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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Kalasha; festivals; cultural tourism; religious heritage; commodification; indigenous identity; community participation; Hindu Kush; Pakistan	Kalasha festivals in the Hindu Kush of northwestern Pakistan are religious events, demonstrations of identity, and growing manifestations of cultural tourism. The visibility of these festivals offers possibilities for cultural recognition, heritage preservation, and livelihood creation, but also involves issues surrounding boundaries of ritual, cultural representation, commodification, and the distribution of tourism proceeds. In this paper, we discuss these issues through the conceptual trinity of gods, guests, and gold. "Gods" denotes the meaning and traditional authority invested in festivals; "guests" involves visitors, spectatorship, photography, and outside representation of Kalasha culture; and "gold" relates to economic opportunity and inequality connected with tourism. Using literature from history and ethnography, the fieldwork on Kalasha history and festivals carried out by the primary author, recent tourism studies, and heritage documentation, this paper contextualizes the issue of festival tourism in a broader history of cultural persistence and change. The paper states that there is no necessity in considering tourism to be either harmful or positive. Everything depends on the way of organizing access, representing cultural expressions, taking part in decision-making processes and distributing economic gains. Current scientific researches on the topic of tourism in Kalasha valleys prove the existence of unequal access to tourism-oriented activities, whereas the current UNESCO projects on heritage demonstrate the new trend towards community-based protection measures. The article suggests that the culturally responsible tourism should treat festivals as alive religious and social events and not mere exhibitions. The conclusion states that community control, historical perspective, ethically correct behavior of visitors and benefit distribution can help to assess tourism without making it necessary to choose between cultural conservation and economic growth.
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Introduction

Cultural tourism raises a series of possibilities and conflicts for communities whose distinct practices have been singled out by visitors, scholars, news agencies, and preservationists. Cultural practices, which are normally entrenched within local religion and society, might become visible due to the arrival of tourists who come to see the practices. This might lead to financial gains, documentation, and recognition for the communities that have been marginalized in the history of their respective nations. On the other hand, the public display of culture might entail the need to satisfy visitors' expectations, oversimplification of traditions, and commoditization of cultural expressions. This issue is particularly relevant when one talks about practices that tourists visit not only because of their showiness but also as parts of beliefs, customary relations, and collective memory.

The Kalasha community of Chitral situated in the Hindu Kush region in Pakistan represents an ideal case study of this problem. The community occupies the valleys of Bumburet, Rumbur, and Birir and has its own distinct culture and religion expressed in festivals, oral tradition, music, dances, clothing, customs, and relations to the environment. Kalasha history is also characterized by shifting political relations, contacts with adjacent peoples, religious conversion of former Kalasha areas, and adaptation to modern institutions. All of these experiences defy the portrayal of Kalasha culture as static survival of an unspoiled past.

Historical investigations carried out by the lead author encompass the origin of Kalasha, political history of Kalasha people, cultural change and continuity among Kalasha people (Ali, 2019). The book entitled *Kalasha: Sole Non-Muslim Indigenous People of Pakistan* further extends historical investigation of Kalasha culture through exploring topics such as the pantheon, festivals, languages, customary practices, agro-pastoral economy and cultural change (Ali, 2026). Such historical perspective is crucial for understanding of festivals in that it contextualizes festivals within the wider social and religious context of Kalasha community.

Joshi, Uchau and Chaumos represent important components of representation of Kalasha culture in public. Nonetheless, it would not be sufficient to describe their importance solely in terms of festival tourism. Ethnological and historical studies have addressed the socio-cultural life of Kalasha and significance of winter festivals (Ali & Chawla, 2019; Cacopardo & Cacopardo, 1989; Cacopardo, 2016). These studies highlight the importance of analyzing festivals within their own historical, social, and religious context. The danger of applying the descriptions of one festival, valley, or time period to all Kalasha valleys is also revealed by these studies.

The advent of tourism brings in a variety of stakeholders as well. Tourism may be pursued for educational, photographic, artistic, craft, hospitable, and scenic purposes, while locals may take on the role of hosts, guides, craftsmen, performers, transportation service providers, and businessmen. Government institutions and heritage bodies may promote festivals as examples of cultural diversity and regional development. While there may be overlaps between the stakeholder interests, the two sets of interests need not be identical. For the visitor, what makes an

interesting public performance may not hold the same significance for those who have developed the religious and social traditions necessary to conduct the festival.

Tourism in the Kalasha valleys is increasingly attracting attention in research studies that highlight these differences. In the study by Kalhoro and Saifuddin on Bumburet, interviews and focus group discussions are used to assess cultural commoditization and show unequal benefits amongst the stakeholders (Kalhoro & Saifuddin, 2021). The research by Sadiq and Ahmad (2026), on differences in tourism-based livelihoods and economic performance of households in these areas, questions the assumption that there will be equal benefits for all parties related to a place because of tourism. However, none of these studies can be seen as an assessment of the economic impact of each Kalasha festival.

