

THE SEEDS IN THE CONTAINER: METAPHORS OF CONCEPTION AND KINSHIP IN RURAL BANGLADESH

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This article discusses the concepts and metaphors of conception and kinship among the Muslim villagers in rural Bangladesh. I aim to connect the metaphors of kinship and gender to the broader understanding of the key ideas about fertility, social reproduction and continuity of life. I will distinguish two separate, yet related topics: sexual and social reproduction. To some extent, the former topic presupposes the latter and vice versa. Sexual and social reproduction are inextricably linked, though not in a straightforward and an unproblematic way. The subject is a part of my dissertation project dealing with family planning and fertility practises in a Bangladeshi village. My work is based on anthropological fieldwork in Bangladesh in 1995-1997 and especially examines Muslim women in the village of Mayapara (a pseudonym).

Delaney (1991: 183) argues that the meaning of ideas about procreation and fertility derive from their place in a specific cosmological and religious system. She continues that in the Islamic theory of procreation, men are believed to be generative agents when they provide the 'seed' for procreation. Women in contrasts are represented, as 'soil' which can be either fertile or barren.

She describes fertile women as passive receivers of the seed-child, who provide a generalised medium of nurture which helps to make it grow. Nourishing is often seen as a passive state or non-action (Delaney 1991; Inhorn 1996; Kotalova 1993; Dube 1997). Delaney (1991) and Inhorn (1996) have concluded from their work in Turkey and Egypt, that the Islamic procreation theory is monogenetic i.e. Allah, created the world, and the male recreates Allah's creation leaving only a little space for women. I argue that there is no overall Islamic procreation theory that can be found anywhere in the Islamic world or among the Muslims, but the theories of conception and procreation are always contextualised. I suggest that the speculations on procreation among the Muslim villagers in Mayapara are mainly duogenetic. As I will show, the villagers of Mayapara suggest that the continuity of life is predicted first by Allah and then a combination of female and male substances. The imagining

and expressing relatedness between females and males among the Muslim villagers of Mayapara is largely an exercise in imagining gender complementarity. The speculation on and narration of conception and procreation among the Bangladeshi Muslim villagers are mainly the same as those Fruzzetti and Östör (1976) have indicated among the Bengali Hindus in West-Bengal. As I will show, there is a duality of transformation and the transmission of the substance for the conception of person, a child.

FERTILITY AND LAND

The people of Bangladesh, as well as the villagers of Mayapara, are predominantly farmers. For the Muslim villagers, Bengali Islam provides the major premises of how they view the land. The world creation myth is widely narrated in different forms and it is narrated as an Islamic truth derived from the Koran and Hadith¹ The creation myth is expounded by both men and women and each narrator constructs his or her version of the myth to fit the occasion.

The local creation myth tells about Adom and Bibi Howa (Adam and Eve). After creating the air, the water and the earth, Allah gave life to the earthen doll that became Adom. From Adom's left side Allah took a bone and created Howa to be Adom's wife. Then Allah announced that Adom was to cultivate the earth for Him, and to be the owner and the master of cultivation and land.

Our Bibi Howa and Adom lived in heaven once. While they were staying in Heaven a devil (*shoitan*) disguised as a religious man (*maulavi*), came and cried. Because the women tend to have more kindness, Bibi Howa asked: 'Why are you crying, Father?' 'Oh mother, It's not my cry, I'm crying for you', he replied. 'Why are you crying for me?' 'I'm crying because you don't eat the *gandhomphol*.² You will be thrown out of heaven. You have to take the *gandhomphol*.'

It was a devil (*shoitan*). Our Bibi Howa took the *gandhomphol* and later she said to Adom: 'Here, You listen. If You don't eat it, we will be thrown out of this heaven.'

When Adom started to eat the fruit, it got stuck in his throat, there is a *goda* (a small fruit, Adam's apple). Isn't there a *goda*? After having the *gandhomphol*, they start to defecate – and they could not stay in heaven any longer. They were sent to two different countries. One was sent to the Island of Shoron (*Sharon dip*), the other to Jedda. Because we have taken the fruit, as the tree had its sap, *gandhomphol* made a curse: 'As I bleed my sap for five days, you have to give your sap once a month.' Did you understand? This is said in Hadith.

