

From hostage to host: the spirit possession, mediumship, and gender relations in Chitral, Pakistan

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Abstract

This study explains how certain women in Chitral, Pakistan attain the status of spirit mediumship (Pari Khan) – a process where certain women attain the status and qualification to host spirits through which they claim to heal illnesses. For data collection, the study conducted in-depth interviews with spirit media, their assistants and clients, shamans, and clinicians; collected cases studies of possessed persons and their lived experiences of illness and healing; and conducted participant observations with spirit media (Pari Khan) to observe the healing rituals in its natural setting. The study reveals that patriarchal culture and oppressive norms frustrate women to the extent of illnesses that are locally interpreted as ‘spirit possession.’ As per the local practice, the treatment of the illness lies in either exorcism or domestication of the spirit. In the case of domestication, the possessed women (patients) gradually learn to live with the spirit and become its host. Such a woman is locally called Pari Khan, who gains considerable attention and social status by virtue of her alleged spiritual powers to heal various illnesses. The authors argue that spirit possession and mediumship, though provide relative empowerment to women, take away attention from women’s social and psychological deprivation.

Keywords: women, spirits, spirit possession, exorcism, adorcism, spirit media (Pari Khan), social deprivations, psychological deprivations, patriarchy, paradigm shift.

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1. Introduction

This study was conducted in Chitral, Pakistan with the purpose to explain the process of women becoming spirit media (*Pari Khan*) i.e., spiritual healers and to analyse the gendered nature of the process. This study is significant for it not just adds rare data on the topic in the research area but also tends to explore the phenomenon of spirit possession and spirit mediumship through the multi-disciplinary lens of sociology-anthropology, gender studies, psychology, and psychiatry. The main argument of our study is that patriarchal culture and socially oppressive norms thwart women to the condition of mental illnesses which are locally interpreted as spirit possessions. The possessed women could be healed either through ritually driving away the spirits or through the domestication of the spirits. In the latter case, the women become the spirit media locally known as the *Pari Khan*. The spirit media are believed to have the power to heal illnesses of various kinds. In Chitral, Pakistan, the easy accessibility of spiritual healers and the less economic cost associated with them, coupled with the shortage of medical and psychiatric staff make these healers perform a pivotal role in the traditional healing system.

The study though agrees with existing anthropological and sociological studies which argue that spirit possession and spirit mediumship bring relative attention and empowerment to otherwise marginalized women, yet it also contends to highlight another aspect of the phenomenon accordingly associating women's illnesses to spirits takes away attention from the patriarchal and oppressive social conditions. Moreover, the relative empowerment of the spirit media (*Pari Khan*) is also questioned because as per the local beliefs, it is the spirit not the woman who gives advises and heals illness. The status gained by the spirit media gets performed in such a manner that the status quo of men is not challenged. Once the spirits leave or the illness disappears the women are exposed back to the existing oppressive social conditions. The objectives of the study are: (a) to investigate the process of women becoming spirit media in Chitrali society, and (b) to see the gender dimension of spirit mediumship in the research area.

2. Literature review

Belief in spirits and their ability to possess humans is a fairly universal phenomenon (Bhasin, 2007; Baker & Bader, 2014; Dein & Illaiee, 2013). Spirit possession is defined as “any altered or unusual state of consciousness, change in identity and allied behaviour that is indigenously understood in terms of the influence of an alien spirit, demon, or deity (Cohen, 2008; Dein & Illaiee, 2013; Huskinson & Schmidt, 2010, p. 4). Studies reveal that mostly women (Sommer, 2004) and socially marginalized people get possessed (Dein & Illaiee, 2013; Mischel & Mischel, 1958).

Across cultures, spirit possession is believed to be an illness (Bourguignon, 2004) and it is considered to be the domain of a holy man - a shaman- who through a series of religious-cum-magic intervention would exorcise¹ the spirits (Morris, 2006). Alternatively, the spirits, usually holy, get domesticated through adoricism² (Langley, 1980) in which case the illness disappears and the possessed persons, mostly females, become the spirit media by acting as an intermediary between humans and the spirits (Patamajorn, 2007). By becoming spirit media, women usually attain high status and respect in the community (Patamajorn, 2007; Mischel & Mischel, 1958). They become spiritual healers and serve clients by entering into trance³ (Schaffler et al., 2016; Patamajorn, 2007). Moreover, the possessed persons enjoy sick roles

