensuring privacy and obscurity of the respondents.

Theme 1: Role of Unwritten Language in Conversion of Kalasha Minority to Islam

Written language is important for keeping a culture and religion alive. It helps in passing traditions, prayers, and teachings from the predecessor to the younger generation. Written language protects holy texts and religious knowledge for future generations. The unwritten nature of language results in forgetting religious teachings and rituals, leading to the decline of oral faith. As Salaam (2025) mentions that written language helps to keep culture and religion alive by sacred texts, written rituals, and prayers eradicate the chances of being changed or forgotten. Writing down religious stories and teachings provides a stable reference and evidence for future generation to preserve their culture and religion. Written language protects religious identity and cultural heritage. According to Peterson (2016), among several threatened ancient languages, *Kalasha-Mun* is one of them. Due to an unwritten structure, the language is on the verge of decline and needs attention to preserve this ancient language. Similarly, this study aims to explore how the unwritten study of the Kalasha minority leads to the decline of their religion and culture. The research respondents including non-converted and converted (Kalasha), point out that the unwritten structure of the Kalasha language is one of the prominent and core factors in its decline and conversion to Islam, as a respondent described:

"Yes, definitely, it is a reason. No written structure of the Kalasha language is a factor in conversion to Islam and the decline of the Kalasha identity. But now the government is trying to provide a written structure to the Kalasha language, but it is still in its infancy and will take time to introduce it in the school curriculum" (Liaqat Kalash).

Likewise, it is believed that the written form of language provides a foundation for religious beliefs and the preservation of culture. Written structure of language helps in maintaining religious identity, rituals, practices, and doctrine of a particular faith from one generation to the next. As a child best understands in their mother's language and written form provides a solid base for it and eradicates the chance of losing traditions, such as:

"Yes, it is because language is important for culture's survival, and our language has no written structure. A child best understands their native or mother tongue language, and if there is no written structure, it is difficult for the child to learn this language. The unwritten structure of the Kalasha language leads to the decline of Kalasha faith and culture" (Guleena Kalash).

Henceforth, it is believed that the Kalasha young generation is keen and interested in learning and communicating in other languages, which is the demand of the job market. The absence of curiosity among Kalasha adolescents in learning the *Kalasha-Mun* language threatens the persistence of their ancient religion and culture.

"Yes, it plays a role in losing Kalasha's identity. No written structure of the Kalasha language compels Kalasha youth to learn and be aware of other languages more than the Kalasha language. Other languages are used as mediums of interaction, more specifically, the Khowar (Chitrali) language in the valley. Kalasha youth are more interested in learning other languages like Urdu, English, and Pashto for economic and academic success" (Zulfi Kalash).

In addition to this, the religion and culture of the Kalasha indigenous minority are facing the threat of extinction due to the unavailability of the written text of the Kalasha language. The unavailability of the divine book and oral transmission makes life harder for this ancient minority community to protect their primeval culture and religion, resulting in conversion towards Islam, as highlighted by a respondent:

"Yes, it is a reason. The culture of Kalasha is under threat due to the decline of the written form of our language. We have no divine book related to our religion or culture in written form that plays a crucial role in conversion. Secondly, our religious and cultural rituals are changing over time due to oral transmission" (Bibi Nasreen).

Absence of Divine Book/Scripture and Kalasha Conversion to Islam

The religion of Kalasha community is built on oral transformation and absence of a divine book. One of the pivotal reasons behind the decline of the Kalasha faith is the absence of religious scripture, which is a key driver of conversion towards Islam. Islam is based on written scripture in the shape of the holy book Quran, which provides a solid base and evidence for the faith of Islam, thus attracting Kalasha to accept it. Chitral Today (2013) article reveals that the unavailability of the divine book is playing a crucial role in the decline of the Kalasha religion. The Kalasha religion lacks a stable and formal platform without written scripture that can be taught in schools to preserve their religion and culture. The Washington Post (2018) report stated that, alongside economic, cultural, and social challenges, the absence of a divine book makes conversion to Islam easy and rapid, most specifically among the younger generation and women, which is predominantly evident in the excerpt from the interview data:

"Yes, it is the most important reason for conversion because whenever our Muslim friends talk to us about our religion, we have no solid arguments to protect our faith. Further, our traditions are transferred orally, which is changing from one generation to the next, so we have lost numerous rituals of our religion and culture due to the non-availability of its written structure" (Michel Kalash).

Likewise, another respondent stated that the Kalasha lack a written scripture and a divine book, creating a question mark on Kalasha faith. The Kalasha kids are studying an Islamic curriculum in schools due to the absence of religious texts and the divine book. The young generation believes that due to the absence of the relevant scripture, they have no evidence to support their faith and think that they are practicing an ambiguous faith. Thus, the absence of scripture creates an inferiority complex among them and motivates them towards Islam. As mentioned by a respondent:

"Yes, it is a reason. After studying the Islamic curriculum, they changed their faith and accepted Islam. We observe our youth converting yearly. These students have less knowledge to support their faith in front of dominant Muslim colleagues who invited them towards Islam by giving references from the Holy Quran" (Uroosa Kalash).

