

# Shamanism in Bangladesh

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## INTRODUCTION^

When I was young I visited my village along with other members of our family. A relation of mine had a daughter, the first child. The daughter was then three years old and was beautiful and healthy, but she suddenly fell ill and died within two days. It was discovered that some of her hair had been taken away, and there were marks of scratches on her chest. Everybody in the family believed that it was the work of a sorcerer, who caused the girl to die in order to bring a cure to a certain childless mother whose babies had all died shortly after birth. The family called a faquir, a mystic and native healer who was capable of detecting such a sorcerer's crime with the help of magical methods, such as the use of a magic glass known in Bengali as *aina-bharon*. The faquir explained that the sorcerer took away some of the hair and chest skin of the victim and put these into an amulet either on a Shanibar (Saturday) or Mongolbar (Tuesday) during the night of the new moon, or *amavasya*, and then closed its mouth with wax from a bee's comb. The faquir further said that the victim in such a case must be a mother's first child, and that the death of the child would procure an off-spring for another childless mother. The off-spring who was thus procured would continue to live as usual. The faquir added that if the crime of the sorcerer was detected before any damage was done to the life of the victim, this was to be brought at once to the attention of everybody in the village. An announcement should be made that the sorcerer had taken away the hair or nail or chest skin of the victim. Then all the victim's hair should be cut, burnt, and buried at the meeting point of three roads. The victim would then be safe. During our stay in the village, we came

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## 278 ANWARUL KARIM

across another incident in which the hair of a child was cut. At once the villagers were informed by an announcement, and a ritual was performed accordingly and no damage was suffered by the victim.

This kind of sorcery is not uncommon in rural Bangladesh. Although sorcery for malevolent use was condemned, the story of a childless mother suggests that such actions could be done also for benevolent intentions. It had been used to facilitate childbirth and to procure offspring for barren women. It also helped cure ailing children. A sorcerer is capable of using both magic and witchcraft for fulfilling his designs. He can destroy a person but at the same time can explain misfortune and reveal the cause of sickness with the help of supernatural powers (see Lessa and Vogt 1979, 332-333).

A shaman is like a sorcerer, but performs primarily white magic and deals only secondarily in black magic and witchcraft to counter sorcery and its evil effects. In traditional societies, a shaman is a kind of healer who makes use of supernatural powers and magic for various healing or curing of disease. A shaman specializes in spirit illness and spirit possession, deals with good as well as evil spirits, and is a mediator between the supernatural and the community (Kakar 1983, 90). On many occasions the shaman is found working as a medium and mouthpiece of supernatural beings, and his power comes from direct contact with the supernatural (Lessa and Vogt 1979, 308). It may be pointed out here

that although witchcraft is considered evil, a shaman may use it in an attempt to benefit society as a whole.

The term "shaman" is believed by scholars to have its origin in Asia, though it is used to describe similar phenomena in many parts of the world, which are found not only among hunters but also in contemporary peasant nomadic and urban communities as well (Eliade 1964).

Shamanism is assumed to have originated in association with hunting and gathering (Lessa and Vogt 1979, 301). It is commonly held that the shamans are a kind of mystic and can cure sickness by virtue of their techniques of ecstasy and magic. The shaman can "see" the spirit and he himself occasionally behaves like a spirit. He can leave his body in a trance and travel in ecstasy in all cosmic regions. He recognizes various diseases through mystical insight or with the help of his "pet-spirits" who are at his disposal, and he is capable of curing these diseases with his healing techniques. Although he has a number of auxiliary spirits at his disposal, he is not possessed by them.

Bangladesh is a small country with an area of over 55,000 square miles and a population of over 100 million. It has 68,000 villages and few cities. At least 80% of the people live in rural areas where people are mostly illiterate and have limited health and medical facilities.

#### **SHAMANISM IN BANGLADESH 279**

There is one physician for 7,810 people and one hospital bed for 4,000 people (Government of Bangladesh 1985). Although Bangladesh is a land of rivers, these are dry most of the time, and people must depend on the rainy season which, in fact, is a gamble on the monsoons. They live in houses built of mud with thatched roofs and narrow rectangular windows. These people still drink water either from the river or ponds and suffer from various diseases including diarrhea, dysentery, jaundice and fever. Cholera and dysentery often break out in epidemic form. Their farming is still primitive and at a subsistence level. In the absence of proper diet they suffer from acute anemia and malnutrition.

A recent study of mine in three Bangladesh villages reveals that 90% of the rural men and women use indigenous health care. Shamanistic and herbal care are common. The persons engaged in shamanistic and various ways of herbal health care include both men and women. Shamanism in Bangladesh, which evolved as an integral part of folk or animistic religion, later was assimilated into Hinduism and Buddhism, especially Tantric Buddhism. With the introduction of Islam by the Sufis, who syncretised different religious ideas and incorporated the same into mystic Islam, shamanism became an integral part of folk life. It may be pointed out here that although shamanism is rooted in animistic culture, it is intended for correcting disturbances in the individual's social order. The shamans perform the same role in a traditional society as psycho-therapists in modern society.

The objective of this paper is to present the role of the shaman in traditional Bengali society. The study is based on the author's personal observation as an insider in three villages of Kushtia, a western district of Bangladesh bordering West Bengal. The paper suggests that a shaman is a healer who uses magic and witchcraft for benevolent purposes. He is not a sorcerer who is engaged in malevolent activities. The paper's key assumption is that Bangladesh as a traditional society still holds to animism as the basic belief and guiding source for the cultural attitude of the people.

## SHAMAN: S TYPEASND THEIRCH ARACTERISTICS

In rural Bangladesh people turn to the shamans as their treatment is less expensive and less time consuming. It is also found that people turn to these shamans or traditional healers when modern medicine fails to cure them. The shaman acts as a psycho-analyst who effects a psycho-therapeutic cure mobilizing strong psychic energies inside and outside the patient which are no longer available in modern society (LCvi-Strauss 1963, chapter 10). This psycho-therapeutic tradition tells us about certain social values in Bengali society and throws light on the symbolic universe of Bengali culture in which its various healing traditions are embedded.

Basically there are two types of traditional healing: 1) Shamanism or magico-religious healing, and 2) natural or herbal healing. The first of these includes magic and charms, holy words, and holy actions to cure disease. The second involves the seeking of cures in the herbs, plants, minerals, and animal substances of nature. Both shamanistic and herbal healing have been widely practiced in Bangladesh. Although the shamans in Bangladesh use herbs together with mineral and animal substances including clay, mud, animal organs, and human urine and excrement, I shall confine myself to the study of shamanism as a way of magico-religious healing.

As far as I know there has been no previous study of shamanism in Bangladesh, although scholars have dwelt adequately on herbal and folk or natural medicine. During my study period I came across a number of manuscripts and puthi literature<sup>2</sup> with elaborate occult texts and formulas. I met a number of shamans who made good use of these puthi.

I also collected various mantra or incantations from the shamans I met, and attended a number of musical programs which were held in the villages as a part of shamanistic cures.

The persons engaged in shamanistic activity in the villages are known as ojha,<sup>3</sup> faquir and kabiraj.<sup>4</sup> In certain areas they have names like khunker (not khundker).<sup>5</sup> The Pirs, Mullah, or Munshi, although they are engaged in faith healing, are not considered shamans because they are not professionals like the ojha and faquir.

The shamans in Bangladesh may be grouped into the following categories : non-professional and professional. Non-professional shamans include the Pir, Mullah, or Munshi. These are religious specialists and are engaged only occasionally in faith healing. The word pir is a Persian word which denotes a spiritual headman or guide among Muslim mystics called sufis. But among Bengali Muslim folk the Pir is more than a mystic guide, saint, or holy man. He is regarded as most powerful and considered as a demi-god. Shrines of the Pir are found in every nook and corner of the country. These Pirs exert great influence over supernatural beings by virtue of a certain magic-religious power. People go to them not only for mystic guidance but also for treatment of different kinds of diseases including spirit illness and spirit possession.

The Pirs use holy words from the Quran, charms or amulet knots. They enjoy vast social status and position.

The Mullah or Munshi are religious persons who are generally engaged in leading prayers and various social functions, such as funeral services. They are also faith healers. Although they are considered

religious specialists, they do not live by faith healing. They have other occupations like teaching in a madrassa (Islamic school). They are not landless people, and they maintain social intercourse with those around them. People go to them for religious instruction.

