

The Muslim Farmers of Bangladesh and Allah's Creation of the World

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THE CREATION MYTH

The population of Bangladesh is predominantly agrarian and Muslim. Islam provides Bangladeshi farmers with the major premises of their cultural system. Many of these premises are embedded in the particular version of the Muslim story of creation which these farmers recount. This creation myth is fundamental to the explanations the Muslim farmers of Bangladesh give for the universe and their place in it. An analysis of this myth will reveal the major outlines of rural Muslim culture in Bangladesh. This story serves as the beginning and/or the end of these farmers' explanations of themselves and their world. In what follows I will first present one version of the myth, and I will then examine the major cultural premises contained within it.¹

Although the story these farmers tell is Quranic in inspiration, the Quran does not contain an authoritative version of the complete myth. Instead, the Quran contains a number of scattered references to Allah's creation of the universe.² Nevertheless, Bangladeshi farmers tell a coherent and highly developed creation story which expands upon the passing references in the Quran. No canonically authoritative version of the story exists in rural Bangladesh. Each story teller constructs his own account to fit the occasion on which he is telling it. Each of the accounts, however, does share a common cast of characters and a basic scenario. I have constructed the following version from the specific accounts of three different story tellers and numerous other partial renditions. No story teller recounted the myth for me, or for other audiences of which I was a part, from beginning to end as presented here. Inevitably, in the midst of dramatically recounting the myth, the teller would apply some aspects of the story to the experienced life of his listeners. Completing the story would be forgotten about

in the discussion of life as experienced. The creation myth of these farmers is part of a lively oral tradition of Islam. The following version of the myth represents only one, concise version of the myth, but it does present the complete cast of characters and the basic scenario:

Before everything else Allah's own light (*nur*) existed. When Allah decided to create the world, he first created Muhammad from this light. But Allah held Muhammad in reserve, like an idea in a person's mind, until it was time for him to appear on earth. From the light which he had given Muhammad, Allah created heaven and earth. He created the air, the water, fire and earth. Taking some fire Allah created the angels, and he placed them in heaven. The leader of the angels was known as Iblis. Then taking some earth and mixing it with water Allah fashioned a doll which he dried in the air, and then baked with fire. Allah then gave life (*ruhu*) to the doll. However, this life returned to Allah complaining of the darkness within the doll. So Allah put some of Muhammad's light into the doll, and the life was able to dwell there. This was Adam. From Adam's left side Allah took a bone, and he created Howa to be Adam's wife. Allah set both of them in heaven with the angels. Allah began to teach Adam the names of everything in heaven and on earth. Adam learned quickly because he was talented. When Iblis saw what was happening he became jealous. Then Allah announced that Adam was going to cultivate the earth for him, and be its owner and master. Iblis became even more jealous. How could Adam, being made of dirt, learn the names of everything in heaven and on earth so quickly? Why should he possess and cultivate the earth? Then one day Allah called all the angels before Adam, and Allah told them to bow down before Adam who was his favorite creature. Iblis objected. Allah had specifically commanded them to bow down only to himself, and now he was telling them to bow down before Adam! Allah explained to Iblis that this was a new command that must be followed by all the angels. At this all the angels obeyed Allah's command, except Iblis. He refused to bow down before this creature made from dirt because he was made from fire. Allah threatened to put Iblis out of heaven, but he still would not change his mind. Instead Iblis vowed that he would make Adam forget Allah's commands, and thus do evil. Allah admitted that Iblis would succeed. However, if Adam wanted to remain faithful to his commands, Allah would see to it that Adam knew how to obey. Finally, Allah put Iblis out of heaven and assigned him to hell.