Another aspect of heritage management is the recognition of heritage sites. The Kalasha Valleys Cultural Landscape was put forward to UNESCO's World Heritage Tentative List on 9 March 2026 (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026). In the nomination, the valleys are presented as a living cultural landscape in which religion, habitation, farming, and environment are interrelated. Being listed as Tentative is part of the process of nomination, not inscription to the list of World Heritage sites. The UNESCO report on its living-heritage project in 2026 includes capacity building among Kalasha tradition bearers. It also mentions the issue of ethics of heritage entrepreneurship, price setting, misrepresentation of cultural motifs, and violation of sacred space (UNESCO, 2026). This makes it relevant to analyze the interplay between tourism, religiosity, and heritage governance.

This paper analyses that interplay using an analytical trinity of gods, guests, and gold. The term "gods" refers to the meaning and authority that turn festivals into religious events. Term "guests" highlights visitors, spectatorship, photography, and the representation of culture from outside. "Gold" focuses on revenue generation, commercial relations, and the distribution of benefits related to tourism. The analytical trinity does not mean that religion, guests, and gold are three separate or mutually exclusive phenomena. The paper raises three questions:

1. How do historical and ethnographic studies interpret the social and religious significance of festivals of the Kalasha?
2. How can tourism affect public perceptions and commercialization of the festival culture?
3. How can the principles of community involvement, boundaries of rituals, and benefit distribution serve as a model for culturally responsible tourism governance?

The dilemma cannot be solved by choosing between conservation and development. Tourism may lead to acknowledgment and survival without the guarantee of community control and distribution; just the fact of visitation does not equal cultural erosion. The important aspects here are the issue of access, representation of practices, and involvement of the community in the heritage management process.

Historical and Religious Context

Cultural continuity and historical change

Accounts of the Kalasha have also tended to focus on the uniqueness of their religion and their differentiation from neighboring groups. While Biddulph's (1880) account forms part of the history of the Hindu Kush region, more recent scholarship has analyzed various aspects of the religion, social structure, language, and culture of the Kalasha from a variety of disciplines (Fentz, 2010; Maggi, 2001; Morgenstierne, 1932). Such sources provide important information, yet they need to be considered in the context of the purposes, methods, and times of their production. For example, colonial era sources should not be taken as neutral and comprehensive depictions of contemporary Kalasha society.

However, there is a history of the community as well, which involves change in settlement, political control, and religion. Cacopardo and Cacopardo (2001) have situated the religious history of the Kalasha within the broader cultural and historical context of the Hindu Kush. The work by Cacopardo and Cacopardo (1992) focuses on the history of Jinjeret Kuh, an area inhabited by Kalashamun-speaking communities and problems related to the origin of the Kalasha. Ali's historical research deals with political interactions and cultural transformations, former Kalasha settlements and changes in the community's circumstances (Ali, 2019, 2026).

These histories thus render it problematic to present Kalasha culture as an unchanged relic of the past. Continuity means the preservation and re-interpretation of traditions amidst changed circumstances, where some traditions have survived whereas others have disappeared or waned away (Ali, 2019, 2024, 2026).

This has implications for tourism, as external portrayal can glorify the idea of timelessness. Cultural change, if interpreted in terms of decline with regard to a static image of the past, becomes distorted. Historical understanding, on the other hand, respects the right of the community to determine their continuity.

Festivals and religious life

The festival calendar holds a special place since it ties religious observance to the cyclical organization of work, food, animals, relationships, and celebration. The festivals considered by the main author along with Muhammad Iqbal Chawla in their published research include Joshi, Rat Nat, Uchau, Pul, and Chaumos – winter solstice festival (Ali & Chawla, 2019). The importance of the wider festival calendar should be considered for the present argument: while tourism tends to focus on just a few prominent festival days, the cultural meaning of the festival might depend on preparations, seasonal activities of pasturing and farming, household involvement, and ceremonies not designed to be seen.

Joshi, sometimes referred to as Zhoshi or Chilam Joshi, is connected with the coming of spring. Preparation includes milk gathering and distribution, cleaning and decoration of places, flowers and branches used for decoration, songs, dances, and religious ceremonies of the community (Ali & Chawla, 2019). It is clear why only a visual representation of the festival cannot cover its essence. The public festival is tied to earlier research and obligations. The visitors arriving for a dance or procession might witness a significant aspect of the festival, but this does not mean that they would experience the entire social process behind the festival.

Uchau, Rat Nat, and Pul are also a part of a larger seasonal cycle. They cannot be considered synonyms for a generic "Kalasha festival." Their meanings, customs, and local interpretations might vary, and no literature warrants the assumption that every Kalasha valley celebrates the occasions in the same way. In terms of tourism interpretation, it means that the promotional material needs to specify which festival is being celebrated.

