

Danyalism: A study on spiritual healing in Chaprote Pakistan

Altaf Hussain

1998

ah.macp@glt.comsats.net.pk

Keywords: spiritual healing, rituals, religion, shamanism, Danyalism, Pakistan.

1. Introduction

Spiritual healing is a little investigated field not only in Pakistan but also in the west. A study was carried-out in a traditional village (Chaprote) of Northern Areas of Pakistan in 1989 by an anthropologist, which describes indigenous healing techniques of a native spiritual practitioner known as Danyal. Danyal or Danyalism in Gilgiti culture can be seen as more or less what is popularly known in anthropology as shaman and shamanism. A Danyal can be linked to a shaman of Siberia or elsewhere in the world on the basis of his acquired status and the role he plays in that particular society. However, he goes through a unique and indigenous recruiting process through which he learns his professional skills. Danyalism is thought to be an old religion in Gilgit, therefore the folks of the area consult Danyal in important crises of their life, even though they have access to some of the modern health facilities.

Let's have a look what scholars commonly understood the term shaman and the phenomenon of shamanism:

Since the beginning of the century, ethnologists started using the term "shaman" for medicine men, sorcerer and magician to designate certain individuals possessing magico-religious power. Whereas, Eliade describes shaman as "The word refers to a man whose soul journeys to other sphere and contrast it with a "medicine man"¹, Hunter writes "A shaman is a part-time magico-religious specialist.... derives magical power directly from a supernatural source, usually through mystic experiences of public (rather than private) rituals in which divination and curing are accomplished through trance and also sleight of hand tricks".

¹Eliade, 1964.

Referring to shamanistic practices among Polar Eskimos, Beals and Hoijer (1971) write: "To become a shaman an individual must be visited by spirits while walking alone. When such a visitation occurs, the individual seeks advice from an elder and well established shaman and under his guidance, has a

number of religious experiences during which he talks to one of the outstanding divinities the oldest and most powerful spirit".

A Danyal is a village man/woman, who after satisfactory completion of his/her recruiting process becomes the expert in applying indigenous methods to summon his/her Baraies². He develops such a relationship with his helping spirits through which he being a human being is able to communicate with them without thereby becoming their instrument. He controls a certain number of spirits, who according to him are spiritually existing since the very creation of the world. He induces trance in order to diagnose diseases and applies his spells to cure illnesses. With the help of spirit he predicts future events and locates lost objects.

²Baraies: Spirits that encounter with Danyal.

Danyal's role in the village Chaprote seems very significant, where people spent more time with spiritual thinking than the social sanctions. To them a Danyal, as a spiritual practitioner provides information about spiritual-world, as a healer he cures illnesses and as a foreteller he predicts future events.

Apparently all the villagers in Chaprote are considered equal on the basis of their income, resources and living standard. As a matter-of-fact some holds more land and livestock as compared to others and a few get more respect and have more influence in community decisions. During the state era in Gilgit, Danyal's position was next to the ruler in the state affaires and planning for wars. After abolishment of the states his role went on decline and his services were confined to the families and individuals.

2. The Milieu

Chaprote is located in sub-division Nagar of district Gilgit, at about 65 k.m. toward northwest from the main city of Gilgit. An 8 kilometers long jeep-able road connects it with the Karakoram Highway. Crossing over a suspension wooden bridge the road first enters in Chalth and divides into two, one leads to Bar village and the other to Chaprote. Chaprote is situated on the top of a small mountain, beyond this point there is no human settlement exist but glaciers, high altitude lakes and wild life. Two fast flowing streams originate from eastern and western mountains and flow down into the Hunza-river encircling the village. Most of the families are engaged in agricultural and livestock raising activities for their livelihood. All the settlers are Muslims and speak Shina language.

Generally shamans indicate cosmic mountain as the Center of the World which establishes path between earth and sky. Eliade writes: "the Mongols, Buryat, and Kalmyk know the mountain (cosmic mountain) under the names of Sumbur,

Sumur or Sumer (Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy). The word "Sumulo" is being used in Shina language for the sacred person or place.