In the same way, it is thought that Muslims have a written and divine book in support of their faith as compared to Kalasha community. Kalasha are becoming aware of Islamic knowledge and Islam while living closely with Muslims. As their children are learning the Islamic curriculum in Schools and the elder generation are observing Muslims in the locality with their daily routine motivate them towards Islam, such as:

"Yes, it is a reason as well. They have no holy book, and Muslims have a holy book in written form. When they are aware of Islamic knowledge, they accept Islam" (Rafiq Khan).

Hence, it is assumed that Kalasha rituals, customs, traditions, and way of life are changing due to oral transformation, which results in the disappearance of numerous Kalasha rituals and traditions. The reason is obvious, which is the absence of a divine manuscript in written form in Kalasha religion, as evident in the following interview extract:

"As Kalasha, we have no holy or divine scripture in written form, which plays a crucial role in conversion towards Islam. Additionally, our cultural and religious rituals are changing due to oral transmission, which also results in the religious decline" (Shaira Kalash).

Oral Faith of the Kalasha Community and Conversion towards Islam

The Kalasha religion, along with its rituals, beliefs, practices, and rituals has been transmitted orally through traditions. The Washington Post (2018) report mentions that due to social pressure and Islamic preaching, Kalasha are accepting Islam. The oral transformation and unwritten structure of the Kalasha faith make them vulnerable to losing their religion and culture. Islam (2024) stated that the Kalasha community depends only on *shamans* (pious and pure soul person among Kalasha) and elders whose knowledge disappears when they die. On the contrary, Islam with strong institutions like religious madrassas and mosques, provides solid ground for faith preservation through written knowledge in the form of Quran and Hadiths. Thus, Kalasha oral faith without written or institutional support becomes fragile and faces a decline. In this context

"Yes, oral faith transformation does play a role in the decline of the Kalasha religion and culture. Our religion was unwritten and only told by elders. Many stories and religious rituals are forgotten by the young generation as they were verbally transmitted from elders" (Ali Kalash).

Similarly, it is believed that the oral transmission of the Kalasha faith makes it vulnerable to decline and perish. In this context, the death of elders endangers and threatens the very existence of the religion because the transmission either stops or is not completed thoroughly, and threatens its preservation.

"Kalasha rituals and traditions are transferred from the elder to the younger generation. The death of elders of the community results in the disappearance of Kalasha rituals and religious practices. The youth become more attracted towards Islam due to solid knowledge based on written scripture, which makes Islam a more organized and clear religion in comparison to Kalasha religion" (Shaira Kalash).

Hence, it is observed that oral traditions in the Kalasha religion cannot contend with the holy and written structure of Islam. Islam with its inspirational written text in shape of Quran and Hadiths dominates the Kalasha faith in the locality. As is evident in the following interview quote:

"Kalasha are changing their faith and converting towards Islam. The obvious reason is that oral teaching cannot compete with the written and holy books of Muslims. Thus, makes conversion easy and smooth" (Rafiq Khan).

Additionally, it is believed that the teaching of Islamic studies and the Islamic curriculum in schools attracts the Kalasha young generation towards Islam. The reason is that oral traditions

in Kalasha religion compel their youth to study Islamic studies as a compulsory subject. Learning Islamic studies in schools plays a significant role in brainwashing of these kids, and they start to question their oral faith, such as:

“The Kalasha religion is informally documented based on oral faith, stories, and rituals. Due to an unwritten structure, it becomes difficult for the younger generation to hold and maintain their traditions. At the same time, Islamic studies are a mandatory subject, which influences the Kalasha child. Teaching of Islamic studies plays a role in brainwashing of Kalasha kids and steadily leads to conversion to Islam when they grow up” (Sardar Kalash).

Conclusion

It is concluded that cultural and structural limitations in the Kalasha religion and faith motivate them to accept the message of Islam and change their ancient faith. The Kalasha beliefs and traditions are transmitted orally because of the lack of a written system of language, which makes the community vulnerable to face the challenges of extinction. Although efforts are underway to design a written and formal structure for the Kalasha language, but still in its infancy. Their rituals are weakened day by day due to oral transformation that leads to the decline of their religious identity. Additionally, the unavailability of written scripture positioned Kalasha community's faith at a disadvantage compared to Islamic doctrine. Islam based on solid evidence in the form of Quranic knowledge and Hadiths, attracts Kalasha to change their ancient faith and accept Islam as the way of life. Henceforth, the lack of textual validation left the Kalasha community unable to defend their faith and provide solid evidence for its preservation. Thus, these factors create a space for Islamic ideology that motivates Kalasha to embrace Islam regularly and leads to the decline of their culture and religion.

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