

# RECIPROCITY AND REDISTRIBUTION IN KALASHA PRESTIGE FEASTS

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## Summary

*The Kalasha ("Kalash Kafirs") are the last non-Islamic people of the Hindu Kush mountains of northern Pakistan. Goat husbandry plays an important role in the agro-pastoral subsistence economy of the Kalasha, being largely motivated by sacrificial feasting for prestige. This paper examines the articulation of such feasts with political leadership and social stratification, with particular reference to current debate about the political economy of feasting and ceremonial exchange elsewhere. Examination of the herding economy of Kalasha goat husbandry in relation to prestige feasts indicates that periodic culling of male goats through prestigious sacrifices is a prerequisite for the maintenance of exceptionally large herds, which tend to accumulate at the culmination of the developmental cycle of household expansion. Feasts thereby serve to legitimate a minimal form of social and political differentiation, expressed in an ideology of festal "eldership", whose ceremonial symbolism of regal hierarchy belies an otherwise egalitarian subsistence regime.*

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## Key Words

*Pastoralism, Goats, Feasting, Hindu Kush*

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## Introduction

In this paper I examine the role of livestock husbandry in articulating relations of prestige and political influence among the non-Islamic Kalasha ("Kalash Kafirs") of the Hindu Kush mountains of northern

## Résumé

*Réciprocité et redistribution lors des fêtes de prestige Kalasha.*

*Les Kalasha ("Kalash Kafirs") sont les derniers peuples non islamiques des montagnes de l'Hindou Kush du nord du Pakistan. L'élevage de la Chèvre joue un rôle important dans l'économie agro-pastorale de subsistance des Kalasha, largement renforcé par les fêtes sacrificielles de prestige. Les lignes qui suivent examinent l'articulation de ces fêtes avec le pouvoir politique et la stratification sociale. Elles s'inscrivent dans le courant des débats actuels sur les relations de l'économie politique et des échanges cérémoniels. L'examen de la gestion pastorale des troupeaux de chèvres Kalasha en relation avec les fêtes de prestige indique que le sacrifice périodique de boucs est une nécessité pour maintenir un troupeau exceptionnellement grand, situation qui apparaît au point culminant du cycle de développement des maisonnées. Ainsi, les fêtes servent à légitimer une forme minimale de différenciation sociale et politique, exprimée dans un système de "patriarchie" festif, dont le symbolisme cérémoniel de hiérarchie royale vient à l'encontre d'un régime de subsistance par ailleurs égalitaire.*

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## Mots clés

*Pastoralisme, Chèvre, Festivités, Hindou Kush*

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Pakistan. According to the "pastoral ideology" inherent in Kalasha religion (PARKES, 1987), goat husbandry is demarcated as a sacred (*ōjista*) activity, exclusively restricted to adult men. The ritual premisses of Kalasha society are thus founded upon the welfare of goat herds,

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transmitted from gods to early ancestors, hence upon the notion of reproducing a competent and ritually pure male community of herdsman. Goats are therefore essential mediators between the Kalasha and the hidden world of powers that surround them. But goats are also primary items of ceremonial exchange : core elements of bridewealth (*mal*, “livestock”) and of sacrificial prestige feasts (*biram’ur*, the “slaughter of male goats”).

In examining the articulation of goat husbandry with political influence, we should keep in mind this ritual significance of Kalasha goats ; for this renders the goals of their pastoral economy quite different from those of most other contemporary pastoralists, who are largely raising animals in order to sell their meat and dairy products to commercial markets (DAHL and HJORT, 1976). Kalasha livestock husbandry is alternatively directed towards social and religious “prestige” (*nam’us*).

### **Kalasha Agro-Pastoral Subsistence**

The non-Islamic Kalasha number around three thousand people, inhabiting three minor valleys of the Hindu Kush mountains in the Chitral District of northwest Pakistan. I shall focus on the small northern

community of Rumbur valley, whose Kalasha population numbered 505 people (80 households) at the time of my fieldwork in 1975-77, increasing to 815 people (93 households) by 1989 (PARKES, 1993). The entire valley community (*des*) of Rumbur is comprised of eight exogamous patrilineages (*kam*), distributed over five villages.