Geographers have identified the collision point of Indian and Asian continents near the Chaprote village under which local people offer animal scarifies, when crossing it with bride and groom. On the other hand, the village Chaprote is considering center and native village of Danyals in the area and the renowned Danyal of the region "Khimitto" was the native of this village.

3. Recruitment of Danyal

It is said, to become a Danyal is not an easy task but takes a few years during which the candidate has to suffer a lot of physical and mental pain. In his initial recruiting period the magnitude of his sickness significantly varies on essence of the moon position. During the first fourteen days of each moon, the candidate experiences laziness, body pain, burning heart. During the course, the candidate faces abnormal events, in his state of unconsciousness he sees images of spirits and various frightening creatures. In his dreams in the nights spirits appear to him in the shapes of insects, pigeons, butterflies and wild animals. However, the leader spirit adopts comparatively a bigger shape than the others do. Sometimes, she appears in a frightening human face and presses the body of the candidate then he cries by pain. It is commonly believed among the Danyals that during recruiting period the candidate is being tortured by the spirits and during his visitation to the spiritual world he enjoys seeing the unique beauty. Danyal goes to these complex experiences for 3 to 7 years and then the master Danyal organizes the last ritual of the recruitment process which is locally called as Shut-toky.

4. The last recruiting ritual

The bridge role of Makhakher (spirit mother) appears to be very important in demonstration of Shut-toky. First of all the master Danyal cleans the open ground with smoke of a local herb then the candidate stands in the center of the ceremonial ground in which people and musician are gathered in a circle. The master Danyal applies Viow (spell) on candidate and puts some dried juniper leaves on burning fire kept in an iron plate. The candidate places his face above the iron plate and starts inhaling the white smoke of dried juniper leaves for about five to ten minutes. Then he stands and starts dancing in the circle, and musicians play a specific wild tune. Through out the period of trance he keeps his eyes open. He goes to the flute player and listens the tune carefully; again he stands and dances looking up into the sky and nearby treetops.

After a few rounds of dance he starts singing songs (he uses the local language Shina) in which he tells about the departure of the spirits from the upper world to the human world. In his songs, he tells details of spirit-journey from upper

world to the ceremony. The master Danyal listens candidate's songs carefully. Then the dramatic part of the ceremony reaches, when the candidate sings the song that his "Makhakher Aji (spirit mother) reached in the ceremony with milk and blood in two horns of a ibex (a wild animal), and he has received the milk as his gift".

After hearing this song, the master Danyal gives signal to the people for slaughtering the green goat given by the mother's brother of the candidate for this ceremony. When the candidate smells the perfume of blood he runs from the circle to behind the gathering and tries to drink the blood of the slaughtered animal. The master stops him, when his lips just touch the blood. This is the most critical and dangerous movement in the life of a candidate, if he drinks more than a sip of blood, he will be placed in a lower category. Again the candidate starts dancing in the circle holding bleeding head of the slaughtered goat in his hand. When the master Danyal puts a string³ around the neck of the candidate like a necklace, then the candidate falls down on the ground. Again the master Danyal releases him of the string, he again stands up and starts dancing. The master Danyal repeats this activity three times and announces that the Shut-toky is over. Few young men take the unconscious candidate into a clean room, where he goes in a deep sleep for the whole day and night, when he wakes up he acquires a new status of a complete Danyal. It is said by the Danyals that the same night of Shut-toky, the leader spirit comes to the would-be Danyal and teaches him the danyalic spells Viow, Ganow and Pherun.

³The master Danyal produces this string by using seven colors of thread, dipping it into the blood and shit of the slaughtered goat and by applying his spell Ganow (a technique to bound spirits or some thing else).

