

Kalash Brochure

By M. Bugi

THE RENAISSANCE OF A TRIBAL ART

by

Chullaine Oreilly



At first glance they would seem to have nothing in common, these two men from opposite sides of Pakistan. They share neither language, age or even religion. One was educated in Lahore and has travelled the world. The other is an illiterate farmer in a backwater village. Yet Bugi and Mirzamust both burn with a passionate yearning for the same goal, to save the art and culture of the ancient Kalash people.

"When I was a small child there were seven full size wooden figures in my village. Today there isn't one. They were all stolen by outsiders," said Mirzamust, one of the last Kalashi artisans in Boumbaret valley.

Like his father before him, Mirzamust makes his living as a farmer in the village of Brun. He lives in one of the three valleys harboring this fast shrinking population of non-Moslems. Unlike his fellow farmers and herdsman, Mirzamust is the only man left who has inherited the traditional skill of carving a ghandow.

Since before recorded history the Kalash have honored their ancestors by erecting ghandows, life size wooden figures. But times have changed since the 56-years-old wood carvers first picked up a chisel. Of the several hundred ghandows that existed when Mirzamust was a child, there is nothing left now except a legacy of deceit thievery. Even the ghandow that honored the spirit of his dead grandfather was stolen.

"The statue of my grandfather was named Sauhawat. It cost a great many goats to have such a statue made. So only seven families in our village had even been able to afford to honor their dead in this traditional way," Mirzamust said.

"One night a man from Dir stole the statue of my grandfather. Later, the other six ghandows were also stolen. The identity of the other thieves is still a mystery," he said.

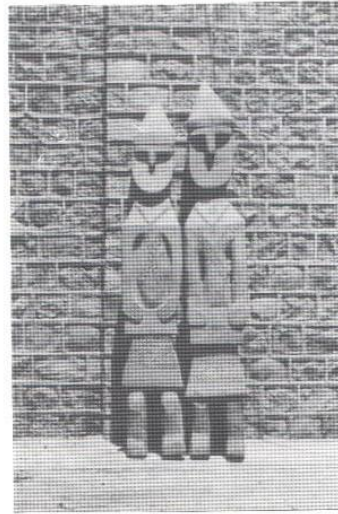
Muhammed Bugi is a well-known artist from Lahore with a reputation for creating surrealistic art and supporting under dogs. During the era of martial law, Bugi's art was interpreted by the Zia regime as being critical of the powers that were.

Several galleries caved into political pressure, with drawing his paintings. In protest Bugi hung an old, filthy pair of his shoes in the Karachi Arts Council gallery. He then went into voluntary exile overseas for several years.



During his travels he clung to one artistic vision, to tell the world about the beauty and demise of Kalashi art. Despite the fact that his name means happiness, Bugi becomes furious when the subject turns to the demise of Kalashi art.

"Why the hell should the Kalash go through all the religious rituals it takes to make a statue when it will be stolen 48 hours after it is erected," Bugi said.



"The Kalash have to go through a lot of trouble to make their art. Animals have to be sacrificed and religious rituals have to be performed. But over the years corrupt government officials and unscrupulous foreigners keen on acquiring Kalashi artifacts have plundered or bought them at a nominal price from naive Kalashi natives," he said.

Bugi believes that the resulting destruction of the ancient heritage has brought the Kalash to the brink of cultural destruction and left the people in an artistic coma. To illustrate his point he cited the case of the missing qundurik, the life size wooden statue the Kalash believe protected the village of Brun. Despite the fact that the statue had stood unmolested for generation it was savagely cut off at the base and carried away by thieves. A few notched logs that made up the base still mark the empty spot where the wooden guardian once stood, an ugly visual reminder of yet another artistic rape of this ancient culture.

"Even today, if I made a ghandow or qundurik some thief would steal it. I would like to see a ghandow that I made in a local museum with my name under it" Mirzamust said. "This way my grandchildren would not lose the spirit of their grandfather, like I did," he said.

Now Mirzamust's dream is Bugi's goal. Immediately after the P.P.P. government took power, Bugi petitioned for an artistic grant that would enable him to preserve any remaining Kalashi art. Unlike their martial law predecessors, the new government's response was immediate and positive. A small fund was established. Bugi was dispatched to the Kalash valleys. And for the first time in decades, practical steps have been taken to not only save any remaining facts but to actively encourage the native people to continue on their traditional work.

"Before I came here I had done my homework. I didn't want to interfere with the Kalashi's religious practices or insult their sensibilities," Bugi said. "I gathered the chiefs from the three Kalash valleys in one place. I told them that I was willing to live among them. I explained how I wanted to teach their children to paint, how I wanted to have traditional art revived and saved in a museum," he said.

After four hours of often heated discussion, they agreed to support Bugi's proposals. Each valley will practice different types of art, including painting, wood carvings and weavings, in an effort to revive their endangered heritage.

"After Bugi asked me, I started carving again for the first time in twelve years," Mirzamust said.





