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FOLK-RELIGION IN NORTH-WEST PAKISTAN (SOUTH-WAZIRISTAN)

A field study of magical practices and of some symbols in marriage ceremonies*

During the three years I was working in North-West Pakistan my post was mainly in Ṭānk, a small town south from Bannu. People of that area are mostly Paṭhāns, their language being dialects of Pashto. In the town resides a small Christian minority which had migrated from the Punjāb and is therefore Punjābī-speaking. In the villages towards Dēra Ismaīl Khan (central town of the district) a local mixture of Punjābī, called Dērawālī, is spoken.

As my knowledge of folk-tradition is collected from the patients coming to our hospital and belonging to these different groups (in addition the nomads, called *Pawinda*, coming from Afghānistān every winter), and from the local women working in our hospital as *dāī's*, my aim was to analyse and study further different components in the folk-religion of that area (the people of many isolated villages in tribal areas, as also the Afghān nomads, have retained much of their old traditions compared with the more "modern" people of the towns). That task, anyhow, is huge and requires more field survey; so I will leave most of the background aside here and describe some of the religious practices, and their functions in the community.

To begin with the magic: I dare say that being Muslim means for many people in those remote villages¹ hardly more than having got new names for deities in their pantheon, new spells; the technics being much the same as 4000 years ago. The popularity of different kinds of magical objects shows the need of an illiterate man for a very concrete religion. The amulets², inscribed with the potent verses from the holy Book (in Qur'ān there are special verses used for healing, protection etc.) give

more power when carried with or placed on that very place which needs healing or protecting (for instance in childbirth on woman's abdomen).

Since the fear³ of evil spirits and the evil eye is great, especially with regard to small children⁴ who have not yet been initiated into any social group (as well as to other persons at the transitional periods of their lives), a new-born baby⁵ is equipped with charms and talismans: An amulet tied around the neck, a red thread or cloth around the head and the wrists, even strings made of small glass pearls and tassels placed between the fingers. If a child is very pretty, a line of soot is drawn on his cheek. Lamp-black or antimony (*surma*)⁶ is also used around the eyes (it is said to have some medicinal properties as well).

Evil spirits are believed to cause illnesses, for instance epilepsy and mental disorders. Some persons they torment during the darkest night, especially between midnight and three a.m. Those believed to be possessed are avoided, since this *bad rūḥ* can attack a person nearby. A tree may also be a dwelling-place for an evil spirit, under its shade you will get ill or even die.

An ordinary man cannot heal the possessed one, nor hinder an evil spirit (old people⁷ have more power than the others), this work being done by a special practitioner called *faqīr* (*magus* in ancient Persia). The knowledge of a *fakīr* is kept secret, and is taught by means of special initiation rites to a novice. The rites include sitting for forty (40) days and nights naked on a bed, concentrating, inside a magical ring, isolated thus from evil spirits and from women. (These rites symbolize the death of the novice's old self and his being raised to the other world above this profane one during this transitional period.) Thus he gets the power and skill for practising the knowledge of light, *nūr'ilm* (which is considered less effective) and the black knowledge, *kālā'ilm*.

These practitioners make amulets, *ta'wīz*, as they are called, and give instructions for different purposes. For instance, to get somebody to fall madly in love with you, hide a *ta'wīz* under the fireplace in his house, or get him to eat or drink it, and he will follow you like a dog. Besides benevolence, a *ta'wīz* can have other effects, as when a woman of a remote village⁸ hastily left the hospital with her new-born baby,

and on inquiring why, we heard that another woman who had just arrived for delivery was wearing a special *ta'wīz* containing seven needles; the effect would be the miscarriage or death of seven other babies, and protection for the one of its carrier.

Effective magical objects are made for the prosperity of somebody's own household, but also to harm an enemy, to destroy his harvest (by burying the object in his field), to drive away peace from his house (by hiding the object under the fireplace). A *ta'wīz* can be cooked, mixed in food or beverages and served to a person, for instance, in order to get him to go mad or to become your enemy! (In this dualistic world one apparently needs to have an embodiment of the evil powers, perhaps for channeling one's aggressions in an accepted way in the community.)

Besides the fireplace, things like a bit of flesh, a clod of earth and needles can be placed at an enemy's door or inside the walls⁹, or in some corner of the courtyard, the former things obviously being meant to work by initiating the transformation of the enemy's body (likewise the flesh of every living being in his possession) into dust, while the needles apparently are used as symbolic weapons against him. When digging the effective object under the threshold¹⁰, it possibly affects the powers of fertility in the underground world.

The connection between the living and the dead is commonly maintained in the cult of the tombs of saints (*ziyārat*)¹¹. This cult is practised by all classes and different religious groups of the community. The usual reason for visiting a tomb is sterility. The rites include prayer and the bringing of food, and a gift to a possible warden of the tomb. After a child's birth, a second visit is paid for thanksgiving, and a piece of cloth is hung up on a stake at the tomb as a mark of fulfillment. Besides fertility, the tombs are visited for recovery, and for other needs also.

As the connection between man and nature is very close¹², everything that grows (including hairs, nails etc.) can be used as a magical object. Here and there a sacred tree is secretly worshipped. Even the cloth¹³ which tribal women use for their dresses has solely floral motifs.