Before the late 1970s, when jeep tracks were built into their valleys, Kalasha communities were isolated from their neighbours in Chitral. Kalasha economy has therefore been preoccupied with domestic subsistence. Grain crops of wheat, millet and maize are cultivated on irrigated and terraced fields around village settlements at an average altitude of 1800 metres. Herds of goats, with a few sheep and cattle, are driven to high mountain pastures in summer, at altitudes over 3,000 metres, returning to winter stables near evergreen oak forests in the valleys. A wide range of natural resources at different altitudes is thus exploited, which enables most households, with barely an acre of arable land and a few score goats, to be self-sufficient.

Kalasha organize this agro-pastoral economy by means of a strict sexual division of labour. Goat husbandry is assigned exclusively to men, while women



**Plate I :** Kalasha goat corral in the mountain pastures. Rumbur valley, July 1976.

undertake most agricultural tasks, repeatedly weeding and watering crops throughout summer. Kalasha agriculture, despite its use of the plough, might best be characterised as a form of "cereal horticulture", dependent upon highly labour-intensive techniques of hoeing, weeding and watering by women, as well as regular manuring with goat dung by men (cf. EDLEBERG and JONES, 1979). The small size of average holdings of cultivated land (0.6 hectares per household in Rumbur), less than a fifth of the mean size of arable holdings reported elsewhere in this region, is thus compensated by harvests of grain with three to four times their yield elsewhere (PARKES, 1983 : 75-82).

Productive dependence upon female labour limits the amount of land that a household can profitably farm, resulting in a broadly equitable division of property, where land holding is largely a function of household size. As families grow in size, more sons become available to prepare new land for cultivation, or to earn the wherewithal in livestock or cash to acquire additional fields from other households, and more women become available to cultivate additional holdings. But as such families expand, so do the numbers of male heirs who

Goats per herd	Number of Households
	1976 (80 households)
0-10	21 *****
11-20	7 *****
21-30	4 ****
31-40	11 *****
41-50	6 *****
51-60	8 *****
61-70	11 *****
71-80	3 ***
81-90	4 ****
91-100	2 **
100-200	3 ***
200 +	1 *
	1989 (93 households)
0-10	26 *****
11-20	12 *****
21-30	10 *****
31-40	17 *****
41-50	4 ****
51-60	6 *****
61-70	1 *
71-80	2 **
81-90	1 *
91-100	3 ***
100-200	8 *****
200 +	3 ***

Fig. 1 : Distribution of Rumbur Herds by Household.

No. of Males over 15 years	Herd Sizes by Quartiles			Total	
	0-30	31-50	51-70		71-200
1	17	9	2	0	28
2	14	3	9	0	26
3	0	4	5	3	12
4+	0	1	3	10	14
Total	31	17	19	13	80

Table 1 : Association of Herd Sizes with Household Male Labour Force, Rumbur 1976.

$\chi^2 = 55.84$  (with 9 degrees of freedom),  $p = .0001$

will ultimately partition their property. Wealth in land holding therefore tends to be an impermanent product of personal industry and demographic chance, roughly redistributed in each generation.

Livestock husbandry is similarly conditioned by the labour capacity of households. But its more stringent demands on male manpower result in greater temporary inequalities in herd ownership, where almost one third of the domestic community in Rumbur owns few or no goats (fig. 1). There is indeed a close association of herd sizes with the amount of male labour available for herding in any household, where newly founded families are rarely in a position to own separate herds until their eldest sons have reached an age of around fifteen years (tab. 1). Goats herds are therefore frequently maintained as the joint property of expanded households, surviving as symbols of agnatic unity after brothers have separated their homes and fields.

The heavy dependence of goat husbandry on male manpower does therefore create productive inequalities between large and small households, corresponding with the male age of household heads, where prestigious herd owners are almost invariably patriarchal "elders" (*gad'erak*) of large families, while herdless households are typically headed by junior men with newly founded families. Underlying a broadly egalitarian subsistence regime, Kalasha pastoral economy thus harbours a latent gerontocracy, differentiating the wealthy "elders" of large herd-owning households from the majority of junior household heads with few or no livestock. Such eldership is culturally inscribed in Kalasha prestige feasts, where the successful patriarchs of large households publicly compete in the ceremonial distribution of their accumulated surpluses of livestock and grain.