My Danyal informant told that red, green and white colors play significant role in the whole recruitment process and in his public performance. During the Shut-toky, those who are wearing red clothes are not allowed to attain the ceremony, because the candidate attacks on them. In the ceremony, spirits wear green clothes and the Makhakher wears white clothes, she brings red blood in one hand and white milk in other hand, and the family of the candidate slaughters a so called green goat.

5. Categories of Danyal

Like magicians, shamans also have two major groups' black and white, and a similar division can be traced among Danyals. Danyals are of two groups The Makhakher-Danyals and The Rowoaley-Danyals. Again each group divides into two sub-groups. This division is basically based on power and nature of helping spirits of the Danyal. Those who belong to Makhakher-Danyals are supposed to be more powerful, more skillful and more beneficial for the community and families. Whereas, villagers associate some danger of utilizing services of

Rowoaley-Danyals therefore, most of the villagers prefer to use the services of and the Makhakher-Danyals.

6. Status of a Danyal

The status acquired by a person is basically the result of the role he plays in the society. Beside his routine work in the family a Danyal plays three major roles as a part time magico-religious practitioner. He diagnosis and cures illnesses, predicts future events, and acts as medium of communication between human beings and spirits. He gets respect from the people on the basis of his spiritual assistance offering for the villagers. In past, the Danyal was honored with a prestigious status next to the ruler, because of his significant role in the planning of state affairs. At present, his services are somehow limited to the individuals, families and clans; still he acquires a respectable social position among the folks of Chaprote and people living in the suburbs, due to his unique and traditional method of diagnosis and distinctive healing tools.

Conclusion

The term "spiritual healer" or "spirit medium" is being commonly used in China, Central America, Siberia and some other parts of the world to denote a shaman, however there are varieties of the specialists who act as spiritual healers or spirit mediums. They can be magicians, seers, medicine men, Pirs, Pashu and Sadhus but they stand in contrast to a shaman because they do not induce trance for healing and divination purposes.

The present study is the first detailed anthropological research work on Danyals of Gilgit with an objective of documenting the characteristics and role of the Danyal with regard to the well known shaman of primitive cultures. The literature review confirmed that the shaman is known with different local names in various cultures. The present study revealed that the local Danyal applies a similar procedure to summon his helping spirits and offers more or less similar services to the people like a shaman do. Therefore, it is concluded that the term "Danyal" in Shina speaking people and "Bitton" among Brushos are in-fact local names being used to designate a shaman in that particular society.

The most interesting finding of this study is the local language (Shina⁴) a Danyal speaks in trance, when interpreting information he received from the spirits. However, it is learnt that in other primitive cultures shaman learns a special language to communicate with his spirits. This shamanic language is regarded as secret or animal language, which needs experts to interpret the information to the common people. This aspect needs further research work to explore any possible linkage between shamanic language and Shina language. Shina is a local language of the Northern Areas of Pakistan and no evidence was found of speaking Shina in other parts of the world.

⁴*Shina is a local language the majority population speaks in the Northern Areas of Pakistan.*

Chaprote is a traditional village regarded as native village of Danyals in the area. The role of a Danyal is meaningful in this village, because he has been an integral part of the local culture. He helps them in illnesses, protects them from witchcraft and forecasts the future events and hardships. Normally, his status in the community is more or less an ordinary man, but in certain occasions he leads the families and communities. His unique and traditional curing method and public demonstration of his spiritual power makes him distinguish among the common villagers. He as healer and foreteller help provide comfort and satisfaction to the villagers. As a matter-of-fact his status and social importance is declining with the advancement of modern medical and educational facilities in the area. Now his services are more confined to the individuals and families rather to communities or states.

It is commonly believed that one can not become a Danyal by himself or by his clan's resolution. It is a God gifted role and they are the spirits who select a candidate for a future Danyal, either from the men or from women kin of the dead Danyals. The process of becoming a Danyal is a long one, it can take three to seven years in which several ecstatic experiences and ritual are supposed to achieve. During the initiatory sickness, the candidate faces physical and mental tortures and in his dreams he visits the spiritual world along his helping spirits where, he learns norms and values of the spiritual world. On the other hand, he learns from the master Danyal and demonstrates his spiritual competency publicly. During this whole process, he observes cleanliness in eating, wearing and living. His experiences of spiritual journey and training by master Danyal help increase his competency of performing Danyalic role and the last public ceremony Shut-toky publicly recognizes his status as a Danyal.