Chaumos holds special significance in the academic literature on the topic of Kalasha religion. Cacopardo and Cacopardo (1989) explored the winter-solstice festival and the more extended exploration of winter feasts was given by Cacopardo (2016). Similarly, the winter festival of Ali and Chawla (2019) also comes into existence as part of the yearly cycle. Both pieces provide insightful information concerning rituals and social life. However, the research scope and ethnography of both works differ from one another, and, therefore, they should be understood comparatively rather than combined into a single piece of timeless text. Any claim concerning some valley or a contemporary practice based on ethnographic data of another valley needs additional evidence.

It can be seen that the seasonal calendar also highlights the relation between the festival culture and its natural environment. Pastoral activities, dairy farming, crops, food supply, livestock, and seasonal changes are all the factors of the context in which festivals acquire their meaning (Ali & Chawla, 2019; Ali, 2026). It does not imply that the landscape and seasonal cycle are the only factors determining religion practices. Festivals exist within the framework of relations of people, their living environment, work, and beliefs. The same idea can be seen in UNESCO Tentative List application, where ritual, settlement, agriculture, and landscape are all connected with each other (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026). There are practical consequences of the distinction between the festival itself and the larger ritual calendar for tourism purposes. When the promotional effort is aimed at the most attractive aspects of the festival, then the event seems to be staged for the visitors rather than being an organic part of life. The more historically based interpretation will include the explanation of seasonality, preparation, and social relationships that keep the celebration going, while keeping in mind that certain information cannot be shared publicly.

The Kalasha festivals are part of the broader religion and social system. They cannot be explained by only those aspects that can be easily transmitted to the visitors and that include dancing, music, clothing, and the celebration itself. There is a vast literature devoted to Kalasha religion

and their festivals that put them into the larger context of traditional social relations and seasonality (Ali, 2024, 2026; Ali & Chawla, 2019; Cacopardo & Cacopardo, 1989, 2001).

Among others, Chaumos, the winter festival, has been of interest to the scholars. In addition to the research by Cacopardo and Cacopardo (1989) on the winter solstice festival and the study conducted by Cacopardo (2016) on winter feasts, ethnographic data about the unique ritual context of winter festivities have been gathered.

It is important to bear in mind that this ethnographic information should not be considered equivalent to a description of any other festivities or the three valleys.

This idea also relates to Joshi and Uchau. Their significance should not be limited to the visibility that they have in promoting tourism. According to Ali and Chawla (2019), festivals have a place in the socio-cultural life of Kalasha. Meanwhile, according to Ali (2026), they should be studied as a part of the history of religion, social organization, and culture. Thus, one can realize that festivals are more than just performances, being a part of daily routine. This means that just because a festival has visibility does not mean that everyone associated with the festival activities can be watched. People in the community can decide to invite outsiders to participate in some activities while closing off others. What matters is whether or not access is negotiated in a manner that respects community autonomy.

Identity, language, and representation

Identity is not only about religion, special clothing, and events but also the language people speak, their social structure, history, and relations with other inhabitants of the region (Ali, 2019, 2026; Heegård Petersen & Mørch, 2004; Maggi, 2001).

The history of ethnic labeling offers another lesson. Torwali (2019), when writing about the identity and ethnicity in Hindu Kush area, explains how labeling done by outside forces has influenced the perceptions of groups in question. The Islamization of Kafirs described by Cacopardo (2016) is another example of religious and ethnic classification being a part of a historical process. These examples are important for tourism since the narrative of the community can present its members as a group defined by its unique characteristic.

The religiosity of the Kalasha must be contextualized too. The study of heritage and extremism, cultural survival, and indigenous identity shows how continuity of a community is determined by the broader social and political situation (Ali et al., 2020; Kalash, 2010; Kalash & Heegård, 2016) but does not mean that everybody in the community shares the same view of priorities. It is also important to consider gender. According to Maggi (2001) and Ali (2020), it is crucial to understand cultural practices in their social context. Although their findings do not link tourism with the impacts on women, they warn against limiting women's participation to that which tourists can observe in public space.

Literature Review and Analytical Framework

From ethnography to heritage tourism

Scholarship on the Kalasha has emerged in a number of disciplines. There is historical writing about the political and cultural context of the region; ethnographic scholarship regarding the rituals and life cycle events; linguistic scholarship regarding Kalashamun language, and gender scholarship concerning the relationship between social institutions and identity (Biddulph, 1880; Fentz, 2010; Heegård Petersen & Mørch, 2004; Maggi, 2001; Morgenstierne, 1932). Each of these offers different types of data and cannot be considered interchangeable.

The work by Cacopardos relates Kalasha religion to the greater context of the Hindu Kush and has conducted detailed study of winter rituals and Jinjeret Kuh. Historical research conducted by Ali fits well with the literature above in linking festivals to politics, the pantheon, agro-pastoral culture, custom, and cultural transformation (Ali, 2019, 2026).