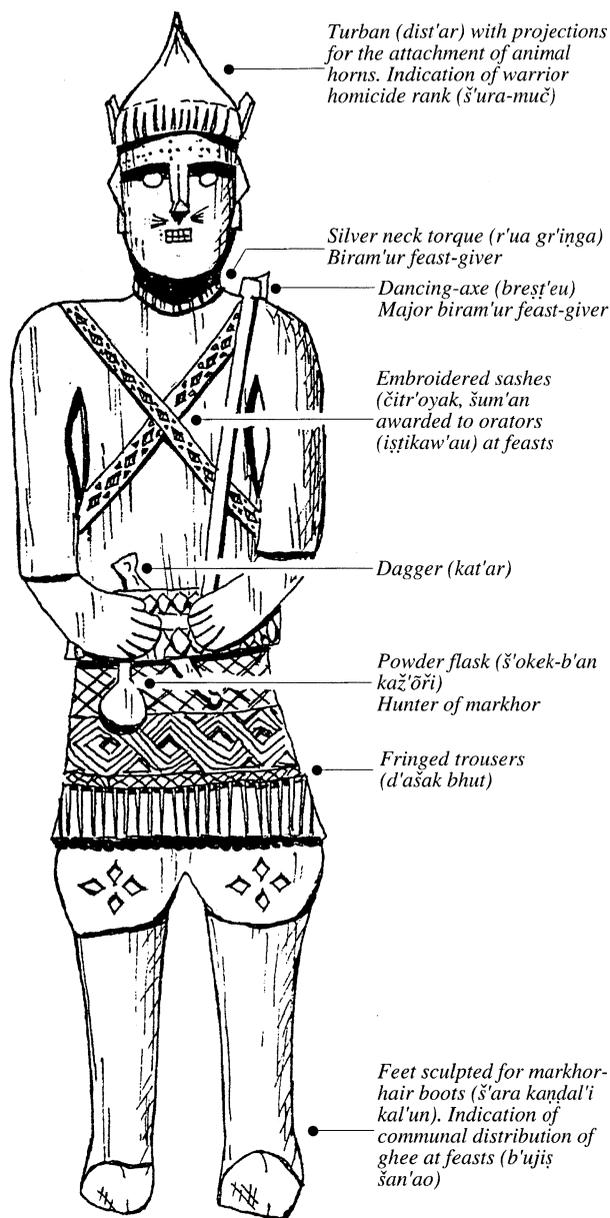


Fig. 2 : Ancestor effigy (*gaṇḍ'ao*) with characteristic rank emblems.

## Prestige Feasts

Among many kinds of public feasting in Kalasha culture, I shall concentrate on major "prestige feasts" (*namus'i čašt, žir'e*) that have evident analogies with the "feasts of merit" of Southeast Asian tribal societies (cf. SIMMOONS, 1968 ; STEVENSON, 1943 ;

LEHMANN, 1963 ; KIRSCH, 1973). We may broadly distinguish funeral and commemorative feasts for the deceased (*n'ašta žir'e*) from sacrifices and communal banquets (*mar'at, biram'ur*) given in a man's lifetime. Yet these two kinds of feasting are ideally related, as a linked series of prestigious acts that reaffirm the festal renown of a patriline of fathers and sons from one generation to the next.

## Mortuary Feasts :

All Kalasha funerals are celebrated by some degree of mortuary feasting, its scale usually determined by the festal renown of the deceased as well as by the resources available to his or her household. The reciprocal contributions of lineage members are often critical in this respect, so that the magnitude of a feast also demonstrates group support behind a household. The funerals of poor men, largely sponsored by their own families, are usually held over a single day and night, essentially restricted to an evening feast with cheese (*pand'ir žir'e*) followed by a meat feast (*mos žir'e*) at interment in the morning. Nevertheless, the cost of such minimal feasting typically amounts to over 450 kg wheat and 75 kg cheese, together with the slaughter of several goats. At prestigious funerals, celebrations of oratory and dancing are prolonged for two to three days, to enable visitors from other Kalasha communities to attend, thus doubling or trebling these costs and entailing the sacrifice of twenty or more goats.

