

# HOLGER HOFFMANN

## At the Kalashi's Winter Solstice Festival

**T**he Chawmos, a 14-day Winter Solstice Festival, is the most important event in the year of the Kalashi, an animist minority in northern Pakistan. The Festival is a portrait in contrasts: solemn ritual and joyous dancing, gender segregation and public flirtation, togetherness, and isolation. Purity and purification are the big themes of this festival.

The torchbearers set out for the procession with their 2 to 5 meter long torches.  
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The festival starts with women and  
children waving juniper twigs above  
their heads as they process to the  
temple.  
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Men making walnut bread for the purification ritual.  
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At the women's purification ritual, their heads are circled with burning juniper branches.  
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During the festival, whenever there is a possibility, people dance – day and night.  
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Beans cooking in huge iron pots to be used for internal cleaning.  
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**T**he Kalash are a group of about 4,000 people, the country's smallest minority group, who live in the mountains of the Hindu Kush, where they practice an ancient polytheistic faith. Their religion is often compared to an ancient form of Hinduism, but the origins of the Kalash are a mystery. Their faith incorporates animistic traditions of worshiping nature and a pantheon of gods, whose members, in some instances, bear resemblances to the Vedic gods of ancient India. The main god of the Kalash is Balumain, the lord of heaven to whom the festival is dedicated. The Kalash believe places and people are most likely to be visited by Balumain only after being cleaned, pure, and sanctified.

Each year, they come together for Chawmos, a New Year festival that coincides with the winter solstice marked by animal sacrifice, dance, and prescribed roles for men and women. Holger Hoffmann has experienced this festival up close and has undergone the necessary cleansing rituals, getting to know the lively and very friendly people.

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During the festival, whenever there is a possibility, people dance – day and night.  
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Left Page Top: At the beginning of the festival, the house and clothes are cleaned.  
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Left Page Bottom: After having sacrificed goats, the men's purification ritual ends with the blessing of the bread.  
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Top: The Kalash village, Pakistan, with a stunning mountain backdrop.  
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The torchbearers set out for the procession  
with their 2 to 5 meter long torches.  
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The initiation of  
the 7 to 10-year-  
old boys, who are  
seen as the purest  
creatures in the  
Kalash culture.  
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From all three  
valleys, the Kalashi  
people get together  
to celebrate the last  
day of the festival.  
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# HOLGER HOFFMANN

Holger Hoffmann has traveled together with his wife Sylvia Furrer on more than 75 trips since 1977 and has visited 60 countries outside Europe. In 1995 they founded chaostours.ch. Sylvia is the director, Holger the guide, and they are so far the only customers, but very satisfied with the self-organizing way of traveling. That keeps them open-minded to the unexpected.

The longer they travel together, the more they become fascinated by the customs and the daily life of indigenous people who preserve their traditional culture. They developed a profound respect for these people who subsist in remote

areas under harsh living conditions such as in the extreme cold of Siberia, the hot desert of the Danakil, the wet jungle in West Papua, or the high mountains in the Himalayas. Nomadic people have become a major focus of their recent travels. They are deeply impressed by how they handle the threats of climate change and adapt to the advances and pressures of the modern world.

In 2012 they started to publish some travel reports to share their impressions with a broader community of travelers. Usually, Sylvia is the writer and Holger the photographer.





From all three valleys, the Kalashi people get together to celebrate the last day of the festival.  
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At the women's purification ritual, their heads are circled with burning juniper branches. Holger Hoffmann © All rights reserved.

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