



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Unveiling the Healing Rituals of Spirit Media (*Pari Khan*) in Chitral: A Dramaturgical Analysis**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study explores the healing rituals of Spirit Media (*Pari Khan*) in Chitral, Pakistan, using Goffman's Dramaturgical Analysis and Lew's Sex War theories. The research encompasses comprehensive data obtained from extensive interviews conducted with spirit mediums, their assistants, clients, shamans, therapists, and those impacted by spirit possession. Additionally, participant observations of therapeutic rituals in their authentic settings supplement this data. The research analyses the performative nature of spirit media, portraying them as the conduits via which spirits communicate information. Throughout these therapeutic rituals, spirit media establish a profound spiritual bond by skillfully manipulating images, controlling information, and creating an aura of mystery during their performances. By strategically positioning religious objects and assuming specific roles, they provide impactful revelations that captivate the clients seeking spiritual restoration. These women assume the positions of healers, allowing them exemptions from their regular household chores and elevating their status to that of matriarchs in their households. Within the traditionally male-dominated society of Chitral, this advancement often results in monetary advantages, signifying a significant change in socioeconomic dynamics. Through the use of Goffman's Dramaturgical Analysis, we observed the interplay of "backstage" and "frontstage" dynamics in these ceremonies. A profound sense of spiritual interconnectedness arises from the meticulous coordination of one's environment, appearance, and behaviour. Clients are driven to seek a range of services, including healing and settling domestic difficulties, due to their belief in spirits and the fascinating performances of spirit media. The study's recommendations emphasize the significance of cultural comprehension, ethical principles, integration of traditional healing into modern healthcare systems, addressing gender dynamics, enhancing community awareness, and promoting further collaborative research that connects cultural practices with contemporary knowledge.

**Keywords:** Chitral, *Pari Khan*, Patriarchy, Social & Psychological Deprivations, Spirit Media, Women

**Introduction**

In the heart of Chitral, Pakistan, amidst the majestic landscape and rich cultural tapestry, lies a profound yet enigmatic practice - the healing rituals of Spirit Media, known as *Pari Khan*. This ancient tradition, deeply rooted in the ethos of Chitrali society, serves as a conduit between the spiritual and material realms, offering a fascinating glimpse into the intricate interplay of gender dynamics, dramaturgy, and the profound cultural significance embedded within.

Drawing from the lenses of Goffman's Dramaturgical Analysis and Lew's Sex War theories, this study ventures into the intriguing world of Spirit Mediumship. Through a

meticulous blend of comprehensive data garnered from in-depth interviews and participant observations, this research peels back the layers of mystique surrounding these therapeutic rituals.

At the core of this exploration lies the performative nature of Spirit Media - individuals revered as vessels through which spirits communicate. Employing a sophisticated array of dramaturgical techniques, these practitioners artfully craft an aura of spiritual connectivity. By adorning the ceremonial space with sacred artefacts, assuming specific roles, and skilfully managing impressions, they orchestrate profound and captivating performances, beckoning clientele seeking spiritual solace and healing.

However, beyond the captivating spectacle, lies a nuanced tapestry of societal dynamics. Within the traditionally patriarchal framework of Chitralli culture, the elevation of women assuming roles as healers and matriarchs through spirit mediumship challenges conventional norms, offering them a sphere of influence and economic rewards otherwise elusive.

This article navigates the multifaceted terrain of Spirit Mediumship, unravelling its cultural significance while delving into the intricate gender conflicts it illuminates within the fabric of traditional Chitralli society. Beyond mere observation, it extends toward recommendations aimed at fostering cultural understanding, integrating traditional healing into modern healthcare paradigms, addressing gender disparities, and advocating for further collaborative research bridging ancient practices with contemporary perspectives.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study employed two theories as the theoretical framework. First Erving Goffman's Dramaturgical Analysis has been used for explaining the performance rituals of spirit media in the research area. Using the theatric analogy, Goffman (1959) argues that members of society act for the social audience to portray a balanced self-image. He has used the word 'dramaturgy' because this performance is similar to stage performance and the performers (individuals) are akin to stage actors. The actors use the techniques of "impression management" and "information control" to add "dramatic realisation" to their performances. This involves the strategy of mystification through "social distancing," a brief appearance, hiding certain information, concealing errors, and revealing others in the face of the audience. This is necessary to avoid "disruptive information"—things—that, if noticed during performance, could disprove or disrupt the impression of the performance (Goffman, 1959, p. 141).

