Baiṭhak: Exorcism in Peshawar (Pakistan)

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THE SETTING

The word *baiṭhak* is a Hindi-Urdu word used in Pashto and Hindko of Pakistan and in a general context, it means "sitting; place to sit." In Hindko[1] of the Peshawar area in Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP), its meaning includes the specialized sense of this paper, that is, a particular kind of gathering of women[2] for exorcism of evil spirits.[3]

*Baiṭhak*s played an important role in the life of Peshawar women in the past and although the custom of holding *baiṭhak*s is now dying out, the practice still survives today among residents of various quarters of the Old City of Peshawar.[4] It has two functions, a healing function for treating of psychosomatic illnesses and a social function of providing an opportunity for women who keep purdah (lit. "curtain" but meaning the segregation and seclusion of women) to get together.

The observance of purdah was strictly maintained in the Peshawar of the past, and the province continues to be one of the most conservative areas of Pakistan in this respect even today. Women of Peshawar literally could not set foot outside their houses except for a few specific purposes. These were mainly to attend important social occasions, either happy occasions such as a marriage or sad occasions such as a funeral. Walking about in the streets and bazaars for pleasure was considered highly improper and could have severe consequences. Life within a joint family also imposed a further set of strict rules regarding social behavior. Beginning before puberty, various aspects of posture, speech and dress were directed toward the appearance of extreme modesty and non-sexuality as well as the definition of status within the household hierarchy and these were all regulated in minute detail. With the

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continual confinement to the house and the general restrictions on social life, the life of a woman was not unlike that of a caged bird or a prisoner. Restrictions on education added to this lack of experience with the outside world gave women no opportunity to understand and cope with various problems they might face. It is not surprising that this would sometimes result in mental and physical illness for these women.

The first manifestation of this breakdown is extreme irritability and over-sensitivity; in a more advanced state, the woman becomes weak and sometimes faints and starts to have periods of uncontrollable shaking or trembling (*ghoṭa*). It is at this point that a household will decide that a woman is under the shadow of an evil spirit.

When it has been decided that an evil spirit is at fault, the unhappy family first takes the woman to practitioners of traditional medicine (*ḥakīm*s and *ṭabīb*s for Islamic medical systems and, prior to the formation of Pakistan, *vaid*s for the Hindu systems). These doctors, however, offer only herbal-type medicines which may not cure psychological and mental ailments. A next step is to take the patient to men learned in religious lore (*ᶜālim*s or *mullā*s) who can recite religious texts and auspicious incantations and who can provide charms and amulets for the patient. A patient may also be taken to visit holy men (*pīr*s, *faqīr*s, or *darvesh*s) or to shrines (*mazār*s) of holy men no longer living.[5] These attempts at a cure would be the standard procedures suggested by men of the family, and the men would be the ones who would take the patient to the doctors, religious men, or shrines.

If these religious techniques do not provide relief for the patient, the older women of the house then confer with each other and it is at this time of desperation that a *baiṭhak* session is suggested. As can be seen from the following description, there is a considerable amount of effort and financial expenditure to be made when a *baiṭhak* session is arranged. A decision to organize a *baiṭhak* is therefore not undertaken lightly.

Preparations for a *Baiṭhak*

The first steps taken after a decision has been made to hold a *baiṭhak* are to contact a group of *mīrāṣin*s,[6] the female singers of the *baiṭhak* songs, and to make an agreement with them on the time and place of the *baiṭhak*. The traditional day of the week is Thursday (*jumaᶜ-rāt*, lit., Friday night), because it is followed by the Muslim's day of prayer on Friday (*jumaᶜ*). The senior woman of the house where the *baiṭhak* will take place then invites her female relatives, friends and neighbors to join her on the date chosen for the *baiṭhak* gathering. The number of guests who are invited depends on the size of the house; houses in the Old

City tend to have small rooms, but there may be fifty or sixty guests if there is a sufficiently large room. The guests are usually invited to come at some time in the morning after breakfast, between, say 9 and 10 a.m., and will expect to spend the whole day, including the mid-day meal and tea, at the session and to return to their homes and families only in time for preparation of the evening meal. In contrast to festive occasions such as marriages where children of all ages accompany their mothers, babies and very small children are not allowed in the room when a *baiṭhak* session is being held.[7]

An invitation to a *baiṭhak* is treated as a very serious matter and those who are invited make every possible effort to attend, since they want to be sure that the hostess will reciprocate if there should ever be a similar problem in their own households. The hostess carries out the formalities of the arrangements with the same degree of seriousness that she has when undertaking a religious obligation.

On the day before the *baiṭhak* is to be held, all the furniture is taken out of the hall (*dālān*: the largest room of the house, which in more modern homes would be a living/drawing room). The walls of the room are cleaned and may be whitewashed, and the floor is washed with scented water. Once the floor has been washed, some clean, often new mats and/or carpets are placed on the floor for the guests to sit on. A bed (*palang*) is washed for the patient and it is then put in one corner of the room where the patient can watch and listen. Clean, often new mattresses and pillows are put on the bed and it is made up with new white bedsheets.

Incense sticks (*lobān*) are put in the four corners of the hall so that the smoke from the incense will give the room a mysterious and religious atmosphere. A brazier (*manqal*) is set in front of the place where the *mīrāṣin*s will sit so that during the dance of the possessed,[8] sandalwood powder can be thrown on the burning coals in it, and the smoke from this will add further to the mysterious atmosphere of the room. A tray is also put in front of the place where the *mīrāṣin*s will sit; this tray will be heaped with sugar[9] and sweets for the *mīrāṣin*s and guests to take with them when they leave. A metal flask with small holes on top (*ʿitr-dānī*) is filled with perfumed water to be sprinkled around the room and on the participants during the session; this will keep the air of the room fresh and fragrant.

