

Shamanistic Ecstasy and Supernatural Beings

A STUDY BASED ON FIELD-WORK AMONG
THE KALASH KAFIRS OF CHITRAL

FROM THE THIRD DANISH EXPEDITION TO CENTRAL ASIA 1947-54

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For more than a century and a half the Kafirs of Afghanistan have been known to European students, but it was not until Sir George Scott Robertson in 1896 published his famous book *The Káfirs of the Hindu-Kush* that they attracted universal attention. From a scholarly point of view that was none too soon, for about that time, the Kafirs, living west of the frontier between Afghanistan and British India were converted to Islam, and their country, formerly called Kafirstan, became Nuristan, the Country of Light. Giving up their ancient religion, these Nuristanis now entered the great Islamic sphere of culture, and what today is left of their original spiritual life is only the last remnant of a once powerful religion.

However, a minor Kafir group, called the Kalash or Black Kafirs, living on the Indian, now Pakistan, side of the border, did not embrace Islam. The majority of the Kalash Kafirs live in their own cultural and religious environment, worshipping their own gods and drawing on a rich inheritance of myths and legends. But due to growing contacts with the outside world their three tiny valleys Rumbur, Bumboret and Birir, are under constant influence from the Moslems surrounding them, and therefore the three thousand or so Kalash Kafirs who are left will probably soon lose their cultural and religious characteristics.

Before I proceed to give an account of my own experiences among them, I shall briefly mention some of the important relevant publications. There is, to my knowledge, no author who has specially investigated Kafir shamanism, and one has therefore to collect what material one can from scattered

chapters and paragraphs in the publications of various British officers, Government officials, travellers, and investigators. Among these should specially be mentioned Mountstuart Elphinstone, *The Kingdom of Caubul and Its Dependencies in Persia, Tartary and India*, 1815, and Alexander Burnes, "On the Siah-Posh Kafirs", published in the *Proceedings of the Bombay Geographical Society*, 1838. H. G. Raverty has several interesting articles on Kafir culture as e.g. "Kafiristan and Kafiri Tribes", *The Calcutta Review*, vol. 103, pp. 65 ff., Calcutta 1896. In the same year Sir George Scott Robertson published his big and invaluable book *The Kafirs of the Hindu-Kush*, which immediately called forth great and well-merited admiration. He had really travelled and lived among the Kafirs and gave excellent descriptions of almost all sides of their life, culture, and religion. His book has become the classic on this area, indispensable to anybody who wants to study those complex questions.

In order to understand the further background of the Kafir religion it is frequently necessary to resort to investigations of neighbouring cultures, as e.g. G. W. Leitner, *Result of a Tour in Dardistan, Kashmir, Little Tibet, Ladakh, Zanskar*, etc., Lahore 1873, and Ghulam Muhammed, *Festivals and Folklore of Gilgit* (Memoirs of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, vol. 1, No. 7, 1905), and O. Olufsen, *Through the Unknown Pamirs*, London 1904.

By the turn of the century so much knowledge had been gained that the encyclopedias were able to publish articles on these areas, see e.g. the article "Dards" by George W. Grierson in the *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*, edited by James Hastings, vol. IV, 1911, pp. 399-402, and the article "Kafiristan" by George Scott Robertson in the same encyclopedia, vol. VII, 1914, pp. 634-636.

Since the appearance of Robertson's book the Kafir problem has been the subject of many discussions, largely due to the ancient tradition that the Kafirs are the descendants of Alexander the Great's soldiers. But the first World War put a temporary end to all field work. Meanwhile the religious problems were discussed, as e.g. in "The Mythology of the Kafirs" in J. Hackin, *Asiatic Mythology*, London 1932, pp. 57-60, cf. also D. L. R. Lorimer, "The Supernatural in the Popular Belief of the Gilgit Region" (*Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Part III, July 1929).

