



Mumuret: drawing a valley on the Afghan-Pakistan frontier

TOM CROWLEY

This essay is about a drawing I produced over eight years between 2011 and 2019. The drawing is big (1.6 by 0.9 metres) and very detailed (Image 1). The subject is Mumuret¹, a high-altitude valley skirting Pakistan's border with Afghanistan. I have represented the valley divided by the river which runs down its middle. Trees creep up the sides while, lower down on the valley floor are clustered settlements, single buildings, and people. The perspective shifts throughout the drawing, moving between a ground-level view and a bird's-eye view. At one end, the valley folds in on itself, and we see it from high above, winding its way through the serried peaks of the Hindu Kush mountains.

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I first visited Mumuret as a twenty-one-year-old backpacker five years before I started the drawing. Subsequent trips followed in 2008 and in February 2011. On the latter trip, I was travelling with a film crew; our objective was to record a golf-like game played between opposing clans and unique to the region. The first days of filming coincided with a period of heavy snowfall, covering the valley in a thick carpet of brilliant white against which trees, people, and buildings looked like they were in perpetual shadow. This vision in monochrome inspired the drawing, which is executed entirely in graphite. When I returned over the following years, I found the inspiration to produce new sections of the drawing, although I never took it with me, instead adding to it from memory and the odd photo once I was back in the UK.

Like thousands of visitors before me, I travelled to Mumuret because of the celebrity of one of the communities living there. The Kalasha number only around 4,000 and have their own distinct religion, language, and culture. The surrounding regions are now uniformly Muslim, but this is a relatively recent development. Only 125 years ago, the Kalasha represented just one element in a much larger patchwork of interrelated pre-Islamic cultures². The distinctiveness of the Kalasha, combined with the belief that their

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1. Mumuret is the name of the valley in Kal'as'amondr, the Kalasha's language. It is more widely known through its Khowar version: Bumboret. Khowar is the majority language of the district.
 2. See Cacopardo 2016 for maps charting the demise of the pre-Islamic cultures of the region.

culture represents a ‘survival’ of a lost way of life, has, over the past century, attracted a significant number of scholars, writers, filmmakers, and tourists.

Most Kalasha I know have told me that their identity is endangered. Every year, a few Kalasha convert to Islam, abandoning not only their faith but also important elements of their culture and sometimes even ceasing to speak their language. This situation is further compounded by the fact that local Muslims cannot apostatize and join the Kalasha, meaning that there is little potential for taking in new members from the outside. Sadly, the Kalasha’s perception of vulnerability is reinforced by active discrimination from elements of the Muslim majority. To be told that their way of life is shameful is a regular experience for many Kalasha, and I’ve met members of the community who have been physically attacked because of their difference.

In September 2009, the precariousness of the Kalasha’s existence was highlighted by a Taliban raid which crossed the border from Afghanistan and penetrated deep into Mumuret. The objective was the kidnap of Athanasios Lerounis, the director of a Greek NGO that focused most of its resources on projects intended to benefit the Kalasha. Six months later, Lerounis was released, but the building he was kidnapped from – a Kalasha museum, school, and cultural centre – remained on a Taliban ‘hit list’. To nullify this threat, the Pakistan Army established a substantial base at the head of the valley close to the Afghan border. Although this initiative has no doubt provided security, the military presence brings with it its own issues for the local population, including the Kalasha.

While the rise of the Taliban in the Pakistan-Afghanistan borderlands certainly represented a time of heightened anxiety for the Kalasha, it seems likely that a sense of vulnerability has been part of their experience since the wider pre-Islamic cultural zone of which they were part started to disintegrate. Certainly, the idea of Islam as threatening has existed long enough for it to have filtered into Kalasha cosmology. The Kalasha divide the world into two spheres, *onjes’t’a* and *pragata*. The former is understood to be vulnerable to the latter, and the Kalasha observe various taboos to keep the two separate. *Onjes’t’a* and *pragata* each bear distinct and often opposed characteristics. High places are *onjes’t’a*, for example, while the valley bottom is *pragata*. Certain foods, activities, and bodily states are also classified as either *onjes’t’a* or *pragata*. Importantly for this discussion, Muslims are associated with the *pragata* sphere, while the Kalasha, taken collectively, frame themselves as guardians and generators of *onjes’t’a*.