Food and Drink for the *Baiṭhak*

The food and drink for this gathering are prepared with great care so that the guests as well as the evil spirits will feel that they are being treated with proper formality and respect. The mistress of the house

is in charge of the food, which is prepared by the women of her house; nearby neighbor women also often volunteer their help in the food preparation. The food is cooked very early in the morning and arranged attractively for serving; neighbors who help with the cooking then go back to their own homes to bathe before returning for the *baiṭhak* session.

Seven cooked dishes are prepared, which typically include some or all of the following: (1) *pulāo* (rice with spices and meat); (2) *zarda* (a sweet rice flavored with saffron) (3) *korma* (meat in a rich gravy); (4) *nān* (a flat leavened bread baked on the wall of a clay oven); (5) fried liver and/or heart and/or brains; (6) *halvā* (a sweet dish made with semolina, ghee and sugar to which dried fruit and/or nuts and cardamom are added); (7) *khīr* (a sweet pudding of rice and milk, usually flavored with cardamom or rosewater and covered with very fine silver foil). In addition to the seven cooked dishes, there are seven kinds of fresh fruit, such as apples, grapes, oranges, guavas, bananas, pomegranates, and mangoes, depending on the season. There are also seven kinds of dried fruit and nuts, such as dried mulberries, dried apricots, almonds, walnuts, pine nuts, pistachios, and raisins.

Like the fresh fruits, the drinks also vary according to the season. In the summer, the hostess may serve sandalwood juice[10] or cold milk; in the winter, the guests may be offered *shīr-chā'e*[11] or other hot drinks. The guests who come to the *baiṭhak* bring sugar (traditionally seven kilos, but now only two or three kilos), garlands of flowers (traditionally of seven varieties) and other kinds of fruit or sweets which they give to the hostess, thereby showing their appreciation for this occasion.

During the *baiṭhak* session, the spirit who has possessed the patient can request any particular food, fruit, drink, or flower. The hostess must immediately provide the items requested so as not to annoy the spirit which would then cause further pain to the possessed woman. Therefore, the senior woman of the house is careful to have available a good supply of extra foods and drinks which past experience has shown that a possessed woman may request.[12]

At the end of a *baiṭhak* session, guests are given small amounts of sugar, sweet dishes, dried fruit and nuts, and flowers to take home to their families and especially the children, not only for enjoyment but also to help ward off evil spirits. In the past, a wealthy family might give fine silk kerchiefs to the guests for wrapping up these things to take home. If there is left-over food, it is also packed up for the participants in the *baiṭhak* session to take home. If the brazier has had time to cool, a woman may put a tiny amount of ashes in her mouth or she may take some of the ashes home for herself and her family.

THE *baiṭhak* SESSION

Before going to a *baiṭhak* session, the women, including the patient, all have a complete bath and then get dressed in clean clothes.[13] In the house of the hostess, the patient is put on her bed in one corner of the hall. The group of *mīrāṣin*s who come are seated on mattresses, usually in the corner diagonally across the room from the patient. The guests sit on mattresses laid on the floor all along the four walls of the room, often with bolsters (*motaka*) behind them to lean back on. The dancing of the patient is done in the center of the room, which is called the *maidān*, lit., "field." Several layers of mattresses are stacked on the *maidān* so that the woman who is dancing during the exorcism will not harm herself in any way. When most of the guests are present, the *baiṭhak* session is opened.

The music of the *baiṭhak* is of two kinds, first, the religious songs which are sung at the beginning of a session, and second, a set of lighter songs about various supernatural beings. The dancing of the possessed person usually occurs during the time when the *mīrāṣin*s are singing this second group of songs; however, particularly pious women (for example, women who have always wanted to go on the pilgrimage to Mecca but have never been able to) sometimes begin dancing during the religious songs.

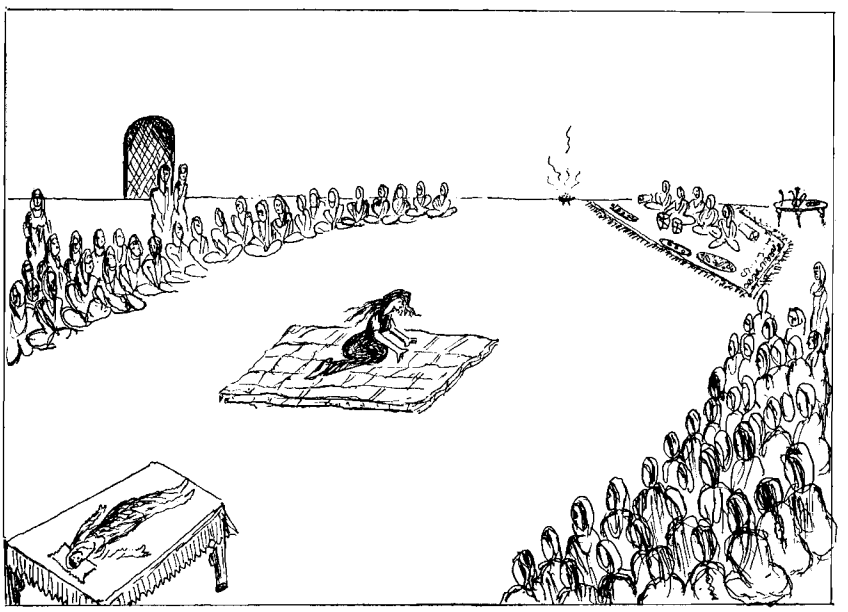

Fig. 1. *Baiṭhak* with guest dancing and patient resting.

THE DANCE OF THE POSSESSED

The dance itself can be divided into three parts, a beginning or " warming up " period, the dance itself, and the end or " cooling down."