In the middle of the 1930's a German expedition travelled in many Kafir

areas (see *Deutsche in Hindukusch*, Berlin 1939), and about the same time the British colonel R. C. F. Schomberg visited the Kafirs of Chitral and published his valuable results in *Kafirs and Glaciers*, London 1938. This is, to my knowledge, the first book that deals in detail with the localities of the country of the Kalash Kafirs and describes a great number of their sacred places and religious customs. In *The Red Kafirs* from 1946 M. A. Shakur treats the culture of this Kafir community. The Norwegian scholar, Professor Georg Morgenstierne, who has devoted his life to the study of the Indo-Iranian frontier languages, and who has made several expeditions to the peoples of these areas, has also given a very informative account of "The Spring Festival of the Kalash Kafirs" published in *India Antiqua*, A Volume of Oriental Studies Presented to J. P. Vogel, etc., Leiden 1947, pp. 240-248.

The German Hindukush Expedition of 1955/56 brought back important results, and so did the Austrian Karakorum Expedition of 1958. In this connection should be specially mentioned Karl Jettmar's excellent study of the intricate Dard problem in "Ethnological Research in Dardistan 1958", Preliminary Report (*Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, vol. 105, No. 1, February 1961, pp. 79-97) and Peter Snoy's valuable study *Die Kafiren, Formen der Wirtschaft und geistigen Kultur*, Stuttgart 1962. Snoy has also some very informative notes to the film "Darden-Nordwestpakistan (Gilgitbezirk), Schmanistischer Tanz" (*Encyclopaedia Cinematographica*, Institut für den wissenschaftlichen Film, pp. 3-8, Göttingen 1960). In his article "The Cultural History of Northwest Pakistan" (*Year Book of the American Philosophical Society*, 1960, pp. 492-499) Karl Jettmar gives interesting sidelights on the Kafir problem in general. Interesting observations and excellent photographs will be found in the book *Where Four Worlds Meet*, Hindu Kush 1959 (on the Kalash Kafirs, see pp. 242-271) by Fosco Maraini, English Translation, London 1964. One team of the Third Danish Expedition to Central Asia 1947/54 visited Nuristan, and one of the members of this expedition, Lennart Edelberg, who also later visited Nuristan, has published many articles on the Nuristan Kafirs. Perhaps the most important of these is his study made in collaboration with A. Schafer and W. Lentz "Imra, The Creator God of the Kafirs and His Main Temple in the Parun Valley" (Nuristan, Southern Hindu-Kush), *Akten des vierundzwanzigsten internationalen Orientalisten-Kongresses Mün-*

chen 1957, Wiesbaden 1959. The present author has dealt with the Kalash Kafirs in his *Ethnological Field-Research in Chitral, Sikkim, and Assam*, Preliminary Report, København 1956, pp. 12-34 (Historisk-Filologiske Meddelelser udgivet af Det Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab, Bind 36, No. 2), and in: "Shamanism among the Kalash Kafirs of Chitral" (FOLK, vol. 5, København 1963, pp. 295-303).

In most of the above-mentioned publications will be found a great many valuable bibliographical references. As for general bibliographies I may draw attention to R. Fazy: *L'exploration du Kafirstan par les Europeens* (Asiatische Studien, 1-2, pp. 1-25, Bern 1953), and to a very comprehensive and excellent *Annotated Bibliography of Nuristan (Kafirstan) and the Kalash Kafirs of Chitral I* (Historisk-Filosofiske Meddelelser udgivet af Det Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab, Bind 41, No. 3), København 1966, by Schuyler Jones.

A general survey shows that shamans exist, or existed until quite recently, within the whole area in question. Moreover, these shamans had so many peculiarities in common that we may assume that the shamanism of the Hindukush/Western Himalayan area represents a particular branch of the well-known greater Asiatic shamanism. But there are, of course, also certain differences within this branch of shamanism, as e.g. in the official names of the shamans.

In the ancient Kafirstan the shamans were called *pshur*, and Robertson has given interesting descriptions of their customs and performances (cf. Robertson 1896, pp. 214 f., 245 f., 334 f., 402 f., 416 f., 425, 430 f., 465, 619, 627, passim). Snoy writes that the Prasun Kafirs, according to Buddruss, used the word *paschki*, i.e. seer for their shamans (cf. Snoy 1960, p. 209).