The significance of the maintenance of the boundary between *onjes’t’a* and *pragata* and how it intersects with the Kalasha’s perception of the surrounding Muslim communities has been raised as an area of anthropological enquiry by Peter Parkes (1994, 159–60) and later by Wynne Maggi (2001, 31 and 71). Both borrowed from Mary Douglas’ (1993) conception of an enclave culture to argue that the Kalasha practice of demarking their world into two oppositional categories represents a response to the existential anxiety brought about by a steady loss of membership to Islam. Internal boundaries, so the premise goes, reinforce the external boundary between the community and what threatens it.

In my doctoral research, I drew on Parkes and Maggi’s discussions of Kalasha identity preservation, but rather than looking at boundary building, I instead examined the community’s capacity to acquire and naturalize certain external discourses (Crowley 2021). The example which first put me onto this line of enquiry came up in discussion with two Kalasha who had visited an archive holding recordings and fieldnotes made in Mumuret around the middle of the twentieth century. The visit revealed evidence of a Kalasha theology markedly different to today’s. Recordings of prayers and transcribed interviews demonstrated the belief in several god-like beings. While these beings still exist for the Kalasha, they are not considered divine, instead fulfilling the role of messengers to the God of the Abrahamic religions. My discussants argued that this shift to a more Abrahamic-inflected conception of divinity was in response to growing exposure to Islamic critiques of polytheism. Interestingly, following this shift, the Kalasha authored their own critique, claiming that their relationship with God is closer than that of followers of the Abrahamic faiths as they have no priestly orders or institutions separating them from their maker.

The Kalasha have also absorbed elements from an altogether more unexpected set of discourses. For the past 150 years, external commentaries have framed them and their pre-Muslim neighbours as atavistic Europeans. This narrative begins to emerge in the mid-nineteenth century writings of colonial

administrators and soldiers active on what was then the northwest frontier of British India. The narrative consolidates further in Rudyard Kipling's well-known short story *The Man Who Would be King* ([1888], 1987), which is set in a region that today lies just across the Afghan border from the Kalash Valleys. In more recent years, the same archaicizing and Europeanizing themes we see in the frontier writings and Kipling have been picked up by travel writers, journalists, documentary-makers, and some scholars³. How the Kalasha have been imagined across this work strongly resonates with romanticized visions of prehistoric and preindustrial Europe⁴. In both instances, we see the conjuring of utopias imbued with nebulous qualities such as 'living in harmony with nature', qualities that are perceived to have been cast aside by the progress of modernity (Crowley 2021, 51-61). During my doctoral fieldwork, I came across multiple examples of Kalasha people actively encouraging the fantasies of outsiders. Certainly, there has been a clear economic imperative to this work: Western visitors spend money in Mumuret, so encouraging them makes financial sense. Equally, however, ideas of atavistic Europeanness have filtered into the narratives by which some Kalasha define themselves. In Kalasha hands, the idea that their culture represents a survival from ancient Europe combines with concepts like *onjes't'a* and *pragata*, or the belief that they have an especially intimate relationship with God, to demonstrate their difference from Muslims and the ongoing viability of their existence as a distinct religio-cultural community.

My drawing of Mumuret primarily recorded events and places that felt important during the eight years of its making. For example, in its centre is a depiction of an inter-clan brawl (Image 2), which happened during the filming trip in 2011, and further along, to the right is a representation of the Taliban's kidnap of Lerounis (Image 3). However, alongside these literal representations are the conceptual influences of Kalasha theology, the discourses of *onjes't'a* and *pragata*, and the narrative of the Kalasha's association with ancient Europe.

Tracing their way along the valley sides are watercourses, which I included because they are used to demark higher, more *onjes't'a* parts of the valley from lower, more *pragata* parts (Image 4). Knowledge of *onjes't'a* and *pragata* also shaped how I chose to draw the valley as it folds in on itself; the vague resemblance to reproductive organs here and the flow of the river reflect the understanding that menstruation and sex are some of the most *pragata* activities. Furthermore, the positioning of this part of the drawing at the end of the valley which leads out to the rest of Pakistan resonates with the belief that this is the direction from which *pragata* enters Mumuret.

The influence of Kalasha theology is present in the drawing through a depiction of the Idreyin, an unmarked area at the base of a cliff and the most sacred space in Mumuret (Image 5). The Idreyin is only visited by men and is a site of worship for one night every year at the zenith of Caumos, the winter solstice festival and the most important time in the Kalasha's ritual calendar. The Idreyin is dedicated to Balimain, who was the chief deity of the old Kalasha pantheon and today remains very important. The night of worship at the Idreyin, although ostensibly directed at the Abrahamic God, represents a moment of strong connection to older, more polytheistic conceptions of divinity.