After falling into vice and eating the forbidden fruit (*gandhomphol*), Adom and Bibi Howa were put out of heaven and Allah ordered them to cultivate the earth. They

¹ The Koran does not contain an authoritative version of the complete myth but instead the Koran contains a number of references to Allah's creation of universe: Sura 2:22-40; 15:25-49; 13:1-12; 38:72-86. See also Thorp 1982.

² *Gandhom* – the forbidden fruit eaten by Adom and Bibi Howa in Bengali Muslim tradition. According to Throp (1982) the Parsi word *gandhom* means wheat and it has been interpreted to carry sexual meaning also. The first Bengali feminist Begum Rokeya rejected the idea of sexual symbolism and interpreted *gandhom* as the origin of knowledge.

cultivated the land and had lots of children. All of their children were born in Mecca and besides Kabel and Habel, they had many daughters and sons, and all the peoples (*jati*) of the world are descended from them. *Habil and Kabil were two brothers. Habil took the way of the Hindus and Kabil took the way of Muslims. They were sons of Bibi Howa and Adom.*

The villagers of Mayapara consider earth to be the origin of the man, i.e. Adom, and the source of power and strength. Earth is the substance which provides the food and basic elements of rural economy. (Thorp 1982.)

As in many other cultures, there is also a deep analogy between land and human fertility in Bangladesh. The wife is regarded as a field (*khetra, mat*) in which the husband sows his seeds (*bij, sukra*). As the earth yields its moisture, its generative strength, *sakti*, becomes part of the crops grown in it. So the mother provides the foetus with juice or female semen (*ras*) and menstrual blood, which gives strength and power to the growing child. After the birth, the female ingredients form the milk (*dudh*) the mother provides for the child. Young, single women are sometimes referred to as 'non-cultivated' land and old single women as 'waste-land' – 'Land without cultivation is like a woman without husband', the villagers said. (See also Kotalova 1993.)

The idea of an analogical relationship between human fertility and land also appears in Hinduism, and Muslim and Hindu views are divinely ordered and inseparable. In Hinduism earth is analogous to the female generative force, *sakti*, which the male as a cultivator is requested to release. In Bengali culture (except among some tribes) cultivation is men's work and women do not touch the plough. According to Maloney, Aziz and Sarker (1981: 12), the plough (*langgal*) is a symbol of the male organ (*lingga*) as it pierces the mother earth.

In Mayapara, as well as in other parts of Bengal, women may weed or harvest, but not plough. Muslim villagers believe that women should not enter the field because they might pollute it. Any failure in cultivation and crops is associated with women's pollution. In Mayapara paddy fields are divided with low banks and women use these banks as their paths when they visit neighbouring hamlets (*para*). Main roads and paths are not suitable for them because of seclusion rules. Some religious men condemned women for the destruction of the soil and causing crop failure because of the increasing transfer of female labour from villages to town and garments factories. They argued that economic independence for women is undesirable because it may give them a comparable or even superior status, which was not God's will.

Marriage and sexual life, which in the villagers' narratives are seen to go together, are usually metaphorised. In addition to talking about the images of fields, seeds and the soil, vessels and bearers of the vessels are often used in this context.

When a man marries, his line (*bongsho*) is established, so it could be said that it is the wife who completes and accomplishes the line. The bridegroom is called a

patra and the bride a *patri*, *patra* meaning a vessel and *patri* meaning 'she who installs the vessel'. According to Fruzzetti (1998), 'Men give to receive and women are exchanged to tie men to each other through the line' and 'Women are the fields, the earth, men cultivate and bring culture to the land'. In sexual intercourse the husband's seed (*bij*) is received and accepted by the wife. The wife is the vessel, the earth, in which the seed is planted or stored while it grows.

The Bengali word for womb is *gorbho*, which means a granary, a container or a store. Pregnant women are called *gorbhoti manus*, people with a granary. After conception, the womb is seen as veiled (*parda*). In the veiled womb, the female and male semen become blood and which develops through the mother's nourishment and blood. The foetus is the result of both maternal and paternal contributions and collaboration. The wife receives her husband's seed and increases the blood of the child that is growing in the uterus.