Until recently, funerals of senior household elders would often be followed within a year by a further commemorative feast to celebrate the making of an ancestor effigy (*gaṇḍ'ao*) in honour of the deceased (fig. 2), entailing over 1000 kg wheat and a further score of goats. Most prestigious of all is the great *šarug'a* mortuary feast series for erecting an equestrian ancestor effigy (*ist'ori gaṇḍ'ao*), whose prescribed celebrations over three days include nine separate cheese, ghee and meat feasts, with the distribution of 4,500 kg wheat and some 60 "cows" (or livestock equivalents) to all households within a community.

## Sacrificial Feasts :

Sponsored sacrifices and communal distributions are usually held in the November "month of sacrifices" (*biram'ur mastr'uk*), shortly after the descent of the goat herds from the mountain pastures. Each year, apart from lineage sacrifices (*preč'eš*) at this time, at least one household in Rumbur usually sponsors a major *sari'ek* "assembly feast" to celebrate the public award of dowry



**Plate II** : Distribution of food at a *sari'ek* "assembly feast". Rumbur valley, November 1976. Assistants of the feast giver distribute portions of a porridge (*kāf'i*) made from wheat flour cooked in the stock left from boiling goat's meat at the feast.

(*žez*) to a daughter. Such celebrations are held over two days and a night, requiring vast quantities of wheat bread (1,250-1,700 kg) and cheese (100-200 kg), together with the sacrifice of twenty or more goats, often with additional distributions of ghee to each household (pl. II).

True sacrificial feasts of merit (*biram'ur*) range in scale from a "sacred feast" (*'ōjīšta biram'ur*) of 10-20 male goats to a major "autumn feast" (*š'aru biram'ur*) of 50-60 male goats, ideally enabling whole carcasses to be distributed to each household in a community. Only four such feasts have been held in Rumbur over the past fifteen years, inaugurated by the most prestigious "great feast" (*gh'ona biram'ur*) held by a political leader in autumn 1977 (see DARLING 1979 : 121-50). This great *biram'ur* requires a prior "demonstration of twenty-score goats" (*haz'ar pai paš'ai*) to senior elders of the community, as a prerequisite for the *šarug'a* mortuary feast series. The feast itself lasts over three days, entailing the sacrifice and distribution of over sixty goats (pl. III), with prior sacrifices for ritual purification

(*ist'ongas*) and for the instalment of commemorative benches (*p'īndi že mal'eri*) at the god's sanctuary, as well as the distribution of some 30 yearling kids as endowments to married lineage women. Subsequent estimates of the expenses of this feast further reckoned over 1000 kg of wheat, 100 kg cheese, 70 kg ghee, and some 6,000 Rupees (£300) expended in silken gowns and awards presented to orators and senior elders.

This cursory synopsis of the most common Kalasha feasts scarcely conveys the complexity of their performance, requiring preparations many weeks in advance, with subsidiary feasts given to entertain lineage members and kinspeople co-operating in the venture. Married lineage women (*žam'ili*) will be notified several months prior to a feast, so that they may prepare finger-woven garlands and sashes to reward visiting orators and praise singers ; then they will be called with their husbands to grind and prepare over several days and nights the vast quantities of bread required for such feasts, for which they are rewarded