When I visited Mumuret in 2008, it was during Caumos. I had joined the men of the village where I was staying as they processed along a high watercourse to the Idreyin. The night was clear and very cold, and we lit our way with torches made of splinters of resinous wood bound together. Far below us in the valley bottom, we could see the torches of the women of the village as they walked their parallel route. A few months previously, I had completed my undergraduate degree in the archaeology of Scotland. Visions of European neolithic communities making ritual processions through monumental landscapes of barrows and megaliths were fresh in my mind, and it seemed to me that the parallels with what I was experiencing were striking. The journey to the Idreyin stayed with me, and it was partly responsible for my choice to clearly mark the watercourses on the drawing several years later. My interest in neolithic Europe also influenced the overall form that the drawing was to take. The primary idea of folding the valley in on itself was to turn it into something which, when displayed vertically, evoked a standing stone.

3. For a detailed discussion of the development of European imaginings of the Kalasha, see Crowley 2021, 40-60.

4. For discussions of such visions, see Merriman 1991, 115-118 and Williamson and Bellamy 1983, 177-181.

European imaginings of the Kalasha are reflected in the final addition I made to the drawing. This was during my Ph.D. fieldwork, and I had come to understand my earlier interest in linking the Kalasha to the neolithic in relation to the wider phenomenon of European ancestor-making that I touched on above. I also had, by this point, researched an acute manifestation of the phenomenon: the idea that the Kalasha are descended from the soldiers of Alexander the Great's army (Crowley 2021, 40-49). This story has circulated widely in Greece, and the charity headed by Lerounis has foregrounded what were perceived to be similarities between the Kalasha and ancient Greeks in its fundraising campaigns. Further evidence of the charity's investment in the story is present in the buildings it constructed in Mumuret, almost all of which are decorated with symbolism relating to Alexander, especially the Vergina Sun, a rayed star widely believed to have represented his dynasty (Crowley 2021, 46-48). It was this architectural legacy that led me to include Alexander's head, broken off its statue and in a hole in the snow below the scene depicting Lerounis' kidnap (Image 3). The presence of the head references a headless bust in an alcove in the external wall of a school built by the charity in Mumuret (Image 6). During fieldwork, I was told that the bust had probably been vandalized by iconoclastic Muslim zealots.

Elsewhere, I have discussed the illustrated journals that I kept on my trips to Mumuret as a resource through which to examine my positionality (Crowley forthcoming). The journals, covering all my visits from the first in 2006 right up to my 2017-19 doctoral fieldwork, have allowed me to chart my shifting relationship with the Kalasha and trace the impact that increasing exposure to their society, as well as academic training, has had on how I perceive them and myself in relation to them. The iterative nature of the drawing and the timespan it covers suggest that it can be read in a similar way. The vision of neolithic Europe I projected onto Mumuret reflects an agenda that I brought with me and that I later discovered relates to a wider complex of narratives through which Europeans have sought to fabricate a utopian past. By the time I was finishing the drawing, my approach was far more reflexive, and I included the head of Alexander as an acknowledgement of the very real impact that European atavistic fantasies have had on Mumuret. Thus, the development of the drawing mirrors my changing understanding of how my identity, and European identity more generally, intersected with the Kalasha's lives.

Equally, through the drawing, it is also possible to perceive the impact of time spent learning from the Kalasha. The allusions to the binary of *onjes't'a* and *pragata* and the inclusion of the *Idreyin* are direct Kalasha influences, representing transmutations of discourses that I absorbed or experiences I had while in the company of my hosts. The idea of the drawing as being in part Kalasha-influenced also suggests an interesting lens through which to examine its overall concept. Depicting Mumuret as a coherent entity, hemmed in by mountains and moated by a stormy sky, is, in one sense, highly artificial. The discourse of the bounded ethnographic field site has been problematized for decades, and to focus on Mumuret as I have done, certainly does not reflect the nature of my fieldwork, which was conducted with Kalasha people in locations across Pakistan and beyond. In another sense, however, my choice to depict Mumuret as island-like is defensible as the imagery resonates strongly with the Kalasha's perception of their way of life as being under siege. How self-conscious this decision was when I started out on the drawing, I cannot say, but by that point, I had visited the Kalasha three times and was certainly acutely aware of how vulnerable they felt themselves to be.