Among the professional shamans, three types can be distinguished: faquir, ojha, and kabiraj. The word faquir is derived from Arabic and means "poor." It is used in the sense of being in need of mercy, and one is poor in the sight of God rather than in need of worldly assistance. Darwesh, similar in meaning to faquir, is a Persian word derived from dar which means "a door," i.e. one who begs from door to door. Both terms are generally used for those who lead a religious life. Both faquir and darwesh are religious personages who belong to the Sufi order. In Bangladesh the faquir belong to different religious sects of the Sufi order, and are known as exorcists and faith healers. Faquir include both men and women. Most of them come from a low economic strata. Although there is no caste system in Islam, the Muslims have a stratified society in the pattern of a caste system, though it is not rigid like in Hinduism. The ojha also belong to the faquir community. The word ojha is possibly derived from a Turkish term hodja, suggesting a Muslim priest and teacher who conducts religious ceremonies in mosques and at funerals or during religious weddings. They are considered to have supernatural healing powers, and are believed to have, at their disposal or command, "armies of jinn" for their use against other evil producing jinns.

The ojha in Bangladesh have similarities to their Turkish counterpart in so far as the healing of patients is concerned. They treat ailments of children and others, cattle diseases, women suffering from hysteria and cases of snake bites and hydrophobia. However, their chief occupation is the healing of snake bites. They are also exorcists, driving out ghosts and other supernatural beings. The Hindu ojha, however, belong to peasant communities and are of low caste. Their profession is generally hereditary but it sometimes happens that the senior ojha appoints one of his followers as ojha. In his capacity as a shaman the ojha is much more dreaded than loved, because the rural folk suppose that he can inflict diseases and carry out all sorts of mischief if he is offended in any way.

In my study area I interviewed as many as eleven healers. Eight of them belong to the weaving community, one to the oil pressing community, and two to the farmer class. Eight of the women shamans interviewed belong to landless families. Their husbands either work as servants in other houses of the village, pull rickshaws, or work as day laborers. Three belong to families having less than one acre of land.

#### **282 ANWARUL KARIM**

A shamaness stands for purity. She wears a clean saree. Her house looks neat and clean. The shamanesses have either inherited their knowledge from their family, or they have studied with a Guru (preceptor). Some of them were instructed in dreams.

These shamanesses, particularly those who are engaged in witchcraft, are sometimes dreaded because they are believed to have power to harm others. Children or young boys and girls do not visit their homes, and mothers carefully guard them from their shadow.

Generally marriage to an outsider is not possible. This is not the case with the religious specialists like Mullah or Munshi. They occupy a better social position than the faquir or ojha.

Besides the aforementioned shamans there are certain traditional healers who perform both shamanistic and herbal healing. They are known as Yogi, kabiraj, and bediya. Yogi and kabiraj belong to a Hindu community of low caste.

Yogi follow a Hindu system of meditation and self control. Both male and female Yogi are often engaged in exorcism and herbal healing. Their number is small, following a large scale migration of the Hindu community to India after the partition of the subcontinent.

Kabiraj also belong to a low Hindu caste. They have a good knowledge of human physiology, and consider a human being as a conglomeration of three kind of humors, viz., wind, bile and mucus. They hold that if there is proper balance of these humors in body, mind, and spirit, there will not be any disease. According to them disease is often the result of a state of disharmony in the body as well as in the mind. A balance is necessary to maintain good health. The kabiraj put great emphasis on proper diet, cleanliness, correct breathing, and meditation to keep body and mind in proper balance. They use herbs, minerals, and animal substances as medicine. They also utilize holy words and amulets in the case of spirit illness.

Bediya belong to a number of vagrant gypsy or nomadic groups professing to be Muslims, but they sing songs in praise of Rama and Laksmana in addition to Allah and Muhammad. They also exhibit painted scrolls representing the exploits of Hanuman who accompanied Rama. Their women work as shamanesses and are skillful in the treatment of various kinds of disease and the removal of nervous and rheumatic pain. They belong to a lower social strata of the Muslim community.

These people once lived in house-boats, but now as they move from village to village they use improvised makeshift tents. Their men are often engaged in magic and monkey shows. The women, besides healing, and selling trinkets, are also engaged as snake charmers. They use herbs and animal substances as medicine. The bediya community

#### **SHAMANISM IN BANGLADESH 283**

maintains strict formalities and discipline within their community.

They cannot marry any outsider. Any violation of these rules is severely dealt with by the chief of the community.

The shamans in Bangladesh, both Hindu and Muslim alike, are quite conversant in their own way concerning the movement of the heavenly bodies, and consider these heavenly bodies as deities. They believe that there is a direct influence by the planets on human life. Another important aspect of the treatment by shamans is the use of mystic numbers like three, seven, nine, eleven, and so forth, and in particular the numbers seven and nine. For example: suvarna (gold), rajata (silver), tamara (copper), vanga (tin), sisa (lead), rangska (zinc) and loha (iron); these are seven metals which are considered very important, and are known as dhat-. The doctrine of seven includes: seven *r̥G* (ancient sages), seven mouths of fire, seven heavens, seven seas, the constellation . . . of seven stars, and so forth. Nine, too, is a mystic number. It includes nine planets, nine gems, nine nights, nine rasa (amorous, ludicrous, pathetic, vehement, heroic, terrific, loathsome, absurd and peaceful, according to Hindu sexual art), nine lak~mana (marks of Brahma), nine Sakti (energies), nine doors (the human body), nine islands of the Ganges, and so forth.<sup>6</sup>

The shamans in Bangladesh also have a good knowledge of human

physiology and the nervous system. The human nervous system has been described accurately in the mystical Tantras. The shamans consider the nervous system as cakra, or "wheel," which corresponds to the plexus or ganglion. Proper use of the cakra may help one obtain psychic power.

#### FOLK BELIEFS AND THE CONCEPT OF DISEASE

Shamanism in Bangladesh has evolved from fear of the terrifying effects of spirits. The vast majority of the peasantry, irrespective of their religion, consciously or unconsciously worship various deities. They believe in magic and charms, and in keeping faith in unseen powers and nature spirits. They believe in ghosts and demons commonly known as bhut.<sup>7</sup> This word is mostly applied to persons who have died as a result of unnatural death such as accidents and suicides. Besides ghosts, the people also believe in jinn.<sup>8</sup> These bhut and jinn, who may be called ghosts, are believed to be capable of either entering or leaving a body in various ways. They are believed to enter either through the head or the mouth. The hands and feet are also considered ways by which they might enter into the body. Women are considered common targets for ghosts.

In a society where such beliefs prevail, the existence of shamans and

#### 284 ANWARUL KARIM

other kind of traditional healers cannot be overemphasized. The inhabitants of Bangladesh before the arrival of the Muslims had strong animistic beliefs. When they were converted to Islam by the Sufis who syncretised many different ideals, they incorporated many of these animistic beliefs, keeping them as a part of folk life. The majority of the people consider earth as the Mother Goddess (Basu Mata, Maa Khaki) and hold that she provides succor and fertility. Mother Goddess has a number of deities and nature spirits in her following. These include Durga, Kali, Chandi and others (Chattopadhyaya 1968, 264-265). Islamic ideals based on the Quran and the Traditions of the Prophet do not admit these practices. Still, it has been observed that the folk who are mostly Muslims continue to follow their age-old beliefs. Sufism made the Islamic religion more syncretistic and adaptable to the existing beliefs of the people (see Roy 1983, 207). Almost everywhere in Bangladesh, Muslims in rural areas have respect for trees, river spirits, and in Hindu deities, and believe in magic. This magic is either malevolent or well intentioned. It may be designed to destroy a rival or to cure an ailment. The sorcerer usually practices malevolent or black magic while the shamans perform benevolent or white magic for the cure of a disease. In Bangladesh, particularly among rural people, there is a common belief that disease, sickness, and death are not merely the result of natural causes but are the works of supernatural beings or evil spirits.

When cholera, smallpox or similar diseases break out in epidemic form, it is said that a spirit has been offended and that an atonement on the part of the whole community is needed. Disease is also considered as a sort of punishment for sin or wrongdoing by an individual. There is a common belief that Providence, which is essentially good, beneficent, merciful and the sustainer of all things, may bring disaster, misfortune, and calamities through agents or supernatural beings in the form of death, drought, flood, and cyclone. In such cases special prayers are offered and sacrifices made. Sessions of religious songs are also arranged when an epidemic breaks out in order to appease a particular

deity. In rural areas of Kushtia, religious songs in honor of Manasha, a Hindu deity, are arranged when any calamity befalls the community. Rural people, Hindus and Muslims alike, perform the function with much enthusiasm. One such song is Padma-Purana. The male members of the troupe participate in the music and dance sequence. There is, however, no female participation in the said musical soiree. The male members perform a woman's role. It is also commonly held that a child may be born blind or deformed following sinfulness, moral lapses, or ignorant action on the part of the parents or of other persons. Sickness which is caused by a sorcerer is considered most dangerous by rural

SHAMANISM IN BANGLADESH 285

people. A sorcerer or an evil person makes incantations on tangible objects and his spells cause an immediate effect on the victim. This practice is known as *baan*. A person suffering from disease caused by a sorcerer cannot be cured unless he goes to a good religious healer. The following episode illustrates this fact: A medical doctor, a relation of mine, told me recently that when he worked in the Dhaka Salimullah Medical College and Hospital a patient with severe pain was brought to the emergency ward. He did his best to relieve the patient of his pain, but the pain did not subside. The patient was X-rayed, and to his surprise the X-ray plates showed marks of needles pricked all through the body. The doctor added that the film was thoroughly checked and the patient was X-rayed again, with the same result. The doctor then consulted a Professor of surgery who also looked puzzled. Meanwhile the patient's relatives said that it might be the work of a sorcerer and they took the patient to a *faqir* to counter the action. The patient was then healed.