The performance of actors occurs inside a social establishment, an avenue that blocks the impression that a specific performance occurs. The social establishment is set by establishing the setting of the performance through the specific appearance and manners of actors and the attitudes of the audience, who tend to avoid the falsity of the performance to maintain the idealised image of the actors. The setting, appearance, and manners of actors constitute the 'front stage'. Goffman also talks of the 'backstage' where the "dirty work" involved in the preparation of finished products is performed (Goffman, 1959, p. 44). For the success of the performance, items on the frontstage should be consistent, and the audience should be prevented from entering the 'backstage'.

Likewise, Lewis (1971) employs the phrase peripheral possession to explain spirit possession. He argues that individuals peripheral to power structures, like females, resort to possession as a means of advancing their ambitions. Females' possession, therefore, is a component of the gender war in patriarchal societies. This is the sign of psychosocial deprivations of the oppressed (Lewis, 1971) revealed in culturally approved rituals. The amalgam of these two theories has served as the theoretical framework for explaining the said phenomenon in Chitral.

## Literature Review

Spirit Medium is an agent who claims to mediate between humans and supernatural beings while entering a changed state of consciousness to serve clients or the community (Patamajorn, 2007). Spirit media perform vital roles in the healing rituals of indigenous communities. Spirit media are considered to be selected by the spirits to perform as their hosts. Alternatively, the status could be attained in the ritual of adoricism by negotiation, where an agreement is reached between the victim and the possessing spirits (Langley, 1980). Likewise, many spirits media claim that they were approached by the spirits in dreams and had visions, while some assert that illness was the early message for being selected. The illness disappeared after they accepted the offer to act as spirits agents.

The tale of spirit possession is intriguing news for the indigenous communities. As the tale of the spirit mediumship spreads in the village, people start visiting the spirit medium in the hope of healing and for soothsaying. In the beginning, most of the spirit media are shy, hesitate to perform as in trance, and take a very limited number of clients. Nonetheless, with practice, they attain confidence, get accustomed to it, become famous, get more clients (Nourse, 1996), and perform as healers (Firth, 1940). The spirit medium performs healing in an altered state of consciousness or trance, where it is believed that the spirits serve the client through the medium's body.

Performing as the agents of the spirits gives the host women access to many privileges in patriarchal societies. For instance, the host women perform as healers, which only men can perform (Schaffler *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, women gain the centre of attention and attain higher status (Patamajorn, 2007). Similarly, this carries financial benefits for the hosts, including exemption from routine domestic chores and says in family matters. The status of the spirit media is similar to that of matriarchs among the indigenous communities. Such women who perform as the agents of spirits are locally known as *Pari Khan* or *Nangeni* in Chitral, Pakistan (Ahmad *et al.*, 2023). This study explains the performance rituals of spirit media (*Pari Khan*) in Chitral, Pakistan.

## Material and Methods

This qualitative research study was conducted in Chitral, Pakistan. Data was collected from the spirit media, their assistants, and their clients, patients, and shamans. Moreover, several psychiatrists were also interviewed to add psychological and psychiatric explanations to the topic under study. A variety of tools were used for data collection, such as in-depth interviews with spirit media, patients and assistants of spirit media, and shamans, and focus group discussions (FGDs) with the families of the patients. A total of 35 in-depth interviews were conducted under different categories of respondents, including spirit media (5), assistants (5) and clients of spirit media (5), current and former patients who were believed to be 'possessed' (10), shamans (5), and psychiatrists (5). Furthermore, the healing rituals of the spirit medium were observed in their natural setting. One of the investigators worked as the participant observer. The research participants were selected through snowball sampling and links between the researchers and community members. This study has used only a portion of the data that was related to spirit media. The papers include both male and female research participants, yet we found more female research participants than males, depicting the gendered dimension of the phenomenon. The phenomenon of spirit possession and spirit mediumship is more common among women than men in Chitral.