Part of the motivation for writing this essay has been to work out how my drawing of Mumuret might be framed in the context of ethnography. When I first started to think about it, I found it hard to imagine the drawing as anything more than a curio, particular to my experience of the Kalasha and without obvious parallels with which it might be meaningfully compared. I came to realize, however, that approaching the drawing as a resource through which to interrogate my positionality makes a strength out of its intensely personal nature. Reflexively read, it bears testimony to how I, along with other Europeans and ethnographers, have conceptualized the Kalasha. Perhaps it is also possible to argue for its relevance beyond my case study. Combined in it are both my early perspectives and those superseding them, a juxtaposition that achieves an honesty that written work often struggles to realize. Rather than presenting a *fait accompli*, the drawing reflects the constantly developing nature of knowledge created through the ethnographic process.



Image 1: The drawing of Mumuret in its entirety.

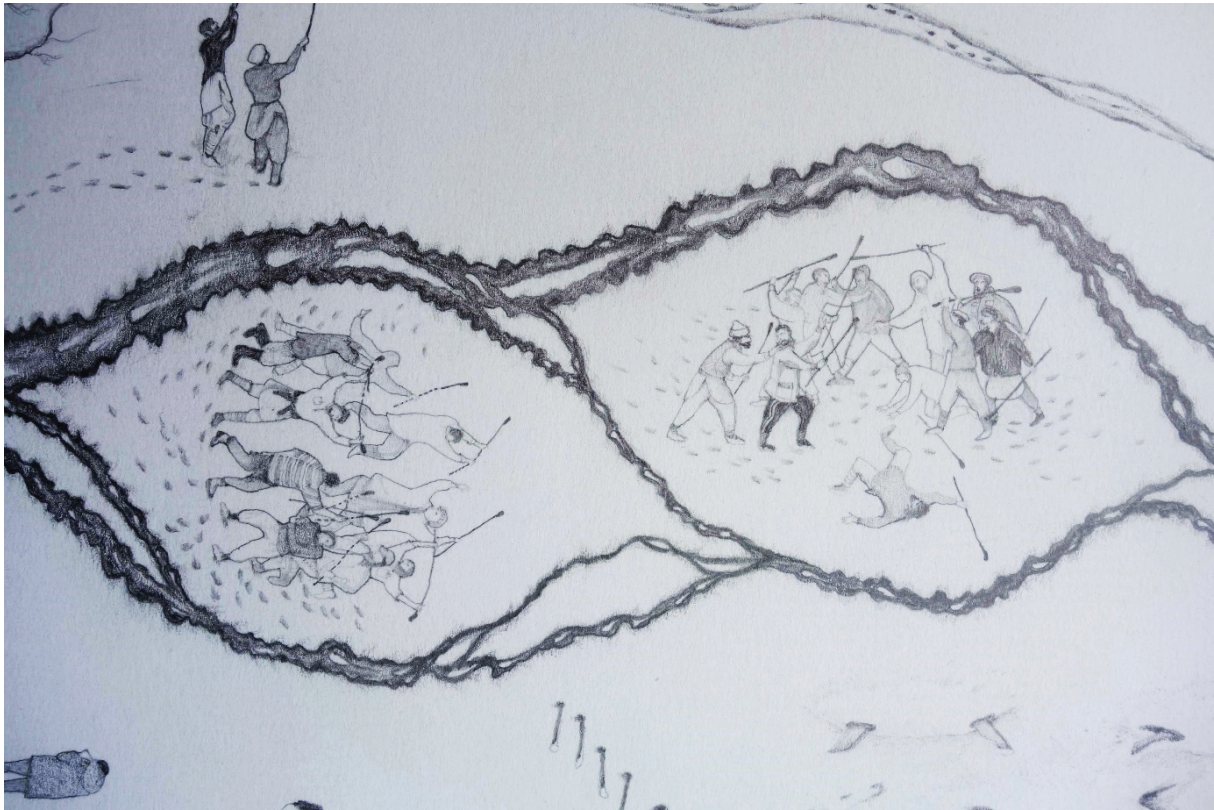


Image 2: A brawl between two clans during the *c'ikik gal'* competition of 2011. The men are holding wooden clubs made especially for the game. In *c'ikik gal'*, clans compete to hit a wooden ball along the length of the valley and back down again to the start point. The ball is hit from one team to another, each team being stationed further up or down the valley, depending on the direction the ball is travelling. It is easy to lose the ball in the deep snow, and teams often secretly produce a new ball when they cannot find the one that was hit to them. This leads to accusations of cheating and concomitant disputes. Spot the anthropologist.