Schomberg states that the Kalash Kafirs of Chitral call their shamans *pshé* (cf. Schomberg, pp. 171, 174 f., 184 f., 201 ff., passim), whereas the Kati or the Red Kafirs call them *dehar* (cf. Schomberg, pp. 174 and 201). The present author was told that the name *dehar* was used by the Kalash Kafirs, whereas the Chitralis used the name *betan* of a person with shamanistic abilities.

The Aryan Dards of Dardistan have their own name for their shamans, which used to be given in the form of *dainyal* (cf. Grierson in Hasting's

Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics, vol. IV, 1911, p. 401), while Jettmar gives the form *daiyal* (cf. Jettmar 1961, pp. 87 and 93) and Snoy uses *dayal* (cf. Snoy 1960, pp. 3-8).

For reasons of space the present paper does not attempt to provide a general and comparative survey of the shamanism of the area under consideration; and the reader is referred to the above-mentioned book by Peter Snoy from 1962. I shall confine myself to my own experiences during my field work among the Kalash Kafirs of Chitral, and the problem of the relationship of the supernatural beings and the shaman will be specially dealt with. I prefer to use the neutral term "supernatural beings" because I want to use a term which will include not only gods, but also other supernatural beings as e.g. fairies.

It is generally agreed that ecstatic behaviour is the outstanding shamanistic characteristic; but the author has been present at ceremonies where some laymen fell into a kind of ecstasy too. I shall begin with this ordinary or minor type of ecstasy.

During the spring of 1948 I attended the great spring festival, called *Ƴoshi* (cf. my Report 1956, p. 24 ff.). On the third day of this festival a great number of ceremonial dances takes place. During one of these dances, which was performed for the fairies of the mountains, I noticed that some of the men now and then behaved in a manner which showed that they were undergoing some violent experience. Their steps became very rapid, the movements of their arms and heads seemed to be uncontrollable, and they delighted in loud shouting. In a few cases some of them even fainted. The other dancers immediately drew away from such men, left them to dance alone, and observed them with an obvious eagerness bordering on a state of awe. These dances may be called ecstatic dances, and they were certainly considered to be so, as the people said that these dancers were under temporary influence of the fairies, or rather, were possessed by the fairies. But these dancers were not shamans, on the contrary, they were to all appearance quite ordinary Kalash men, and they were in no way considered to be pure or holy. They were ordinary men whom the fairies had suddenly selected for the occasion and favoured with their supernatural influence.

While these performances carried the stamp of the sudden, unexpected, and unformalised materialisation of the influence of the supernatural beings,

the following example shows a supernatural influence whose manifestation proceeds according to a definite pattern. This pattern is very important because it testifies to the fact that we here meet with a constitutionalized performance of ancient origin. This performance is confined to a special type of person, the *dehar*, or shaman, who by virtue of his supernatural vocation and by the strict observance of the rules attaching to a state of purity and holiness, is the only one who is qualified for receiving such supernatural favours.

The ordinary *dehar* performance is associated with a sanguinary sacrifice of a goat or a bull and may take place during one of the greater festivals or on some minor private occasion. The initial part of the performance consists of such ceremonial elements as the invocation of the supernatural being or beings, the killing of the animal, the cultic cry, the prayer uttered by the *dehar*, the sprinkling of the animal's blood on the altar and onto the fire, etc. And then the attention of the men assembled becomes concentrated on the *dehar*.

Facing the altar he stands immovable with his arms hanging slackly down along the sides of his body. Although he seems to be waiting for something in a relaxed posture, his entire attitude is that of tense expectation. His gaze is riveted on the altar, and the rigid expression in his eyes reveals that an intense watchfulness has laid hold of his soul to the exclusion of everything else. It is also obvious from the attitude of the men gathered that everyone expects something special to happen. Whereas a few moments earlier they were eagerly looking at the sacrifice, they have now forgotten this, and their attention is turned on the *dehar*, whom they watch anxiously. There can be no doubt that these few minutes are very decisive and that a favourable result of the entire performance depends on these auspicious moments. They wait for the first slight symptom indicating that the supernatural beings have accepted the sacrifice and the invocation, which they will do by taking possession of the *dehar*.