Due to the cultural sensitivity and secrecy attached to the phenomenon, data collection was a challenging task. The consent of the research participants to participate in the interview was attained through negotiations. The female spirit media were suspicious of the study and hesitated to allow us to observe their rituals and conduct interviews. Male members of their families cooperated with the researchers by convincing the female

patients and spirit media for data collection. Where the female spirit media did not talk to the researchers, their assistants and representatives participated in the study. So, interviews with these 'gatekeepers' were conducted first. After winning their confidence, they facilitated our getting data from female participants. Ethical principles of research, such as informed consent and participants' anonymity and confidentiality, were strictly considered. Due considerations were followed so as not to hurt the feelings and emotions of the research participants. An attempt is made to keep a balance between the principles of non-interference in the social lives of the community and the academic duty to contribute to the cause of knowledge creation.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Female Spirit Media (*Nangeni* or *Pari Khan*): A Dramaturgical Analysis**

Our study finds Goffman's Dramaturgical Analysis (1959) to be helpful in properly explaining the performance rites of the female spirit media (*Pari Khan*). By the performances of the spirits media (*Pari Khan*), we mean all those acts that are performed during a period of observation (*healing ritual*) and that have some impression on the observers (the clients). For a successful performance, the medium has to create the impression that a spirit rather than a human is serving the clients. The acts of communication, acknowledgement, and interpretation occur between the spirit medium and clients during the ritual. Using Goffman's theory (1959), it could be argued that the spirit media use the techniques of "impression management" and "information control" to add "dramatic realisation" to their performances. The ritual is arranged in such a way that it could be called the "social establishment," which has barriers to reality. The "social establishment" is established through the specific setting of the ritual room, the appearance and manners of the spirit medium, and by utilising the beliefs of the clients.

The spirit media, their assistants, and clients coordinate what Goffman calls the "team". The ritual of the mediums could be divided into the "front stage" and the "backstage."

#### **Frontstage**

The "frontstage" consists of the setting, appearance, and manners of the spirit medium.

#### **Setting**

The setting is the place where the spirit medium provides services to the clients by entering into a trance. It includes furniture, equipment, physical design, and other background things that provide the scenery and stage props for the spate of human action played out before, within, or upon it (Goffman, 1959). The place where the spirit medium performs is prepared in such a way that it can generate a proper impression of the healing rituals. Therefore, the room is decorated with items like an altar, the symbol of a deity, sacrificial items such as joss sticks, candles, flowers, things depicting religion, fruits, etc. The room of the performance is permeated with the smell of the flaming incense. In a ritual room, we observed a large portrait of Aga Khan IV, the spiritual leader of the Ismaili Muslims, along with a manuscript of the Holy Quran kept on a small table. The room was clean.

The theatrical management of the possession room with religious portraits serves to create a sense of awe among the clients. This reinforces their conformity to the power of the spirit medium. For instance, a client expressed her experience like this:

*“The feelings of deep sensation moved across my nerves; fear took over me, and I started shivering and sweetening.”*

### **Appearance**

Appearance refers to those items that depict the social status of the performer (1959). The spirit media adopt appearances, which tend to portray the impression of the representatives of the spirits. During our interactions with the spirit media, we found the media wearing clean clothes that are religiously and culturally perceived as decent. The spirit media keep religious beads (*dazbay*) in their hands. During participant observations, we observed the spirit medium moving the beads (*dazbean chopaw ushui*) while chanting some religious words. Through her appearance, the spirit media tends to portray the image of a culturally pious woman (*bo parhazghar awrat*). This tends to reinforce the beliefs and confidence of the clients in their potential.

### **Manners**

Manners refers to the postures, speech patterns, facial expressions, body gestures, and so forth of the spirit media that turn operative at the time of performance (Goffman, 1959). Through the interviews of their assistants, we found that the spirit media take a bath on the day they have to perform (usually on Holy Fridays). The spirit media lights incense as the session time approaches and starts the session with some prayer. After some time, the medium acts like an authority, and then her body starts to jolt, and her hands are raised to her forehead. In a trance-like state, the spirit medium starts asking the clients about their problems. She gives the clients interpretations, suggestions, treatments, and prescriptions for their sicknesses and miseries.