" Warming up ": The " warming up " occurs at the beginning of a particular song when the evil spirit comes to the woman. The woman will start swaying gently at the beginning of the song; this is an indication to the other women sitting there that the spirit possessing that woman is coming or has just arrived. Some relatives of the woman or those sitting next to her will then take off her earrings, bracelets, rings, necklaces, ankle bracelets, nose rings, and any other jewelry she might be wearing. They also take off her scarf (*dupaṭṭa*) and the ties on her braids (*paranda*) and they even undo her braids so that nothing can interfere with her dancing. The reason is that during this dance the woman is physically insensible to what she is doing and she can seriously injure herself by, for example, pulling too hard at her earrings or scratching herself with the edge of a bracelet or even pulling a scarf too tightly around her own neck. Even using only her hands, a possessed woman sometimes beats herself so hard that her body is black and blue with bruises the next day.

The dancing: The dancing may take a variety of forms. Often it is an extremely irregular step, frenzied and unsteady, with the dancer unaware of where she is and what she is doing. Each and every part of the body may tremble and shake. She may sometimes kneel down on the floor, beating the ground with both hands like a woman mourning in extreme grief. Sometimes she may look up and put both arms in the air as dreadful noises come out of her mouth, sounding non-human as she moans and groans. She may foam at the mouth and gnash her teeth and sometimes her tongue may come out of her mouth and she may even bite it until it bleeds. She may start swaying her hips wantonly and dancing lewdly, and at other times she may stagger back and forth unsteadily as if drunk, horrifying the women around her with her outrageous movements. The face of a beautiful and dignified woman who was lying there quietly may suddenly become virtually unrecognizable.

A woman may also start yelling and screaming at this time, shouting abuse and cursing a member of her own family, such as a sister-in-law or mother-in-law to whom she would normally be particularly deferential. Her language may be utterly unlike what that woman would use under any normal circumstances. One elderly woman recalls a time when two women even started fighting physically with each other during a *baiṭhak* session; this was due to each of the women being possessed by a jinn (one jinn being the nephew of the other) who was at odds with

the other. At other times, however, the dancing of the possessed woman may become regular and rhythmic and her mannerisms and speech (if she is talking coherently) become soft and gentle, thus making an enjoyable sight for the other women watching her.

During the dancing, the woman's body and clothing become wet with sweat. Then as she gradually tires out, the fatigue shows on her face and she will suddenly fall down and lay sprawled out on the *maidān*. At this point, the " cooling down " period begins.

It should be added here that although the woman for whom the *baiṭhak* is held is the one who is expected to be possessed, the therapy provided for her is available to all. Guests therefore may bring women of their own families who are in need of some kind of treatment. It also happens that women who have shown no signs of abnormality recently if ever will become possessed during one of these sessions and go through the whole process described here.

The " cooling down ": While the patient is lying there as if in a coma, she is given yellow flowers. Other women put sandalwood powder on the brazier and the smoke from it is blown in her direction. The singer stops her song and goes to sit next to the woman and then begins to ask questions of the controlling spirit[14] such as the following: " Please tell me, who are you? Are you a fairy, jinn, demon, yogi, or what? Are you Muslim or infidel? Where do you live? Why are you bothering this person? What do you want from us and how can we make you leave? How can we make you happy so that you don't bother this poor woman again? "

An old and experienced *mīrāṣin* will keep talking soothingly to the patient in this way; she is an expert not only in the songs but also in the manners and etiquette of these sessions. Finally the patient will answer her as if she (the patient) were the controlling spirit, and just as a woman's appearance may change when dancing, so also may her voice and appearance change during this question-and-answer session. In the beginning, the replies of the possessed woman may be very cold and rude, but as the *mīrāṣin* continues talking in a quiet, humble voice, sounding as friendly as possible, the controlling spirit becomes calm and gives its answers in a peaceful manner.

There are many reasons why a spirit may become annoyed at a human being. For example, a beautiful maiden in lovely clothes and nicely made-up may pass some tree or bush, pausing to smell the flowers, and the spirit there sees how beautiful she is and falls in love with her and takes possession of her mind and body. Alternatively, a certain patient may have consciously or unconsciously offended a spirit in some way and the spirit possesses her in revenge. The singers at these ses-

sions are experts at their songs and from their mothers and grandmothers as well as from other guests have learned lots of information about these spirits.[15] They understand the spirits' language and can tell hundreds of stories about women who have been possessed. One aged *mīrāṣin* told of a *baiṭhak* session where there was a young girl who just lay there on the bed as if she were dead. She was so weak that her parents had even had to carry her to the toilet. Her face was as yellow as saffron and her right eye was closed and pushed back in its socket. But on the day when that particular *baiṭhak* song was played, she jumped up like a spark from her bed and started dancing on the *maidān*. During the dance, a white froth of spittle came from her lips and she cried and screamed sarcastically, repeatedly saying, " Go on, stomp down on my children, and I'll watch you stomping down. My name is Green Fairy (*sabz parī*)."

When the sick woman was questioned, speaking in the role of the fairy, she replied that her place was on a certain jujube tree and this girl (the patient who was speaking like the fairy) " had come late at night and had urinated there and had trampled my children who were playing under the tree and had ruined the right eye of my daughter. In revenge for this, I made her lose her sight in her right eye and I pushed in her eyeball. She will never be rid of me for her whole life."

