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Shamans and Mountain Spirits in Hunza

Abstract

The Hunzakut, a high-mountain people in the western Karakoram mountains of northern Pakistan, possess a shamanistic tradition centered around religious specialists known as *bitan*. These practitioners inhale the smoke of burning juniper branches, dance to a special music, drink blood from a freshly severed goat's head, enter into ecstatic trances, and converse with supernatural beings. An ethnographic and historical analysis of this little-known shamanistic tradition is offered, focusing on the rituals, beliefs, and practices of Hunzakut *bitan*, the place of these practitioners in the traditional ritual and politico-ideological apparatus of the former Hunza state, and their role as healers and soothsayers.

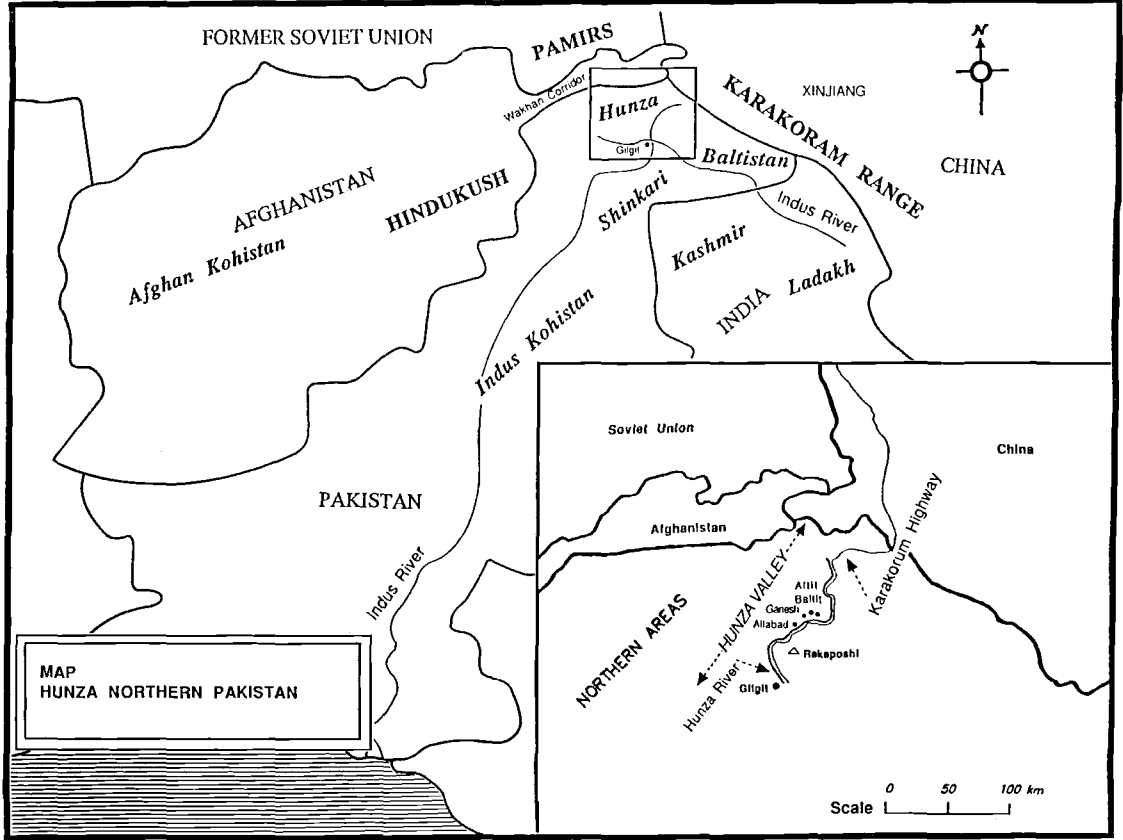
Key words: Hunza (northern Pakistan) — shamanism — animal sacrifice — ritual healing — pre-Islamic religious beliefs

INTRODUCTION: HUNZA, ISLAM, AND FOLK RELIGION

THE past physical isolation of the Hunzakut, a high-mountain population in northwestern Pakistan, has been instrumental in allowing them to preserve elements of their pre-Islamic shamanistic religious beliefs. Centered around practitioners known as *bitan*, this tradition has certain characteristics—such as the shaman inhaling juniper smoke and drinking blood from a freshly severed goat's head—that seem to be unique among South and Central Asian peoples (SIDKY 1990, 275–77). This paper examines the particular configuration of rituals and beliefs associated with these *bitan*, their place in traditional society, and their situation in modern-day Hunza.¹ The data were gathered during anthropological field research in Hunza in 1990 and 1991.