In early July the two men with apparently so little in common met on common ground at the first art show ever held in the Kalash valleys. Several hundred people, including several dozen foreign guests, gathered at a local hotel to see paintings by Kalash children, a series of wood carvings by Mirzamust and the beginnings of an artistic revival. As Kalashi children pointed out their paintings to proud parents, Qazi Bariman, the Kalash high chief, admired the artists and their collective results.

"When I was a boy (he is now nearly 80) there were 106 statues in my valley of Rambur. Today there is only one. But today I am happy to see our people smiling again. This is a good idea," Bariman said.

But Bugi is only beginning. The art he has collected is now being displayed in a shop near the village of Brun. For the first time tourists are able to not only buy Kalashi handicrafts and art, they are being given an explanation of the culture and its traditions as well.

"This idea is like wildfire. Hopefully it will bring in enough funds to buy new art supplies for the children and local artists," Bugi said.

With a string of local successes and the united support of the Kalash people behind him, Bugi is hoping that he will be able to convince the federal government in Islamabad to support his next steps. These include the construction of one museum in each of the three Kalash valleys, publication of a tourist information pamphlet and the formation of a special police force to protect newly constructed artifacts.

"We would appreciate it if the government would take some measures and help us solve some of these problems," Mirzamust said.

Regardless of the official reaction in Islamabad, Bugi says he won't abandon either his new friends or his artistic mission.

"I made a vow to the Kalash people and I believe that God has given me this mission to help them," Bugi said.

For now Bugi and Mirzamust remain as the only fragile bridge between the Kalashis' tragic past and the possible dawning of a brighter future.



FOLK ART AND COMMERCIALISM: TWO DIFFERENT WORLDS

In today's mass production art market invasion of innocent domains of folk art is a matter of fact. The African, American-Indian and Eskimo folk arts are but just a few examples of how commercialism degenerates the pure essence of folk art. This is why I have mixed feelings about the publicity of Kalash art. If the proper precautions are not taken the rough beauty of Kalash art work can easily disappear into the slick world of commercialism. When and if this happens the form and substance of Kalash art would become stagnant and die.

The industrial countries, ever hungry for the consumption of fresh, non-commercial, and pure creativity, would, if the utmost care is not taken, engulf the Kalash art within a short span of time. It is therefore a dilemma how to present the Kalash art to the industrial societies while preventing it from the perilous consequences of commercialism.

It is easy to understand the charitable feelings of those who are trying to present the art work of Kalash people to the outside world. Because the profits to be made from the sales of art work can help to lift the life-styles of these semi-isolated people. However a process of rising expectations of people can also lead into unexpected socio-psychological consequences. Sincere human care is one of the essentials in carrying out the publicity of Kalash art.

I am a rural sociologist engaged in research in irrigation projects in Pakistan. I deeply appreciate the progress of rural people because it is my mission to work with them towards the achievement of this goal. I am also an enthusiast of folk arts. I admire their bold, unintimidated approach and exquisite purity. So for me it is a matter of heart and mind to how to achieve a balance between preservation of a culture and yet have people benefit from its spirit. I think it is an intellectual challenge which requires understanding and appreciation not only from the people of Pakistan but from the world community.

The domain of pure folk art is shrinking with frightening speed. I hope and pray that joyfully refreshing and enchanting art of Kalash people be preserved in its originality while it is being exposed to the outside world for the appreciation of their fellow humans.

Oguz B. Nayman

KALASH : SOME QUESTIONS

An exhibition on Kalash arts and handicrafts provokes questions. What do we want with such an exhibition? One answer is: To preserve the culture of Kalash. But this answer raises even more questions. Who is going to preserve the Kalash culture, we as non-Kalash? Men like Mohammad Bugi, who lived with the Kalash for months, would say: "of course not, the Kalash themselves have to be asked. We have to discuss these questions with them." So far so good, but how can we make sure that the interests of Kalash can be protected by arranging an exhibition which is shown all over the country and perhaps even abroad?

What happens with symbols which are part of cultural rituals when they serve as aesthetical objects in an exhibition? Does this help us to get a better understanding of Kalash culture? And then, what does it mean to preserve a culture? Kalash people are suffering from different diseases. We can provide them with medicines. They could even earn money for these medicines through tourism. If tourists come to their valley, there would also be a larger public interest and understanding for the problems of Kalash in the country. On the other hand tourists want to have clean rooms but water is a symbol of purification to Kalash people and is, therefore, only seldom used. Thus this symbol will be automatically changed with the promotion of tourism. This is only a small example of how a measure to support the people changes their values, their symbol systems and therewith their culture. Of course the impact of tourism would change a lot more of the original culture. Thus what does "preservation" mean? What if the people want to have progress which is going to change their culture, but we, with a kind of romantic feeling, want to "preserve" their original culture?

Last but not least another question:

Why are we – and here I speak especially as somebody coming from the Western part of the world – getting so interested in preserving old cultures. Is it the feeling of a lack of originality in our own culture? Are we seeking something we lost but others should now provide to us?

This question expresses the most important point which covers all my questions. First it looks as if we are speaking about an exhibition of a culture which is for most of us still unknown, but at the same time we may experience that our own attitudes, our own concepts are in question too.

Dr. Bernd M. Scherer

mbbugi@gmail.com

GOETHE-INSTITUT
KARACHI & LAHORE