In contrast to the popular belief that spirit mediums know everything (Nourse, 1996), our study finds that spirit mediums inquire about the client's issues. This is the strategy to know the problems and their perceived causes from the client's own perceptions. The medium then gives advice and prescribes healing, mostly consistent with the perceptions of the client, reinforcing their beliefs.

The mediums generally do not ask for money; however, a plate containing some money, like the donation box for charity institutions, is kept on the table in front of the medium. It is believed that to make the healing work well, some money should be kept on the plate. Some media also demand a specific amount.

The spirit media follows the dramaturgical disciplines (Goffman, 1959), which entail the presence of the mind to avert slips, maintain self-control, and manage the facial expressions and verbal tone of their performances. Likewise, they select a good audience, prevent discussion, make brief appearances, and prevent the audience from private information. For instance, the medium asked one of our researchers if he believed in spirits and if she could experiment with them on him. This psychological game works on most of the clients who remain in constant fear of spirits (Oak, 2010). Moreover, the media has plans for emergencies and deals with errors. A client explained:

*“The medium asked about my beloved girl, who in reality did not exist. I said that no such girl existed. She changed the topic and started reciting some spells and told me that she had resolved the issue and I would soon be able to concentrate on my studies.”*

Furthermore, these healers use the technique of mystification by keeping “social distance” (Goffman, 1959) and segregating the clients so that the “falsity” of the act is not disclosed. A client revealed:

*“I had consulted the spirit medium along with my mother. The medium asked me to leave the room, but later on, the assistant took me back to the room when my mother had left. I was surprised to know that the medium knew most of the secret events in our family”.*

The spirit media do not attend funeral and wedding ceremonies, which is explained as necessary to provide a pure environment for the spirits. Inside the home, care is taken as the spirits prefer their hosts consume clean foods and wear pure (*pak*) clothes. Likewise, the spirit media use socially sanctioned solutions (Nasir, 1987), mobilise social support networks, utilise religious-cum-magical strategies for healing, use preconceptions and pre-healing expectations of the clients (Lee, 2007), and give social meaning and social myth (Morris, 2006) to the illness. For instance, telling a depressed daughter-in-law that someone among relatives, perceived to be her mother-in-law, has done black magic work for her. The spirit medium generates a trance that has a psycho-physiological pattern that gives momentary relief to the patients (Gadit, 2007). Similarly, by dividing illnesses into material and spiritual domains (Rogler & Hollingshead, 1961), not only the competition of clinicians is avoided, but seemingly rational-minded people are also attracted.

These techniques adopted for “impression management” are necessary to perform the agents of spirits while failure would reveal what Goffman says as the “destructive information’-- things which, in case noticed during the performance, can disprove, disturb or turn the impression the act futile (Goffman, 1959, p.141). For instance, an initially famous spirit medium later lost her credibility as the agent of spirits when she was unable to retain her “dramaturgy”. Likewise, a mentally ill woman received clients until her illness was diagnosed and cured. Recently, a 13-year-old child had been giving injections and doing surgery on patients as the *jin* doctor. He was banned by the District Administration under the act of quackery only after his video of injecting patients went viral on Samaa TV (2020). The *Jin* Doctor, like other healers, would have continued the quackery if he remained stuck in spiritualism and avoided doing surgery. However, for the local people, in a few cases being fake does not mean that there is a problem with the practice; rather, the problem is with the practitioner.

### **Back Stage**

What Goffman (1959) calls the “backstage” applies to the performance of the spirit media. To retain the idealised image of the spirit medium, it is necessary to prevent the clients from entering the “backstage,” where “dirty work” for the preparation of end products occurs.

### **Assistants**

The spirit media are facilitated by assistants such as fathers, husbands and in some cases by their mothers. The assistant ushers the client to the ritual room and leaves when the spirit medium enters. The assistants make sure the clients perform as the clients.