Hunza is located in the far northwestern part of the South Asian subcontinent, in Pakistan's Northern Areas District. This is a high-mountain area where the Hindu Kush, Karakoram, and Himalayan ranges have converged to produce a vast network of peaks, valleys, and glaciers. Here is the most massive concentration of high peaks to be found anywhere on earth. Hunza's territory is roughly 7,900 km² and borders Afghanistan and Xinjiang (Chinese Turkestan) to the north, Shinkari and Indus Kohistan to the south, and Kashmir to the east (see map). For centuries Hunza was an independent principality headed by a hereditary autocratic ruler, who was known locally as the Thum, but who also held the Persian title of Mir (SIDKY 1993).

In the past, the region's formidable geographic barriers made access to this small mountain kingdom extremely difficult. Travelers from China and northern Afghanistan who wanted to reach Hunza had to traverse the high and extremely dangerous mountain passes of Irshad, Kilik, Mintaka, and Khunjerab, open during the summer months and blocked by snow for the rest of the year. Travelers from Shinkari, Kohistan, and Kashmir did not have to worry about snow, but still faced a treacherous trail zigzagging across steep and precipitous gorges. Incessant rockslides made journeys to Hunza from any direction both



terrifying and dangerous, as accounts written by travelers to the area indicate (CLARK 1956, 37-38; SCHOMBERG 1935, 95; SHOR 1955, 275; STEPHENS 1955, 155; THOMAS and THOMAS 1960, 96-97).

Semi-isolated throughout most of their history, the people of Hunza have survived in their remote territory by raising cereal crops, fruit trees, and livestock. Over many generations, they have transformed a harsh environment into a fertile and productive land. Unspoiled and beautiful beyond description, Hunza has enjoyed an almost mythical reputation in the West as a Shangri-La, a paradise on earth.

No less extravagant than the almost fairytale-land image of Hunza is the extraordinary reputation of its people. Phenotypically, they have Mediterranean features and fair skins; a few even have blond hair and blue eyes. Accounts written by twentieth-century Western travelers have often made exaggerated claims about the extraordinary health and longevity of the Hunzakut, whom they assert live well past a hundred years (RODALE 1949; BANIK and TAYLOR 1960; TOBE 1960). But such claims are not easy to reconcile with observations by medical practitioners and researchers (CLARK 1963; HARADA and MIYOSHI 1963; GILES 1984, 351) that the Hunzakut suffer from a host of diseases, including rheumatism, intestinal worms, cataracts, goiter, trachoma, pneumonia, tuberculosis, dysentery, appendicitis, and heart disease, making it difficult to believe the claims of the Hunzakut's long life and phenomenal health.

The origins of the Hunzakut are lost in antiquity. A persistent, though improbable, Hunzakut local tradition claims that their ancestors were five soldiers of the army of Iskandar Azimo (Alexander the Great), who brought his armies across the Pamirs and the Hindu Kush in 330 B.C.E., reaching Taxila, the capital of Gandahara, in 326 B.C.E. Equally enigmatic is the Hunzakut language, Burushaski, which seems to be related neither to the Indo-European languages spoken in India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, nor to those of the Sino-Tibetan family found in Ladakh and northeastern Xinjiang (LORIMER 1935).