According to Fruzzetti and Östör (1976: 121) and Maloney, Aziz and Sarker (1981), the mother contributes the *sakti*, the generative strength and the power of mother and earth to the child. *Sakti* is a combination of power, force, ability and affection – which are also seen as conditions for the growth of the foetus. Both parents determine the completed child and its sex. In this developing process, the mother complements the father at every step and gives strength to the bones, the flesh and the blood of the coming child.

The husband sows the seed and the wife is said to bear the fruit (*phol*) until it becomes too heavy and falls³ down, cutting its tie with the earth (Fruzzetti & Östör 1976). The placenta is called a flower (*phul*) and it mediates the nutrition to the child. The mother-to-be is fed by the husband and his line, but the child consumes the nutrition transformed by the mother (see also Merret-Balkos 1998).

The umbilical cord is called a root of the whole body (*shara shariler mul*). Before the birth, the root is considered to belong to the mother, but when the baby and the placenta are delivered, the cord belongs to the baby. One widely used metaphor for birth spacing is that 'if you have banana plants too close to each other the fruits grow weak' meaning that if you have too many children too close together the children are born weak and are likely to die.

Women are also commonly referred to as fruit trees. When Hamida Kathon reached her menopause, her husband announced that

the tree inside my wife is dead, what is the use of this woman. When a woman becomes old, nothing can be done, she does not bear any fruits but old banana and mango trees continue bearing, even if some branches are cut, it can recover itself.

³ Miscarriage and delivery are described as a 'fall of the child' in Bengal. Jeffery, Jeffery & Lyon (1989) have reported that the same phrase is also used in North India. In addition to *dai*, another Bengali word for midwife, *dhoruni*, means literally 'the one who catches the falling baby'. When a baby is about to come out and its head is out, the women ask the midwife or elder female relatives 'to catch the falling child' *bacha dhoro*, *bacha dhoro*.



Fig. 1. The national family planning programme in Bangladesh uses metaphors and symbols of land and fertility to motivate people to use birth control methods. This poster guides couples to keep enough space between rice plants and children to have healthy results.

The midwife (*dai*) of Mayapara used same metaphor when we talked about complicated deliveries:

If the delivery is difficult and both mother and child are in danger, it's better to save the tree than the fruit.

TWO COMPLEMENTARY SEMENS

Male Semen (*bij, birjo*)

Most of the villagers believe that male semen is made of blood, which originates in the head (*mata*) and flows down the spinal column. One drop of semen may contain over 50 drops of blood. Blood is considered to give the strength and power to semen. For conception, both male semen (*bij, birjo*) and female semen (*ras*) must combine and these transmit the essential substances that distinguish one hereditary group or caste (*jati*) and line (*bangso*) from each other.

The core substance of kinship in local perceptions is blood, and the major contribution to blood is food. Blood is considered to be transformed food, especially rice and meat. Those people who do not eat enough rice and meat have less blood, they are not fertile, and their bodies become cold and dry.

Sexual appetite and potency is considered to depend on food, which is divided into hot (*garam*) and cold (*thanda*) foods. Hot foods are basically those with animal proteins like meat, especially beef, eggs, milk, fat fish, and onions and especially honey. These food items are believed to excite the body and the mind and to give more sexual drive. If a person can afford to eat *garam* food in large quantities, he can have frequent coitus without feeling weakness (*durbol*). Cooling food, like vegetarian food, decreases sexual drive and appetite. A satisfactory sexual life is also seen to depend on the general health status of a person. Rich *garam* food is seen to affect positively the quality of blood. Muslim villagers explained that Hindu families have fewer children because of the vegetarian i.e. cooling diet they follow. Muslim men were considered to have more strength (*shokto*) for sexual life and Muslim women were considered to be more fertile than Hindu women. Even though an active sexual life is considered good for mental and bodily well-being, many of the villagers said that limited coitus is also necessary and good for health as it maintains the purity of blood and keeps skin, especially female skin, in good condition. The loss of semen, whether in nocturnal emission (*sophno dosh*), masturbation or excessive coitus is deemed to cause anxiety.