But then as the singer kept pleading, making her request humbly with palms joined in supplication, the green fairy agreed to leave the woman on the condition that every Thursday evening the area under that tree would be cleaned and washed and in the future nothing dirty would be put there. Furthermore, they should arrange for the Qoran reading for the dead (*fātiḥa*) in the name of the Prophet Solomon (*ḥaẓrat sulīmān*) under that tree, they should make an offering (*niyāz*) of seven types of foods and seven fruits, and they should light candles under the tree. When the *mīrāṣin* gave assurance to the green fairy and promised that this would be done as the fairy requested, the singer asked in the name of the Throne of the Prophet Solomon that the fairy would please leave the patient. While listening to this, the patient (who was still in the role of the fairy by whom she was possessed) trembled and then smiled and said, " Yes, I agree, and I'll leave her but first you (i.e., the singer) must sing a song of Solomon the Prophet and a song of Green Fairy." The singer said, " It's my great pleasure! " and started a song of tribute to Solomon. On hearing this song, the weak patient again started a dance of the possessed and during the dance, her eye which had been closed and pushed into its socket began to open slowly. After dancing for a while longer she fell down on the *maidān*. She was so completely relaxed that she looked like a corpse. A few

moments later when she opened her eyes, her right eye was as normal and as beautifully shaped as her left eye. The *mīrāṣin* telling this story says that this was a miracle because for the whole past year, the parents of the young girl had taken her to hospitals, western and traditional medical specialists, and holy men, who had all declared that nothing could be done about her eye. It had only been in the moment of extreme disappointment and sorrow that this *baiṭhak* had been arranged on the advice of the old women.

This dance of the possessed is thus a way in which a woman can directly or indirectly express many inner feelings. Women have few options open to them in traditional city life. They grow up knowing that their entire life will be spent within the narrow confines of the family setting. They go from their childhood homes to the house of a mother-in-law, where they have virtually no rights of their own. They are open to criticism from any member of that household, and though some may have husbands with whom they are very happy, others are married to men much older who treat them only as physical property. In families with limited means, the junior women in a household have none of the simplest luxuries and few of the necessities, passing their life in a wretched condition. It is no wonder that a variety of feelings pour out like lava from these women during the dancing and the cooling down periods of these *baiṭhak* sessions. Because the woman is oblivious to everything around her during this dance of the possessed, she can cross the bounds of what is accepted as normal behavior in her society, saying things and demanding things in a way that would never be possible in any other situation. This *baiṭhak* can be regarded as a form of group therapy, under the guidance of an experienced *mīrāṣin* who lets women act out their feelings and helps them find some socially sanctioned solution to their problems. The women guests can learn from the experiences of others, and can provide support for those who are afflicted. And thus, through these *baiṭhak*s many patients have been cured of unexplained and incurable ailments and have regained a healthy life.

Baiṭhak Music

Though film music and western musical instruments have influenced many kinds of traditional music in Pakistan, *baiṭhak* music and its instruments have maintained their traditional style without any recent additions or alternations in melody or beat (*tāl*). The only instruments used for the various *baiṭhak* music songs are a pair of drums (*dukṛa*) and a pair of little brass bells (*ṭalī*) played by striking them against each other; these are shown in Fig. 2. When the tunes are changed for the various songs, the beat of the drums and the rhythm of the bells is also

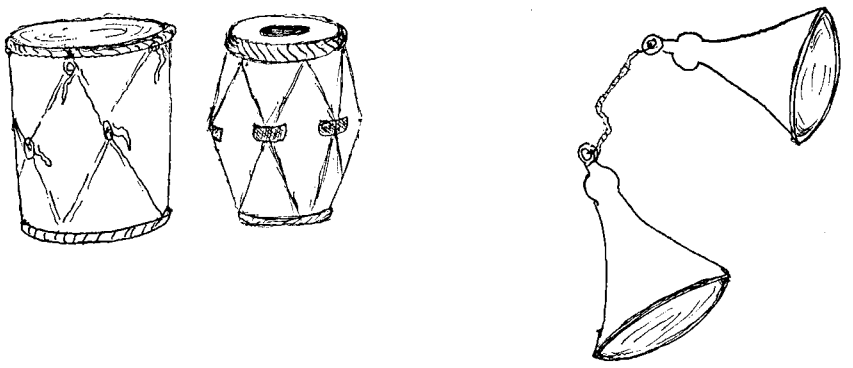

Fig. 2. Drums and bells.

very delicately changed.

At the beginning of the *baiṭhak* songs, only two of the *mīrāṣin*s will play together, using the drums and bells in a simple beat called *ek tāl*. The drums and bells can be heard for some distance, indicating to anyone listening that a *baiṭhak* is going on in the house. As the session continues, the melodies of the songs change and rhythms used by the bells and drums will also change.

In addition to the two instrumentalists, the group of *mīrāṣin*s will include one or more singers. The total size of the group will vary, but may be as many as six or eight if there is a large hall with a large number of guests; the groups generally consist of members of a single family. The group will usually include one or two old singers who act as prompters for the younger singers, because the older singers have a larger repertory of *baiṭhak* songs and tunes. Whenever a singer is upset and forgets some verses or words during a song, an older singer will supply them for her; the old singer will also correct a younger singer if mistakes are made or verses are left out. The corrections are done by the senior singer re-singing a line or phrase; usually this is done in such a subtle way that the audience does not realize that a junior singer is being corrected.

The more singers there are, the more volume and excitement can be produced at the *baiṭhak* session; also, the singers can take turns so that no one singer will become too tired out from singing. The instrumentalists may also join in on various lines to increase the volume of singing.

The verses which are sung have very simple words in Hindko and have a light metrical pattern (*halkī baḥr*). The tunes (*sūr*) do not use the scales (*āhang*s) of classical music of Pakistan; the interest of the

*mīrāṣin*s is not in producing elegant and sophisticated music, but rather in affecting the emotions of the listeners; for this a clear, strong beat plus a simple and easy-to-follow melody and straightforward, understandable poetry is most effective.