Allah ordered Adam and Howa not to eat the fruit of one plant in heaven, the *gandamphal* (wheat). All the others would provide them with plenty of food. But one day Iblis convinced Adam and Howa that they should try this fruit, that there really would not be any harm in just tasting it. So Adam and Howa ate this fruit. Iblis had succeeded for the first time in making them forget Allah's command. Adam and Howa had eaten the fruit in secret, but their secret did not remain such very long because to their

amazement they began to urinate and defecate. Before very long the angels were complaining to Allah that Adam and Howa were smelling up heaven. If he did not do something soon, heaven would not be a fit place to live. Allah summoned Adam and Howa before himself, and he accused them of having eaten the fruit which he had forbidden to them. He told them he was putting them out of heaven, and that they were to begin to cultivate the earth. As punishment he put Adam down in Jiddha, but he set Howa down a great distance away. Only after many years of searching did they finally find each other again at Mecca.

Adam and Howa's children were born in Mecca. They were born as sets of twins, a boy and a girl together. Adam's first son, Habel, was very industrious about his cultivation, and he succeeded at it admirably. The Muslims have descended from him. Adam's second son, Kabel, on the other hand, was not a good cultivator. He was constantly bickering with him. When Adam decided Habel should marry Kabel's twin sister, and Kabel would marry Habel's twin, Kabel became very jealous, for Kabel's sister was very beautiful. Finally, one day in the midst of an argument Kabel murdered his brother.

Besides these two sons, Adam and Howa had many other sons and daughters, and it has been from all the sons and daughters of Adam and Howa that all the different peoples (*jāti*) of the world have descended.

This story sets out the fundamental distinctions within the cultural system of the farmers of Bangladesh. The story differentiates and defines the major cultural units of the system. Allah the Creator, angels and mankind, groups of mortals, male and female, and the ideal type of the individual person are all marked off in this story, and specific relationships between these categories of beings are established. Each category will be treated in its order of appearance in the story, and elaborated upon in accordance with the views held by the farmers of Pabna District, especially those farmers living in the area of the District I have named "Daripalla."³

ALLAH, MUHAMMAD AND ADAM

The most basic distinction for Daripallans is that between creator and creature. Allah alone is the creator, and everything else is creature. Allah is the one and only member of the category of creator, and the great multiplicity of his creatures are dependent upon his glorious, miraculous, all-powerful creative activity (*kudrat*) for their existence. Allah has acted, and Daripallans along with the rest of the heavens and earth exist. Everything is subordinate to Allah, who is conceived of as being entirely "other" from his creation. Allah creates and commands; his creatures exist and obey. The maintenance of this

distinction is of fundamental importance for Daripallans. It is a basic concern that no creature be associated with the creator. The Christian teachings about Jesus, and the Hindu beliefs about the *murti* (images) of their gods and goddesses, receive frequent criticism for associating creatures with the creator. Allah is one and undivided, without part or partner. He alone is divine. Nevertheless, Allah's *nur* (light) is said to exist. The existence of this light, however, is not considered to be a contradiction of Allah's oneness by the farmers of Daripalla. This light is explained as an emanation of Allah's greatness and power. His light is not separate from himself, as the light of a candle is not separate from the candle's flame, even though the light is not the flame either. It is not possible to have one without the other. Allah's *nur* is a "something" that creatures are able to experience, although no living Daripallan has ever experienced it directly. Only in heaven will Allah's light be visible. Daripallans' belief in this light says more about themselves than it explains about the nature of divinity. For Daripallans it is important to think about Allah not only in his activity as creator, but also as somehow sensually perceptible to themselves. Thus, Allah has the substantiality of light, and this light provides the "stuff" out of which Allah creates.