and are exempted from routine social roles and the responsibility for the behaviours during possession (Morris, 2006). Possession is also argued to be a ‘coping strategy’ by which the victims can express their unconscious forbidden feelings and emotions, and forward aspirations which otherwise are denied (Bourguignon, 2004; Bhasin, 2007). It has been argued that spirit mediumship depicts sex war in patriarchal societies (Lewis, 1971) where women use possession to ‘resist and protest’ their oppression in culturally sanctioned ways (Cohen, 2008). Lewis (1971) uses the term “peripheral possession” according to which people peripheral to power structure such as women use possession as a means for forwarding their aspirations. It is the symptom of the social and psychological deprivations of the marginalized (Lewis, 1971) expressed in culturally sanctioned religious rituals. However, this approach is unable to provide a full explanation to possession as most women do not resort to possession by thinking that they are oppressed (Sered, 1994) nor they do it overtly to gain benefits (Nourse, 1996; see Khan & Bano, 2020).

In contemporary medicine and psychiatry, a spirit medium is defined as an individual who is having some sort of mental illness, hysteria or neurotic disorder, paranoid, or even psychotic due to their initial illness and hysteria (Devereux, 1961). In many cultures, they are accused of selling magic and selling holy verses to gain material benefits, being superstitious, cheating ignorant people of their money and a threat for development and thus destined to wane (Marsden, 2005; Yang, 2015). Despite these allegations, in many traditional societies (Patamajon, 2007; Lee, 2009; Teoh, 1873) these healers are more famous than clinicians and attract more patients than formally trained psychiatrists (Chandrashekar *et al.*, 1982).

3. Methodology

The study was conducted using qualitative traditions. Intensive fieldwork was conducted in Chitral to collect data from the local people, including spirit media, their assistants, shamans, and their clients/patients. A few psychiatrists were also consulted to understand their views regarding the phenomenon of spirit possession and spirit mediumship. Data was collected using a variety of tools, including in-depth interviews with spirit media, patients of ‘possession’, and shamans. In total, 35 in-depth interviews were conducted with various groups of participants, including spirit media (5), assistants of spirit media (5), clients of spirit media (5), current and ex-patients who were declared as ‘possessed’ (10), shamans (5), and psychiatrists (5). In addition, focus ethnography was also used with the purpose to observe the performance rituals of the spirit media in its natural setting. One of the researchers, who belongs to the local area, was able to work as a participant observer and record the processes and rituals of healing and exorcism in three different settings. Most of the participants were selected with the help of a snowball sampling technique, while some were identified through personal links and relationship of the researchers in the community. In this article, however, we have used only some of the data relating to spirit media. Both men and women participants were selected for this study, but female participants outnumbered male participants. It is because spirit possession is experienced more among females as compared to males in general and because the spirit media and their clients in Chitral were almost all females.

It is relevant to mention here that data collection was not easy because of the sensitivity and secrecy attached to spirits and faith healing. It took a lot of negotiating skills to get the consent of the participants for interviews. The spirit media, all of whom were female, were mostly suspicious about our research and they were hesitant to allow us for observation or interviews.

Male members of their family were taken into confidence who, in turn, convinced the female patients and spirit media for data collection. In some cases, the female spirit media never talked to stranger males. Instead, their husband/other male relatives worked as their assistants and spokespersons. Therefore, these ‘gatekeepers’ were interviewed first and once they were befriended, they allowed us to collect data from female participants. Throughout the research, ethical principles were strictly observed, including informed consent and participants’ anonymity and confidentiality. Care was taken so that the feelings and emotions of the research participants would not be hurt. The researchers have attempted to keep a balance between non-interference in the social lives of the people and academic duty to contribute to the knowledge.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Spirit media (*Nangeni* or *Pari Khan*) and the gender politics in Chitral

Our study reveals that spirit media in Chitral are mostly women. Similar findings have been reported for other cultures such as in Trinidad (Mischel & Mischel, 1958) and in Thai society (Tanabe, 1996). In Chitral, like most other societies, women are considered as weak, fragile, and flattering. Likewise, being viewed as soft and easily penetrable, it is believed that women are prone to get possessed by alien forces such as spirits and demons. This is especially the case with adolescent girls at puberty (Kim, 2010; Patamajorn, 2007), a stage which attracts all kinds of spirits⁴. A shaman in Chitral who claimed to have knowledge of astrology explained:

“Men’s stars are strong (*sitara mazbut*), so, cannot be possessed though could be influenced. It is women whose stars are weak and who are more susceptible to get possessed by spirits.”