Incidentally, a similar story was told by W. Ivanow in a report "A witchcase in Medieval India" (1923). Here the victim was a Sufi saint named Shyakhul Islam Fariduddin Masu, a Pir of Shyakh Nizamuddin. A sorcerer caused an injury to him through magic and witchcraft. The Shyakh experienced severe pain. His disciple Shyakh Nizamuddin, however, unlocked the mystery. He discovered some tangible objects from the hole of a grave. It was a figure made of flour, into which some needles were stuck, and which was firmly tied with hairs from a horse's tail. That figure was brought to the Shyakh Fariduddin Masud. He ordered Shyakh Nizamuddin to pull out the needles and to untie the hairs which were knotted. Every time he pulled out a needle, his pain subsided. When he had pulled out all the needles and untied the hairs, his health returned completely. The flour figure was destroyed and thrown into running water.

There is a common belief in rural areas that the evil eye can cause serious ailments to persons fallen victim to such action. The vegetable and animal world may also face similar action. Loss of appetite, headache, fever, and general weakness with pain all over the body are said to be characteristic symptoms of a person affected by the evil eye. It is also held that the evil eye can cause one's death. There are human beings, men and women, whose shadow and breathing may cause sickness to every living being, animal or plant. Mothers paint their new born babies, farmers set up deformed wooden dolls or puppets, broken plates and boxes together with torn-out shirts, etc., to detract the evil eye. In rural areas the rich do not eat before the poor and hungry for fear of being affected by the evil eye. The hungry look of the poor people can

instantly cause loss of appetite and various stomach troubles of a painful nature. Certain animals, particularly dogs, may also cause harm through the evil eye. Mothers zealously guard their children and put a black mark around their cheeks, or use amulets. I have also noticed on a certain occasion that a beautiful milch cow stopped giving milk despite medication by a veterinary surgeon. There are reports that milch cows after being affected by the evil eye had stopped giving milk, and that their swollen udders bled. But as soon as an ojha or ,faquir is called, the cow and the calf return to normal. The same is true for bulls, horses, and buffaloes. Growing plants and fruit bearing trees may either wither away or bear no fruit because of the evil eye.

In general rural people in Bangladesh hold their ancestors in high regard. It is believed that various kinds of sufferings may take place in the family if the ancestors' wishes remain unfulfilled or if they are offended. The spirits of the ancestors are offered sacramental food on certain occasions, namely Shab i barat, as it is believed that after death the individual continues to exist and that they have power to influence the family. There is a custom among the rural people in Icushtia to offer food to dogs on certain religious occasions in the belief that the dead returns to the house in the shape of a dog and shares food offered to it. In such a case the food is offered to the dead in a secluded area outside the house. There is another belief in Kushtia that if a person dies leaving his family in debt he reappears in the form of a dog and guards the family until the debt is paid back. An idea prevalent among Hindus has it that unless the used plates from the previous evening meal are touched by a dog, these are not clean. There is a common belief that if a dog is heard barking in a melancholic tune, some misfortune will befall the community. Similarly the cry of a crow on a house-top, or of a cock at midnight, or the yell of an owl is considered an ill omen. There is also a fear of the dark on the occasion of the new moon or Amavasya. It is believed that the spirits, particularly the evil ones, move freely during this night.

In rural Bangladesh the dead are always remembered by their surviving relatives and friends. The belief in the dead or their reported appearance either in dreams or in the shape of a ghost is very significant for explaining crises and causes of illness in the family. The living perform various rituals as soon as the person dies in order to appease the dead. There is also a belief among rural people that the persons who meet an unnatural death may turn into ghosts and take up their abode in certain trees. When these trees are either damaged or destroyed the ghosts will take revenge causing death or sickness to those responsible. In Kushita tree worship known as garshil<sup>2</sup> is common in the months of **SHAMANISM IN BANGLADESH 287**

September and October.

Among both Hindus and Muslims the relatives have certain obligations towards the deceased. In both cases the kinsmen arrange feasts for the salvation of the departed soul. Among the Hindus the number of religious functions concerning the dead is greater than those of the Muslims. On the day of the Sraddha ceremony<sup>13</sup> the sons of the deceased invite all their blood relations to bathe and dine with them for the benefit of the deceased soul. The ceremony is performed on the 11th day after a death. Through the Brahman officiating at the Sraddha the soul of the deceased is presented with all the requirements for



its survival and comfort which include food, bedding, clothes, and furniture. It is believed that these provisions will be used by the deceased, without which the latter would suffer.

In Kushtia Muslims distribute sweets among everybody attending the burial rites. Rural people offer cooked food to the animal deity if the grave is damaged by an animal. This is done in order to appease the deity who might have been annoyed with the deceased while living. The Baul community, an obscure religious sect, performs the *sandhya* ceremony at the grave of the deceased. This includes burning of incense and lamps and offering prayers in the evening. During any religious festival of the Bauls, the food prepared is first offered to the dead spiritual leader or the dead member and then it is taken by his followers. Among the Hindus, the sons as well as the wife of the deceased avoid salt for ten days. The sons avoid use of any metallic utensils and bear in their hands a piece of iron. The sons and their wives avoid physical comforts and become strict vegetarians for a certain period.

#### SPIRIT POSSESSION AND EXORCISM

Spirit possession is considered quite common in rural areas. As mentioned earlier the proportion of spirit possession is higher among women than men. Menstruating, pregnant, and parturient women are believed to be especially vulnerable to the mischievous action of evil spirits. Broken taboos are also considered responsible for spirit possession. There are special taboos to be followed by menstruating or pregnant women and mothers giving birth, without which there is a danger to become possessed by a spirit. A pregnant woman is not allowed to lie down during a solar or lunar eclipse. She must keep on sitting or walking. She must not go out alone or sit with her hair loose. She should not go to defecate at noon in the bamboo groves, particularly on Shanibar (Saturday) or Mongolbar (Tuesday). The same is true for menstruating women. Spontaneous abortion and a still-born child are always believed to result from spirit or *bhut* action. During childbirth both

#### 288 ANWARUL KARIM

the mother and her child are vulnerable to spirit possession. As a result they are always kept segregated either in a dirty room or in a makeshift hut not frequented by any member of the house except the attendant. During this period, which continues for forty days, the mother is not allowed to come out of the room except when she is in dire need. She is provided with an insufficient quantity of food. She has to keep an iron rod in her bed beside the baby and when she goes out she must carry it with her for fear of being possessed by a spirit. It is believed that spirits shun iron. The room of the mother is constantly filled with smoke and the burning of incense to drive away evil spirits. Her room or hut, called *Zturghar*<sup>14</sup> in Bengali, is considered most unclean and unhygienic since it is associated with childbirth. The doors and windows are always shut to avoid an evil spirit or the evil eye. In fact, the period of menstruation and childbirth are considered polluting, and during this time women are not allowed to touch anything other than their own. Amavasya, or the new moon, the full moon, and twilight, morning, and evening are considered moments when the spirits move around.

1; my fieldstudy I noticed that almost all cases of female disease were attributed to spirit possession. I came across a number of such cases. Methods adopted to drive away spirits vary from place to place. There are, however, some features common to most areas. It is a popular

belief that the holy Quran can counter the attack of the spirits, and certain Suras (verses) can help keep or drive them away. The Muslims use Quranic verses written on the doorway or the opening of the confinement room in order to avoid any attack of the spirits, or to scare away the ghosts. A faquir, particularly a religious specialist, is called to help prevent the attack of the spirits known as jinn. Sometimes offerings are made at the asthana of the abode of the Pir. When anybody is attacked, a faquir or an ojha is called, and he then adopts various measures not always conforming to the Muslim faith. The faquir or the ojha are generally less educated, and in most cases they are illiterate. It may be pointed out here that the Hindus believe that the ghosts cannot stand the name of RZma, Siva, and Kali. Whenever a man happens to pass by a haunted place or is terrified by an apparition, he uses the name of gods and goddesses. Similarly the Muslims utter the name of Allah and Muhammad, the Prophet, or the name of their Pir. The faquir or the ojha in most cases use mixed religious names in their acts of driving away spirits. In certain areas houses and confinement rooms are often protected from evil spirits by using divine names, enchanted dust, or mustard seeds strewn over the doorway. Other methods include hanging up a piece of a fishing net, the horn of a cow, or a piece of the bark or twig of certain plants.