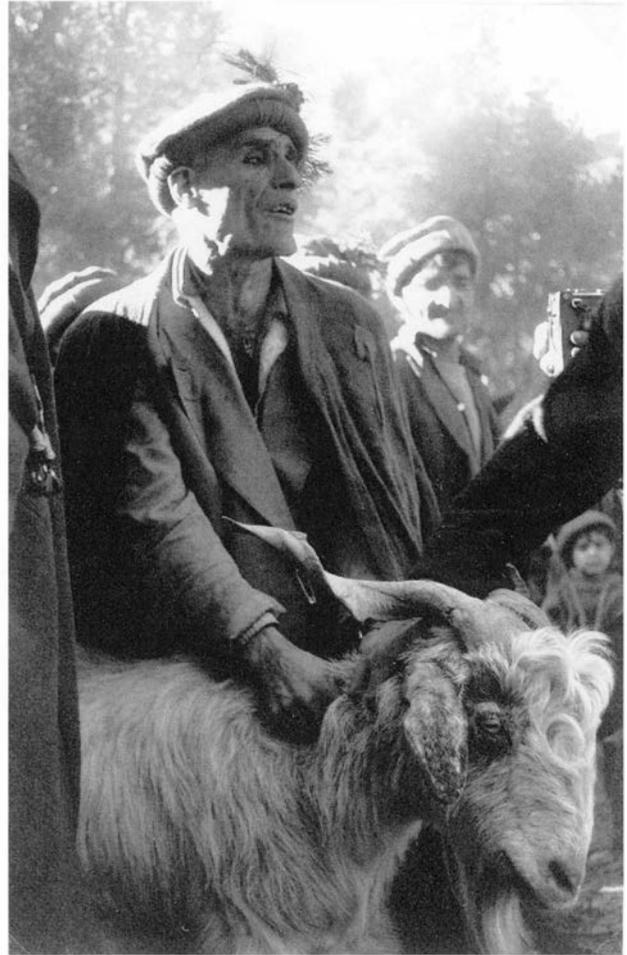
with endowments of kid goats. Major prestige feasts also require preliminary private feasts for senior valley elders (*g'aḍa baṣ'ara*), who ensure that stipulated quantities of wealth are available for distribution.

The ceremonial performance of such feasts is also characterised by elaborate symbols of nobility, where extravagant clothing and regalia (e.g. gowns, turbans, ear-rings, dancing-axes) denote festally achieved emblems of rank. At the culmination of *biram'ur* sacrifices, for example, the feast-giver will be conducted on horseback “like a king” to the sacrificial sanctuary, accompanied by other senior elders in festal attire, where he also supervises the proceedings seated on a specially carved “throne of renown” (*namus'i kurs'i* : cf. JONES, 1970 ; EDELBERG, JONES and BUDDRUS, 1984). Festal oratory similarly portrays the feast-giver as a mighty “king” (*baḍ's'a*), ruling over his subjects who have come to feed from his bounty.

### Feasting and Leadership

Similar prestige feasts were described by Robertson (1896) among the non-Islamic “Kafir” tribes of eastern Afghanistan in the late nineteenth century, from whom several Kalasha feasts and rank symbols were evidently adopted. Among the neighbouring Kam Kafirs of Bashgal valley, Robertson indicates that such feasting for rank was a precondition for effective political leadership or “Jast” (*jeṣt*) eldership (ROBERTSON, 1896 : 449-50 ; cf. STRAND 1974 : 58), with a ranked series of festal grades culminating in a title of Mir “kingship” associated with quasi-chiefly government (ROBERTSON, 1896 : 472-73 ; cf. PALWAL, 1977 : 247-50). ROBERTSON further alludes to a caste-like stratification of some five “social grades” articulated by festal status in BASHGAL (1896 : 474), together with subordinate classes of indentured clients and artisan slaves. A comparable hierarchy of graded festal ranks is also attested by JONES (1974 : 166-85) in the Waigal valley of Nuristan.

Among the Kalasha, however, the symbolism of rank and regal sovereignty emphasised in prestige feasts contrasts with an otherwise egalitarian ideology, denying any status differences within a “moral community of sufferers” (in relation to a long history of domination by encompassing Muslim powers). Kalasha notions of political leadership are indeed markedly informal : house eldership (*d'urai gaḍ'erak*) is metaphorically extended to broader lineage or community constituencies (*kam gaḍ'erak* “lineage elder”, *grom gaḍ'erak* “village elder”,



**Plate III** : A senior Kalasha elder prays with a large male goat prior to sacrifice and feasting at a sanctuary. Rumbur valley, December 1976.

*deṣ gaḍ'erak* “valley elder”) ; but such titles do not imply any distinctive status of political authority. Effective leadership is rather associated with the successful arbitration of local disputes, particularly those of wife-elopement (PARKES, 1993 ; cf. JONES, 1974 : 62-91), where the most active mediators tend to be relatively young men, in contrast to the “senior elders” (*g'aḍa baṣ'ara*) preoccupied with feasting. Indeed, most major feast-givers in Rumbur during the 1970s had either retired from active political life or else had never been considered leaders, thus having no immediate motive in converting festal renown into effective influence or authority. Yet the unprecedented revival of

major feasting over the past fifteen years, initiated by the great *biram'ur* of 1977, requires some assessment of the role of prestige feasts in political competition.

