The Dardic Pashai language is spoken by about 200,000 persons in eastern Afghanistan, inhabiting the valleys of the Hindu Kush between Nuristan and the lowlands of the Kabul/Kunar river system. Pashai, related to Sanskrit, is the northwesternmost Indian language, being divided into various dialects, and its linguistic unity was first declared by Morgenstierne in 1926. Though the term ‘Pashai’ is of local origin, not all Pashai-speakers – for instance the Soom, Shenganek and Chugani in eastern areas – regard themselves as Pashais, Pashai-speakers not having developed the same sense of ethnic solidarity as did the neighbouring Nuristanis as a result of their forcible conversion to Islam in 1896. The Islamization of the Pashai took place gradually, being completed in the 19th century. Morgenstierne thought the present-day Pashai to be the offspring of the Hindu-Buddhist civilizations of the plains, but local traditions refer to immigrants from the north (Kurdar in the Pech valley). With its sexual division of labour, the ‘Nuristani Pattern’ has prevailed among the Pashai, with the exception of those near the plains who have been most exposed to Pashtun influence; this means that women are excluded from activities involved in animal husbandry and the breeding of goats. In terms of their social structure, which was originally exogamous and based on patrilineal descent groups of various levels, they resemble the Nuristanis, much more than the Pashtuns in the south. Meritorious feast giving, now practised in Islamic terms, is still common among them. There is evidence of numerous pre-Islamic sites, such as wine cisterns, hewn in the rock, grave chambers and megalithic memorials for feast givers, warriors and men hunters (badur), whose names and deeds are still handed down by the people. A memorial in Oigal, in the Darra-i Nur valley, next to a public meeting place (wastal), has marks on a rock indicating the number of human beings (men and women represented by different signs) who were killed in raids by a badur. There are ancient village sites connected by local tradition with a lower social stratum of serfs and craftsmen, allegedly converted to Islam only later, by newcomers. Hence their ‘social inferiority’ is regarded as being legitimized by historical tradition.

The Pashai village nearest the Plains is Shewa, on the banks of the Kunar (near it’s mouth to the Kabul river) at an altitude of 600 m (2000 ft). The uppermost settlements are close to the timber line, at 1,900 m (6,200 ft). Owing to their ecological setting, houses are made mainly of mud, stone masonry or timber, and there are various intermediate constructions like mud houses with stone masonry at the base, or stone houses with their upper floors built partially in timber. Higher up the valleys, the villages are situated above elaborately irrigated field terraces, and the biggest of them, consisting of up to 400 houses, are found on the upper sides of the valleys. With the higher slopes covered by holly-oak forests, their populations depend much more on the breeding of goats than do those living further down the valleys, where mountain slopes are bare and desert-like. At the bottom of the valleys, arable land and the number of villages both increase. Whereas the upper villages are built terrace-like on steep and rocky slopes, lower villages are smaller, being built on more gentle slopes or forming clusters of houses on the valley bottom. Therefore the basements of their houses do not get much light, in contrast to their roofs which are connected to, and form part of, lofty summer quarters; this accords a basic pattern which holds true for the upper villages: the house and its environment, including the mountain pastures, are used in a seasonal manner, the lower floors of the houses being used as winter lodgings and cattle pens.

Cows are usually kept near the door, with people sitting on stools or Indian beds around the open fireplace in the centre, from which the smoke escapes through a smoke-hole in the roof, or simply through the entrance door. Frequently such a room is connected with a storeroom or cellar, and there are mud-plastered granaries at its rear, amidst earthen pots, some of them in a pile and covered by a type of three-legged bowl, in a modest variant of certain Nuristani rank-objects such as fire stands made of twisted wrought iron and three-legged table stands, which are seen also in Pashai villages (e.g. Aret, Shumasht and Oigal), though they have become rare there.