Life for the inhabitants of this small Central Asian mountain kingdom remained relatively unchanged until quite recently. In 1891 the British, then involved in the "Great Game" with Russia, invaded Hunza and made it part of their Gilgit Agency, administered under India's Jammu and Kashmir States. The invaders, however, granted the region full internal autonomy. Thereafter, Hunza's political and socioeconomic status remained more or less unaltered until the British withdrawal from the subcontinent and its partition into India and Pakistan in 1947. In the subsequent dispute between these two newly independent states over Kashmir, the Mir of Hunza proclaimed allegiance to Pakistan. But

the rulers of Hunza continued to exercise internal administrative powers until 1974, when the government of Pakistan abolished the privileges of all its former princely rulers and incorporated Hunza into the Northern Areas District, under the direct administration of Islamabad.

Hunza's physical isolation, however, was not significantly breached until 1978. That year marked the completion of the 1,284-kilometer Karakoram Highway linking Pakistan and China via the Hunza valley. Since the mid-1980s, the growth of tourism, opportunities for wage labor in the job markets of Pakistan, the decline of subsistence agriculture, an expanding cash economy, as well as the spread of lowland Pakistani tastes in architecture, dress, and music, have been major forces impinging on traditional Hunzakut society. The new circumstances are destined to alter, radically and permanently, the traditional Hunzakut way of life.

Today, the inhabitants of Hunza are Muslims. Islam spread here from various directions and at different times. The written and orally transmitted sources, however, are contradictory. According to local tradition, Islam (of the Shia variety) came to Hunza during the fourteenth century, after Ayasho, Thum of Hunza, married the daughter of the king of Baltistan. Tradition tells of Shia divines, called *akhund*, coming from Baltistan to Hunza to disseminate the Asnahashari (Shia) religion. Other sources (STALEY 1969, 230) suggest that Shia Islam reached the Hunzakut a few centuries later, with the arrival of missionaries from Baltistan or Kashmir during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Much later, the Hunzakut were converted to the Aga Khan's Ismailia sect of Shia Islam. This was brought to them, at the invitation of the Mir of Hunza himself, by religious missionaries from Badakhshan in northern Afghanistan. All Hunzakut, with the exception of the people of the village of Ganesh, adopted Ismailia doctrines. According to some local sources, the Hunzakut adopted the Ismailia faith during "the fifteenth year of the rule of Mir Ghazanfar Khan" (1824-65). Other informants maintain, however, that Ismailism came to them earlier, during the time of Mir Silum Khan (1790-1824). Local people with whom I have conversed still recall the names and genealogies of the Ismailia teachers who visited their country to spread the doctrines of the new sect.

Wherever Islam has gone, its God has overshadowed indigenous shamanistic and polytheistic beliefs and practices (LORIMER 1929, 511). Under Muslim hegemony ancient local deities have either been forgotten, or else reduced to the ranks of the mountain spirits (STALEY 1982, 176). Only in the most secluded valleys of Gilgit, Chitral, and Hunza were

the old gods still remembered and their altars adorned with sacrificial offerings of juniper boughs and goat's blood (BIDDULPH 1880, 72; DURAND 1899, 215; LORIMER 1929, 513 and 1935/I, 195). Although nominally converted, the Hunzakut seem to have accepted Islam only at the superficial level. Local tradition has it that, with the exception of relinquishing their mortuary custom of cremating the dead, the Hunzakut refused to abandon their "pagan" customs. They continued to honor the *pari*, or mountain spirits, and to venerate their *bitan*, the *pari*'s earthly spokesmen.

Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century travelers to Gilgit and Hunza described *bitan* (*danyal* in the Shina language of Gilgit) as religious practitioners who inhaled the smoke of juniper or cedar branches, entered into ecstatic trance states, drank goat's blood, and conversed with the *pari* (DURAND 1899, 212-19; LEITNER 1889, 263-64; LORIMER 1979, 263-64; SCHOMBERG 1935, 209-12; MUHAMMAD 1905, 103-105). The British official John BIDDULPH, who visited the region several times between 1873 and 1878, noted that *bitan* were once common among the Dardic speakers of neighboring Shinkari (the area of the former Gilgit Agency), but by the 1800s were to be found only in Gilgit, Hunza, and Nagar (1880, 98). Elsewhere they had been superseded by Islamic religious practitioners (cf. LORIMER 1929, 511).