The Prophet Muhammad is the first creature of this light. He was created first in point of time, and he is first in the order of importance. He was created entirely from Allah's own light, and because he was created directly from this light, he is Allah's Prophet. He is the one who definitively revealed Allah's commands to the descendants of Adam and Howa in the Quran and the Traditions. Furthermore, Muhammad will intercede for all the believers on the final day of judgment (*kiyāmat din*) when Allah will reward the virtuous and obedient with a place in heaven (*behest*), and punish the wicked and disobedient in hell (*narak* or *dōjak*). Finally, Muhammad is a unique creature because Allah continued his creation by using his own light as it had become transformed in Muhammad, making him not only a creature but also an integral part of the creative process. Muhammad is not like the rest of men, nor is he like any other creature, but to attribute any hint of divinity to him is the worst of heresies. For all his uniqueness, Muhammad is still a creature.⁴

After Muhammad Allah created the whole universe. For Daripallans this universe is made up of three distinct places: heaven, hell and earth (*behest, dōjak/narak, duniyā*). The most important inhabitants of these three realms are angels and men. Using his light as transformed in Muhammad, Allah produced four fundamental substances: earth, fire, air, and water (*māti, āgun, bātās, pāni*). Using different com-

binations of these substances, Allah created the whole universe, but he especially distinguished between angels and men.⁵ Allah created angels from fire, and he instructed them to worship him by bowing down in his presence. Allah then created men from earth and a little water. He distinguished this particular creature by giving him life (*ruhu*), and then by adding some of Muhammad's light (*nur*) to this life. Adam was a living and an enlightened creature, made of earth.

Daripallans consider earth to be a uniquely powerful, strong, productive substance, and it is a substance about which they have immediate, experiential knowledge. Earth is the substance from which food can be produced. Earth is also considered to be the active purifying agent in the elimination of waste products, especially the most troublesome, those two products that cost Adam and Howa their place in heaven, urine and feces. Furthermore, when someone dies and his life returns to Allah, his body is buried in the earth so that the unpleasantness of its decay may be concealed, and so that the strength (*sakti*) of the surrounding earth may speedily reduce the cadaver back to its fundamental state: ordinary, productive earth. Finally, the superiority of earth over the other elements of the universe is confirmed for Daripallans in the episode of Iblis's refusal to accept a position inferior to Adam because of his constitution from earth. Allah affirmed Adam's superiority when he punished Iblis by putting him out of heaven.

Daripallans insist that the distinctive feature in Adam's composition and that of all mankind (*mānabjāti*) is earth. (See also Thorp, 1979: 15-34.) Although light (*nur*) and life (*ruhu*) figure in the creation story, these elements are not stressed in Daripallans' interpretation of this story. When directly questioned about the significance of light (*nur*) in Adam's composition, Daripallans will admit that Adam and all mankind do have a special share of that light. However, Daripallans are reluctant to discuss the significance of light in their own lives. Instead, they prefer to discuss the effects of this light in Muhammad's life.

Muhammad's creation entirely from light made him a special creature. Although he was also a human being, he was not like the rest of men. The presence of light in his composition, first of all, made it impossible for him to cast a shadow. Much more importantly, however, the presence of this light made him Allah's prophet and teacher. Muhammad pursued his vocation through miraculous sorts of activity that defied the ordinary laws of nature and customary human behavior. Other human beings who are particular friends of Allah (*olī, pīr*) have also possessed the power (*kerāmat*) to perform these same kinds of miraculous feats in the service of religion. However, this power is considered to be specifically bestowed upon its possessor over and

beyond the share of light he has as a descendant of Adam. The extra share of light that Allah originally bestowed upon Adam seems to be a pre-requisite that makes mankind eligible for further special endowments.

That all men have a share in Muhammad's light makes it possible for some of them to be able to become special friends of Allah and imitators of Muhammad in their ability to perform miracles (*kerāmat*). However, in the farmers' own lives light is not an operative or dynamic component. They emphasize that mankind's possession of a special share of Muhammad's light does not in itself bestow any special power, skill, capacity or knowledge. Earth was the source of Adam's power and ability. Adam was able to learn the names of all the creatures in heaven and in the world because of his creation from the earth. Later he was able to turn this knowledge to productive use in the cultivation of the earth because of the strength and skill that the earthy component of his constitution gave him.