In each kind of song, a limited set of phrases is sung and repeated in whole or in part for a varying number of times. The style resembles the *qawwālī* style used for religious songs of Pakistan and north India. The first song is in praise of God (*ḥamd-i bārī taᶜālā*). This is followed by *naᶜat-i-rasūl*, a song in praise of the Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him). After that a tribute is paid to a great saint of the Islamic world who is particularly popular in Peshawar, Abdul Qādir Gilānī of Baghdad; this is known as *nazrāna* of Ghaus-i Pāk. These three songs start off the *baiṭhak* session with a pious and mystical atmosphere.

After this, the lighter songs are sung. These are songs about fairies, *dev*s, jinns, yogis, and (particularly in past times) various Hindu deities. The *mīrāṣin*s of Peshawar say that there are two kinds of supernatural beings. One kind are infidel creatures (*kāfir makhlūq*) and the other are "Muslim" (*ahl-i kitāb*) creatures. The actions of the Muslim creatures, such as the jinns, are under the control of the Prophet Solomon. The supernatural world is thus divided on a religious basis just as is the world in which the *baiṭhak* participants are living.

In the context of *baiṭhak*s, a distinction between Muslim and non-Muslim spirits is made in the following way. When a patient who is doing the dance of the possessed at a *baiṭhak* gathering begins behaving wildly on the *maidān*, the women who are present request her to be calm in the name of the Prophet Solomon. If she then shows signs of dancing peacefully or if she stops dancing, it is said that the spirit possessing her is Muslim. Or if the *baiṭhak* song being sung is a tribute to Solomon and a woman jumps into the *maidān* and starts dancing, it also means that the spirit possessing her is Muslim.

Many of the infidel creatures who do not obey the Prophet Solomon are incarnations (*avatar*s) of gods and goddesses found in Hindu mythology. These creatures include Rājā Indra, Deva Rānī, and Kālī Mātā. In pre-partition Peshawar before 1947, a substantial portion of the city's population was Hindu and the Hindu women had their own gatherings for *baiṭhak*s where they sang *baiṭhak* songs in praise of such spirits. The Hindu women, like the Muslim, observed a strict form of purdah and suffered from the same maladies; the songs sung for them would, however, not include those which were specifically Islamic. For a Hindu woman who was ill, they might, for example, have songs of Kālī Mātā. Kālī Mātā is remembered by the *mīrāṣin*s as being a Hindu goddess who always revenged herself on pregnant women and killed

their new-born babies. The Hindu women would therefore arrange *baiṭhak*s for pregnant women so that such a spirit would be pleased and happy. But since the time of partition, the younger generation in Peshawar knows little or nothing about the Hindu culture and tradition and they have forgotten the names of these gods and goddesses. As a result, the atmosphere of Peshawar *baiṭhak*s has a definitely Islamic hue. But even now in some *baiṭhak*s where an old woman sits and listens to various songs but stays motionless and silent as if struck dumb, and none of the *baiṭhak* songs has any effect on her, an intelligent and learned *mīrāṣin* will realize that she is possessed by some non-Muslim spirit. The *mīrāṣin* will then sing one of the old *baiṭhak* songs to please that spirit and when the dumbstruck woman starts dancing, all the women at the session will realize that she has been possessed by that particular non-Muslim being.

The Status of the *Mīrāṣin*s

The role of the *mīrāṣin*s in the *baiṭhak* session has been described above. It should also be mentioned here that the whole session is actually under the control of the senior *mīrāṣin*. In her role as the mistress of ceremonies, the senior *mīrāṣin* makes every attempt to have the guests feel welcome and comfortable as well as to treat all their mental problems; having met a number of guests at previous *baiṭhak*s, she often knows a great deal about the problems of particular individuals.

At the end of a session, she (rather than the mistress of the house) will be the person who distributes the sweets for the guests to take home. Guests may at this time make arrangements with a *mīrāṣin* for a future session. The mistress of the house will humbly present a suit of clothes to the senior singer and scarves to the other musicians before they leave; this is presented as a gift, above and beyond the money payment agreed upon beforehand.

Since these *mīrāṣin*s are constantly invited to important functions such as marriages and *baiṭhak*s of all classes of society, they naturally become experts not only on traditional culture of the region but also on particular customs and traditions within different families. They also become experts on genealogy, because they know when and where the daughter of any particular family married a son either from within or outside of that family. They know not only which class a family belongs to and which class it interacts with but also other factors such as religious orientation, geographical origin, and considerable details about other members of any particular lineage. The women of a family thus have great regard and respect for these *mīrāṣin*s.

As a consequence of their genealogical knowledge, the *mīrāṣin*s also

became experts at matchmaking.[16] They themselves are able to see eligible young women when they sing on these various occasions and in the past, they could thus help in arranging marriages between families with children of marriageable age. When a *mīrāṣin* successfully arranged a marriage, she was given many gifts at the time of the marriage and earned further status in the eyes of that society.

In the past, another function of these *mīrāṣin*s was to apply bridal make-up; this function has today been largely taken over by beauty parlors. Because the *mīrāṣin*s were at so many weddings, they would become experts on fashions in makeup and could make the bride so beautiful as to be barely recognizable even by her own family, who would then reward them with suitable gifts. After the bride was dressed and made up, she would be taken to the groom's house for the first night of marriage. The next day, the groom would give further presents to the *mīrāṣin*s who had prepared such a beautiful bride for him. Thus the *mīrāṣin*s played an important role in the social life of the city, contributing grace and charm to happy occasions.

Conclusion

In the Peshawar of earlier times, supernatural beings were believed to cause various misfortunes including affliction with mental illness. The society in which women lived in Peshawar was extremely repressive, with behavior rules rigidly laid down from pre-adolescence. Opportunities for acquaintance with ways of life outside the family were extremely limited, and social contact was generally restricted to this tight family circle within which the rules operated. The *baiṭhak* sessions described in this paper provided a broader set of social contacts and an accepted form of outlet for emotional expression under the supervision of experienced women from outside the family circle and in the company of sympathetic family, friends and neighbors of the same sex. The use of music with its rhythms and songs developed over the years contributed to the therapy, perhaps utilizing the psychological effects of music which are being observed in more scientific testing situations in western countries today.