Folklores in Chitral contain dozens of stories where spirits have influenced or even killed the locals. Beliefs in spirits makes such kinds of tales a cultural reality (Sersch, 2013). Like other patriarchal societies, women’s lives in Chitral are restricted to domestic sphere (Yang, 2015), remain at periphery, and certain conditions and emotions such as love are unapproved for them. Such a social structure frustrates women leading to socio-psychological conditions, which in extreme form may manifest themselves through hyper-senility, having faints, and uncontrolled shaking etc. At this stage the patient is believed to be under the influence of spirits (Nasir, 1987; Sersch, 2013). The shaman further explained:

“Women possessed by spirits are diagnosed through the symptoms which include having strange dreams, being violent, pulling one’s hairs, falling oneself on ground, uncontrolled shaking and attaining immense physical power which even several strong men cannot sustain.”

The symptoms narrated by the shaman show mild to severe mental conditions usually expressed by psychiatric patients. In Chitral, however, the illnesses are usually treated by traditional and spiritual healers (mostly men) in which the inflicting spirits are ‘exorcised’ by the shamans (Sersch, 2013). It is believed that the spirits could be expelled successfully but sometimes these may also return and may lead to the death of the victim/possessed person. A woman, whom we met and interviewed during the fieldwork, later died after a few unsuccessful exorcism attempts. Likewise, it was told by the locals that a young girl was burnt by spirits after being frightened by the ritual of exorcism.

Alternatively, the victim may become the host of the spirits, in which case the possessed person come to terms with the spirit and learns to live with it. This is also called “domestication of the spirits” (Langley, 1980). The illness would disappear, and the woman becomes the spirit medium (Nourse, 1996). A number of such women were found in Chitral who are locally called *Pari Khan*. These *Pari Khan* usually enjoy respect and status in the community due to their alleged ‘friendship’ with a supernatural being and due to their spiritual powers to heal illness. The husband of a spirit medium who was also working as her assistant explained the process of her wife becoming *Pari Khan*:

“My wife was possessed by spirits. After a number of sessions (of exorcism), the Duagho (Shaman) revealed that she (my wife) would recover if she agreed to serve as the host for the spirits. We agreed and she became *Pari Khan* (spirit medium).”

Above was the most usual process of becoming a spirit medium. However, some of the women who currently work as *Pari Khan* in Chitral claimed that the holy spirit came to them in their dreams or ‘visions’ and became friend with them. Elsewhere, Nourse (1996) has also recorded such cases in which spirit appears in the dream of a person and the two start to live together and develop guest-host relationship. Once the rumour of spirit mediumship spread in the village, people start consulting the medium for healing. Nourse has explained that the spirit media at the start are usually shy; they tend to avoid being in trance in public and receive only a few clients, if any. However, with practice they gain confidence, get used to it, and receive more clients (Nourse, 1996). A spirit medium in Chitral confirmed the same experience:

“At the beginning, entering into trance was difficult for me as my body could not sustain the immense power (or weight) of the spirits. With time I got used to it.”

A client had similar views:

“The spirit medium (nan) at the time when she was new seemed to me as ineffective but later on, I was convinced that she is the real spirit medium (sahe hush kuyan).”

The spirit media in Chitral are known as *Pari Khan* or sometimes as *Nangeni* (holy mothers) who serve as spiritual healers. As the name ‘*Nangeni*’ depicts, these women are considered holy, and they attain higher statuses and roles equivalent to those of matriarch or those usually reserved for males. For instance, women in Chitral, like other patriarchal societies, cannot serve as the family or community heads nor can they perform as healers. Performing as the spirit media provides them with the chance to become a matriarch and get the power to work as healer. Likewise, the name *Pari Khan* also depicts that the host women can perform roles culturally reserved only for men. *Pari* refers to spirit in local culture while *Khan* is a male name.

Women’s elevation and transcendence to the position of the spirit media in this sense depicts the ongoing sex war (Lewis, 1971) in Chitrali society where spirit possession serves women for forwarding their aspirations in culturally sanctioned ways. Possession could be called as ‘coping strategy’ to express unconscious forbidden feelings and emotions (Bourguignon,

2004). On a number of occasions during the fieldwork, we found people labelling possessions as ‘love sickness’, alluding to a condition in which women who are possessed by intense feeling of love behave (or pretend) as if they are possessed by spirits.

In fact, we studied case histories of three young women who after unsuccessful healing and treatment in expensive city hospitals, eventually, recovered after getting married. However, both Lewis and Bourguignon’s models are insufficient to provide full explanations to possession as most women don’t resort to possession by thinking that they are oppressed nor they do overtly for gaining benefits (Sered, 1994; see also Nourse, 1996). This makes us to make a case to add another interpretation. Locals grow up internalizing beliefs in spirits and values associated with possession as the part of their personalities. Conditions indigenously associated with spirits and the ontological and phenomenological existence of spirit possession convince not just the local people but also the victims (women) that they are truly possessed by spirits.