Earth is the important element in the constitution of the farmers of Daripalla. In fact, any claims to miraculous powers by one of their own number would be rejected as unwarranted posturing. "Miraculous" feats would be dismissed as nothing more than learned, circus magic. No matter how hard they might be pushed, Daripallans will make no claims for themselves based on the element of light in Adam's composition. They simply repeat what the story itself says: Light made the earthy doll more easily habitable for Adam's life (*ruhu*).

This life, too, is a concept Daripallans find difficult to discuss. When they are questioned about it, they almost inevitably suggest the questioner consult with a learned religious teacher (*mowlānā*). Three such religious teachers, who have very esoteric views of the meaning of life⁶ which the ordinary farmers are not familiar with, live in or near Daripalla. If such farmers are pressed for their own opinions, they will interpret life as that phenomenon which men share with all the animate creatures they see around themselves. Cows, goats, birds, fish, and all other moving creatures possess life. Plants too possess life. *Jīban* and *prān* are frequently given as synonyms for *ruhu*, and the root meaning of each of these terms as "to live" is emphasized by Daripallans. Occasionally *ātmā* will also be given to try to explain the meaning of the term *ruhu*, but with the same emphasis on being alive (*bācā*).

Daripallans find it difficult to elaborate on the meaning of the term *ruhu* because they consider it to mean the same thing in whatever creature it is found, and it is something they take for granted until death occurs. Whenever death does occur, Daripallans say that the creature's

life has left it, and like a bird has flown back to Allah. In the context of death *ruhu* approximates the meaning of "soul" or "spirit." In the case of humans, at least, this *ruhu* is individualized and is maintained as that of a particular person. In this way on the final judgement day (*kiyāmat dīn*) Allah will be able to reward with heaven and punish with hell each person individually.

Only in the context of death does the explanation Daripallans give for *ruhu* approximate the meaning of "soul" as a person's spiritual reality and identity, as something dualistically separate from the body. During a person's lifetime *ruhu* is interpreted as the principle of dynamism that gives action and movement to an individual. *Ruhu* is not a principle of identity so much as the moving force that invigorates the composite but unified creature of earth that a man is. This view of life held by the farmers themselves is not at odds with that held by the locally famous religious teachers, but it is far simpler and much more straight forward.

ADAM'S DESCENDANTS

Adam was a composite of earth, water, light and life. These elements were combined in Allah's act of creation to produce a single, unified creature, a man. All other men share in the composite nature of Adam, but they are not exact replicas of Adam. The farmers of Daripalla mark the similarities and differences between individuals in a number of ways.

First of all, Allah gave Adam a particular form (*gaṭhan*) when he created him in the shape of a doll. This form distinguished Adam from all other creatures. All of Adam's descendants share in this same form in a generalized way. However, Adam's form was particularized so that he was uniquely himself. Adam's face (*mukh*) was unique and one of a kind, as was his complexion (*cehārā*). Each of Adam's descendants also have possessed their own faces and complexions. In this way, although mankind shares the same generalized form or shape, individual differences are nevertheless readily obvious. Each individual's appearance is markedly different from every other individual. No two faces have ever been the same, nor will two faces ever be the same.⁷

Allah further distinguished Adam from the rest of earthly creation by giving him the power of speech (*bāksakti*). Other creatures of the earth are able to communicate, but only Adam and his descendants achieve this communication through the flow of words that constitutes speech, or in stories, songs and poetry. However, this generalized ability to communicate through speech has been particularized in the many different languages (*bhāsā*) mankind now speaks. Furthermore,

all people who speak one particular language do not all speak it the same way. The farmers of Daripalla speak what they consider their own peculiar dialect (*mātribhāsā*) of Bengali, which differs from that of other districts like Dacca or Chittagong.

These dialectal differences are associated with the different kinds of earth in each of the areas of Bangladesh. Different earth has different capacities, and these capacities become part of the rice obtained from this earth. The consumption of these different kinds of rice accounts for the different dialects. Finally, each speaker of any language has his own particular way of speaking. Some people are more articulate than others, but, most particularly, the sound, tone, or quality (*sur*) of each person's voice is unique. Like a person's face, his voice is a unique individualizing characteristic.