Some mystical numbers and colors play significant role in Danyalism. The number 3 and 7 are frequently being used in many occasions: the recruiting process of a Danyal usually constitutes 3 to 7 years, the master Danyal takes 3 to 7 days to organize Shut-toky. The master produces a string (dolo) for the neck of the candidate using thread of seven colors. A Danyal do not visit a house till seven days of childbirth and till three days in case of a death. He usually counts the number of his helping spirits multiplying with seven as: $7 \times 2 = 14$, $7 \times 3 = 21$, $7 \times 4 = 28$ and $7 \times 5 = 35$. Danyal divides the supernatural world into three regions the upper, middle and the lower region, and a Danyal prefers to induce trance in the first fourteen days (7×2) of the moon.

Like the mystical numbers, combination of three colors white, green and red play a symbolic role in Danyalism. When a would-be Danyal visits spiritual world during the recruitment, he sees lush green valleys, green jangle of juniper, greenish Ice Mountains, white glaciers and stocks of ruby (red precious stones) etc. In the ceremony of Shut-toky he do not like presence of people

who wears red clothes, his spirits appear in white and green dresses and his family sacrifices a green goat. His spirit mother brings his gift, the white milk and red blood in two horns of ibex. When a Danyal induces trance he inhales white smoke of green juniper leaves burning on red fire etc.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Akhtar, Hidayatullah. 1987. Aina-e-Dardistan. Gilgit: K.A. Publishers.
2. Ali, Manzooom. 1982. Bloristan. Gilgit:
3. Arthur, S. Gregor. 1972. Witchcraft and Magic. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
4. Biddulph, John. 1986. The Tribes of HinduKush. Karachi: Kamram Publishers.
5. Durand, Algerrion. 1899. The Making of a Frontier. London.
6. Eliade, Mircea. 1964. Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy. Princeton: University press.
7. Eliade, Mircea. 1958. Patterns in comparative religion. London: Sheed and Ward Ltd.
8. Hunter, D. & P Whetten. 1971. Encyclopedia of Anthropology. New York: Harper and Row Publishers.
9. Knight, E.F. 1978. Where Three Empires Meet. Karachi: Indus Publishers.
10. Laurence, G. Thompson. 1969. Chinese Religion: An Introduction. California: Dickenson Publishing company.
11. Lessa, William. Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach. U.S.A: Harper and Row Publishers.
12. Muhammad, Gullam. 1980. Festivals and Folklore of Gilgit. Islamabad.
13. Reichel-Dolmatoffg. 1987. Shamans and Art of the Eastern Turkanoan Indians. Leiden: Institute of religious Ichnography State University of Groningen Leiden E.J. Brill.
14. Schomberg, Colonel. R.C.F. Between the Oxus and Indus.
15. Winsted, Richard. 1982. The Malay Magician. London: Oxford University press.

Notes to readers

This is the summarized version of his unpublished thesis submitted to the department of Anthropology, Quaid-i-Azam University Pakistan, in partial fulfillment of the degree of Master of Science in Anthropology in 1990.

The author may be reached at:

A-30/1
Riaz Road

Jutial Gilgit
Northern Areas of Pakistan
Tel: 0092-572-55162 / 0092-51-448738

The author is a social anthropologist. As a practicing anthropologist, he had worked for Aga Khan Development Network, Catholic Relief Services, ActionAid and Karakoram Research & Development Services in Pakistan. Currently the author is working on production of a documentary.

His field of interest is developing tools, methods and approaches for sustainable management of community-based projects through Participatory Action and Development (PAD).