

Making myth a reality



Two model gandas, Kalasha, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, Pakistan, late 19th century, from the collection of Colonel G.C. Hodgson



Two model gandas, Kalasha, Pakistan, late 19th century, from the collection of Captain H. Bethune

Three model gandas, Kalasha, Chitral District, North-West Frontier Province, Pakistan, late 1915–16, from the collection of Captain J.P. Sulley



Funerary carvings from northern Pakistan were transformed to meet the demands of foreign visitors. **Sushma Jansari** elaborates



Kalasha man in front of model gandas, photographed by Capt J.P. Sulley, 1915–16 (©Royal Geographical Society)

The Department of Asia's ethnographic collection comprises around 35,000 diverse objects and textiles, ranging from intricate Siberian carvings in mammoth ivory to stunning Japanese lacquer ware and breathtaking shadow puppets. Most of the material was acquired during the 19th and early 20th centuries, but contemporary pieces are also represented, including exceptional textiles and beaded basketry. Among this wide-ranging collection is an unusual group of eleven carved wooden statuettes that closely resemble figures made in Pakistan called gandas.

Gandas are life-sized male and female effigies carved from wood by the Kalasha people, who live in Chitral District. The wood used is traditionally deodar, a type of fragrant Himalayan cedar. The gandas are often intricately carved, painted and draped with items of clothing, and the eyes are frequently inlaid with round white stones. Considered to be imbued with the spirit of the deceased, the figures are placed near coffins. Notably, they are not exact portraits of the deceased but generally uniform and stylised representations. There are three types: standing, seated and equestrian figures. Male figures are more common than female and are generally carved either standing or on horseback, with the horse having either one or two heads. The two-headed horse figure is a particularly potent

symbol of power, representing the highest status that can be accorded through a gandau to a Kalasha individual. Similarly, male figures carved wearing turbans denote authority and bravery. By contrast, women tend to be depicted seated on ornately carved chairs wearing caps with four horns. These horns refer back to the belief among the Kalasha that a goat born with four horns was an auspicious omen.

Kalasha funerary culture is distinct from that of their Muslim neighbours. A number of anthropologists, including George S. Robertson who authored *The Kafirs of the Hindu Kush* in 1896 and, more recently, Peter Parkes who completed the most significant and comprehensive work on the Kalasha, have demonstrated that these people have their own distinct way of life, speak their own language and produce their own unique material culture, including their style of dress. They also practise their own unique religion and rituals, strongly influenced by ancient Hindu Vedic religion and rituals. There is an Indra-like deity, called Indr in Kalasha (the Kalasha language), for example, who shares many attributes with the Vedic god, but with some modifications: when it thunders, it is said that Indr is playing polo.

The Kalasha live in three valleys in the Chitral District of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province (formerly

Carved wood model gandau, Kalasha, Pakistan, late 19th–early 20th century, from the collection of Lieutenant-Colonel G.P.T. Dean





Carved wood model gandau, Kalasha, Pakistan, late 19th–early 20th century, from the collection of Major-General S.H. Powell



Carved wood model gandau, Kalasha, Pakistan, late 19th–early 20th century, from the collection of H.G. Beasley



One model gandau, Kalasha, Pakistan, late 19th–early 20th century, given by anonymous donor

North-West Frontier Province) in Pakistan, which borders the Nuristan Province of Afghanistan. These valleys are Bumburet, Rumbur and Birir. This remote mountainous homeland contributed to the Kalasha's isolation and their relative immunity from historical waves of religious change. The same is not true for other polytheistic communities in neighbouring Nuristan who, in the past, had belief systems, rituals, festivals and a number of cultural aspects in common with the Kalasha. This changed in 1895–96 when Emir Abdur Rahman Khan (the so-called 'Iron Emir') of Afghanistan oversaw their enforced mass conversion to Islam. Up to this point, these communities were referred to as 'Kafirs' ('unbelievers') and the land in which they lived 'Kafiristan' ('land of the unbelievers'). After their religious conversion, the Emir renamed them 'Nuristanis' ('enlightened ones') and the land 'Nuristan' ('land of the enlightened ones'). The British control of Chitral at this time meant that the Kalasha escaped the Emir's attempts to convert them.

The Kalasha have various stories about their history and origins. Interestingly, many claim descent from Alexander the Great and those of his army who settled in ancient Arachosia, Gedrosia and Bactria. The story of a lost Hellenic people in these north-

western regions of the subcontinent has been repeated many times and over many years, including by Rudyard Kipling in *The man who would be king* (1888). Recent genetic testing, however, has overturned these claims: the Kalasha have Indo-Iranian rather than Macedonian or Greek genetic ancestry. As the narrative has clearly come from an outside source since it was not handed down through their oral tradition, it is interesting that this claim has become a widely accepted belief among the Kalasha themselves. Notably, the earliest ethnographic studies of these peoples by G.S. Robertson and H.W. Bellew (*An Enquiry into the Ethnography of Afghanistan*, 1891) revealed that the Kalasha made no such connections; in fact, it was Robertson who made the link.