Some other pieces of literature deal with cultural heritage vulnerability and transformation. Thus, for example, Ali et al. (2021) summarize literature about pre-Islamic religions and Kalasha shamanism; Kalash and Heegård (2016) investigate cultural survival; while Ali et al. (2020) analyzes heritage and extremism. All these publications enrich the general background, although none of them should be used in order to relate cultural change to tourism.

Tourism, commodification, and unequal benefits

Cultural commodification can be defined as activities through which cultural artifacts, performances, and expressions get a market value and organization due to their demand. When applied in a tourist environment, it includes the promotion of cultural attire, handicrafts, performances, ritual iconography or cultural experiences. It is not always the case that a cultural practice gets devalued when commodified as it may continue retaining its meaning to its performers even while earning money from it. What really matters are the control and distribution of profits derived from the process.

The research by Kalhor and Saifuddin on Bumburet valley specifically examines issues related to cultural commodification and tourism in Kalasha valleys. Utilizing qualitative analysis, the authors demonstrate uneven benefits among participants of such process with the most benefits going to better-off ones (Kalhor & Saifuddin, 2021). This contradicts the idea that tourism brings benefits to every household or community connected to the destination under consideration. It is important to note that since the research was conducted only in Bumburet valley, generalizations cannot be made for other valleys or festivals. The authors Sadiq and Ahmad (2026) investigate tourism livelihoods and household experiences from varying segments and locations within the Kalash Valley. This investigation demonstrates disparities within access to tourism-related resources as well as seasonal disparities between locations. Such a relationship suggests that there could be a possible intersection between religious affiliation, geographic location, and tourism

opportunities as factors influencing economic status. Nevertheless, they do not prove the economic impact of each celebration individually as well as individual households' situation.

Comparative research is another tool of investigation that could be applied to the issue under consideration. In their work, Quang et al. (2022) address the problems of heritage-tourism development and commoditization of "authentic" culture in the Cham community of Vietnam. The results obtained do not serve as evidence of the situation in Kalashas but still provide an opportunity for asking questions. Ali's (2025) research on Jinjeret Kuh expands the scope of the topic by incorporating the history of Dardistan with heritage tourism. It is related to the topic as heritage tourism should not only focus on the prominent festivals of the three current valleys. The heritage of the former settlements of Kalasha people and their history provides another dimension to the changes in the culture of the region.

Comparing the available tourism evidence

Two most directly relevant tourism research papers in the literature review differ in types of evidence used. Kalhoro & Saifuddin (2021) discuss cultural commodification in Bumboret and apply qualitative interviews, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and thematic analysis in their case study. The results obtained show that the costs and benefits associated with tourism are unevenly distributed. Since the empirical context of the research is Bumboret, this study is particularly useful for discussing local experience in terms of cultural exhibition, visitor behavior and benefits distribution. It should not be considered a representative survey of all the households in all the three valleys.

As for Sadiq & Ahmad (2026), they use stratified sampling and econometric analysis to evaluate household livelihoods in tourism and non-tourism places, groups and seasons. According to the research findings, the access to opportunities in tourism industry depends on religion and geography. Bumboret and Rumbor are tourism destinations while Birir is not. The research also highlights seasonal variations in expenditures in connection with tourism. Such research provides an expanded quantitative perspective on the issue of differentiation in the local tourism economy; however, it does not distinguish between the economic impacts of the festival itself and does not reveal how the income from the festival is shared each time.

Therefore, the studies need to be discussed together, not seen as measuring the same thing. Kalhoro and Saifuddin can be used for finding the social experience and commodification perception in a certain place; Sadiq and Ahmad can demonstrate that there are consistent differences in tourism livelihoods in their samples. It is clear that both pieces of research undermine the generalized statement that tourism either helps or hurts "the Kalasha community." They do not, however, answer the questions raised in this article: who controls access at festivals, visitor behavior in ritual spaces, and the distribution of income from visits to festivals. These questions demand a much narrower set of evidence. Future research could contrast the impacts during the time of festivals against other times, track the type of activities done at work and in business in relation to each specific festival, and analyze how the benefits differ across different

valleys, household wealth, gender, age, religion, and involvement in tourism-related activities. This kind of study would have to have proper guidelines for consent and for gathering data in sacred spaces. Until this evidence is available, the paper considers the festival-level economic impacts as a research question.

The analytical triad

These are three inter-related categories that this article employs.

Gods: religious significance and established authority. This category addresses the religious significance of festivals, authority to decide proper participation, and protection of ritual boundaries.

Guests: visitors and representation. This category addresses spectatorship, photography, promotion of tourism, and visitors' expectations in cultural encounters.

Gold: economic opportunities and distribution. This category addresses livelihoods, business dealings, and distribution of opportunities and challenges related to tourism.

This triad is an analytical tool created for this article and not an assertion of how Kalasha people structure their experiences. The dimensions overlap in the sense that religious activity can bring visitors, expectations can affect representation, and economic opportunities can affect presentation.