Among the Pashai are skilled artisans, such as blacksmiths and silversmiths, potters, weavers, and carpenters and wood carvers. Pashai wood carvings take different forms with two main styles. One of them has ist local centre in Sotan in the Darra-i Nur, and the other in Aret and Shumasht in the upper Darra-i Mazar, where it can be studied in the window shutters of the houses, especially in the facades of their upper floors, with their lofty summer lodgings (loara). Certainly the style of Aret is of local origin, and it is related to the wood carvings of Ashkun, Wama and Waigal in southern Nuristan. The Sotan style, on the other hand, derives from Hellenistic and Indo-Iranian civilizations like the much better-known carvings of the Swat valley in Pakistan, from which it is, however, very different.
Kalasha is an Indo-Iranian language of various dialects, being spoken by a few thousand individuals in five valleys on the west of the Chitral river; there are remains of it, too, in the valley of Chitral and Shishi Kuh. The Kalasha are well known as the 'last Kafirs of the Hindu Kush' because of their ancient religion, which has survived amidst an overwhelming Islamic majority in the valleys of Rumbur, Bumburet and Birir (Kalasha: Rugmu, Mumuret, Biriu). They are based on exogamous patrilinear descent groups, inhabiting small villages of the valleys, at an altitude of approximately 1,500–1,900m (5,000–6,200 ft), covered by holly-oak forests; the main basis of their economy is animal husbandry combined with agriculture.

According to a sexual division of labour, women are excluded from all activities of animal husbandry, particularly the breeding of (he) goats, which belong to an idealized sphere of ritual purity. They are not permitted to participate in the enclosing of the alpine pastures, and such activities as the ritual killing of sacrificial animals and hunting. The female sphere is considered to be ritually impure, as are such phenomena as birth, menstruation and death. Hence a system of binary classification embraces human beings, animals, plants and artefacts, dividing the world of valley, village and houses into pure 'upper' and impure 'lower' parts. These meet in the central areas of the villages, where family- and clan houses (the ceremonial centres of a clan) are situated.

During the winter solstice festival all Kalasha men in Bumburet (Mumuret) retreat for several nights into their goat pens, which serve as cult meeting houses for the performance of secret hymns. Whereas family houses have some measure of comfort (Indian beds, stools and chairs), the shepherds sleep in the goathouses on rough platforms above the ground and close to the animals. The upper levels of the villages are places for the sacrificial animals, and many of them are killed there. The lower levels, close to the river, are places of death and birth. The menstruation house (bashali) is also there (being taboo for men as the goat pens are for women) as is the cemetery, a miniature village of the dead, whose coffins (effigies) are placed in the ground, according to their clan membership.

The spatial division of houses follows the same principle. The house is seen as a world, the world is seen as a house. The rear of the family houses (the space beyond the second pair of central columns) is called 'pure place' (on jeshta wa), corresponding to the ritually pure village quarter of the goat pens and the village shrine, from where it annually receives (at the winter festival) a handful of earth. The Kalasha word for house (dur) also denotes holy places, the abodes of the gods, even if they are not within a built structure, but occur only in natural formations beyond the ritual space of the village.

Guest-houses (anguti) and summer lodgings (gutu) are nowadays built on shaded places at the river side, changing the original settlement pattern of a few compact villages on the mountain slopes. These buildings do not belong to the ritual unity, which includes such places as family houses and the most rudimentary shrines. Once a shaman had discovered a regular, circle-like line on a boulder in the Birir valley, associating it with a shield (a symbol of rank) or a smoke hole, he became, by an act of perception, an 'architect' and the founder of such a place, a house in the broadest sense of the world. A more common type of shrine consists of a built structure with a symbolic window to the other world, corresponding to the smoke-holes of the dwellings, both receiving sacrifices. Architectural structures such as shrines have more or less a secondary function, and their establishment must be seen in connection with a feast-giving, an institution which concludes any building activity. The restoration of a clan house, for example, demands a lavish feast (han sarik), being much more costly than the actual building process. It is thus legitimized, giving evidence as important as that of wood carvings, effigies of feast-givers and their symbols of rank.

Kalasha dwellings are similarly constructed to those of neighbouring ethnic groups. Stone masonry, stabilized by layers of wooden beams, is laid under the advice of carpenters, who might belong to another ethnic group. In the construction of irrigation systems or watermills, the Kalasha are dependent on experts among the Kho, while there are a few houses of high-ranking men in upper Bumburet built some generations ago by Bari artisans of the Kati of Nuristan. The Kalasha might have adopted from the Kho a special roof construction, the 'lantern'. It is a sign of prestige, and most of the clan houses show it, except those using defence towers of an ancient type, such as are being preserved in the Islamized Jinjiret Kuh. Wood carvings and effigies are similar to those in the pre-Islamic Bashgal valley in Nuristan, due to the advice of Bari artisans, especially one from Burmutul in upper Bumburet, named Tsawile. But the central columns of clan-houses and ancient family houses are of a very different stile.