#### **SHAMANISM IN BANGLADESH 289**

Other preventives popular among Hindu and Muslims are charms or amulets (Mitra 1933). These are also quite common among the educated class. The amulets are tied around the neck or the arm of the person liable to be haunted by spirits. Sometimes a coil of thread or a cowrie is used, and religious incantations are pronounced over them. When roots and leaves of plants are used, these are collected either on Shanibar (Saturday) or Mongolbar (Tuesday). The new moon, or Amavasya, is also considered an auspicious time for collecting them. Plants growing on graves are used, too.

For the shaman, as the term is used to designate the faquir or the ojha, the first thing to do is to protect himself by reciting certain mantras or incantations, and the next is to protect the house or room of the patient. He then makes a circular line between him and the patient.

After that he holds a parley with the spirit asking him who he is and what he wants to do, and then he orders the spirit to leave the patient. If the spirit is unwilling, the shaman throws turmeric in the fire and asks the patient to inhale the smoke. This is done in order to evict the spirit through the nuisance of the smoke. He also reads out incantations and blows them over black peppers, asking the patient to chew the same. Likewise hot mustard oil is put into the ears in order to make the spirit talk through the patient. Sometimes the patient is beaten mercilessly.

The shaman also uses a looking glass and split bamboo for magical use to diagnose spirit illness, or he may resort to some other tests. He draws three long lines and then several short ones across the long ones on the ground with a twig and then fixes the twig in the ground inside one of the squares. He then reads incantations and jerks his head and body a couple of times, each time destroying the figure drawn until he can diagnose correctly that it was an evil spirit that caused the sickness. Occasionally a winnowing fan and an earthen lamp are used. The shaman holds the winnowing fan upside down in his left hand. He places a small lamp filled with oil and a burning cotton wick in it. Holding the lamp with his left hand he begins to swing it slowly to and fro. He then implores deities to tell if any spirit is causing the malady. When the

flame of the lamp suddenly burns brightly, he assumes that the sickness has been caused by a spirit. It has also been observed that the shaman in the course of his performances uses a twig of a Nim tree (*Melia axaddirecta*) and brushes the body of the patient, and recites mantra or incantations. Some water, after it is properly ritualized by incantation, is given to the patient to drink and is sprinkled over his body. A Muslim shaman takes the name of his Pir, shows deep veneration, and asks the relatives to sacrifice a fowl or a goat, as the case may be, at the shrine of his Pir. The Hindu shaman asks for a sacrifice at the temple of his

290 ANWARUL KARIM

deity. Sometimes roasted fish, milk, or unripe plantain fruit are offered. It may be mentioned here that in rural areas people consider *jinn* as male and *pari* as female. A female is always attacked by a *jinn* and vice versa. EXAMPLE OF SHAMANISM IN ACTION

### *Faquir*

The patient was a village woman aged over thirty who became mentally sick and deranged. She was a beautiful lady. She was jumping from one place to another, shouting abusive language, stamping on the floor, and was almost naked. Everybody in the family was of the opinion that an evil spirit or a bad *jinn* possessed her. The woman was quite sound in body and mind before she was thus possessed by the evil spirit. She had been very modest, sober, and always kept purdah (head cover). It was quite unusual on her part to go almost naked. It was learnt that she had gone out alone at dark, as she felt the necessity to respond to the call of nature at a nearby bush. She was menstruating at the time. Reportedly she had seen a monster in front of her on her way back home. Thereupon she fainted and was afterwards recovered by her relatives, and since then she talked incoherently and occasionally muttered unintelligible sounds. Sometimes she looked moody, danced, and sang, to the utter surprise of everybody since she did not know how to sing. She had two children and a husband. A *faquir* was called for treatment. He was a middle aged bearded man with a thick moustache and long loose hair. His eyes were sharp and penetrating, his teeth broken and uneven. He was constantly chewing betel leaf and occasionally puffing *gunja* (cannabis).

The first thing he did upon arrival was to look straight into the eyes of the patient. The moment the patient saw the *faquir* she shrieked and went to a corner. The *faquir* had a small looking glass and a stone ring. He asked the patient to look through the magic glass but she refused violently. The *faquir* then read a mantra and blew it over her. He again asked her to look through the glass. The woman made a sign that she could find an object in the looking glass. The *faquir* then shouted at the top of his voice, using abusive language to the evil spirit who was believed to have possessed the woman. His whole body began to shake and tremble. He then recited some incantations taken from the religious books of the Muslim and Hindu community. He used the names of Allah, Hari, Mahadev, Muhammad, Krishna, Atima, Ali, Makali, and made a circle around himself and the patient. He burnt turmeric and asked her to inhale. He also brought an old shoe and asked the patient to inhale the smell. The patient refused and got violent. The *faquir* then stroked with a broom and put hot mustard oil into the ears of the patient. He repeatedly asked the identity of the spirit. The patient refused to comply with his requests. Then the *faquir* burnt

mustard seed and read out a mantra. This brought the desired result. There was a burning sensation all over the body of the patient, and she agreed to talk. The following is the exchange between the faquir and the patient or the spirit who possessed her.

Faquir: Who are you? Where do you live?

The patient, with a strong nasal accent, said: I am Kalu, I live in the bamboo groves behind the house.

Faquir: Why have you come into the body of this woman?

Patient: She is beautiful, I like her.

Faquir : Leave her immediately.

Patient: No, I shall kill her husband.

Faquir: I order you to leave her body.

Patient: I shall not go.

Faquir: See, how I force you to leave.

The faquir began to mutter mantras. Then he brought out the root of a herb which he kept in his bag. Meanwhile his associates started to beat a tin can which made a roaring sound. The faquir flogged her cruelly. She was fleeing from one corner to the other. Her women associates could not control her movement. She had acquired much strength. Her hair was disheveled and her clothes fell off her body. At last she was forced to eat the root of the herb which she chewed and swallowed.

The faquir said: Would you leave now? Have you seen I am more powerful than you?

Patient: Yes, I will leave her. Don't torture me any more.

Faquir: What sign will you make of your departure.

Patient: I shall leave her. Don't worry.

Faquir: Break a twig of a tree or carry with your teeth the earthen pitcher full of water from the house and break it when you leave her.

Patient: Yes, I will do as you order.

She carried with her teeth an earthen pitcher full of water and broke it after going five or six yards. Then she fainted. The faquir revived her by sprinkling water on her face. She was taken to a room where she slept for hours and awoke normal. The faquir then asked the husband to make a sacrifice and offer a small amount of money to a shrine of a Sufi saint known to the family.

In many cases the faquir or shaman burns the body of the patient with an iron rod. As the case concerned a female patient, exorcism was done in the presence of close relatives.

In another case, in which a young man was mentally retarded, a

#### **292 ANWARUL KARIM**

*faquir* was called who diagnosed a spirit illness. He made the following shamanistic performance. It was night time. The patient was kept in a small room. There was a limited number of people in the room. The *faquir* had an attendant with him who was present with a tin can to be used as a drum. He asked everybody to look down and to remain silent until the activities of the *faquir* came to an end. The light was put out and the attendant began beating the tin can. Everybody in the room was alert to hear the voice of the spirit. The *faquir* was reading out an incantation. At one time he shook his whole body. The attendant was beating the can violently. After a while we heard an incomprehensible sound. The spirit spoke. The *faquir* asked him to tell the cause of the ailment. The spirit, with a strong nasal accent, said that

the man was possessed by a female spirit when he was young. The *faqir* prescribed certain herbs and asked for the sacrifice of an animal. There are other interesting stories regarding spirit possession. In one case a woman patient and an *ojha* were involved. The patient was a widow and occasionally fell mentally sick. But it was found that she was cured when she could meet the *ojha* in a closed room. The *ojha* had to marry the woman when she became pregnant as a result of the meeting. In my field area I observed many married women becoming mentally sick or deranged because of dissatisfaction in their sex life. A number of women became spirit possessed when they went out to attend nature's call at noon or night time. They were spirit possessed in a solitary place near the jungle and at a time and place not frequented by any person. It has been observed that the women who were thus spirit possessed had husbands working in distant places and rarely saw them come home. I also heard stories of rape and murder which were initially attributed to spirit possession. In a Kushtia village there were four mysterious killings involving children and new born babies during October, 1985. I visited the village and talked to the inhabitants. Everybody in the village attributed the case to spirit action. Deaths occurred in intervals of two to three days. The dead bodies were found floating in a nearby pond or ditches. The *faqir* were called and they held that it was the action of an evil spirit. People invented a number of stories concerning the spirit and its movement. But when the law enforcement agency posted police in the village, there were no further deaths. The police afterwards interpreted the case as murder by an organized group who was involved in village politics, and the police took them into custody. Nevertheless I believe that spirit possession is a reality. I know of a case in Kushtia where the niece of a highly qualified physician was possessed by a spirit. The doctor took it as a case of mental disorder