Today, this custom of holding *baiṭhak*s is dying in Peshawar. Although the city continues to be conservative in regard to its women, these women are becoming ever more educated; modern transport and particularly automobiles provide a means of travel which maintains the privacy of purdah whether within or outside the city; and radio, television and video cassettes now bring into the homes of Peshawar a world which could not be imagined in earlier generations. And in the process, what is happening to the jinns and other spirits these days? I asked

an elderly aunt of mine who is wise in the ways of Peshawar's jinns. At first, she only smiled and didn't answer. Then I asked which made a worse noise, a particular jinn she had told me about or one of the three-wheeled motor rickshaws that chug their way into the narrow lanes of the Old City of Peshawar. She made a rare pause in her talking, and then she laughed and said, " Yes, it seems that these new scientific inventions make more dreadful noises than jinns. And that is why these scientific inventions are replacing the jinns."

APPENDIX:

Folk Songs of *Baiṭhak*

The following songs are all translated from Hindko, which has an extremely rich oral literature that at present has been very little studied. These songs seem particular to the city of Peshawar; the fact that Peshawar once had a large Hindu community which was in close contact with the Muslim community must surely be considered important in any speculation about the development of the songs themselves. The sentences are very simple; the lines rhyme at the end, often with several words or phrases repeated at the end of each line after the changing rhyme words.

The following song to Green Fairy illustrates the way in which a very few lines of text are repeated in performance; sometimes the repetitions will simply substitute synonyms as in the first two lines where a Persian word (with a Hindko plural-marking suffix) is first used for " hand " and then an Indo-Aryan word, both of which are included in the Hindko lexicon.

1) Put henna[17] on both hands (*dastõ*), fairy!
2) Put henna on both hands (*hāthõ*), fairy!
3) Put (it on), fairy! Come on a little, fairy!
4) Put (it on), fairy! Come on, fairy!
5) and 6) (*repeat* 1 *and* 2)
7) Hey, put henna on both hands, fairy!
8) Look in the hub of my heart, fairy!
9) Come on, fairy, hey, come on!
10) and 11) (*repeat 1 and 2*)
12) My Green Fairy has gone out for a walk.
13) Put flower bracelets (*jūṛe*) on both hands (*dastõ*), fairy!

14) and 15) (*repeat 1 and 2 with some change in word order*)
16) (*repeat 3*)
17) and 18) (*repeat 14 and 15*)
19) Hey, put (it on), fairy! Yes, put (it on), fairy!
20) and 21) (*repeat 1 and 2*).

The following are some lines from various other songs; they are intended to indicate the general content of the songs rather than to reproduce either a particular performance or an entire song text. The religious songs are given first, in the order in which they might be sung in a *baiṭhak* session.

Song in Praise of God (Allah):[18]

God has sailed my boat to this shore,
Recite: There is no God but Allah.
O Mohammad, O Prophet, O Messenger of God,
O Prophet! Your *kalima* causes sovereignty. God brought my boat to the shore.
The Prophet made God my great friend!
Recite: There is no God but Allah! O Mohammad, Messenger of God!

Song in Praise of the Prophet Mohammad (peace upon him):

O, I'll be a sacrifice, Allah! Hey, I'll be a sacrifice, Allah!
The Prophet Sahib has come to my house.
Recite the Truth, the Prophet's *kalima*! Oh, I'll be a sacrifice, Allah!
Recite the Truth, the Prophet's *kalima.*
O, my handsome lover (*sajan*) has come!
My dear Mustafa (=Mohammad) has come!
Recite the Truth, the Prophet's *kalima*! Oh, I'll be a sacrifice, Allah!
My dear Prophet has come!
My handsome (man) has come to my house!
Recite the Truth, the Prophet's *kalima.*
O, I'll be a sacrifice, Allah! Hey, I'll be a sacrifice, Allah!

Another song in praise of Mohammad:

Arabian Messenger, I would go to your tomb,

I would go to your tomb and plead to the five,[19]
I would go to your tomb and plead for Master Ali.
O Medina dweller, I would go to your tomb,
Stop a little, you who go to Medina!
I should put kohl on your eyes.
I'd clean off your tomb well,
And I'd kiss the grill of your tomb.
Arabian Prophet, I would go to your tomb,
I'd kiss the grill of your tomb millions of times,
And I'd put my breast to the grill.
Arabian Messenger, I would go to your tomb.
Medina dweller, I would go to your tomb.

Praise of Abd-ul-Qādir Gilānī:[20]

My master is the Greatest Saint!
Who has erased the writing of fate.
My master is the Greatest Saint,
Who saved the one
Whose boat was sunk by the sea.
My master is the Greatest Saint.
My Lord is Powerful (and) Praiseworthy, while my master is Qādir (powerful) Gilānī.
My master is the Greatest Saint,
There is no ruler like mine,
Without beginning or end, never defeated.
My master is the Greatest Saint.

Song of Devī Rānī:[21]

Hey, come close, Goddess Queen,
Open the fortune of my girl, O Queen!
O Mother Queen, hey there, Mother Queen,
I'm the mother of this maiden,
Open her fortune, Mother Queen!
O my mother, for the sake of the girls,
Open the fortunes of the girls, O Queen of Fortune!
Open the head of the girls, Goddess Queen,
Open the fortunes, Fortune Queen,
Open the fortune of the girl, O Queen,
Hey, Goddess Queen, Goddess Queen!