Each person's physically perceptible individuality is marked and summarized in the name (*nām*) by which he is called. Allah named his first human creatures "Adam" and "Howa," and each of their descendants is also considered to possess a name to be called by. Among Daripallans a person's name is an external label that sensually marks a person's individuality in the same way as the appearance of his face and the sound of his voice. A name, however, is not simply something a person is called by. A person's name (*nām*) is also the reputation by which he is known. Allah has given each person a particular work or set of activities (*kāḥ*) to perform and it is in the performance of this vocation that each individual's reputation is formed.

In the view of the farmers of Daripalla, Adam's primary task was to be the master (*mālīk*) of the earth by farming it (*cās karā*) successfully. They also consider this to be the fundamental task of all mankind. This is a task that is necessary if mankind is to survive, but it is also a right and duty (*kartabba*) incumbent upon men because of their creation from earth. Adam had to exercise the ability he possessed as a creature of earth, and he had to decide on a course of action that would lead to the completion of his task. He also had to provide the labor necessary to bring the task to completion. To engage in the activities (*kāḥ*) assigned by Allah is an individual's duty and a fundamental part of his destiny (*takdīr*, *bhāḡga*). At each stage in the carrying out of one's work Daripallans realize that extensive variations of circumstances and performance are possible. At any particular point in his life an individual's position varies from that of his neighbors in the details of its plan, in the quality of his commitment to the plan, and in the amount of labor actually expended on the task. A person's performance in carrying out the particular set of activities that constitute his life-work (*kāḥ*) is the fundamental source of his own personal satisfaction (*man*

bhālo āche) or displeasure (*man khārāp āche*), and it is also the source of his reputation within his community.

Until recently the only productive task that was possible for the majority of Daripallans was farming. They were either farmers (*cāsī*, *krisak*), or they were beggars (*phakīr*). However, they are now aware that the ability to comprehend the nature of Allah's creation, which their formulation out of earth has given them, can be applied through formal schooling to obtaining a place in government service (*chākrī*). Few Daripallans have succeeded in finding such a place, but it has become an attractive prospect, as an alternate life-work. Daripallans admit that there is more to Allah's creation than what they see before themselves. The person who is able to travel as widely as possible is considered able to learn more about the magnificance of Allah's creation. As people learn about the nature of Allah's creation, other tasks or occupations might become available as alternatives to farming. Daripallans admit there is more strength and skill (*sakti*, *khamatā*) in the earth (*māti*) from which they were created than they are currently aware of. Should other alternate occupations become available, Daripallans will still interpret a person's ability to pursue them successfully as the result of his creation from earth, and as a response to the task Allah has set for the particular person so employed.

MANKIND DIVIDED

All of mankind shares with Adam a common shape or form, the power of speech, and a purpose or task in life. However, individuals are also differentiated by their faces, voices, names and reputations. Humanity (*mānabjāti*), further, is also differentiated into a series of specific communities (*jāti*) that are important in the thought of the farmers of Daripalla. Although all men have been, are, and will be substantially the same, they have become divided into various groups.

The first division took place between Adam's sons, Habel and Kabel. Habel was a dutiful son who pursued his calling as a farmer with skill and diligence. He was the industrious son, the hard worker, and the honest man. Kabel, on the other hand, was lazy and jealous. He was impatient and dissatisfied. Ultimately, he became a murderer. Daripallans consider themselves to be the heirs of Habel. They likewise consider Habel to be the ancestor of all Muslims, who together form the first and most important group (*jāti*) of mankind. The second group of any importance within Daripalla are the Hindus, and they are considered to be the heirs of Kabel. A small community of Christians live near Daripalla, and they are considered a separate *jāti* descended from one of Adam's many other sons. The fourth and final *jāti* that

is discussed by Daripallans are the Buddhists, and their origin too is attributed ultimately to an unnamed son of Adam.