During the late 1700s and early 1800s there were two renowned Hunzakut *bitan*, Shun Gukur and Huke Mamu, whose supernatural deeds still figure prominently in local lore. The magical powers Hunzakut credit these diviners with is revealed in the following celebrated account, given to me by a Hunzakut informant:

One day Shun Gukur and his nephew Huke Mamu were near Altit fort, looking toward Baltit. There was no one in sight, nor were there any cattle to be seen. Then Shun Gukur asked his nephew, "Do you see a cow coming from Baltit to Altit?" Huke Mamu replied, "Yes, uncle." Shun Gukur then asked, "What color is it?" Huke Mamu replied, "Black and white." Shun Gukur asked, "Is it pregnant?" Huke Mamu said, "Yes, it is pregnant." Then Shun Gukur queried, "What color is its calf?" "Black, uncle, but with a white face," Huke Mamu responded. "No!" Shun Gukur replied, "It has a black body and a white tail which is covering its face, giving you the impression that the calf has a white face." The two *bitan* could not agree so they sent for the owner of the cow and asked that he summon them when the calf was born. Some time later, the cow gave birth; it was clear that Shun Gukur was right. Such was the power of the *bitan*.

BECOMING *BITAN*

The source of the *bitan*'s powers, Hunzakut say, lies in his ability to communicate with the *pari*. These supernatural beings are said to inhabit the snowy peaks and alpine meadows, high above the valleys. Night and day, Hunzakut affirm, one can hear their voices in the howling of the wind, the roar of mountain streams, the thundering echoes of falling rocks, and the creaking of the juniper trees. Shepherds, who spend their summers tending flocks in high alpine pastures, are the ones who feel their presence most keenly. On numerous occasions when I talked to shepherds about their life and work in the upland meadows, they would casually mention that they had heard *pari* voices and their eerie unhuman music.

The *pari* appear to be the embodiment of natural forces, displaying the life-giving and life-threatening attributes of the mountains. Hunzakut say that the *pari* jealously guard their domain against human encroachment. This is why the Hunzakut traditionally regarded the upland pastures and the mountains beyond as sacred places, the hallowed domain of the *pari*. Hunzakut say that shepherds who behave improperly, by, for example, neglecting their flocks or allowing them to damage the fragile meadows, are sure to invoke the wrath of the *pari*. Likewise, these supernatural beings are offended by the presence of women (believed to be impure because of their menstrual periods) and cattle (which Hunzakut regard as unclean animals).

But *pari* are said to favor goats, because these animals resemble the ibex (*Capra ibex*) and *markhor* (*Capra falconeri*), the "livestock of the mountain spirits," so Hunzakut say. Goats may therefore be safely taken to the upland pastures. This connection between goats and the *pari* is the basis both for the quasi-religious belief among the Hunzakut regarding the sacredness of goats and for the indispensable role they play in the initiation and oracular performances of the *bitan*.²

The *pari* have a malevolent nature and are known to wreak vengeance on transgressors, striking them with the dreaded altitude sickness, crushing them with tumbling boulders, or else sweeping them away with roaring avalanches and lethal pulsating mudflows. They are also thought capable of harming people in the villages by stealing their children, injuring their livestock, and blighting their crops. But the *pari* also bring good fortune, health, and prosperity to those who know how to honor them and avoid offending them. To propitiate these mountain spirits and so ensure their own security, the ancestors of the Hunzakut erected altars, sacrificed goats, and burned sacred juniper branches in their honor (cf. STALEY 1982, 177; DURAND 1899, 90-91, 211-16).

The *bitan*, human beings able to communicate personally with the

pari, were traditionally revered as oracles and holy men who exercised their supernatural powers for the good of the community. Few *bitan* used their reputation for supernatural powers for their own material benefit.

The predisposition for becoming a *bitan* seems to run in certain families. Practicing *bitan* are often the children, grandchildren, or even great-grandchildren of other *bitan*. In the past there were both male and female *bitan* in Hunza, but nowadays *bitan* are primarily male. (I was able to locate only one female practitioner, a resident of Khanabad, in lower Hunza, but did not have the opportunity to see her perform.)