It is this historical background and the Kalasha people's perceived genealogical link with Alexander the Great that seems to have made their artefacts – especially the group of the eleven objects under discussion – so interesting to the people who collected them. The four earliest examples of these funerary-related objects in the Museum's collection were acquired by Colonel G.C. Hodgson and Captain Hector Bethune, both of the 32nd Sikh Pioneers, during the Relief of Chitral in 1895. After this campaign, the men accompanied Francis Younghusband on

the British Expedition to Tibet where Bethune died; Hodgson was awarded the Edward VII Distinguished Service Order. The four figures thus travelled from Chitral to Tibet and then to India before arriving in London. Three figures were made for Captain J.P. Sulley in Chitral in 1915–16, arriving at the British Museum with a selection of photographs of the Kalasha and, among others, their important funerary and ritual sites. Of the remaining four objects in the collection, two were also acquired by soldiers stationed in this region – Lieutenant-Colonel G.P.T. Dean who served with the 14th Punjab Regiment in Chitral in 1923 and Major-General S.H. Powell, the founder of the Indian Signal Service. The acquisition information regarding the final two remains vague. One was donated by H.G. Beasley, an important collector of ethnographic objects, while a label associated with the last object notes that it was acquired in 'Kafiristan' in 1936.

Overwhelmingly, these objects were acquired by soldiers, which raises the question why. Military personnel stationed in the region would of course have the opportunity to acquire such pieces, but these objects appealed to them for a reason. The perceived link between the Kalasha and Alexander the Great was part of the nexus of assumptions about the region which

informed British visitors in the late 19th century. The men who acquired them were from the British officer class, whose education would have emphasised Graeco-Roman history, making them particularly susceptible to stories linking their empire with Alexander's. It was most notably this mythology surrounding the origins of the Kalasha that attracted the British officers to these objects as, perhaps for them, the objects embodied a palpable link with their illustrious predecessor and conqueror of the region.

Although these eleven objects closely resemble gandas, there is one significant difference, that of size. Gandas are traditionally carved life-size, whereas those in the collection are between 40 and 56 cm in height. The Kalasha carved smaller human figures to place on top of shrine-posts, but a careful examination gave no indication that the Museum's objects had ever been part of a shrine-post. It seems that they had a different function in the culture of the Kalasha community.

A letter found among the photographs donated by Sulley was most revealing, as it stated: 'Three genuine replicas of funeral effigies from Kafirstan, possibly no longer obtainable – made for me by Kafirs of Bomboret Chitral in 1915/16.' One of his photographs

(now in the Royal Geographical Society) portrayed a man wearing a traditional Kalasha wool cap in front of eight model gandas that very closely resemble those in the Museum. It seems likely that the Kalasha made these especially for sale to eager British customers. Thus the Kalasha's distinct culture – including material culture – gave rise to a market for their cultural artefacts which caused a demand-led transformation of how they themselves interacted with these objects.

In Kalasha culture today ganda models remain significant and relevant. Rehmat Wali, a contemporary sculptor living in Kalashgram village in Rumbur valley, makes his living from carving gandas as funerary effigies, souvenirs and also as works of art. He has introduced changes to the traditional way gandas were carved, such as carving them with the traditional, everyday woollen caps that Kalasha men wear in place of the martial pointed turbans of older generations. The custom of commissioning these objects for funeral is in decline, however, as it is too expensive. This makes the creation of gandas as souvenirs and works of art more important as sources of income.

Wali learned his carving skills from his father, who had travelled to Prashun

valley in Nuristan Province to learn this art. The carvers in Prashun were noted for their ability to carve gandas from a single piece of wood. This transfer of knowledge across geographical, political and cultural boundaries has essentially ground to a halt, but the craftsmanship survives and continues to change and develop.

While gandas are still being commissioned and made for their original purpose, the other form of production, started by soldier-collectors in the 19th century, continues to feed the foreign, increasingly tourist-driven, market. These beautiful, striking objects have become souvenirs or works of art in their own right, depicting a people in transition.

The author would like to thank Zulfiqar Ali Kalhoro of the Pakistan Institute for Development Economics (PIDE) for sharing information he recently gathered from Rehmat Wali; for details of the objects, see the Museum's online collection at britishmuseum.org



Gandua being carried to its resting point as part of a funeral, Chitral © Luke Rehmat



Gandua statues erected outside a village in Chitral © Luke Rehmat