The first symptom of the supernatural influence is almost imperceptible and may easily be overlooked. The relaxed posture of the *dehar* is by and by replaced by a slow stiffening of the whole of his body, a stiffening which seems to come from his internal organs, and to penetrate outwards into the smallest muscles. His spine becomes stiff, the muscles of his neck, arms and

legs become rigid, while his feet seem to lose their easy and natural grip on the ground.

To this new state is soon added another symptom which is easier to notice. That is a slight shivering or, perhaps better, vibratory movements noticeable in some of the smaller muscles. Up till now the *dehar*'s eyes have been wide open and firmly fixed on the altar, but now the eyelids begin to flutter slightly, and so do some of the facial muscles and his fingers. This fluttering is accompanied by the appearance of beads of perspiration on his forehead. There is no doubt that he is beginning to lose control of himself, a circumstance which to the attendant men is a sure sign that the supernatural beings are taking possession of him.

By and by this shivering grows stronger until it is a real trembling that takes hold of the whole of his body. This trembling runs through his limbs and makes them shake violently in short, rapid movements as if in a series of shocks. Meanwhile his facial expression changes considerably, he gets a wild look in his eyes, the muscles of his jaw jerk suddenly, often violently, and he begins to foam at the mouth. At this stage he may utter some indistinct words or short sentences in reply to questions which are either put to him then or which he has been asked previous to the performance.

It is immediately obvious that this physical state constitutes a very heavy strain on his nerves, and that it cannot last long. After a few minutes his body begins to sway, first slightly, but soon the swaying movements become more frequent while the shaking slowly disappears, till finally he sways like a person who has lost consciousness, control of his body, and his sense of balance.

In the meantime some of the men have gathered immediately behind him. In a few moments his swaying movements become still more unconscious, his body sways almost now with a circular motion, while his arms hang down, flaccid and dangling. The fixed look in his eyes has disappeared and has been replaced by a vacant stare indicating that his mind has lost all power of thought and concentration.

The attitude of the men show also that they are expecting a crisis, they are standing in a semi-circle behind him and watching him anxiously the whole time, ready to catch him the minute he falls. And then the last will power seems to leave him quite suddenly, his spine, legs, and muscles lose

all strength, and he faints into the arms of the men. They catch him, support him, and lay him on the ground so that he can rest stretched out and unhurt.

As he lies on the ground he looks like a person completely exhausted and powerless. His face is pallid, his eyes are closed, his respiration is almost imperceptible, and if one did not know better one might take him for dead.

From the behaviour of the men it is clear that the performance is over. Their reverent conduct has given place to ordinary behaviour, they walk about, some squat, and some talk in a low voice. They let the resting *dehar* alone, but their frequent and scrutinising glances at him show that they have not forgotten him, and that he is under constant observation.

By and by small symptoms indicate that he is slowly recovering. The ordinary colour returns to his face, he moves his fingers and his limbs a little, his eyelids open now and then, and his respiration becomes more perceptible. At last he moves, stretches his legs in an attempt to rise, and a couple of the men assist him to get to his feet. He staggers, sways a little, but soon he gains control of his body and walks some steps like a person who has just awakened from a deep sleep. This state is soon over, and accompanied by the men he leaves the precincts of the shrine.

The performance at a funeral ceremony is of another kind, it is more sudden, more wild, and of an immediate importance to the people, who may benefit from the influence of the supernatural beings present. I shall here only quote what I have written in another publication of 1963 (p. 299 f.) about such a performance which I once witnessed. "The corpse of an old man was lying in state in the middle of the meeting place, and mourning relatives and friends had assembled around it. The funeral ceremonies were protracted and went on for hours on end with dances, dirges and eulogies succeeding one another. Suddenly a tall man appeared on the scene, and breathless silence descended on the mourners, while they watched his every movement with intense expectation. The tall man was Rota, a famous *dehar*. Turning his face towards the nearby *Mahandeo* and raising his arms ceremonially above his head, he murmured a long prayer. Then his body began to tremble. It was fantastic to observe how the ecstasy gradually took hold of the whole of his body, until he finally in ecstatic rage leapt in among the people. He rushed to the right and to the left, his long arms raining heavy blows on men as well as on women whenever anyone came too close to him. Some men