This analytical approach seeks to know under what circumstances religious practice, tourism, and business can go together without infringing upon agency of the community.

Methodology and Source Limitations

The methodology applied in the current article can be considered qualitative historical-documentary. Sources of information for it comprise historical research and book of the main author, publications on religion and festivities of Kalasha, works on culture survival and identification, research on tourism and commodification, heritage-tourism literature, and UNESCO documents.

The chosen methodology cannot be considered descriptive; there is no attempt to provide the results of new field research. The article does not claim any new interviews, visitors' surveys, participant observations, or economic figures at the level of the households. Results of previous empirical researches are referred to their authors and interpreted within the frame of methodologies and populations studied by them.

Three types of evidence were distinguished in the course of analysis. Firstly, historical and ethnographic researches give the context of understanding the religious and sociological sense of

festivities. Secondly, tourism research gives empirical evidence on commodification and economic discrepancies in studied regions. Thirdly, heritage documents show how the institutions perceive the cultural landscape and living tradition and protect it. The institutional description can be perceived as the heritage framing evidence but not the independent evidence of communities' agreement. Ali's work is cited extensively in terms of history, particularly his analysis of the Kalasha religion, festivals, and culture (Ali, 2026). The historical synthesis offered in the book provides an understanding of festivals within the context of community history. It is not taken as an alternative to tourism data from current times.

Gods: Sacred Traditions and Ritual Boundaries

The first dimension of the dilemma has to do with the relationship between the festivals and their religious meaning. Tourism advertising tends to focus on features which can be easily explained to visitors: the dates of the festivals, their distinctive clothes, music, dances, and photo opportunities. All of these aspects can be considered significant; however, they do not constitute all the meaning of a festival. The festivals of the Kalasha are closely linked to religion, customs, and the seasons of the year (Ali & Chawla, 2019; Ali, 2024, 2026; Cacopardo & Cacopardo, 1989, 2001).

The historical narrative presented by the first author is valuable since it places festivals within the context of the broader history of the Kalasha people. Traditions cannot be separated from changes in history; the former are sustained and interpreted in the context of changes in the political, social, and economic situation (Ali, 2019, 2026). Continuity cannot be understood solely in terms of retaining each and every feature in the same way. Tourism has the potential to generate a gap between the meaning of practices for their participants and the way they are perceived by the audience. While a tourist may see a dance as entertainment, a procession as a spectacle, and ritual object as something to be photographed, for example, the participants can perceive these phenomena through the lenses of religion and traditions. Such approaches can be compatible; however, the visitor's approach cannot dominate the one chosen by the community.

This generates the issue of access. An open public festival can involve tourists while not providing them access to all related practices. Some practices can be open, others are observable according to local agreement, and some are restricted. This should be negotiated through appropriate mechanisms within the community, not defined by tourists, researchers, or any other outsiders.

Moreover, respect for rituals demands the recognition of diversity within the community. The perspectives of elders, religious representatives, women, youth, entrepreneurs, and local residents involved in tourism may differ regarding access and the degree of public performance of certain practices. It would be inappropriate to assume that a representative of the community necessarily speaks for everybody. Governance that is community-based must ensure that opportunities exist for participation of relevant communities in decision-making. Lessons from history indicate that one must be wary of interpreting authenticity in terms of conformity to a fantasized past. Traditions of Kalasha culture have evolved in the context of different historical, political, religious, and social conditions (Ali, 2019, 2026; Cacopardo & Cacopardo, 2001). It is people who

constitute the community that are primarily responsible for negotiating continuity. Thus, the "gods" dimension does not mean that religion needs to be fully detached from tourism. Rather, it raises questions regarding the centrality of religious meanings and customary authority in making these festivities publicly visible.

Guests: Tourism, Spectatorship, and Cultural Representation

The second dimension refers to the status of the visitor. Visitors do not come empty-handed; there are travel writing, media imagery, promotional discourse, and other ethnographic descriptions, which influence their expectations. Such a representation can stimulate the visitors' interest in cultural diversity, yet it can also limit the experience that they are prepared to consider as important. Various disciplines described the culture of the Kalasha people historically and ethnographically (Biddulph, 1880; Fentz, 2010; Maggi, 2001). Each representation is a particular choice of observation and description, as explained by Torwali (2019) in his analysis of ethnic nomenclature.

Traveling can amplify the focus on the visibility of costumes, dances, music, and religious differences. While festivals are represented in promotional imagery, other elements of the culture, including history, change, economic practices, and inner diversity, may get less coverage (Kalthor & Saifuddin, 2021; Quang et al., 2022). Again, this is a tendency rather than an affirmation that all travelers do so. There are visitors who respect local culture, promote local economy, learn about the history of the Kalasha, and appreciate cultural diversity more thoroughly. The question is about the organization of this relationship. Photography is an example of where access differs from entitlement, since photographs can go beyond their context of creation and create unintended representations. That does not mean that all forms of photography are wrong; on the contrary, it emphasizes the need for clear expectations regarding consent, access, and the subsequent usage of images. An interpretation code of conduct that would be created by locals can help to clarify what is expected, including proper behavior, photography rules, and the difference between public celebration and sacred ritual.