This great *biram'ur* feast, sponsored by a dominant leader of Rumbur in honour of his aged father, was in fact overtly associated with local factional politics, successfully clinching this man's pre-eminence in the community over a rival politician who had increasingly dominated the valley over the previous decade. Indeed, his intention to give the great *biram'ur* had been dramatically announced at an earlier feast, when it is customary to challenge the feast-giver by shaking the bells of his prize goat at the sanctuary, declaring one's ambition to outdo the feast. Subsequent feasting in Rumbur (and other valleys) has also been related to factional politics over the past fifteen years, when there have been three other *biram'ur* sacrifices, together with renewed feasting for *gaṇd'ao* effigies (cf. LOUDE, 1982). Major lineage feasts for the rebuilding of clan temples (*han-sar'ik*; see PARKES, 1984) have also been revived, with two such feasts being prepared in Rumbur valley for autumn 1991. From oral histories one can also reconstruct at least two similar periods of intensive feast-giving in the past (c. 1900, 1930), associated with comparable struggles for valley leadership.

Major feasting may therefore be episodically related to political leadership and factional competition in the relatively egalitarian politics of the Kalasha, as was more clearly attested in the hierarchical and festally graded societies of the Afghan Kafirs. Indeed, such feast series as the *šarug'a-biram'ur* evidently serve to transfer and perpetuate political authority within particular patrilineal lines from one generation to the next. Yet how does the political economy of such feasting structure broader social and economic relations in Kalasha communities?

## The pastoral economics of prestige

Recent ethnography on feasting, particularly in southeast Asia and Melanesia, has particularly emphasised its role in structuring political domination and social asymmetry (LEHMANN, 1963; FRIEDMAN, 1975; MODJESKA, 1982; GODELIER, 1986: 162-88; cf. GODELIER and STRATHERN, 1991). Where earlier functionalist ethnographers focused upon the reciprocal "redistribution" of resources in such "institutionalised liberality" (BARNETT, 1938; LEACH, 1954: 87; PIDDOCKE, 1965), Marxian analyses of social reproduction alternatively highlight the canalising of

authority and control over resources that is often presupposed by the organisation of redistribution. Hence reciprocity (exchange) and redistribution (pooling and sharing) become analytically polarised, often to characterise the dominant transactional modes of respectively egalitarian and hierarchical polities (SAHLINS, 1972: 130-48; GREGORY, 1982: 69-70). Following Bourdieu's (1977: 171-83) analysis of feasting and gift-giving in Kabylia as techniques of "symbolic violence", some ethnographers further argue that such feasts typically entail processes of disguised coercion and exploitation (e.g. JOSEPHIDES, 1985).

Kalasha prestige feasts, however, being largely dependent upon the agro-pastoral resources of single households or minor descent groups, appear to play little strategic role in the reproduction of social asymmetries, which are mainly derived from the differential development of domestic groups. Feasts rather serve to "emblematised" the ephemeral prosperity of large households, just prior to their dissolution on the death of an elder, when sons usually partition their property - and frequently dissolve their accumulated pastoral resources in extravagant funerals.

The social implications of Kalasha feasts should rather be interpreted within the pastoral dynamics of their "prestige economy" of goat husbandry (PARKES, 1983: 144-72). Examining the composition of Kalasha festival herds (tab. 2a), one finds that reproductive nannies constitute a much smaller proportion (c. 45%) of total herd sizes than is commonly reported elsewhere (DAHL and HJORT, 1976: 88, 96, 207), with a greater proportion of mature bucks (up to an age of nine years) being allowed to survive for sacrificial feasting. Large herds that have been accumulated for feasting also have significantly higher rates of kid mortalities than smaller subsistence herds (tab. 2b): ranging from 25 per cent in herds of around 100 animals to over 70 per cent in a herd of some 200 goats (Herd D, accumulated for the great *biram'ur* feast of 1977). Such festival herds have therefore reached a peak of expansion, when escalating mortalities of kids and immature goats (mainly due to their trampling and insufficient fodder in the winter stables) undermines future growth (tab. 2c). Feasting therefore becomes imperative at this stage, in order to cull herds of surplus male stock (which are predominantly sacrificed) and thus ensure continuing capital growth. Annual rates of herd growth vary from over 20 per cent in herds of 20-30 goats to barely 15 per cent in herds of 60-80 goats, after which threshold they rapidly decline. Under ideal conditions, it would therefore take a household at least