withdrew beyond his reach, some women ran screaming away, but some courageous people, both men and women, approached him cautiously from behind, trying to touch his back. It was difficult because he sometimes turned round with whirlwind speed, and distributed punches and blows to those who did not make good their escape in time. However, some were lucky and succeeded in touching his back with their hands. No sooner had they done so, than they quickly turned round and ran away with a happy look on their faces. It was obvious that they were envied by the others, because by touching him they had come to share some of the supernatural power which manifested its presence in his body through the ecstasy. I was standing with my camera on the edge of the meeting place, but I soon had to retreat hastily because he came dangerously close to me. After about a quarter of an hour the ecstasy was over, he collapsed and lay gasping on the ground until some men carried him away.”

This ecstatic performance, probably intended to drive away evil spirits, was obviously peculiar to Rota, for the mourners seemed to await something extraordinary as soon as he appeared. But it was not usual *dehar* behaviour, and another *dehar* said that he himself never became subject to ecstasies when attending funeral ceremonies.

These performances give rise to the problem of the relationship between the supernatural beings and the *dehar*. The *dehar* is a person who is singled out from other people by his special vocation, the prohibitions resting on him, and the particular faculties with which the supernatural beings have endowed him. But it seems, on the other hand, that his special status does not confer upon him permanent contact with the supernatural beings. The relationship may perhaps best be expressed by saying that he must always take care to live in a state which enables him to receive communications from the supernatural beings whenever they choose to communicate. If he does not possess the will to comply with the commands of the supernatural beings he cannot be a *dehar*. He must be their servant, always ready to receive and obey their messages.

But how do the supernatural beings convey their messages to him? There may be several ways, but we know only of a few: ecstatic experiences, dreams, and visual and auditory manifestations. We shall concentrate first on the ecstatic experience.

A *dehar* performance may be divided into three phases: the first phase during which the supernatural beings are approached, the second phase during which the supernatural beings take more and more command of the *dehar* until he is fully under their sway, and the third phase when they have left him, and the *dehar* is slowly returning to his normal state of mind.

It will be seen that the phase during which the supernatural beings act in the *dehar* is marked by his initial shivering and his final fainting. The visible symptoms of this phase are the strange and uncontrollable movements of his body, his exclamations, etc. It may also be explained in this way that what takes place belongs to a sphere quite different from the daily and ordinary sphere of human beings. During this short period the *dehar* is the meeting-place of supernatural beings and human beings. Therefore nobody dares to interfere with him as long as he is in this state because the supernatural beings are really working in him, using him as a means by which they communicate with and show favour to human beings. We might call it a superhuman state characterised by a complete voidance of personal mind and will, which are replaced by an infusion of the mind and will of the supernatural beings. This state is so heavy a drain on the mind and body of the *dehar* that it can last only for a short time, and leaves him completely exhausted.

The *dehar* dream is another example of how the supernatural beings may communicate with the *dehar*. Ordinary people may sometimes have significant dreams, but the *dehar* dream is particularly powerful. A completely pure state is a prerequisite, and therefore the *dehar* cannot be in his home where his wife is nearby. His goathouse up in the mountains is a good place for dreams. The goathouse is a pure place, only visited by men, and the goats are ceremonially pure animals. There the supernatural beings may appear to him in a dream and for instance warn him that the people will be attacked by an epidemic. The next day the *dehar* will issue warnings to the people concerned, so that they may take their precautions. There is in one respect a similarity between the sacrificial situation and the dream situation. During the sleep in which the supernatural beings convey their message to the *dehar*, he is not possessed of his waking consciousness, just as he is unconscious when the supernatural beings act in him during the ecstatic performance. Common to both situations is the fact that the supernatural beings take possession of his mind and will.

This communication of the supernatural beings seems always to have an immediate purpose. It conveys information of something that will happen, what the people ought to do in order to escape something, etc., but it does not seem to convey any information concerning the other world.

The above examples show that the supernatural beings on certain occasions respond to ceremonial requests and establish an extraordinary contact with human beings, a contact which may even develop into important communications.