There is also the question of who represents the community. Scholars, tour operators, journalists, institutions, and heritage organizations all play a role in creating an image of the Kalasha tradition. While such actions can help to spread awareness, it should not override the voice of the community or impose someone's perspective as a universal point of view (Quang et al., 2022). This study by Quang et al. (2022) is pertinent in that it addresses conflicts related to the commercialization of the notion of "authentic" culture in another heritage tourism destination. The study does not claim that the same dynamics occur equally in the Kalasha valleys. Instead, it offers a way to analyze who sets the criteria of authenticity, what impacts people's expectations on its public presentation, and how cultural bearers cope with the demands created by tourists. In the case of Kalasha, the task is to provide visitors with the possibility of learning about the festivals without presenting the entire community as a spectacle of otherness.

Gold: Economic Opportunity, Commodification, and Inequality

The third aspect of this research relates to money. Tourism can lead to the creation of demand for accommodation, transport, guiding, food, handicrafts, and other services. This kind of economic activity can benefit locals and can help make cultural heritage economically relevant to development. However, tourism revenue is not distributed equally, and the presence of any kind of commercial activity does not imply that the benefits will be felt by all members of a particular community.

The importance of direct evidence from the agreed literature cannot be underestimated. In their research about Bumburet, Kalhoro and Saifuddin state that there is an uneven distribution of the benefits related to the process of cultural commodification and tourism (Kalhoro & Saifuddin, 2021). This study questions the idea that the tourism sector creates prosperity for everyone.

Additionally, Sadiq and Ahmad (2026) present another piece of evidence showing differentiation in the economy of Kalasha tourism. In their research, tourism-related livelihoods and household outcomes are compared in different locations and among different population segments. The authors claim that access to tourism opportunities depends on location, religion, and season in the groups of people studied. Scope of the studies must be maintained. It neither takes into account the income earned from all festivals nor does it determine the economic status of all families. Special studies on festivals need to be conducted in order to analyze expenditure, employment, business ownership, seasonal earnings, and distribution of income. But still the current studies raise some issues that have to be addressed during heritage and tourism planning.

Commercialization must not be seen as a process of changing authentic culture to a commodity form of culture. Cultural producers might want to sell the handicrafts, provide guiding services, or engage themselves in public activities without any compromise with their cultural values. Commercial activities may help in sustaining their family needs and give them scope to pass on their skills. The important thing is whether they have any say over what they sell and how commercial the transaction is.

Some issues might crop up where market pressure or external decisions restrict the options of the community people, make participation a necessary act for survival, or divert the benefits away from those people who bring the attraction through their cultural acts.

On the contrary, locally owned businesses and community-based interpretations could give people an opportunity to participate in tourism in ways that they perceive fit them. These are possibilities that need to be assessed empirically and not making assumptions about the impacts of the commercialization process.

The distribution of benefits depends on the ownership of accommodation facilities, modes of transportation, language capabilities, links with tour operators, and the ability to invest. These are issues for investigation and not assumptions about individual households; previous studies

highlight the importance of assessing the issue of distribution (Kalhor & Saifuddin, 2021; Sadiq & Ahmad, 2026).

The heritage study carried out by Ali (2025) regarding Jinjeret Kuh opens up heritage issues of the area beyond festival tourism sites. Former settlements and the historical geography of the area could give another perspective about the region's cultural heritage. However, expanding the heritage tourism sector is not something that will necessarily lead to the benefit of locals. Such an initiative needs to take into account the issues of ownership, infrastructure, participation, and revenue distribution.

The listing of the area as a Tentative List item by UNESCO creates chances for conservation and interpretation. This UNESCO Living Heritage Program indicates capacity-building efforts that incorporate involvement of the Kalasha heritage bearers and training concerning ethics of entrepreneurship and heritage protection (UNESCO, 2026). Such efforts indicate that heritage policy can be directed towards both the issue of cultural transmission and economic livelihoods. Yet, these facts do not prove that all the advantages associated with tourism are distributed fairly and that all the concerns of the communities have been dealt with.

“Gold” aspect requires to answer the following questions: who gets money, on what terms, and with what leverage over tourism. Relevant indicators include local employment, possibilities of establishing small businesses, stability in seasonal employment, transparent distribution of the state aid, and involvement in governance.

Discussion: Toward Community-Centred Festival Tourism

Three dimensions of gods, guests, and gold explain why the interaction between Kalasha festival and tourism cannot be presented in terms of either/or options for preservation and development. Dimensions of religious meaning, representation, and economic significance are interconnected. They can influence each other, and should not be assessed separately.