Bhajan of Rājā Indar:[22]

" I am king (*rājā*) of my tribe (*qaum*), my name is Indar.
I don't rest unless I look at the fairies.
(*Fairies talking to Indra:*)
" O dear king, you go to sleep and rest now.
I'm going out for a walk, my job is dancing.
Listen, O black monster, listen to our words.
I come with a leap into the meeting. That's our job.
Singing and playing (music),
That is just the fairies' jobs.
I'm going out for a walk, that is my only job."

NOTES

* The author is a staff member of Pakistan's National Institute of Folk Heritage, Lok Virsa. An earlier version of this paper in Urdu was submitted as a field report for Lok Virsa's archives; tapes both of interviews and of songs are held in Lok Virsa's collections. The author has been doing research on this topic at various times since 1975; the tradition is rapidly dying out as beliefs in western medical techniques have taken precedence over these traditional methods of treatment that the author remembers from his boyhood. The author wishes to thank Mr. Uxi Mufti, Executive Director of Lok Virsa, for permission to send a copy of this paper to Dr. Wilma Heston and to thank her for assistance in translation. The author assumes all responsibility for the contents of this paper.

1. Hindko is a lingua franca of Peshawar city; it is an Indo-Aryan language often classed as a dialect of western Panjabi. In 1981, it was spoken by more than 300,000 households in Pakistan; it includes several dialects, usually identified with particular cities, as, for example, the Peshawar dialect. Pashto, an eastern Iranian language, is the majority language of the Northwest Frontier Province in which Peshawar is located. Many inhabitants of Peshawar city are bilingual in Pashto and Hindko.

2. There are other rituals for exorcising spirits from men, some of which are physically quite drastic, such as the festival of Nosho Hādī. It is hoped that this topic can be treated in a later paper.

3. The term " spirit " is used in this paper to include a number of kinds of supernatural beings, many of whom may take human form. These include beings such as jinns, fairies (*paris*, generally malevolent rather than the kindly beings of modern fairy tales in English), demons (*devs*) and yogis (*jogī* (m.) *jogin* (f.), the spirit of a deceased mendicant, traditionally Hindu but continuing to play a role in the folklore of the area). In the context of this paper, these spirits are causing human suffering, but they need not be malicious and can even be kindly toward human beings. While discussing these beings with a woman about eighty years old, the author asked if she had ever actually seen a jinn. She then told of a certain jinn, called Baba Ladda, who was said to inhabit a certain jujube tree. When she was nine or ten years old, she was with a group of friends and one of them dared the jinn to show its face, although she had been warned by the older women not to do this. The jujube tree started moving as

if caught in a terrible wind and a dreadful old face with vertical rather than horizontal eyes looked down from the tree, and said, " Oh, yes, my girl, I am indeed here." One girl fainted and the rest were ready to run away, but then the jinn said, " Don't worry, I won't harm you, you are all my daughters."

4. Peshawar city has several major divisions such as the Old City, which was once completely walled, and the Cantonment, which was originally for the British military and administrative establishment and now is a residential area for wealthy and more westernized inhabitants of the city. The Old City is very conservative and now has many small businessmen and craftsmen residing in it; the streets are often too narrow for cars or other modern transportation. The houses are generally crowded next to each other with little or no open courtyard area; they are often several stories high, with grates in the floor so that women in purdah upstairs can observe what is happening below without themselves being observed. Wealthy families with larger houses in the Cantonment or other areas of the City sometimes retain a family house in the Old City in which some family members live and where traditional ceremonies can be held.

5. Possession by evil spirits has been and still is a widespread belief in this area, and visitors to the area who show any interest in the subject will hear dozens of stories. Some other instances of possession by fairies are included in a story of Nimbulla and Dimbulla in the forthcoming volume *The Bazaar of the Storytellers* by W. Heston and this author, scheduled for publication by Lok Virsa in 1987. The belief in jinns extends far beyond the NWFP; a series of letters to the editor in *The Pakistan Times* in spring, 1987, offers a variety of contemporary views on the subject.

6. These *mīrāṣin*s (from the Arabic root *v-r-s* " to inherit " plus a fem. suffix) emphasized very strongly that they were a group distinct from other musicians, usually referred to as *ḍomnī*s (f., *ḍom* m.). In general, musicians in South Asia have a very low social status, and their women, who may be dancers as well as singers, are often considered as no more than prostitutes. The *mīrāṣin*s of this paper, however, are treated as a respectable social class in Peshawar. They are extremely conservative and only a very elderly woman among them would talk directly with the author; most of the interviewing was done with the author in one room, calling questions to the women at a microphone placed in the second room.

7. Nursing babies may be taken along by a mother, but are kept outside the hall and fed there; they are not allowed in the hall itself where their elimination processes would pollute the area in which the exorcism is taking place. Also, a small baby is considered more vulnerable to possession by an evil spirit. Young children of, say, two to eight years of age, are kept away because they may be frightened by the proceedings, especially if their mother, sisters, or other close friends or relatives are possessed and act in a very abnormal way. Older girls may attend these sessions, but not older boys.

It should be noted that although men leave a house in which the *baiṭhak* is held, there is no particular secret about the sessions and the men of a household are aware of all the preparations. Since houses of the Old City are very close to each other, they can also hear the music when a *baiṭhak* is being held in their or an adjoining house. One friend of the author tells of how his sister would put mattresses on the floor and start dancing when she heard *baiṭhak* music in a nearby house, because the sound carried so well. As children, men may also have gone briefly into a *baiṭhak* session to ask their mother or some female relative a question or they may have watched the proceedings through the grate in the floor of a room above. Detailed stories of what happens to particular women or with particular songs in these sessions are also recounted by those who have attended; the author has, however, not been able to find

any mention of this custom in written studies of the Peshawar area.

8. The translation " dance of the possessed " is used for *isrār* (pl. of *sirr* " secret ") *khelnā* (" to play ") in Urdu and *ḥāl kheḍṇa* in Hindko.