SHAMANISM IN BANGLADESH 293

and applied all modern drugs, but these did not work. He was a modern man trained in foreign countries and did not have faith in spirits or *bhut*. He was struck dumb when he heard his brother's daughter, who lived all her life in a village and was not at all conversant in the English language, start talking in English. This was witnessed by many, and the doctor called a *faqir* who cured her. Such a case of spirit possession was confirmed by Dr. Syed Ali Naqui, a highly qualified Professor of Sociology who witnessed a case in which simple village folk living in rural areas started talking in English when possessed by a spirit. But one thing remains unsolved; why did these spirits talk in English? In the case of the doctor's niece, the spirit talked in Bengali too. In the Kushtia villages where I observed such cases of spirit possession, all the spirits used Bengali and gave Bengali names as their identity. Many of them said that they were murdered secretly and no religious ceremony was held. There were others who said that they committed suicide. A colleague of mine now serving as Associate Professor of Geography in a government college told me that he personally witnessed a ghost together with other members of his family. At night the ghost came again in a dream and told him that he had been murdered secretly long ago, and no funeral ceremony had been held. My colleague told me that he consulted with his neighbors, who also told him that the ghost had appeared a number of times in the vicinity. He said that the ghost in his dream revealed the location where he was murdered. It was an

old dilapidated house adjacent to his own. Upon digging in the area he found a skeleton in a sitting position. Funeral rites were performed, and since then there has been no disturbance from the ghost.

In a Kushtia village I came across a woman *faquir* who manipulated most skillfully her role as a shamaness, and this was her means of livelihood.

I was told that on each Thursday she was possessed by a spirit and when patients visited her she prescribed various herbs and other methods for getting cured. She received a regular income from this.

When I visited her on a Thursday night I found a large number of patients—men, women and children—waiting anxiously. Her husband told me that the spirit visited her every Thursday evening after the Mughrev prayer, and his visit was marked by a buzzing sound. I found the woman sitting on a cot. Her husband was inside talking to her.

There was a lantern in one corner of the house. We were told that in a few minutes the spirit would visit her. We heard a buzzing sound, and the woman was in trance. She was giving necessary instructions to the awaiting patients. However, when my turn came I met her along with a *faquir* who was introduced to her by her husband. This infuriated her and she abused him verbally for taking me to her place. The *faquir*

294 ANWARUL KARIM

told her that he failed to cure me of my disease and that was why he took me to her. This appeased her. Then I asked her what the disease was I was suffering from. She could not help. It appeared that she was extremely nervous. After some time she fainted. Her husband explained to me that the spirit had left her. The *faquir* told me later that she was a fake. I interviewed some of the patients who visited her earlier. They told me that the prescriptions did not in any way help cure their disease. I did not find any old patients there.

Besides exorcism, the *faquir* also treats other kinds of diseases. A patient suffered from severe headache. The *faquir* touched the forehead of the patient and recited the following incantation.

" In the name of Allah-Hari, Oh mother earth, you are my mother; I am your son. Whatever you may do, mother, do as you like. You are my mother truly." The shaman then used sticky soil soaked by urine and rubbed the affected part of the body of the patient. After some time the patient was cured of his headache.

The use of urine is common with the Bauls who belong to an obscure religious cult. In case anybody among them suffers from fever the Baul shaman or *faquir* would rub his body with urine. Another practice among them is to take urine when they suffer from choleric pain.

When they go for treatment, they use the following incantation:

Guru Satya, Thakur Satya, Hari Satya

Tomar Angate byamo mukto

Translation: Guru is true, Thakur is true, Hari is true

The disease is cured at your behest.

The Bauls also make frequent use of human milk, particularly when they suffer from tuberculosis.

The invocation of spirits is an important part of Bengali shamanism.

This is done to command the presence of jinn or demons for the cure of certain diseases, to secure accomplishment of wishes—temporal or spiritual.

The *faquir* in the course of his magico-religious practice uses the name of the patient. If the patient is named Ahmed then his name should correspond to what element he belongs to, to which planet his

life cycle is planned by or connected with, and so forth. For example: The initial of Ahmed is A, his element is fire, his planet is Saturn, his sign of the Zodiac-Ram, Lion and Archer. The initial of Rahela is R, her element is water, her planet is Venus and the sign of the Zodiac-Crab, Scorpion and Fish. The faquir also makes a diagram on the ground which names certain demons, fairies, andjinn in order to ascertain cause of the disease.

SHAMANISM IN BANGLADESH 295

The ojha

Like the faquir, the ojha is also associated with magic healing technique. He specializes in snake bite treatment. Rural people in Bangladesh consider serpents as deities. The belief prevails that a snake bite is not always an accident. It may have been effected by a god or spirit because of a sin or if a deity takes offense. It is thus important to find out the spirit behind it and how it can be appeased. It is the duty of the ojha to find this out. In Kushtia there is a custom that if anyone is bitten by a snake someone runs to the house of an ojha or a shaman with the news that a man or woman, as the case may be, has a kata-gha (cut wound). He does not say the man has been bitten by a snake. In that case it is believed that the patient would die. As soon as the ojha gets the news he gives up everything and runs to the house of the bitten man. Should he fail he will forget every thing and will never again be able to play the role of ojha. On reaching the place the ojha makes the man sit on a low stool and then moves his right hand in the air in a circular way uttering incantations and using the most abusive language. Then he shakes himself violently and falls into a trance. In such a state if his hand catches hold of a particular part of the body it will be considered that the venom has spread to that part of the body. If the hand catches hold of the head it will then be held that the venom has spread up to the head and there is no way to help him. If the hand falls on another part of the body all precaution will be taken so that the venom cannot spread over. It will then be tied with a rope or an arrangement would be made to check the flow of poison. Meanwhile the ojha will continue reciting incantations. He rubs the place between the bandage and the actual place of injury constantly using incantations until he declares that the venom has come down the place of injury caused by the snake bite. He then collects seven kachu (Eng. arum) leaves, cuts the place of injury and takes out blood in sufficient quantity and keeps it on the kachu leaves. After he has taken a good quantity of fresh blood from the patient he declares that he is out of dang-er. In most cases the ojha uses chickens for sucking out poison from the injury. Chickens will die as long as poison is left within the body of the patient. If no death is caused to the chicken in the course of sucking of blood, the ojha declares the patient free from danger. In Kushtia rural people believe that the serpent deity may cause suffering if it is not worshipped. They, both Hindu and Muslim, arrange certain religious songs known as bhasan, 15 padma-puran, or behula lakmindar. In these songs the serpent deity Manasha along with other gods and goddesses is invoked. One such song was used to help cure a woman in the village of Philipnagar, who was bitten by a snake at night. Another treatment is reported by

**296 ANWARUL KARIM**

Bhattacharya (1977, 218). " Three sanctified cowries are sent to fetch the snake which caused the bite. The cowries are found stuck on the body of the snake, one at the head, another at the middle and the third

one at the tip of the tail. Thus the cowries carry the snake to the place where the exorcist is waiting with the patient for its arrival. As soon as it arrives the exorcist makes it bite the patient again on the same spot with the intention of drawing out the venom from his body. After that a cup full of milk is placed before it. It is believed that the snake vomits into it the venom which it had drawn out of the body of its victim. Thus the patient is cured."

The ojha in rural Bangladesh represents the mystical experience characteristic of primitive and archaic religions. Although his principal function is healing snake bites he plays an important role in other magico-religious rites. He is also a specialist in spirit illness and spirit possession. These ojha are Muslims, and although they are considered spiritually and supernaturally powerful, they rarely go to the mosque for prayer.

#### Other shamans

Except for the ojha, the other groups of shaman like Mullah and faquir also treat people by faith healing. Faith healing based on the belief that sickness may be treated without any medicine or appliances if the prayer be accompanied in the sufferer by true faith. In Bangladesh faith healing is still very common. It is usually associated with amulets, charms, and knots. In Kushtia I have seen a number of cases in which a cure was made through faith healing. I know an old woman who had been suffering from a severe facial paralysis. She was asked by a faquir to offer prayer at a sacred place in the name of a deadpir, and to my utter surprise the old woman was seen totally cured on the next day following her visit to the sacred place. In Kushtia there are a number of shrines such as Jhaudia and Swastipur. Each Friday hundreds of people men and women go there and offer sacramental food and other gifts. At the shrine of Lalon Shah, a Baul spiritual leader, I have seen a number of people visiting regularly for treatment of disease. These people believe that Lalon Shah has power to cure even from his grave. They also offer food and money at the shrine for prosperity in their worldly life.