Firstly, preservation cannot mean freezing the community at an imagined past. The Kalasha history shows the presence of both continuity and change in their culture (Ali, 2019, 2026; Cacopardo & Cacopardo, 2001). Cultural practitioners need the opportunity to preserve, change, transfer, or discontinue any practices they wish.

Secondly, access should not be understood as unconditional right. Locally designed code for visitors can include information about acceptable behavior and prohibited areas and activities.

Thirdly, economic development should be assessed through distribution instead of absolute number of tourists. Current literature mentions unequal distribution of the benefits from tourism as well as differences in access to tourism-related resources (Kalhor & Saifuddin, 2021; Sadiq & Ahmad, 2026). Therefore, tourism planning needs to explore who participates in tourism, who is involved in tourism-related businesses, and if people whose cultural practices attract tourists

benefit from them. Community-based planning, fair disbursement of funds for the festivals, helping small local businesses, and involving citizens in tourism governance could also be some of the strategies to try. Their effectiveness could be determined by evidence.

Fourth, representatives should be accountable to the people whom they represent. Public interpretation must include historical perspectives, be able to address issues of diversity, not portray any controversial history as the only version and allow Kalasha communities to influence festival narratives. As highlighted by Torwali (2019), it is crucial to analyze who defines ethnic identities.

Fifth, heritage policies need to take into account the link between cultural activities and the entire environment. For example, in UNESCO Tentative List nomination, interrelationship between settlement, rituals, agriculture and environment in the Kalasha valleys have been highlighted (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026). UNESCO living heritage project is an example of the role of capacity building and education in preserving cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2026).

These initiatives provide institutional frameworks in which discussions can take place; however, whether they satisfy the requirements of the community will have to be determined based on actual participation and outcomes.

A practical governance system can operationalize these principles by posing questions for consideration by local institutions and tourism managers. First, the access policies must be locally established and known in advance. Instead of one blanket policy governing all festivals, representatives of the community can decide what kinds of events are considered public, which kind require permission, and which need to be off-limits. The policy needs to be periodically revisited as the priorities of the community and the specifics of the festival may change.

Second, the issue of informed consent needs to be addressed in an ongoing manner, rather than a one-off permit to a destination. Consent to being photographed does not mean consenting to having one's picture used in advertisements or sold or distributed online forever. Guides and tour operators can help convey the local customs and expectations but cannot claim the right to act as spokespersons of all individuals or families in a community. Third, heritage interpretation should be developed in collaboration with Kalasha people and recognize any dissent that arises. Interpretation may include explanations of the history of festivals, their seasonal setting, as well as the distinction between public festivities and private ritual practice without divulging any confidential information. Local people should have an opportunity to address any misunderstandings and control the usage of their names, images, and culture. While this would not solve all disagreements, it would introduce the element of accountability into the process.

Fourth, benefit sharing should be evaluated by means of measurable indicators beyond the mere visitor statistics. Indicators might consist of the share of tourism jobs occupied by locals, the chance for local entrepreneurship, seasonal stability of incomes, involvement of smaller businesses, as well

as the distribution of community/public money allocated for festivals. All this should be agreed upon and assessed in cooperation with the locals with caution; increase in total money spent does not automatically mean improvement of welfare of each individual.

Fifth, community involvement should go further than consultation after important decisions are already taken. Representation must be plural as well; elders, spiritual leaders, women, youth, artisans, guides, entrepreneurs, and non-tourism-oriented residents may each perceive the effects of tourism in unique ways. No one stakeholder should assume the role of representative of the entire community.

Finally, the model must have a complaint and review procedure. The residents must have an avenue through which they can file their grievances over issues such as trespass, unsolicited photography, misrepresentation, and visitor behavior. Such a locally agreed procedure will make it clear as to who receives the complaints, how the concerns are assessed, and how the guidelines can be modified. These suggestions are not claims that there is one model of governance or that such a model will end all disputes. Rather, it is the usefulness of these guidelines that would need to be tested.

Sixth, there needs to be a study of the relationship between tourism, gender, age, household resources, religion, and geography. Although there is empirical evidence on the issue of differentiation in the literature of tourism, more festival specific studies must be carried out to demonstrate how the distribution of income takes place during the festivals. It is also essential for research to examine the perception of the visitors, the narrative used in the promotion of tourism and the meanings associated with the festivals by the members of the community. Ethical research requires the researcher to obtain informed consent as well as understand the expectations of the local community regarding sensitive information, taking photographs and recording.

This triangle emphasizes religion, representation and economics but fails to encompass all aspects of the Kalasha society. A documentary approach will not be able to reveal all the opinions of the community as well as the impact of the festival on the economy of the region.

Still, the model provides means to assess the tourism without assuming that either of the two extremes – cultural isolation or total commercialization – is the desirable solution.