The victims initially suffer from some sort of illnesses or social frustrations (Patamajorn, 2007; Sersch, 2013). It is the beliefs which eventually made them start performing as the spirit media. First, beliefs that spirits can possess humans (Baker & Bader, 2014). Second, the shaman’s belief (diagnosis) that spirits have chosen the victim as their host. Third, the woman’s belief (delusion) that she has got vision or dreamed to serve as the agent of spirits. This is similar to “the Bacchic ritual where the god was considered to enter the worshipper, who then believed that he became one with the god” (Russell (2015 [1946], p. 26). Finally, the clients’ belief that the medium can heal them even if they are still having clinical symptoms (Finkler, 1980). These in combination put the spirit media at the centre of attention. Attention brings fame and money, and the women learn how to perform as the agents of spirits. One of the spirit media we studied is quite well-off from the gifts offered by the clients.

However, clinicians are critical on possession and spirit mediumship. A psychologist expressed:

“Women in Chitral are suffering from a number of mental illnesses who associate them either with black magic (seher) or as the influence of spirits even if the real cause is explained to them.”

A psychiatrist explained:

“In psychiatry these are known as conversion disorders arising from potentially traumatizing events in life. The spirit mediums are fake; they are cheating superstitious people of their money.”

Thus, modern psychiatry considers spirit possession as the indigenous interpretation of traumas and social frustrations and are dissociative disorders (Janet, 1894). Spirit possession is scientifically diagnosed as psychological and neurological disorders including hysteria, dissociative identity disorder, epilepsy and schizophrenia (Huskinson, 2010).

Psychiatric explanation of the phenomenon aside, there are enough evidence to establish that women who transcends into spirit media gets the required attention, resources, status and prestige which are otherwise denied to them in patriarchal societies like Chitral. Their

behaviour and tone of speech are changed. The husband of a spirit media who was also working as an assistant described this change in the following words.

“After some meditation, she enters into another world. She then speaks with authority as her voice becomes thick, talks less, and doesn’t like argumentation and discussion.”

Working as a spirit media is economically rewarding in many ways, leading to the economic empowerment of the spirit media. While some media ask for a specific amount for their services which depends on the nature of the issue, it was found during the fieldwork that most of spirit media in Chitral do not directly ask for money /fee for their healing services. However, they earn a decent amount of money in the form of ‘*shukrana*’, a gratitude money voluntarily offered by her clients as a token of appreciation. In one ethnographic setting, the researcher observed that a tray containing some money similar to the donation box for charity institutions was kept close to the medium. It is believed that to make the healing effective fee, *shukrana* should be paid voluntarily. Patients who successfully recover from illnesses also sometimes come back and give precious items and clothes as gifts to the spirit media. Such kind of monetary transaction makes the spirit mediumship a rich source of earning which promotes the economic empowerment of women and lead to increase in their social status.

Being a source of earning, the spirit mediumship not only promote economic autonomy of women but also makes their husbands /men dependent on the earning of the women (spirit media). In almost all cases we study in Chitral, the men (husbands or fathers) of the women were working as assistants of the spirit media. When asked about his role in the healing process, a husband-cum-assistant explained:

“I usher the clients / patients to the ritual room where the Nangini (holy mother) is meditating, and explaining to the client the treatment and related usage and preventive measures etc.”

The role of the husband here is akin to a nurse in clinical setting who assist the doctor in performing his practice. The fact that the husband becomes dependent on the earning of the wife and the wife become her boss during the rituals is effectively transforming the patriarchal relationship upside down. From an ordinary woman, the spirit media is elevated to an extraordinary important figure in the family/village. In the words of Emile Durkheim (1912), the ‘profane’ is transformed into ‘sacred’ in which the spirit media is treated with respect and reverence by people and family members. The following excerpts from an interview with the father-cum-assistant of a spirit media further explain the point.

“We take great care to provide her (the spirit media) with a pak mahol (clean environment) in the home because she is pak (clean, i.e., holy) as the holy spirits are always nearby her. Care is taken to provide her pak food, pak cloths, and pak beddings.”

It should be noted that the word *pak* in most of the South Asian language means *clean* but is usually used in the sense of the ‘*holy*’.⁵ The spirits are considered to be holy and therefore, the spirit media is also treated as a holy being, different than other ordinary women of the

household. Such type of exceptional treatment of a woman, made possible by the phenomenon of spirit mediumship, are rare in patriarchal societies.