In childhood the *bitan* is said to be predisposed to visions and dreams, and sometimes to display an aversion to the flesh and milk of the cow. Formerly, *bitan* refrained from drinking cow's milk, eating beef, and having contact with cattle. Today they observe such restrictions only prior to their ceremonies. Hunzakut informants could not explain the basis for the *bitan*'s ritual avoidance of cattle. One may observe, however, that similar taboos were part of the orthodox religious practices of the Shin, the people who live in the Gilgit region to the south of Hunza (cf. DREW 1875, 428). BIDDULPH (1880, 96-97) believed that the Hunzakut had imported these ideas from the Shin. His contention receives some support when we learn that the Hunzakut *bitan* claim to chant in Shina, the language of their Dardic neighbors, rather than in their own Burushaski tongue. Other Hunzakut say that it is a made-up tongue, however, and one of my Shin informants told me he could not understand a word of it.

The Hunzakut say that a potential *bitan* first realizes his calling when *pari*, in the guise of birds, butterflies, or tall, human-like creatures, appear before him and reveal to him that he has been chosen for this role. He may subsequently become ill, experience headaches, and refuse to eat and speak. Those who are approached by the spirits in this manner must accept their calling, or else suffer dire consequences. One practitioner related the story of the son of Mano, a famous Hunzakut *bitan*, who died in the 1960s. The boy was pressured by the *pari* to become their *bitan*, but his family would not let the boy take up the profession. The price he paid for rejecting the spirits, Hunzakut say, was insanity.

The *bitan*'s pact with the mountain spirits is not, however, permanent. After a man becomes a *bitan*, he has the option of having his powers ritually neutralized, thus ending his relationship with the *pari*. I was unable to see such a ritual personally, but its form is described by LORIMER (1979, 264). An *akhund* places the blood, flesh, and milk of the cow into the *bitan*'s mouth, and fumigates him with the smoke of a cattle

dung fire. Such ritual forcing of taboo substances into the *bitan's* mouth by a Muslim religious practitioner not only brings into play co-existing elements of several cosmologies—Hunzakut, Shin, and Islamic—but also symbolizes Islam's present-day dominance, as evident in the *akhund's* ability to terminate the *bitan's* relationship with the *pari*.

Bitan Ibrahim (see fig. 3), great-grandson of the famous Hunzakut Bitan Fulato (who lived during the late 1800s), told me how he had become a shaman. I shall present this information in some detail here because his account portrays the traditional social and historical context in which Hunzakut *bitan* once operated. I have cross-checked the account of what Bitan Ibrahim told me against data independently gathered from other Hunzakut informants.

I first realized that I was under *pari* influence when I was fifteen years old. It happened on the Talmushi pasture where I was taking care of five goats. There were several other shepherds and they had a total of seventeen goats. One day the other shepherds noticed that I was drawing more milk from my five goats than they were obtaining from their seventeen goats. They accused me of adding water to my milk, and later said that I was stealing their milk. We decided to put the matter to the test by having everyone present whilst I milked my goats. After I did this and obtained an extraordinary amount of milk everyone was astonished, saying that I was favored by the *pari*.

The next day I set off in search of *mel punari* [wild mountain flowers] to take to the villages in time for the Ginani [barley harvest festival]. No one wanted to come along, saying that the season was too cold, and that I would be wasting my time. But after a few hours, I found entire fields of flowers. Then I had my first encounter with the *pari*. They were human-like, but taller than any man I know, with fair skin, red cheeks, golden hair, and clad in green garments. Their mouths were wider than human mouths, their noses extended high into their foreheads, and their feet were backwards. I was so frightened that I lost consciousness. Some time later, when I came to, the *pari* had vanished.

I took my flowers and headed back to the pasture, where my friend was waiting. I was very unsettled by my encounter with the strange beings, and so I took the wrong path. It was very steep and rocky, and almost vertical in places. I could easily have lost my footing and plunged to my death, yet I felt as if someone was helping me. I finally descended, only to find myself half a kilometer or so away from where my flock was grazing. I whistled

and, as if by a miracle, the goats came toward me as dogs do when you beckon them. My friend was amazed.