The first sign of such contacts is the unusual state and behaviour on the part of certain people, especially of the *dehar*. This unusual behaviour is in its first stage characterised by his uncontrollable shivering, trembling and shaking. These symptoms are signs indicating that the supernatural beings have accepted the sacrifice and now manifest their appearance in the *dehar* through his unusual behaviour.

This way of communicating with human beings, i.e. by means of unusual movements beyond human control is, however, not confined to the *dehar* alone. When the people are going to kill an animal at a sacrificial performance, they first sprinkle water on the animal, sometimes into its ears, and await eagerly for the moment when a shivering will run through the animal's body. This shivering is a sure indication that the supernatural beings have accepted the animal as a sacrificial animal. In case the animal, in spite of several attempts, will not become subject to a shivering, the people will reject it, let it go, and choose another animal. In case there is e.g. incessant rains, upsetting the routine of daily life, the people think that some supernatural being has been offended. In order to find out to which of the supernatural beings they have to give a sacrifice for obtaining atonement, they ask the supernatural world by means of a kind of divinatory bow. Some specially gifted person holds the bow in his hand, asking the names of the supernatural beings, one by one. When the bow begins to tremble it is taken for a sure sign that the supernatural being whose name was mentioned at that moment, is the one who has been offended.

These cases indicate a peculiar similarity in the manifestation of the response by the supernatural beings: the shivering, trembling, and shaking of the *dehar*; the shivering running through the body of the sacrificial animal; the shivering of the divinatory bow. In all cases we find that these involun-

tary movements, not under human control, are considered to be conducted by the supernatural beings.

As for the *dehar* in ecstasy, the movements beyond human control are only the initial stage. The real climax is first reached when he becomes unconscious, and the supernatural beings speak through his mouth in reply to question put to the *dehar*. This state of unconsciousness may be compared to the state of sleep during which the *dehar*, being unconscious of the normal daily life, may receive dream revelations from the supernatural beings. These dreams may reveal future events, dangerous to the people.

Summing up we may conclude:

When approached in the proper way, the supernatural beings may intervene in favour of the people. This intervention becomes manifest through symptoms beyond human control, i.e. through ceremonial shivering, etc. The supernatural beings may also give their help in a higher degree through replies to questions, and through dreams to the *dehar* when he is in an unconscious state. These interventions may take two forms: either the solving of an immediate problem which the people cannot solve for themselves, or warnings concerning future dangerous events.

This gives us some indication of the supernatural beings vis-à-vis the course of events. We may perhaps even go so far as to say that we here catch a glimpse of the people's particular conception of causal relation. It seems as if daily and ordinary events do not interest the supernatural beings, but that only exceptional events, which may endanger the life of the people, are their special concern.

It is not quite clear, how one should understand the relationship between the supernatural beings and the course of events. Do the supernatural beings govern or influence the course of events, or do they only possess knowledge of what will happen? It is not possible to answer this question at the present moment. But there is no doubt that the supernatural beings possess knowledge of future events, and that they are inclined to warn the people through the *dehar*. They may then convey information about the right measures for the avoidance of the danger. In other words, they do not themselves change the course of events, but they tell the people through the *dehar* how to avoid the consequences of an untoward event. That is to say, the events seem to follow a certain course of development which cannot be altered, but may be

halted or the consequences of the events in question can be avoided, or, at least, reduced. The messages from the supernatural beings to the *dehar* are therefore information concerning proper counter-measures. The ability to receive such information gives the *dehar* his very special position within the society. He is an intermediary between the supernatural beings and the human beings, and he has been selected by the supernatural beings for the sole purpose of communicating their advice, assistance, warnings etc. to his countrymen. But he has been selected according to a supernatural vocation, and therefore his functions as a *dehar* are really outside the sphere of human beings. Hence the reverence, often awe, with which he is treated.

In daily life the *dehar* is nothing in particular. He has no special social or economic position, but the many rules he must observe place him somewhat outside the ordinary life of the people. His marital relations are also more restricted than that of other men. These conditions often rest as a heavy burden on him, and therefore one understands very well that many young men prefer not to receive a *dehar* vocation. Here as elsewhere it may make heavy demands on a man to be favoured by supernatural beings.