Daripallans relate the origins of the groups which people their universe back to the time of creation, and they speak of these origins in terms of geneological descent. Although the implications of this kind of belief are not clearly thought out, Daripallan Muslims do consider themselves as somehow distantly related to Habel. Daripallan Muslims are also aware that their own *Musālmānjāti* and the *Hindujāti* interspersed among themselves are currently genuine and separate birth groups.

Daripallan Muslims point out that the *Hindujāti* is exclusively a birth group. They realize their neighbors consider it necessary for a person to be born a member of their group to be part of the *Hindujāti*. A person cannot become a Hindu through conversion. However, Daripallan Muslims believe that anyone can become a Muslim through a declaration of faith, by the sacrifice of a goat or a cow, and by the consumption of some of the meat from the sacrificed animal. Although no Hindu in Daripalla has done this in living memory, stories are told of at least one rich Hindu in Pabna town having become a Muslim during the struggle for Bangladeshi Independence. However, in the distant past the ancestors of the Muslim Daripallans were all Hindus, and they were converted by the preaching of itinerant disciples of Muhammad. When their ancestors heard the Prophet's message, they accepted Islam, and for all the generations since then they have been Muslims. For all practical purposes today in Daripalla to be a Muslim is to be born a Muslim.

Daripallan Muslims attribute their ancestors' conversion not only to the work of the itinerant preachers of Islam who first came to Bengal, but also to the work of the prophets who preceded Muhammad and prepared the way for him. According to Daripallans Allah sent 124,000 prophets (*paygāmbār*) to all the different groups descended from Adam's sons so that they might know the correct path to follow in obeying Allah's commands. Some of these prophets are better known than others, such as Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus. However, Daripallans believe Allah guided every group through minor prophets until the day they heard Muhammad's final revelation and accepted his teaching in the Quran and Traditions. Those who had faithfully followed the path of their particular prophets out of the 124,000 were open to Muhammad's preaching. Daripallans consider that their ancestors who first accepted Islam were right-guided descendants of Habel, because they had the sense to accept and obey Allah's commands as they became known to them.

Those Hindus who did not accept Islam were shown to be misguided descendants of Kabel. Daripallans' ancestors' acceptance of Islam is the proof of their ancestors' proper heritage and of their faithfulness in following the prophets who had preceded Muhammad. Those who did not accept Islam when they first heard it were shown to be of Kabel's lineage because of their failure to accept Allah's message revealed through Muhammad.

The acceptance or the rejection of Muhammad's message was a proof of the believers' or disbelievers' heritage. However, Daripallan Muslims are uncertain where to place a recent convert in this scheme. They emphasize the importance, the necessity, of accepting Muhammad's message in the Quran and the Traditions even for a descendant of Kabel, but they recognize conversion at this current point in history cannot change the convert's heritage. Conversion never did change anyone's heritage. Their ancestors' acceptance of Islam was a revelation of what their true heritage was. In the case of the modern convert Daripallans would consider his heritage to have become unimportant. What would be important to the Daripallan Muslims would be the convert's new way of life. After all, the Daripallans reason, everyone is the heir of one of Adam's sons, and, therefore, an heir of Adam himself.