Female semen (*ras, rasa*)

Ras, the female semen, is the counterpart of male semen, *bij*, both of which are needed for successful conception. According to Maloney, Aziz and Sarker (1982), this theory supports the tendency to construct kinship links through both parents. First, the *rasa* means juice, sap or liquid. More widely the concept of *ras(a)* belongs to the core of the South Asian theory of aesthetics. The concept of *rasa* has its roots in Sanskrit poetics and has multiple meanings both in Bengali and Sanskrit: In its most concrete form, *rasa* refers to elements like flavour, taste, juice. In an abstract sense it is seen as love, strong attachment, delight and pleasure and finally as semen (see Cashin 1993).

In a broad semantic sense, *rasa* refers to the flavour, taste or essence of something that can be experienced and extracted in various ways. *Rasa* is also considered a necessary condition for enjoyment, just like hunger is a necessary condition for the enjoyment of delicious food (Toomey 1991: 161-163).

The concept of *ras(a)* originates from the Sanskrit root *raj-*, meaning to be red, to be coloured, sometimes it is also used for menstrual blood. It is also seen as a powerful and generative sexual fluid and a source of life, because out of menstrual blood the mother forms and then feed the foetus. In Orissa *raja* is also used to mean the colourless female sexual fluid a woman is believed to secrete during sexual intercourse. *Ras* has also been connected to the Bengali word *rosha* which means juicy, and used to describe different kinds of vegetables and fruits.

One of my neighbours, Johura Kathon, explained that 'if the juice of youth (*jaubaner ras*) dries up', her husband will no longer feel attracted to her. She explained that contraceptive pills and general ageing dries women up:

A dried women does not emit female semen any more, her skin becomes dry and hard, and her breasts are just a pair of nipples. When the female semen (*ras*) is less, women will lose the softness of their body and they will suffer because of the dryness in the vagina and birth canal, and the sexual excitement is reduced.

Emission of semen is seen as a cause for concern. For a girl or a woman, lubrication is often considered as an emission of female semen. Nocturnal emission is referred to as *sophno dos*, meaning dream-fault. *Sophno* refers to dream and the concept of *dos* implies any fault, illness or bodily malfunction.

Sophno dos is shameful, but unlike masturbation (*hat mara*), it is believed to be involuntary and does not induce so much guilt, but causes feeling of *sorom/lajja*, i.e. modesty and shame. Some old people said that the best way to get rid of the 'bad habits' like nocturnal emission and masturbation is to get married. It is also believed that the loss of semen, which is both male and female substance, deteriorates the quality of semen and can cause impotence and unhealthy offspring.

If the shared substance, the combination of both female and male semen is perfect, the children will be healthy and intelligent. The villagers consider that the semen is always gendered by Allah. Male and female semen are essentially of the same substance. They are the same but both are needed and combined in pregnancy and the formation of a child: neither two female semen nor two male semen are capable of this. As male and female semens are said to be complementary, so are female and male bodies. Male without female and vice versa is incomplete.

CONCLUSIONS

According to Lina Fruzzetti and Ákos Östör (1976: 122-124), the complementarity extends to the abstract concepts of maleness and femaleness. Analogical ideas of vessel and the holder of the vessel, as well the seed and the soil, are linked to and encompass a third unit, the fruit (*phol*), the child in the womb. Male is not opposed to female; Rather the former encompasses the latter in a hierarchical relationship. The mother complements the father's blood in every way, but it is the paternal line that is carried, it is his blood that is being increased and completed by the maternal line.

Blood is a substance that is conceptualised in Bengali terms, as having issued from the father, but is *complemented and completed* by mother. Female and male are in a reversible relationship: Male blood and line (*bongso*) need female blood to be completed and the groom, *patra*, as a vessel is 'established' (*sthapan kora*) but is 'installed' (*protistha kora*) by women in marriage (Fruzzetti & Östör 1976). After marriage women join the husband's line, but still carry their father's blood (*rokto*). A married woman retains her blood ties with her paternal kin after her marriage. The married woman's tie with her father's line is an enduring one, even though she will not pass their blood to her children.

In theories and speculations on conception and marriage, the units of hierarchical action are derived in relation to each other, consisting of units of equivalence and difference (Fruzzetti & Östör 1976). The villagers suggest that the continuity of life in any form is predicted first by Allah and then depends upon the appropriate combination of female and male contributes. The imagining and expressing relatedness between females and males among the Muslim villagers of Mayapara is largely an exercise in imaging gender complementarity; male and female, at an ideational level, stand on equal footing and complement each other.

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