4.2. Discussion

Spirit possession is sometimes interpreted as escape or liberation from the cultural boundaries. It keeps the women at the centre of attention (Bhasin, 2007; Mischel & Mischel, 2009) and some women use it as a ‘coping strategy’ (Bourguignon, 2004) to express forbidden feelings, emotions, and aspirations (Bhasin, 2007; Lewis, 1971). It has been found that in societies like Chitral, spirit possession gives women better statuses and roles (Patamajorn, 2007; Schaffler et al., 2016). This makes some anthropologists to consider possession as culturally empowering women (Huskinson & Schmidt, 2010) and make a case to discard psychiatric models (Halloy & Naumescu, 2012) which pathologize possession (Huskinson, 2010). Likewise, some anthropologists consider spirit possession as a ‘cultural construct and unique experiences’ of communities (Huskinson & Schmidt, 2010, p. 01).

Our study, however, argues that associating women’s social and psychological distresses with spirits takes away attention from the real causes of stresses. We, therefore, argue for a paradigm shift by focusing on the oppressive conditions which lead to such illnesses (i.e., causes) instead of dealing with the possession (i.e., symptoms). The argument that women attain attention and sympathies looks incomplete, firstly because such feeling is short lived and, secondly, it is the spirits not the victims who are accorded attention. Once the illness subsides, the host women return back to the oppressive conditions.

Likewise, the practice of exorcism too need be put to critical test as exorcism is punishing the victim twice; first through cultural oppression and again by beating, whipping and bleeding the victim on the name of expelling out the spirits (Dein & Illaiee, 2013; Nasir, 1987). A quote from Russell (2009 [1950], p. 173) is relevant here: “All medical men know that punishment only aggravates abnormality. It can be cured only by removing some deep-seated and probably unconscious grievance. But most people inflict punishment on an abnormal person, and the medical view is rejected as nonsense.”

Finally, the argument that performing as the spirit media empowers women is also weak. Though, the women attain power, yet in such a way that the status quo of men is not challenged. It is assumed to be the spirits who gives advice and suggests healing while the host is the passive agent of the spirits who usually claim amnesia (Cohen, 2008). The women who fail to maintain the impression as the agents of spirits soon lose their relatively improved statuses. On the other hand, the male shamans perform more active roles who are believed to have mastery over the spirits, can expel them out and talk to them like talking on telephone. Thus, possession and spirit medium ship depicts gender hierarchy in Chitral society.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, spirit mediumship depicts both the indigenous explanatory model of illness and healing as well as the gendered dimension of Chitrali culture. Women’s lives in Chitral remain restricted to domestic sphere and expressions of certain feelings and emotions are unapproved for them. Socially oppressive conditions may frustrate women leading to social and psychological conditions, which in extreme form may manifest themselves through hyper-

senility, having faints, and uncontrolled shaking etc., which are usually interpreted as the influence of spirits. Once possessed, the women gain access to things which otherwise are denied and can engage in behaviours which in normal conditions are unapproved. Certain possessed women who are made hostage by spirits eventually become the hosts of the spirits (*Pari Khan*), who domesticate the spirits. . This transcendence of the patient from a hostage to a host gives a new identity and power to the possessed women. The locals consult the spirit media for healing and soothsaying. With fame and attention, the spirit media gradually learn to ‘perform’ as the agents of spirits. The spirit media are locally known as *Pari Khan* or *Nangeni* (holy mothers), who enjoy relative empowerment. However, we believe that there is a need for a paradigm shift in the study of spirit possession by focusing on the social and psychological deprivations of women which create the state what is called as possessions. Associating illness with spirits takes away attention from such deprivations.

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Notes:

¹ Exorcism: The ceremony where spirits are expelled, and the possessed person is returned to normal state with prayers or magic (Langley, 1980). It includes certain rituals for driving out a demonic entity from an individual or place (Palmer, 2014).

² Adorcism: The ritual of coming to term and accommodating the possessing spirits by serving as the host (Bourguignon 2004).

³ The event or state when spirit/deity enters the medium or host agency (Sidky, 2011).

⁴ The beliefs that adolescent girls are more vulnerable and attracts all kind of spirit could be interpreted as a metaphor referring to the fact the women at this stage are more likely to fall in love with a man and men are

more likely to be attracted by adolescent girls. In this sense, the “spirit” could be interpreted as a euphemism for men.

⁵ For example, the Muslim in South Asia use the term “*Qura’an Pak*” to mean *the Holy Qura’an*.