And then to the marriage: Some details in the ceremonies drew my attention to the question of what actually lies behind the rites.

Concerning the bridegroom, why does he wear¹⁴ that special kind of head-dress (see Figure 1) which is preserved in the family? When he hides his real face, what is he representing with this glittering mask and shining white clothes? One explanation of course is to hide him from the evil eye and other harmful powers at this important moment of transition. The drums¹⁵ and the fore-dancer (called *hijra* - a hint of separation), who almost fell down in ecstasy, the shooting, and the blessing¹⁶ or protecting gesture of an elder lady of the family, could all mean driving away evil powers, and opening a safe and prosperous way into the young man's future life as a spouse.

I don't find this interpretation sufficient though. Why does the bridegroom, who had hardly ever been riding earlier¹⁷, since he is a member of the poor and despised Christian group, leave the church after the ceremonies riding on a horse? His friends are intoxicated with *bhang*, people¹⁸ sing and dance rejoicingly. To my mind, and referring to Indo-European mythology and folk-lore, this young man lifted above others with his radiant appearance symbolizes a solar deity. The dress of the groom is called *šēr wālī*, *šēr* meaning a lion, but since I am not quite sure about the correct local pronunciation and etymology of the word in this context, I leave the linguistical point here, but refer to the symbolic use of the lion, known to the Paṭhāns also¹⁹. Thus the head-dress possibly symbolizes lion's hair or rays of the sun²⁰, but it can be decorated with other figures also (here stars), commonly used as symbols for deities of Heaven (see Figure 2).

As for the bride, the customs of hiding her under a piece of cloth²¹, apparent weakness, weeping, and casting down her eyes²², as well as bringing her away after the ceremonies unnoticed (especially on the occasion of a Punjāb-originated Christian wedding), have the meaning of protection at this critical time (we must take into consideration the prevalent *parda* system also). But when we think about the careful and costly preparations; bathing her in perfumed waters, anointing with fine vegetable-oils, decorating²³ her with precious jewels and gold (silver relating to the moon and thus to fertility, is used as a bridal ornamentation by nomads, but not in customary local weddings), dressing and painting her in the special traditional way (red being the colour of

life, but also that of the deity of Dawn, in Hindu mythology), and finally²⁴ her being lifted up (at least at Paṭhān weddings), to be admired by other people of her sex, all these are rites which are practised when worshipping deities.

I don't deny that people acting like this probably have no idea of the origins of their customs (who among the ordinary people in Finland realises that a bride carrying a most beautiful bunch of flowers to the altar in our churches is, without being aware of it herself, acting according to a very old fertility rite; the deity, the sacrificer and the sacrifice being all combined in her). But the devotional attitude, mingled of course with many other human feelings at occasions like this, tells about the function these ceremonies have in the community, as I already said, people need concrete things for their devotion.

Notes

* I am grateful to Mrs. Anne Huostila who has helped me in collecting this material. The following descriptive notes refer to slides, all but No. 11 taken in and around Ṭānk.

- 1) Village women drawing water, with children (some of them visibly wearing amulets).
- 2) Children of a tribal area. Some have silver containers (used for verses of Qur'ān) hanging down from the neck.
- 3) Village children, some of them covering their faces in fear when being photographed.
- 4) *Pawinda* children, the boy wearing girl's dress (with mirror-work).
- 5) A new-born baby, equipped with red strings for protection.
- 6) A child with *surma* around the eyes.
- 7) Village elders.
- 8) The woman who fled with her baby for fear of the needle- *ta'wīz*.
- 9) Women's courtyard in a village house of a rich Paṭhān landowner.
- 10) At the door of a house in Ṭānk. Houses are fortified with high walls and strong gates.
- 11) A *ziyarat* flagged with pieces of cloth, beside the site of old Harappā.
- 12) and 13) Women and children in their "flowery" clothes.
- 14) Village bridegroom dressed in *šērwalz*, his friends saluting him with their guns.
- 15) On the way to the bridegroom's home, fore-dancer, the drummers and a flautist opening the way for the procession.
- 16) The bridegroom at home with the gunmen and elder ladies of the family.
- 17) A Christian bridegroom similarly dressed, after the ceremonies on horseback surrounded by his friends.

- 18) The drummers and the dancers.
- 19) A skilfully carved lion figure above the main entrance of a Paṭhān house in Ṭānk.
- 20) Bridegroom, his head-dress decorated with stars (among other items).
- 21) At a Christian marriage, the bride is covered with plain white cloth.
- 22) A Paṭhān bride, with her head bowed, under an embroidered veil.
- 23) Presentation of the richly decorated bride, with customary jewelry on.
- 24) The bride lifted up to be admired, under a special baldachin.



Figure 1. Head-dress of the groom in a village near Tank. The tassels in front of his face are made of wollen thread; the colour of them is mainly red and green, as of the shawl also. Otherwise the colouring is gold. A glittering effect is added by using pearls.



Figure 2. A Christian bridegroom's head-dress decorated with stars. The main colour being silver, around the stars, in the "garlands" red and dark green are used.