**Table 2** : Composition and Mortalities of Four Rumbur Herds, 1975-76.

## a) Age and Sex Composition, June 1976

	Herd A		Herd B		Herd C		Herd D		Total Herds		Total
	m	f	m	f	m	f	m	f	m	f	
9 years	–	–	–	–	–	2	5	–	5	2	7
8 years	–	–	–	–	–	2	3	13	3	15	18
7 years	–	–	–	1	–	6	8	15	8	22	30
6 years	–	–	–	4	–	4	–	19	0	27	27
5 years	–	8	3	8	9	10	–	11	12	37	49
4 years	2	10	5	11	8	4	–	25	15	50	65
3 years	3	16	6	11	6	4	5	7	20	38	58
2 years	10	10	6	12	6	9	16	30	38	61	99
1 year	15	8	5	12	7	8	11	9	38	37	75
3 months	14	8	13	17	11	20	10	10	48	55	103
<b>TOTAL</b>	44	60	38	76	47	69	58	139	187	344	531
	104		114		116		197				

## b) Birth and Mortality of Kids, March-June 1976

	Herd A	Herd B	Herd C	Herd D	Total
Fertile Females	44	48	41	120	253
Kids Born	35	50	44	70	199
Kids Died	13	20	13	50	96
Kids Survived	22	30	31	20	103
Kids as % Herd	21 %	26 %	27 %	10 %	19.4 %

## c) Livestock Mortalities, June 1975 - 76

	Herd A	Herd B	Herd C	Herd D	Total
<i>Yearling Kids:</i>					
sacrificed	8	1	2	1	12
died or lost	5	2	4	41	52
Total	13	3	6	42	64
<i>Male Goats:</i>					
sacrificed	3	2	7	5	17
died or lost	2	6	0	1	9
<i>Female Goats:</i>					
sacrificed	1	0	2	0	3
died or lost	5	0	2	1	8
Total Mortalities	24	11	17	49	101
Kids Surviving	22	30	31	20	103
Balance	-2	+19	+14	-29	+2

six years to double an average herd of 30 animals to one of 60 goats, and well over ten years to double it again to a festal size of over one hundred animals. Since few men are in a position to own goats until they have sons to assist in herding, one appreciates that feasting is truly the sport of Kalasha “elders”.

Feasting does therefore express temporary inequalities between Kalasha households at different stages of developmental expansion. Yet most households can eventually establish herds : either by sending boys to work as paid herdsmen for wealthy herd owners, from whom they receive all new-born kids on the third year of employment, or by exchanging land for livestock. Rates of herd growth are also sufficient to enable households ideally to move across the entire spectrum of economic differentials in stockholding within a generation ; and the volatility of goat herds, subject to unpredictable ravages of disease and theft, further adds momentum to such social mobility (PARKES, 1983 : 152-54 ; but cf. BRADBURD, 1982).

Feasting also clearly provides an incentive to pastoral production, encouraging large households to

accumulate “prestige herds” well beyond their own consumption needs, whose surplus products are often redistributed to herdless kinsmen (PARKES, 1993 : ch. 6). And while the slaughter of livestock and public consumption of food in such feasts scarcely amounts to a “levelling mechanism” of redistribution (where the culling of male stock is rather a prerequisite for the perpetuation of large herds), it does preclude alternative investments of livestock into other assets (e.g. land) that could provide a more permanent basis for social differentiation.

In summary, Kalasha prestige feasts articulate a minimal level of social and political differentiation that mainly reflects the increased manpower and pastoral productivity of large households. Competitive feasting appears periodically related to political leadership and factional rivalry ; but feasting is perhaps more commonly motivated by traditional values of “renown” (*nam’us*) - a distinctly ceremonial (and ritually sanctioned) expression of patriarchal authority that is inherent in Kalasha notions of eldership, symbolised by pastoral prowess and sacrificial redistribution.

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