In the morning, we took cheese, yogurt, and milk down to the village for Ginani. We went to the houses of the people whose goats we were pasturing, and gave them cheese and butter. Everyone was pleased. The next day there was music and dancing in Altit. The *lumberdar* [village headman] requested that the musician play a tune just for us, because we had given cheese to so many families. The musicians were playing furiously and sweating. The *dadang* [two-sided drum] player was a Bericho called Huk. As I sat there an uncontrollable urge came over me to stand and dance. It was as if someone was pushing me up from below. Just then Huk, the drummer, said that his drum was "heavy," meaning that there was a *bitan* nearby. Everyone was surprised because no known *bitan* was present.

The next person to dance requested that the musicians play the melody of the *pari*, which we call *shireen zuban* [sweet tongue]. When the music started three blue birds flew down from the sky and sat on my shoulders. I was amazed and looked around to see what others thought, but it was apparent that the birds were visible only to me. The birds lifted me with their claws and took me to the center of the clearing where the men were dancing. In Hunza everyone dances in rotation, and when I entered the clearing out of turn all the men stopped dancing and the musicians stopped playing. Everyone stared at me with great concern, noticing my odd behavior. My friends seized me and forced me to sit down, but I felt the need to jump up, and the birds on my shoulders kept pulling me. It was soon clear to everyone that I had lost control of my senses.

A few of the spectators remarked maliciously, "Ibrahim has been drinking wine; the foolish boy is drunk." But others thought I was ill, and so asked that my friends carry me home. On the way, we came upon Munshi Mughul [an officer of the Mir and foster-father to his daughter]. He had stepped out to see what the commotion was about. My friends told him that I was either intoxicated with wine or ill. Munshi Mughul, however, recognized my symptoms, and asked that I be taken to where the musicians were playing. He then ordered the Bericho to play the *bitan* tune. Now this melody, which I had heard many times, fell upon my ears as it had never done before. It intoxicated me, and, without realizing what I was doing, I began to dance. Everyone concurred with Munshi Mughul that they were indeed witnessing the antics

of a fledgling *bitan*.

While I danced, the three birds transformed into *pari*. They asked: "Do you know that three Ganesh girls were killed by a wall falling on them?" Then a man of the Khurukutz [one of the four clans that make up the Burushaski-speaking population of Hunza] put water on me, and I awoke. I inquired about the death of three girls in Ganesh, but everyone said "Go hatchi tim man-ish" (shit in your mouth for saying such an awful thing). Then they learned that three girls had indeed been crushed by a falling wall.

The village *lumberdar*, who heard of this, reported to the Mir that the Altitkut [people of Altit] had discovered a *bitan*. The king was happy and arranged a dance for me the next day. He also instructed them to give me *chato* [goat sacrifice] to see whether I would drink the blood. Only *bitan* can drink the blood of a goat, since others find the blood disgusting. Even if they force themselves to drink it, they will become ill and vomit.

I bathed and wore the clean new clothing given me by the village headman. *Bitan* must always cleanse themselves and abstain from sexual intercourse prior to calling on the *pari*. At the time I was not married, so I did not have to worry about the second condition. I went before the Mir and the nobles. A multitude had gathered for the event. The women of my village wept when they saw me, saying that it was a pity one so young should be oppressed by the spirits. Then the Mir gave the orders, and the musicians began to play the music.

When I entered the clearing, two men of the Khurukutz clan held me securely, pushing my face over a plate of burning *gal* [juniper branchlets, *Juniperus macropoda*]. *Gal* is a sacred tree; it is the food of the *pari*. When it is burned the smoke attracts them; and when its leaves are eaten it is an act of communion with them. After inhaling the smoke I fell into a trance; the men released me and I began to dance. While dancing, I saw the blue birds again; they told me that I was their *bitan*, and that they would teach me many things. I felt very happy.