Daripallans are aware that their *Musālmānjāti* is made up of people with diverse backgrounds. This diversity is reflected in the family titles (*upādhi*) known to and used by Daripallans. The list of these titles is lengthy: Sayyed, Sheik, Mogul, Pathan, Khan, Mandol, Pramanik, Mallik, Mullah, Sarkar, Sardar, Bishash, Akando, Sharif, Bhuyia, Pathwari, Choudhury, Khandakar, Kaji, Shah, and Kalipha. Furthermore, Daripallans consider some of these titles to be more prestigious (*khāndānī*) than others. There is general agreement that the title "Sayyed" is especially prestigious because a person with such a title is considered a descendant of the Prophet himself. The title "Sheik" indicates descent of some kind from the Arabs. "Khandakar" and "Mullah" mean a person's ancestors were religious guides and teachers.⁸ "Kaji" indicates that a person's ancestors were religious judges. Daripallans also consider the titles "Mogul" and "Pathan" prestigious because they indicate an origin from groups who came from areas closer to Muhammad's own birth place, and who were among Muhammad's early followers. Those who possess the title "Khan" claim their ancestors were awarded this title by the Moguls for their services to these rulers. (Many who do not have this title, however, ridicule this claim to prestige by pointing out that the local pronunciation of the title is *khā*, which means "dog" in local dialect.)

Although the farmers make various claims of generalized prestige

for one or other of the titles listed above, they are, nevertheless, very reluctant to put these titles in any kind of rank order. This runs contrary to their emphasis on equal descent from Adam. Furthermore, they feel such an exercise would be futile. Each person would inevitably rank his own title as the highest. Since each group is conceived to have accepted Islam when it was first presented to them, all are seen equally as descendants of Adam's son, Habel.

Daripallans' claims to openness and equality between titled groups have to be taken seriously. Nevertheless, a common attitude toward a residual category of persons who are considered lowly (*ātrāph*) must also be mentioned. Daripallans are reluctant to discuss this category, and they will only grudgingly admit that this category did exist in the past and was important. Very few Daripallans are willing to discuss current attitudes toward this category of groups. However, these few Daripallans feel that a negative attitude toward these groups still exists. The two untitled occupational groups (*kōm*) of weavers and fishermen fall in this category. Since representatives of neither of these groups reside in Daripalla, interaction with them is unnecessary, and the lowly status traditionally attributed to these groups has not been practically challenged. In the case of the titles "Shah" and "Kalipha" the situation is different, because families having these titles do reside in Daripalla. Traditionally, families with the title "Shah" were engaged in pressing oil, which was considered a lowly occupation. Although none of these families is still engaged in this occupation, they have not completely escaped the lowly status previously attached to it. People with this title will not volunteer that they have it. Although they do not use their title in identifying themselves like other Daripallans, nevertheless others know what the title is and will provide that information.

Two other traditionally lowly occupational groups (*kōm*) share the same title. Those who perform circumcisions and the tailors both possess the title "Kalipha," although they consider themselves separate groups of families, and are so considered by others. These two groups have not entirely escaped the negative attitude associated with their occupations by all those titled groups who consider themselves solely farmers (*cāsī*) by occupation. Members of these supposedly lowly groups, however, do feel that attitudes have changed and will continue to change. Should a prosperous tailor, for example, endow a daughter with a good dowry, he would feel confident about approaching any other titled family with a proposal of marriage. Daripallans inevitably conclude a discussion about the importance of titles with the declaration that ownership of land rather than title determines the importance and prestige of an individual in the community.

THE MYTH AS RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION

The situation within Daripalla was not always as egalitarian as it is today. Daripallans are aware of the change, and they explain it as the result of the intensive preaching of their religious teachers (*mowlānā*). The creation myth figures prominently in this preaching. This preaching occurs more or less regularly at the Friday prayer service in Daripalla's mosques, and in a special way at the prayer services that mark the major Muslim religious festivals. During the winter months special gatherings (*sabhā, jalsā*) for preaching about the significance of being Muslim are also held in Daripalla and throughout Bangladesh. These meetings are especially popular and well-attended. The teaching that occurs on all these occasions emphasizes that the farmers of Daripalla follow the ordinary path of belief (*sarīyat*) given first to Adam and then fully elaborated by Muhammad in the Quran and Traditions. The Muslim's duties to his family, his obligations to pray regularly, to fast during Ramzan, and to give alms to the poor are repeatedly stressed. The pride Muslims can take in fulfilling these obligations as Adam's descendants and brothers to each other is repeatedly stressed.