9. In the past, loaf sugar (*qand*) was used; it was wrapped in brightly colored shiny paper, giving the piles of sugar a very festive appearance. At present, this custom has almost disappeared and granulated sugar may instead be heaped on the tray (*patnūs* or *sīnī*). Sugar plays a role in other important occasions also, as at marriages.

10. To prepare the sandalwood drink (*ṣandal sharbat*), sandalwood powder (*ṣandal-būra*) is purchased from a shop that sells various kinds of medicinal herbs, roots and seeds. The powder is then added to a big kettle of water and boiled all night. It is next strained through some fine cloth, such as that of a scarf (*dupaṭṭa*) and this liquid is mixed with sugar and chilled before serving. The temper (*mizāj*) of this drink is classed as cold, which is the reason that it is served in the hot season.

11. This is a preparation of green tea which has been left to stand after it is boiled and which is then aerated and cooled. When milk (properly, *malā'ī*, the thick top layer of boiled whole milk) is added, it turns a pinkish color. The preparation of this drink, and particularly the aeration, which is done by pouring tea back and forth between containers held at some distance apart, is quite tedious and usually done by the maidservants in a large household.

12. If the requested item is out of season, the hostess will promise to supply it when it is available next year. It sometimes happens that a spirit will ask for something that the hostess herself does not think is in the house. But following the directions of the spirit, she will go to the indicated cupboard and will find to her surprise that the item in question is actually there.

13. The dress of both patient and guests is chosen with care. Not only is the clothing expected to be clean and neat, but it also may have other special significance. For example, sometimes a yellow dress is put on a patient, which is said to be like the dress of yogis. Further indication of possession by a yogi might be given during a dance when a woman possessed by a male yogi wraps her scarf around her head so that it looks like a turban and when her voice becomes lower so that she sounds like a man. But if she is possessed by a female yogi (*jogin*), then, for example, her hair becomes extremely tangled and disheveled and she takes on a female yogi's mannerisms. Guests who have been possessed before may come to a *baiṭhak* in the color of dress associated with the spirit by which they were possessed. Thus a guest who had once been possessed by a yogi might wear yellow at future *baiṭhak*s. A woman who has been possessed by a Green Fairy (*sabz parī*) will wear a green dress, and one who has been possessed by a Red Fairy (*lāl parī*) will wear a red dress.

14. " Controlling spirit " translates *sirwālī/sirwālā* (f.; m.), the spirit who comes and sits on a woman's head (*sir*).

15. The evil spirits may make requests or give orders to any persons attending the *baiṭhak* session. The author remembers when a senior woman of his household was told by a jinn to get a fresh liver from the butcher and throw it into some bushes or else the jinn would harm one of her children. Although the men in the house laughed at this, a boy in the household, then of about twelve years (and now a famous Pakistani movie star), offered to carry out this task. The child, whose head was wrapped in lots of bandages because of a scalp infection, got a fresh liver with attached organs and then ran through the streets following some friends. By the time he had gotten near the schoolyard, he was covered with blood and presented a quite frightening appearance. Startled by the arrival of the principal, he then dropped the liver and dashed away. The principal was equally startled, and felt he had seen some

sort of dreadful apparition. In tracing the source of this repulsive item left in the schoolyard, he was greatly relieved when he found out that he had not seen some supernatural being but only a boy carrying out a rather unusual task.

In another case, there was a *dev* who told a woman not to get married and broke up every proposed betrothal. When the marriage was finally arranged anyway, the groom was afraid to enter the bedroom with his wife. After about a year, the woman gave birth to two children who both had feet like horse's hooves (club feet?).

16. It should be pointed out that even today, most marriages in the Peshawar area are arranged. Except in cases where the bride and groom are closely related, the bride and groom will not have seen each other until the day of marriage. Even when they are related and have seen each other in childhood, as may be the case with marriage between cousins, they will have been kept separated from the age of puberty or earlier.

17. The hands of girls are decorated with henna (*mehndī*) on various festive occasions, such as Eid (*ᶜīd:* "holiday" and particularly the holiday celebrating the end of the Muslim month of fasting), engagement, and marriage.

18. This song is sometimes called the Garland (*sehrā*) for God. The phrase "there is no God but Allah" (*lā-ilāha illallāh*) is the beginning of the *kalima*, the Muslim profession of faith, mentioned in the second song in praise of the Prophet; "and Mohammad is his Prophet" completes the profession of faith.

19. There are Shi'a references in this song, in particular, the five (persons) of the second line are the Prophet Mohammad; Ali, his son-in-law and the first Shi'a Imam; Fatima, his daughter; and their sons, Hasan and Hosain.

20. "Greatest Saint" translates *ghaus-i aᶜẓam; ghaus* is a term in popular Islam for a man who spends time in worship until his limbs fall off.

21. This song to the Goddess Queen (*devā rānī*) uses a Hindu/Sanskritic word, *karm* (<*karma*) rather than a Perso-Arabic word for "fortune." The song is particularly for girls whose menstrual periods have stopped. One term for this in Hindko is *sir-band*, lit., "head-bound"; thus the song's request to "open the head" of the girl is a request that her periods start again.

22. This song with Indar (Indra) as king of the fairies offers a Hindu hierarchy parallel to the Muslim system with the Prophet Solomon as ruler of the jinns. The fairy's easy life of dancing and singing and going out for a walk contrasts strongly with what girls in Peshawar households would be allowed to do. Within a household, the husband is the "lord" of a wife; her job is to take care of him, and only he can intercede for her with her mother-in-law who controls domestic life and who makes decisions as to whether a girl can leave the house even for a visit to her own family. Is the mother-in-law or some other oppressive member of the family perhaps the "black monster" who can be told in this song (but not in real life) that girls should have a chance to sing and dance?