I danced for a long time, and all the while *pari* were flying down from the mountains. Soon they were flocking all around the field, some sitting on tree branches, others on nearby stones and rocks, and others among the spectators. When the women of my village saw me dancing they no longer wept, and remarked, "Ibrahim is a *bitan* indeed." After a while I began to smell the blood of the goat they had killed out of my sight; I ran in that direction and

took the goat's severed neck, which they presented to me, and began to drink the blood that gushed from its veins. The blood tasted good, like the best milk from the pastures. As I was drinking the blood the spirits drank as well. At the conclusion of the ceremony the officials reaffirmed their position, stating that I was a genuine *bitan*.

There was, however, one final test: to dance in Berishal, the Bericho village. The reason is that Berishal is a bad place—it is where the Bericho live, and they are considered to be *razeel* [debauched]. Their women are harlots and their people are dishonest and unclean. Only a genuine *bitan* can dance and communicate with the *pari* in this foul place. I was only to dance; the *chato*, necessary for initiations and prognostication, would not be given. Ayash Khan, the Mir's brother, came to observe. I danced well. Afterwards everyone was convinced of my abilities, and they reported to the king that Ibrahim had passed the final test. The Mir was overjoyed, and he was heard saying, "What a wondrous event this is that in my time they should find a new *bitan*." The king gave me a blue shirt, white pants, a white robe, and white shoes. After I put these on, I danced before the people, and this time they gave me *chato*, so that I could forecast the future. I predicted good fortune for our country and its people, and all that I said turned out to be true. Henceforth I was established as a *bitan*, and I was always called to the king's house during Bopfau, Siqamating [festival of the first blossoms], Ginani, and Nauroz [New Year's Day] to dance and tell of things to come.

In addition to its biographical importance, Bitan Ibrahim's account demonstrates the elaborate set of criteria the Hunzakut traditionally used before they were prepared to recognize the legitimacy of a person claiming to be a *bitan*. It also shows how, in the final analysis, a person's claim to *bitan*-ship had to be affirmed by the Mir of Hunza himself. In this connection it should be noted that, according to traditional Hunzakut ideology, the Mir ruled his state through a divine mandate granted by the *pari* themselves. The Mir was supposed to demonstrate this mandate through his supernatural powers of rainmaking and storm-quelling. I was told by my Hunzakut informants of at least one occasion when, unable to demonstrate such powers, a Mir was thought to have lost his supernatural mandate and was consequently assassinated.

After a *bitan* is initiated, Hunzakut say, anywhere from one to fourteen *pari* become his guardian spirits, helping him to predict the future and tell of events happening in distant places. It is said that these

spirits also teach him incantations for healing the sick, counteracting harmful magic, and "binding" (i.e., rendering harmless) malignant spirits. Hunzakut claim that *bitan* have no other teachers aside from their spirits. They also tell of powerful oracles in the past, like the legendary Shun Gukur and Huke Mamu, who could see and converse with their guardian spirits at all times; less powerful practitioners must inhale juniper smoke to induce trance before their powers become operative.

Dealing with the supernatural world is not without its risk for the Hunzakut. People say that evil spirits called *shiatus* (or *bilas*) are the mortal enemies of the *bitan*. *Shiatus* are shape-shifters said to be able to instantaneously assume any human or animal form. Such creatures, the Hunzakut believe, frequent graveyards and abandoned villages, where they lie in wait for unwary humans. They can hide, it is said, by entering into boulders, from which they may reemerge at will. Shun Gukur is said to have trapped a number of these demonic beings by driving iron spikes into the boulders in which they were hiding. Iron, once a rare and precious commodity in Hunza, is believed to have the magical ability to repel such demons.

From time to time, the Hunzakut say, the *shiatus* assemble in great hordes to attack and try to kill the *bitan*, who pray to their guardian spirits and God for protection. Occasionally these *shiatus* fool an inexperienced *bitan* by assuming the shape of a *pari* and then slay or devour the unfortunate man. Sometimes, late at night, they will stand outside the door of the *bitan*'s house and hurl verbal abuse at him. *Bitan* say that the demons make many strange and terrible noises as they swear to bring the most horrible of deaths upon the *bitan*.