The Mullah or Munshi is possibly the most sought after person for faith healing. This religious priest, whose breath is considered holy, has acquired supernatural healing power. He breathes on the head and afflicted parts of the patient, laying at the same time his hands upon him. He then produces a tiny scroll of paper inscribed with some saSHAMANISM

IN BANGLADESH 297  
cred words which he orders the sufferer to either soak in water and drink the liquid or wear it on his person for a stated number of days. This is not exclusively the practice of the Mullah and the Munshi. In Bangladesh it is customary to provide the patient believing in faith healing with amulets. Muslims and Hindu priests including faquir, ojha and Yogis provide their patients with amulets. Cabalistic talismans are prepared by religious specialists as preventives against and cure for real and imaginary calamities. These are worn constantly by persons believing in them. Such talismans are often composed of cabalistic calculations based on the numerical value of the letters constituting the name of the interested person.

#### Baul faquir

Baul faquir belong to a group of unorthodox native faquir who have taken music as a chief vehicle for communicating their ideas. The word -



haul means a person who has either attained or is making efforts to attain control over oneself by following certain secret practices relating breathing and yogic actions. As with other faquir who practice shamanism, they also belong to lower ranks of muslim communities of Bangladesh. The Baul faquir, because of their obscure religious cult, have their own hamlets separated from the general village population. They neither go to the mosque or say prayers five times nor do they attend any religious festivals. Their method of treatment is similar to that of the other faquirs except that on occasion they use their panca-rasa sadhana connected with magic charm. This is also known as khak sadhana. The khak sadhana concerns the human body and earth. The Baul faquir, while treating his patient, recites the following words: " In the name of God, in the name of God, O Mother Earth, You are my mother, I am your son, whatever you may do, Mother, do as you like, You are my mother truly." After this he uses sticky soil soaked by urine and rubs it on the afflicted part of the patient's body. This they do in curing various cholic pains or headaches. These faquir also take urine, semen, human milk, and menses, believing that these would help them lead a disease-free life. However, they are not exorcists and do not cure people suffering from spirit possession.

#### Bediya

The bediya belongs to a number of vagrant gypsy or nomadic groups professing to be Muslims, but do not follow any tenets of Islam and sing praises of Rama and Lakshmana beside Allah and Mohammad. The bediya as such do not form a tribe nor are they religious practitioners.

They generally live in house boats, but occasionally they live in villages

#### 298 ANWARUL KARIM

as well. Their main occupations are snake charming, and selling of indigenous medicine and various kinds household goods. Their women work as female shamans and are skillful in the treatment of various diseases including those of women and children diseases, and in the removal of nervous and rheumatic pains. They practice massage for rheumatism and suck out bad blood from the body by a method known as singha. They know the use of herbs to cure footaches. The bediya are also hunters and fowlers. Some of the animals which they catch are used for medicinal purposes or for charms. The flesh of the pankauri, a kind of water bird which looks like a crow, if killed on Mongolbar (Tuesday) or Shanibar (Saturday) cures the enlargement of the spleen and puerperal (child birth) disorder. The claws and droppings of the spotted owl (pencha), if pounded up with betel nut, works as a love potion. The dried flesh of the bird Dahuk is very beneficial for rheumatism. The female bediyas are also palmists. They carry with them a bundle of herbs, minerals, and animal bones and substance and various kind of amulets and charms against physical and mental disorders. They are much sought after by village maidens for the sake of the potion with which they restore to them their estranged lovers. They also make forecasts as to the sex of unborn children.

#### Two SHAMANESSES

Fulkumari-a Hirdu Yogi and shamaness

In one of the Kushtia villages where I worked for several years I came across a female shaman named Fulkumari who was a Hindu Yogi and a Vaisnava by faith. She was aged 70. Her husband Shushil Das died long ago. She had one son and one daughter, both were married

and have children. Fulkumari lives in her house in a village named Uttar Lahini, supporting herself by healing. She has a temple by the side of her house, where she sits every Shanibar (Saturday) and Mongolbar (Tuesday). She applies various healing techniques including exorcism and is widely known.

Fulkumari told me that she did not learn her trade from her family nor was she instructed by a guru. Once in a dream it was thrust upon her by a deity whom she named as Kali. On each Shanibar and Mongolbar I found her giving prescriptions to at least forty patients. The number of female patients was fairly large. Fulkumari has a magic stick which was given to her by a Tantric woman whom she visited in a crematory after being made a shaman by the deity. The stick had belonged to a Muslim faquir. There is a river flowing beside the temple and residence of Fulkumari. It is known as Kaliganga. It is a dead river now but it is not dry. Fulkumari's neighborhood has thirty families and

SHAMANISM IN BANGLADESH 299

all belong to the Vaisnava cult. Adjoining areas are all Muslim. Fulkumari has visited a number of holy places and shrines in Bangladesh and India. She learnt various healing techniques by using magic and charms. During her visits she came into contact with various Muslim faquir and learnt the Muslim way of healing as well. Before beginning her day's job Fulkumari recites the following mantra sitting in front of the image of the goddess Kali:

I take the name of Brahma Bishnu, you are ahead of me and behind.

I am in the middle. I take the name of the wind; whosoever is sick you get him or her cured. I am nobody. I take the name of Kali, Icaksha Kali, and Bhairabi. You exist. I take seat before you, O mother! Raksha Kali. My name is Fulkumari. You have to fulfill your obligation to me. Sixty-four mohanto, ten kapalik, six kabiraj. O mother Raksha Kali, 108 Kali, I take their name, O mother.

The following is an illustration of how Fulkumari acted as a shamaness.

It was May 27, 1986. Fulkumari was as usual in her Kali mandir (temple). She takes her seat in the temple every Shanibar and Mongolbar and treats various sick persons, the majority of them women.

Most of them come from neighboring villages. I have also found patients coming from distant parts. A young man brought her sister, a woman named Rupjan, from a neighboring village to her. Aged 40, she suffered from spirit possession. Fulkumari touched the head of Rupjan with her magic stick Kalchander Lathi ("stick of faquir Kalachand") and made a circle around her reciting the following mantra:

In the name of Brahma, Bishnu, and Hari I make this circle.

Jinn, Bhut or Pret you have no power to go beyond this magic circle.

You have to appear here for talks.

Fulkumari then caught the hair of Rupjan with her left hand and kept on touching the head of Rupjan with the magic stick and again recited the following mantra. "I take the name of Goddess Kali, Mahadev help me drive the evil spirit out. I pray to you, I pray to you. I am your servant. I worship you, O Mother Kali. Please help me drive out the evil spirit." The woman was in a trance. Fulkumari then asked the spirit possessing the woman. "Who are you? Why do you possess this woman. What do you want from her? You must leave her; otherwise I shall inflict punishment on you. You know who am

I? " The evil spirit in the woman said that his name was Kadaruddin. He liked the girl and had been staying with her for the last fourteen years. He will kill her husband to get the woman completely.

Fulkumari then read a mantra silently and said to the spirit that he should leave her at once. Kadaruddin (the spirit) replied that he would

### 300 ANIVARUL KARIM

not leave her because his face had been burnt by *afaquir* who used burnt turmeric for treatment, and it would be difficult for him to get back to his own people with a burnt face. Fulkumari said to the spirit if he would get back to his own people he would find everybody with a burnt face. Fulkumari used her magic stick and recited a mantra in unintelligible words and asked the spirit to leave immediately. The spirit appeared to be frightened when Fulkumari said that she would force him to leave. Then the spirit agreed to leave Rupjan. But Fulkumari pressed that he would show a sign of his departure either by destroying a branch of a tree or by breaking an earthen pitcher full of water. The spirit in Rupjan agreed to break the pitcher. To my surprise I found the woman Rupjan carrying the earthen pitcher full of water with her teeth only. After moving a few yards she dropped the pitcher, which broke, and Rupjan fell down completely senseless. Fulkumari then touched her several times with the magic stick and read out a mantra. Rupjan came to her senses and inquired what had happened to her and why she was brought to a Kali *mandir*. She talked normally and showed no sign of abnormality as she did while possessed by the spirit.

It should be mentioned that Fulkumari was the only shamaness who used the magic stick and incantations to drive away the evil spirit. She attributed all sickness to the working of evil spirits. In curing disease other than spirit possession Fulkumari applies the following procedure. She takes a clay bowl and fills it with betel leaf, betel nut, paddy, *durba* (a kind of grass), mango twig and sweets. She then covers the bowl with a piece of new cloth provided by the sick. This being done, Fulkumari takes her seat before the bowl which is kept in front of the image of the goddess Kali, puts a piece of new cloth round her neck and then repeats a number of times incantations or mantra as a shamanistic device. When the patient is cured, Fulkumari asks, " Look, you are cured. Now bring an amulet made of three metals-iron, brass, and silver. And also bring with you three small hooks, three needles and three thorns taken from three different trees. You must also bring a piece of new cloth, some milk, three different kind of flowers, leaves and fruits next Shanibar or Mongolbar." Of all week days, these two days are considered special by the shamans because they believe that the deities are active either for good or bad during these days.