The farmers of Daripalla are aware that three other paths (*tarikāt, mārphat, hakikat*) to Allah are followed by some Muslims, but these paths are not open to them. Daripallans are not clear how these paths differ from, or are related to, each other, but at least one of them is characterized by the wandering beggar-minstrel who is most often described simply as a profligate. A second of these paths is characterized by the hermit or recluse who spends all his time in meditation, and is supported by the free-will offerings of the people who live near his hermitage. The third path is that of a higher learning which is not available to the ordinary Muslims of Daripalla. The Daripallans consider all three of these paths inappropriate for themselves. They follow the *sarīyat*, as laid out by their preachers, which was first given to Adam, Allah's creature of earth and its cultivator.

The religious preacher has been a central figure, first in the introduction of Islam to Bengal and now in its on-going elaboration and development among the predominantly rural population of Muslims in Bangladesh. Sufi preachers introduced Islam to this frontier area of South Asia beginning in about the 11th century (Haq, 1975: 3). That these original preachers were Sufis is evident from the importance given to light (*nur*) in the myth even today, and from the awareness of modern Bangladeshi farmers of the three other (Sufi) paths to Allah besides the *sharīyat*. More importantly, however, the myth seems to have been an important vehicle for distinguishing Islamic conceptions of the universe from the indigenous Hindu conceptions. Adam's in-

dividual and bounded creation is in marked contrast to the much more fluid concepts of being characteristic of Hinduism. The priority of importance given to earth in Adam's creation and his resultant superiority to Iblis, a creature of fire, reverses the Hindu order of importance for these two basic substances. Although this formulation appears simplistic, it embodies a radically different conception of being human from that of Hinduism.

With improved communication in the nineteenth century between peripheral areas of Islam like Bengal and the Muslim spiritual centers in the Middle East and especially in Mecca, various reform movements occurred throughout the Muslim world. Bengal was no exception (Hunter 1878; Khan 1960). The current emphasis upon the *sariyat* as the ordinary path of faith for the farmer heirs of Adam can be traced to this effort as it was elaborated in Bengal. The egalitarian emphasis on brotherhood and communality among all Muslims clearly is an interpretation that can be drawn from this creation myth. Religious preachers regularly do so still today. The creation myth among Bangladeshi farmers is still an authoritative blueprint for life as it ought to be lived.

NOTES

1. The ethnographic research upon which this paper is based was conducted in Pabna District, Bangladesh. I lived in a rural area approximately eight miles from the district headquarters from October, 1975, until October, 1976. During this time I was a participant-observer in the on-going life in a number of rural communities. I developed good working relationships with more than twenty very representative informants. This research was funded by Caritas-Bangladesh, a voluntary development agency with headquarters in Dacca, Bangladesh.

2. See, for example, the following Sura of the Quran: Sura 2: 22-40; 15: 25-49; 23: 13-18; 32: 1-12; 38: 72-86.

3. Daripalla is a pseudonym for one rural Union Council ward in one Police Station of Pabna District. This ward covers approximately three square miles, and has a population of slightly more than 4000 persons who live in ten separate villages.

4. Nevertheless, these conceptions of the prophet would be considered heterodox by a Muslim of the Middle East.

5. Due to the cultural impropriety of unrelated males conversing with females in rural Muslim society, I was unable to obtain the woman's interpretation of her secondary derivation from Adam.

6. These three teachers all happen to profess a belief in classic South Asian Sufism (Haq, 1975: 52-111). Such beliefs are not professed by all religious teachers in Bangladesh.

7. My informants had not experienced an instance of identical twins, and they found it difficult to imagine such an occurrence.

8. Although these titles refer to an occupation, the current possessor has no special claim to the occupation unless he personally obtains the knowledge necessary

to function as a teacher, guide or judge. Throughout South Asia very little can be inferred about a person's actual occupation from a traditional, occupationally-linked title which he may possess.

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