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“Speaking with Angels, Combating Black Magic: Enmity, Spirit Mediums and Acts of Occult Remediation in Gilgit-Baltistan, Northern Pakistan.”

Abstract:

Using ethnographic data drawn from four years of fieldwork in Gilgit Town, my presentation analyzes the efforts of spirit mediums to remedy the social and physical harms which women attribute to the black magic (*kala jadu*) they contend has been enacted against them by family and social rivals. Gilgiti men and women spirit mediums (*daiyahl*) describe themselves as being called to their socio-spiritual roles, usually during childhood, by supernatural beings (*makhlooq*). As adults, mediums work with the assistance of spirit entities in order to ‘return’ (*wapas*) spectral forms of social assault to what women clients imagined and spirits confirmed were the intimately local sources of enmity. Through formalized Islamic mechanisms such as Qur’anic recitation, intercessory and remedial prayer or, more contentiously, the occult powers derived from the practice of black magic itself, mediums summon Islamic and also indigenous spirit beings such as the *muwakkil* (angels), *jinn*, and *pari* (fairies). In variable ways and to different degrees and ends, such beings support the sometimes transgressive efforts of diviners to diagnose, materialize and disempower the malefic objects or spells used to harm clients, thereby relieving women of supernatural harm and the social turmoil and somatized distress it produced. In so doing, the reparative efforts of mediums were central to many of my Gilgiti interlocutors’ senses of subjective and inter-subjective well-being. Rather than being seen to undermine or challenge either Islamic or indigenous belief systems, spirit mediumship operates as an occult economy that is practiced at the edge of, while remaining intimately responsive to, Islamic doctrine and indigenous therapeutic paradigms. In turn, the importance and popularity of the services mediums provide hinges on their capacity to embody and enable authentic and potent connections, not merely to otherworldly realms and forces, but to the fast-disappearing forms of traditional spiritual recourse which were once central to Gilgiti belief systems.