I interviewed Rupjan and accompanied her to her house. There

I heard the following story: Rupjan was first married to one Moksed shaik of Alampur village. She was then only eleven years old and she did not have her first period during the first year of her married life. She was sexually tortured by her husband. Once at night she screamed.

Everybody in the family including her husband said that she was possessed by an evil spirit. After two years of married life she was divorced.

Later on, Rupjan was again married to Aftab Ali Biswas of Harisankarpur, fifteen miles away from the village of her first husband. Here she had fourteen years of married life. During this period she gave birth

to two sons and two daughters. Rupjan's second husband was very poor. He was a worker in the local textile mills. Rupjan occasionally behaved abnormally in her second husband's house also. Everybody in the family held that she was possessed by an evil spirit. She was never taken to any physician. She was given tabiz or amulets by a Muslim faquir as protection against jinn or bhut. It worked well with her for some time. Then she was again possessed. This time a Pir was called. He used certain herbs and roots together with mustard oil and poured it into her ears and eyes. He also used religious incantation. This exorcism made her well for several years. But during the last five years she was occasionally abnormal. Her husband, who lost his job two years ago because of his sickness, maintained the family by pulling a rickshaw. Rupjan's one daughter was married, and the other was eight years old. The eldest son was also a rickshaw puller. Her husband wanted to divorce her, but he was prevented by his relatives for the sake of their minor son and daughter. At last the brother of Rupjan took her to Fulkumari. On investigation it was found that Rupjan suffered from acute anemia. She suffered malnutrition because of poverty. Her husband was not at all sympathetic. A medical examination revealed that she had suffered from hysteria.

In Fulkumari's temple I met Jahanara, a young married woman, who had come for treatment. She had been married for five years but had not given birth to any child. She was twenty years old. She did not have any menstruation until she was married. After her marriage when she began menstruating, the color of her blood was black. Her period was very irregular. Some times it took two months before it recurred. She conceived a number of times, but after some months she would suffer a miscarriage. Her mother-in-law was critical. The women of the family considered it the work of an evil spirit. Jahanara too was also having a similar opinion about herself. She said that she had fear in her mind that she was influenced by an evil spirit who kept an evil eye on her. She was given a tabiz: or amulet by a faquir, but it did not work. Fulkumari considered her to be suffering from an evil spirit. She gave her herbal medicine and an amulet, the use of which she said would prevent evil spirits from causing any harm to her. Fulkumari told me that the use of herbs was communicated to her in dreams.

As I talked to Jahanara, who was married to one Omor Ali of Ujangram, I gathered that her husband was also not happy with her because of his

**302 ANWARUL KARIM**

strained relation with his father-in-law for the latter's failure to provide him with a cycle and cash to supplement his business. Her failure to give birth to a child was also a matter of displeasure on the part of her husband and her mother-in-law. Jahanara was sent back to her father's house. A woman relation of Jahanara brought her to Fulkumari who opined that an evil spirit had possessed her. She gave her a *tabix* which would protect her from the terrorizing effect of the evil spirit. A medical doctor later told me that it was a case of blood incompatibility leading to habitual abortion. He said further, even if a child was born to the couple there was a possibility that the child would die.

I also met a couple there who were married recently. Both of them had severe pain in their stomach and there was a burning sensation all over the body. They had no appetite. Fulkumari at once diagnosed that an evil eye caused the disease. They had been administered polluted

food without their knowledge in order to cause harm to them. Fullrumari prescribed an amulet and herbal medicine for them. She recited a mantra and touched their bodies with the magic stick. After a couple of minutes the couple said that they felt better. Fulkumari asked them to take a glass of water on every Saturday morning with the magic amulet being dipped into it seven times.

As I observed Fulkumari for several days I was convinced, that she was a psycho-analyst. In 80% of the cases her remedy was temporary and short lived. In 20%, however, the cure was permanent. She does not attend any patient except on Shanibar and Mongolbar, and that too she says, must take place in the temple. On no other days does she have any power to cure. The patients and their relatives consider Fulkumari as super-human, having power over spirits.

### ***Sakhina khatun-a muslim shamaness***

Apart from Fulkumari, the other shamanesses I met were all Muslim by faith. Among them is Sakhina Khatun, aged 45, who lived in the village Jugia. Her husband, Rowshan Ali Surdar, was a rickshaw puller. Sakhina's father was a veteran before his death. Her elder brother who lives in the same village is also a shaman. In the course of my meeting with Sakhina she told me that she had received mystical signs and instructions in her dreams which suggested that she was getting spirit possessed. Her father, Rajab Faquir, whom I knew for years, was very happy to learn this. Gradually Rajab Faquir trained her in various shamanistic methods. Sakhina makes effective use of magical words or mantra while trying to heal others. From snake bite to difficult child birth and exorcism, Sakhina uses mantra. In a difficult child birth of a woman of the same village Sakhina used the following mantra: " I

SHAMANISM IN BANGLADESH 303

take the name of Rlma, Laksmana, and Sita. I take the name of Rlma and then Laksmana. Now I take the charge of child birth. There is blood in the generative organ. It has shaped into flesh and bones. In collaboration with MahZdeva I shall make release. After ten months and ten days the child is delivered."

These magic words or mantra concerning childbirth, although they have little or no meaning, proved quite effective and meaningful to help facilitate difficult child birth. The use of mantra in childbirth is somewhat exceptional in rural Bangladesh because women have easy deliveries, and any difficult childbirth is always attributed to the working of an evil spirit. The shamaness takes the name of the Hindu deities Rlma, Laksmana, Sita and MahZdeva in view of a folk belief that these deities have power over the evil spirit and would serve as guardian deities. I observed that Sakhina also took the name of Allah, Hazrat Muhammad, and Hazrat Fatima (the wife of Hazrat Ali and daughter of the Prophet Hazra Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam) while making a jharphuk (a kind of massage of the affected part of the body together with occasional blowing of mantra by the faquir or shaman over the affected part). The women facing difficult childbirth believe in the effectiveness of such jhar-phuk or mantra and so did the society to which they belong. Claude LCvi-Strauss, analyzing a song used by a Cuna Indian shaman to facilitate difficult childbirth, suggests that the effectiveness of the song lies in its power to psychologically manipulate the patient's generative organs. The shaman's song provides a mythical language in which the patient can express the inexpressible incoherence of pain and

disorder. By attaining the psychological release, the shaman also affects a physiological cure. Lkvi-Strauss maintains that the sick woman having a difficult childbirth accepts the mythical beings and never questions their existence. Once the sick woman understands, she does more than resign herself. Livi-Strauss argues that this does not happen to a sick person suffering from a disease caused by virus because the relationship between germ and disease is external to the mind of the patient, for it is a cause and effect relationship; whereas the relationship between monster (evil spirit) and disease is internal to his mind whether conscious or unconscious. It is a relationship between a symbol and the thing symbolized. LCvi-Strauss thus considers the shaman as a psycho-analyst. In fact, the use of mantra or magical words, charms and amulets which the healers use as effective method for healing serves as a psychoanalytical cure. The patient develops confidence in the healer who makes use of the patient's faith in myths in which the community lives [In Lessa and Vogt 1979, 318-3271.

**304 ANWARUL KARIM**

### **ANALYSIS**

The belief in the magic effect of charms, amulets, or other shamanistic events survives the increase in knowledge or reasoning even in religions such as Christianity. According to Don Yoder, "In both Eastern Christendom and Roman Catholicism healing shrines and healing saints were recognized and in most cases the people's drive toward connecting faith and healing was diverted into ecclesiastical, Church sanctioned channels. Through its system of blessings, benedictions, and its wide use of sacraments (essentially expressing the belief in the holiness of material objects) the medieval Church ministered to and encouraged the principles that we consider basic to folk medicine of the magico-religious sort: the ideas of the availability of supernatural powers for healing, and the mediation of that power through material objects as well as human healers [Yoder 1972, 201-2021. Use of amulets, magic, and charms is common. Despite great advances of modern science, shamanism is very alive. It is no longer viewed as superstition, and its psychological value is recognized. There is no doubt that occasionally a shaman may display "neurotic" or "psychotic" symptoms, though in a given society more of them display no such symptoms [In Lessa and Vogt 1979,3271. He is, however, a person who "imposes order upon the disordered and chaotic wild [Shweder 1979, 3271." He attempts to convince the gods to place things back in order and not to leave anybody abandoned in the wild. The shaman is thus indispensable in a traditional society because only he is capable of bringing supernatural revelation into significance and the care of illness. In fact he is the person who brings confidence not only into the mind of the patient but also into the community to which he belongs, and thereby leads the way to security and health.