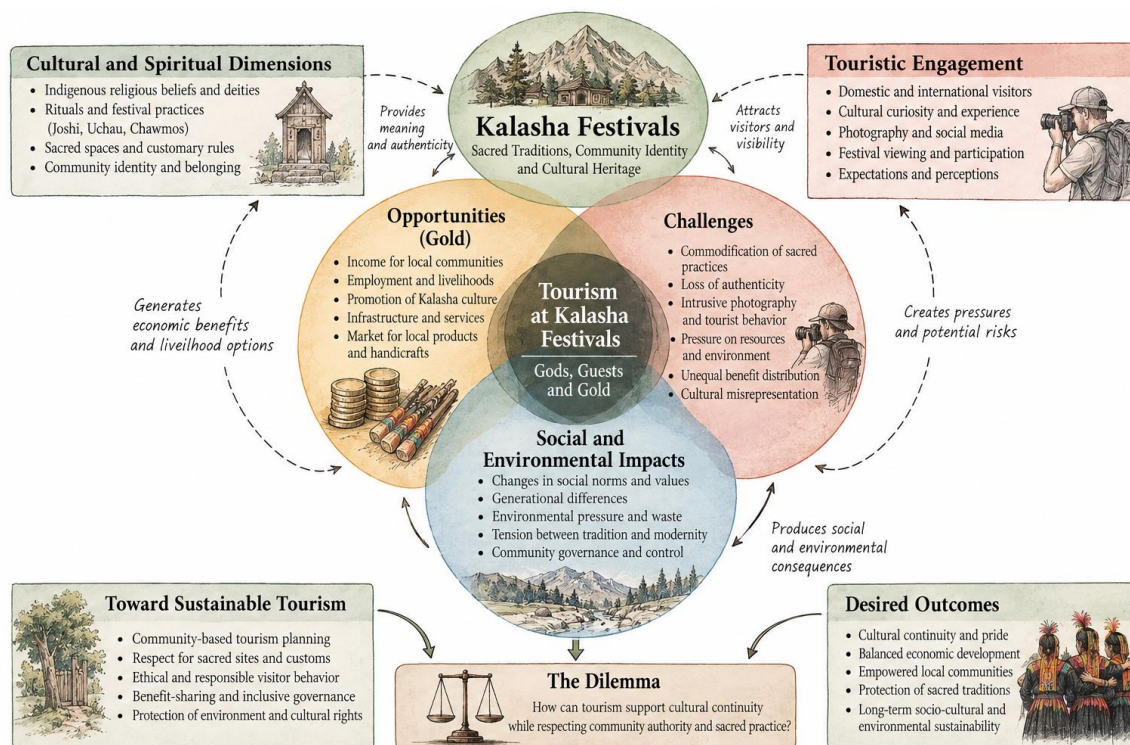


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Tourism at Kalasha Festivals: Gods, Guests, and Gold

Conclusion

Kalasha festivals are not only cultural performances that have historical significance but they are also religious and social practices. Public exposure to such events generates chances for cultural recognition, education, and economic benefits for people involved, but these benefits arise amid questions about ritual accessibility, representation, commodification, and benefit distribution.

Historical and ethnographic works analyze festivals in context of overall religious and social culture of the Kalasha (Ali, 2024, 2026; Ali & Chawla, 2019; Cacopardo & Cacopardo, 1989, 2001; Cacopardo, 2016). The studies on tourism reveal the evidence of cultural commodification and economic benefit distribution within tourism (Kalhor & Saifuddin, 2021; Sadiq & Ahmad, 2026). The current works on cultural heritage emphasize the link between cultural practices and their settlements and landscapes, whereas living heritage initiatives by UNESCO give examples of organizational support to tradition bearers and education. This framework of gods, guests, and gold unites all the problems discussed above. Gods stand for religious symbolism and custom-derived authority that give value to the festivals. Guests stand for tourists and stories about festivals through which the festival gains its public significance. And gold stands for revenue generated by tourism and its economic aspect. All these three elements interact with each other

and it is necessary to negotiate rather than assume that their interaction will be harmonious or even destructive. The community-oriented policy implies the respect for the right of the Kalasha to define how their culture and religious traditions can be presented to outsiders; the awareness of tourists about the history of the festivals; and the transparency of distribution of tourism revenue. It is clear, therefore, that the question surrounding tourism to the festivals of Kalasha people is not only that of whether tourists should come or whether cultural performances should be made economically viable. The question is whether it is possible to develop tourism while respecting religious significance, having proper representation and engaging in fair negotiations about economic opportunity. This would make a better starting point for assessing cultural tourism than the assumption of necessary opposition between preservation and development.

Generative AI Disclosure

ChatGPT (OpenAI, GPT-5.6 Luna) was employed in the process of manuscript development for language editing, organization, style conversion, manuscript formatting, and conceptual figure creation assistance. Authors examined the manuscript and figure and take responsibility for the accuracy of the arguments, references, interpretations, and content.

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