Image 3: Athanasios Lerounis led away by his Taliban captors. Below, the head of a bust of Alexander the Great.



Image 4: Detail of one of the watercourses that runs the length of Mumuret valley, channelling meltwaters to irrigate fields at lower altitudes. The watercourse has trees growing along its length.



Image 5: The Idreyin is to the left of the image, above the houses.

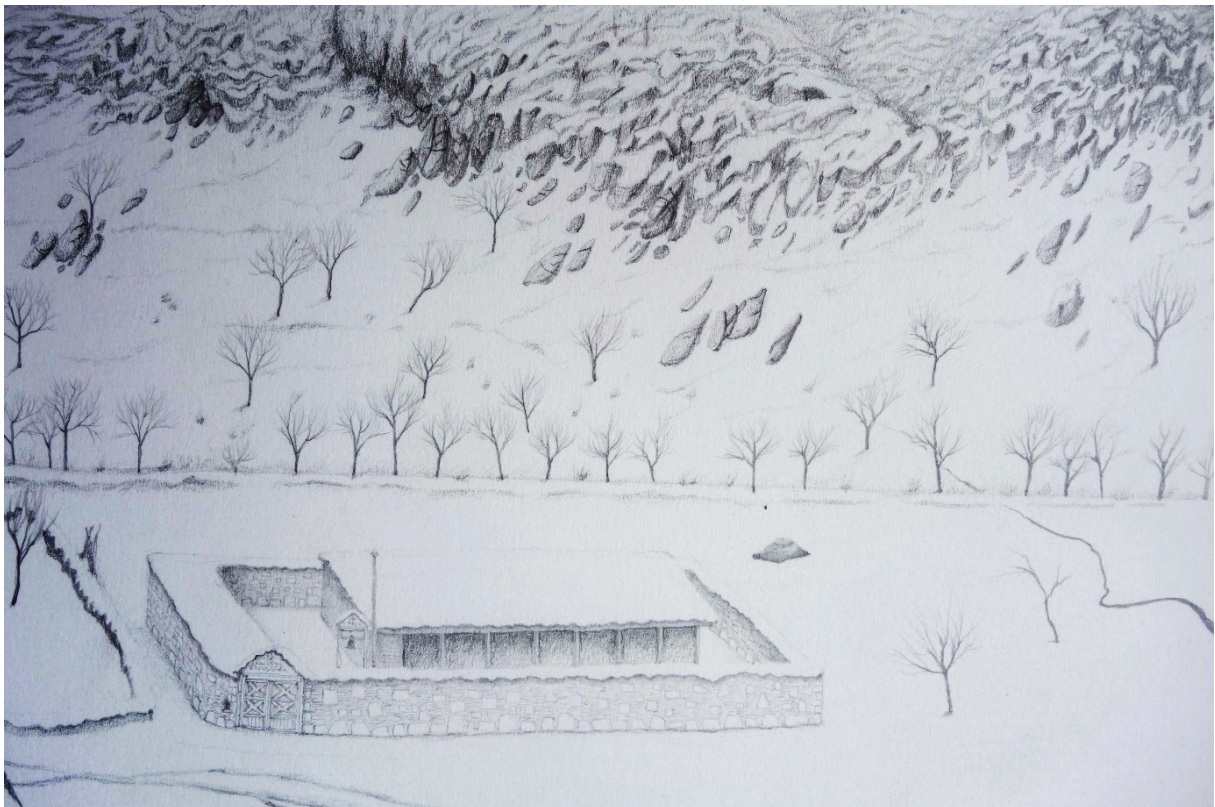


Image 6: The school, built by the Greek charity, at which the bust of Alexander the Great was vandalized.

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Tom Crowley has worked as a curator at the Horniman Museum and Gardens, London and the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge. He has also worked as a community engagement consultant with the Powell-Cotton Museum, Kent. His PhD was at the University of Cambridge's Heritage Research Centre and explored identity-making and the Kalasha of the Pakistan-Afghan Frontier. His website is www.crowleyheritage.com.