Rural people in Bangladesh believe that the faquir, ojha, and others who act like shamans have distinctive cognitive capacities. They believe that the shaman as a magico-religious specialist connects the community with everything that gives meaning to life. What appears to be hysterical or psychotic is to the people concerned a time honored ritual through which the shamans heal sick people or divine the future. Spirit possession is an important phenomenon in the shamanistic activity in rural Bangladesh. Modern science, however, does not accept spirit possession as real. Medical doctors in Bangladesh and elsewhere

consider spirit possession as hysteria. Most of the medical doctors in Bangladesh which I interviewed are of the opinion that hysteria is, due to ignorance, most often misunderstood as spirit possession. Hysteria or spirit possession is prevalent among women, passive men, and occasionally children.

#### **SHAMANISM IN BANGLADESH 305**

In our society women play a role inferior to that of men. They are not encouraged to express their emotion. In questions of love, marriage, sexuality, property, etc., they are denied the right to express their feelings. Although Islam advocates equal rights for women and men, the reality of rural Bangladesh is quite different. It is thus no surprise that this denial of freedom sometimes makes women resort to forms of hysteria. In a joint family or in a situation where not much mutual aid and support can be expected, cases of hysteria may occur among women and passive men.

According to the observations of medical doctors and also of myself, the hysterics, although they do not produce their symptoms willingly, may in fact gain some advantage through them. The patients attract other people's sympathy and attention and may thus avoid responsibilities, either in the family elsewhere. Emotional disturbances are often sign of hysteria which in turn is very often misconceived as spirit possession.

I also observed that 80% of the illnesses believed to have been caused by spirit possession are in fact either caused by mental and emotional disorder or are the consequence of women's diseases such as *sutika*. In the latter case, which is quite common in rural areas of Bangladesh, the patients show symptoms like headache, dizziness, and weakness leading to frequent fainting. Excessive bleeding during menstruation or childbirth which may occasionally lead to death, is most often attributed to spirit possession.

Given the low social status of women, accusations of spirit possession often serve as a cover for not acknowledging the truth concerning a woman's health. The woman thus becomes a scapegoat. Her social condition, together with poor health and restricted medical facilities, make the women easy victims of the age-old belief in spirit possession. In all cases, responsibility rests with women. The low status of women in the family, together with continued mental stress due to failure to give birth to children, to bring with her a good amount of money which her father might have promised on the occasion of the marriage ceremony, negligence from everybody, particularly the mother-in-law and sister-in-law, can cause her to behave abnormally leading to mental sickness which very often is taken as spirit possession. Unfulfilled sexual urges or sexual discontent among married women also may cause psychic disorder leading to hysterical action. Rape and murder of girls in rural Bangladesh is quite common, and these are often dismissed as actions of an evil spirit. However, police investigations sometimes reveal that these acts were done by criminals in order to satisfy their carnal desire, and who afterwards killed the innocent girls.

#### **306 ANWARUL KARIM**

Despite all these cases, spirit possession is not wholly untrue. In Kushtia, to the surprise of everybody, a young uneducated village girl was heard speaking in English while she was possessed by the spirit. A modern doctor was puzzled when he failed to help a patient suffering from severe pain and X-rays showed signs of needle punctures.

It may be said that even though modern science neglects faith healing or shamanism as superstition and a matter of witchcraft, the shamans such as faquir, Yogi, or ojha play the role of a psychoanalyst. Faith healing and shamanism seem to be the exact opposite to psychoanalytic cure. In fact, however, shamanistic cure and psychoanalytic cure are quite parallel. Modern medicine can not always guarantee permanent cure, but both modern medicine and shamanism can bring temporary relief to the patient, one by drugs and the other by means of symbols. Shamanism thus lies on the borderline between our contemporary physical medicine and psychoanalysis.

#### NOTES

\* In 1985, while I was at Harvard, I gave a lecture at the Folklore Department on "The shamans and their role in Bangladesh." It caught the attention of the scholars and Dr. Sylvia Marcos (at that time a Visiting Lecturer, Divinity School, Harvard University) asked me to present a paper on "Traditional healing and women healers of Bangladesh" at the XIth World Congress of Sociology, held in New Delhi, 1986. The present article was prepared for *Asian Folklore Studies* under the instructions of the editor, Peter Knecht, who took much care and attention and helped remodel the whole article sent to him earlier. The author deeply appreciates and gratefully acknowledges his help and kind assistance.

1. See Lessa and Vogt 1979, 332-333. The editors in their introduction to chapter seven ("Interpretations of Magic, Witchcraft, and Divination") explain the use of magic and witchcraft in traditional healing.

2. *Puthi* refers to a kind of folk literature in circulation among the rural people of Bangladesh. The number of *Puthi* texts runs into the several hundreds, and only rarely does a scholar have an overview of even a major portion of this literature. The occult texts speak of spirit illness, their causes, and possible remedies.

3. For further information see Karim 1982. The *ojha* can also cure hydrophobia and scorpion stings. See also Mitra 1915.

4. *Kabiraj*, a medical practitioner who follows the Hindu system. For further information see Risley 1891, 362-366.

5. *Khunker* refers to a group of traditional healers in the district of Noakhali. They have low social status. *Khundker* is an upper class Muslim belonging to the Pir community.

6. See Jaggi 1973, xvii-xxv. Also see Karim 1979-1980.

7. See Crooke 1968, 234-267. Also see Blanchet 1984, 54-60. Nilmani Chakravarty gave a belief account of spirit belief in the Pali Jataka stories, which form the earliest and largest collection of fables in the world. He says "The origin of the belief in spirits can be traced back to the Pan-Indian Soul theory of the Upanishads, acSHAMANISM IN BANGLADESH 307

cording to which every being, whether rational or irrational, possesses a soul, which never dies but passes from one body into another. Even the tree is not without a soul, when the soul leaves the tree it dies. According to these stories there are two types of spirits: the good and the evil. The evil ones are known as *Yakkha* (male) and *Yakkhenz'* (female). For further information see Chakravarti 1914, 257-261.

8. The *jinn* is believed to have been created out of smokeless fire. They are sometimes identified with serpents and sometimes with Satan and his host of evil ones. The Quran takes into consideration both the *jinn* and the evil spirits (the Sura Falaq-Dawn cxviii and Sura Nas Mankind cxlv).

9. Manasha, a serpent deity. There is a common belief among rural people that barren women may be blessed with children if they worship the serpent goddess Manasha. There are certain places in villages of West Bengal and Bangladesh which are considered sacred and holy. Barren women hang pieces of rag with small pieces of stone tied at one end in the branch of trees adjoining such places in the hope of getting children. It is also believed in rural Bangladesh that serpents which generally make the straw roofs of the house their abode are known as *vastu* (dwelling place) snakes. They are believed to possess the souls of some deceased members of the family. In Bangladesh it is a common practice among the Hindus to carry a dying man out of the house to allow his last breath to pass in the open because it is believed that this soul, if unable to free itself from earthly bondage, takes the form of a snake and lives within the very house where it escaped from the body. The rural people in certain areas of Bangladesh also believe that if mating snakes are covered up with a piece of cloth, the same piece when recovered possesses magical qualities-it cures disease. Many folk narratives



concerning serpentlore have been composed in honor of Manasha.

10. *Padma-Purana* and *Behula Laksmindar*, two musical folk narratives, are such serpent lore. In the *Behula Laksmindar* the hero, who was bitten by a snake, was thrown into the river and ultimately brought back to life by supernatural means. It is thus a folk practice in rural Bangladesh that if anybody dies from a snake bite his body should be thrown into river. It is believed that a man who dies of snake bite remains alive for a couple of days, and he may come back to life if contact with water is constant.

12. *Baan* means to shoot an arrow. Here it is symbolically used as witchcraft.

11. *Garshi*: A kind of tree worship. Rural people in Kushtia perform certain rituals concerning fruit bearing trees in the month of September and October. They paint the whole house. Then they put rice, durba grass, green coconut, merrygold flowers, small pieces of sugar cane, and various kinds of bread in an earthen plate. The cow is given a bath and then is fed with various kinds of grass. Then they beat the winnower and burn flames at night to ward off insects and worship the trees. Hindus and Muslims alike participate in such ceremonies with much enthusiasm in rural areas.

13. A Hindu funeral rite. The members of the deceased family feed the poor in the belief that they would pray for the salvation of the soul of the deceased.

14. *Atur* in Bengali means one who is delicate or weak. Here it refers to a room for childbirth.

15. *Bhasan* is also a folk musical narrative similar to *Behula-Laksmindar*. The word *bhasan* suggests one who is floated.

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