### **Clients**

Successful performance requires the engagement of clients (Goffman, 1959). Our study finds that clients consult the spirit media for different services like progress in business, healing sicknesses, resolving domestic issues, winning the heart of the beloved, undoing curses or black magic, and progress in studies and business (Magnus, 2005; Patamajorn, 2007). In most cases, the spirit medium (*Pari Khan*) would associate the problem with black magic (*seher*) hidden in some old graveyard. This would be in the form of rags or locks, which will appear in the closed hands of the medium when she takes her hands to her forehead. Alternatively, the medium may tell the client that spirits destroyed the black magic and the client would return home happily. A client said:

*"My daughter, depressed, agreed to appear for the exam the day after the holy mother undid the curse."*

The clients' beliefs differ and entail those having firm beliefs, partial believers, and those who do not believe yet consult the media in the hope of relief. Suspicion about the truthfulness of the healings by the spirit media exists in Chitral, just as it is found among other communities (Frigerio, 1989). Rationalists accuse healers of being frauds (Marsdon, 2005) who fool innocent people (Yang, 2015). A rational-minded young man ridiculed the spirit media, saying that they were actors. Referring to his own experiences, he gives the open challenge that if the spirit media are true, they should experiment on him.

People in Chitral, like those in other cultures (Patamajorn, 2007), grow up listening to stories about spirits. The fear and beliefs of spirits are learned as conditioning. Even if unlearned, later on, the beliefs can resume as a spontaneous recovery of a 'previously unlearned conditioning' (Malik, 2009). For instance, a client said that earlier he had lost faith in the abilities of the spirit medium, which resumed when he observed the ritual of a medium. Even the hesitant believers could be devoted believers who hide it, as people are afraid of being labelled as outdated, superstitious, and traditional.

There are "dramaturgical disciplines" for clients, which include visiting clean, being respectful, not having doubts about the authority of the medium, etc. The media know these and may predict what has been on the client's mind. In case the prediction goes wrong, the media will make up for the situation. For instance, a spirit medium said that it was not just the cleanliness of the body and discipline but rather firm beliefs and purity of the heart that were also expected from the clients. The wishful thoughts and hope make clients not notice the errors of the media to maintain their idealised images and retain their perceptions as the receivers of unique services, just like the audiences of the actors (Goffman, 1959). Hence, they usually exaggerate the perceived effectiveness of diagnosis and healing. An old woman expressed with devotion:

*"The holy mother (nan) told a client to consult a good surgeon as an insect-like termite was eating her brain. This was confirmed when the victim went through surgery at the Aga Khan University Hospital in Karachi. The healer was called from the hospital and offered to work with them."*

There are dozens of such tales developed from hearsay and are exaggerations serving as advertisements for the spiritualists.

The female spirit media, thus, successfully perform as the agents of spirits in Chitral. Like other traditional societies (Patamajorn, 2007; Lee, 2009), Chitral's easy accessibility, being less stigmatised, shortage of medical and psychiatric staff, and biasedness against modern medical care give the spirit media central importance in indigenous healing rituals.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, spirit mediumship is the rise of a possessed woman from a patient of the spirits to their hosts, giving her a new identity and power. Such women are known as *Pari Khan* or *Nangeni* (holy mothers) in Chitral. Through techniques akin to dramaturgy, the spirit media creates an impression upon the audience (clients) that it is the spirits they are consulting, not the humans. The clients visit *Pari Khan* for services such as curing and soothsaying. Mediumship brings several benefits for the host women, such as performing as healers, attention inside the family and in the community, economic rewards, and exemption from domestic chores and roles that are otherwise denied in patriarchal societies. Spirit mediumship depicts gender conflict in traditional Chitrali culture, where acting as the agent of spirit provides relative empowerment to women. However, the

relative rise comes in a way that could not challenge the existing dominant status of men, as it is the spirits rather than the host that enjoys respect and power.

### **Recommendations**

1. The prominence of spirit media in the healing rituals of Chitral demonstrates the need to take mental health seriously in the research area. Hence, civil society and the government should take the seriousness of mental health seriously and work on it.
2. The spirit media utilize culturally relevant healing mechanisms for their clients. So, modern health practitioners could collaborate with local healers to make their treatments more effective.
3. The rituals of spirit mediumship involve financial matters; therefore, the clients need to make sure the practice does not involve financial exploitation or fraud.
4. The phenomenon of spirit mediumship involves gender dynamics and politics. Hence, scholars and activists could take useful insights from this study and the phenomenon of spirit mediumship in the research area.

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