THE *BITAN*'S FUNCTIONS

Bitan fulfilled a number of specific functions in traditional Hunzakut society. They provided supernatural validation for the actions and decisions of the Mir, for example, and served as conduits through which people of all ranks could communicate with the supernatural world. In times of crisis, *bitan* would converse with the *pari*, asking for their assistance. The Mirs of Hunza, according to informants, used to consult these soothsayers on important occasions, such as agricultural festivals,³ New Year's Day, and the start of military campaigns. The *bitan* would deliver the messages of the supernatural world to the community at a public ceremony.

During their trances *bitan* would sometimes offer supernatural support for public grievances and alleviate the anxieties of the people. For example, in the name of the *pari* they might voice objections to state taxes, or challenge the improprieties of members of the upper class;

these were issues that ordinary Hunzakut could not directly express for fear of being punished. In this manner, oracular sessions provided an institutionalized outlet for built-up social tensions. Similarly, a *bitan's* prediction of bountiful crops served to alleviate anxieties about upcoming harvests, always a matter of great concern in Hunza's unpredictable and harsh high-mountain environment. Finally, during the isolation of the past, the *bitan's* ceremonies, which were always preceded by music and dancing (see below), provided much-anticipated entertainment and a welcome change from the tedium of the usual heavy agricultural work.

HUNZAKUT *BITAN* AND THEIR BERICHO MUSICIANS

Music is an essential part of the *bitan's* oracular performance. Before a *bitan* is "put on," or asked to perform, Bericho minstrels are hired to provide music. The Bericho—who by tradition serve as Hunza's minstrels and blacksmiths—are an occupationally specialized caste of artisans who speak their own language, known as Dumaki, and live in a segregated village called Berishal. Only they are allowed to play the special music to which the *bitan* dance. Like the Hunzakut themselves, the origins of the Bericho are unclear. Local legend has it that, several hundred years ago, their ancestors were sent to Hunza as part of a royal dowry from the rulers of Baltistan. The reigning Mir of Hunza granted them a tract of land near his capital, Baltit; ever since, it is said, they have provided the Hunzakut with musicians and blacksmiths.

The Bericho repertoire includes some fifty different melodies, each intended for specific occasions such as weddings, birthdays, welcoming parties, and so forth. Among these melodies is the special "*bitan* music." The Bericho say their ancestors learned this from a powerful *bitan* to whom the music had been revealed by the *pari* themselves. This special melody, it is said, has been passed from one generation of musicians to the next. "The Bericho," one *bitan* observed, "are an important component of our performance. But today, young Bericho are being enticed away to jobs in Pakistan; fathers are no longer teaching their sons, and so the music will soon be forgotten. *Bitan* always need their music; without it they will vanish from Hunza just like all the other wondrous things of ancient times."

The musical instruments that Bericho play during the *bitan's* oracular performance include the *dadang*, *dadamel*, and *gabi*. The *dadang* is a two-sided, circular bass drum, nearly eighteen inches in diameter and thirty inches in length, which is beaten by hand. The *dadamel*, a pair of kettledrums, are shaped like melon halves, each about seven inches in diameter. They are played with two sticks. The *gabi*, a reed pipe, is twelve inches long and has a high-pitched tone. *Pari* are said to be

extremely fond of Bericho drums and pipes. When these instruments are played, the Hunzakut say, the *pari* seldom fail to swoop down from their mountain abodes and rally around the musicians. But there is one instrument that these spirits detest, and that is therefore absent from the shaman's oracular ceremony: the *surnai*, an oboe-like wind instrument with a raspy sound. It is this harsh sound, Hunzakut say, that the mountain spirits abhor.

THE ORACULAR SEANCE

Bitan always exercise their ability to foresee the future during public assemblies. These shamanic performances were traditionally sponsored by the Mirs. Today, nonroyal Hunzakut may also act as sponsors, provided they have sufficient money to hire musicians and supply a goat for *chato*, or sacrifice.

After consulting with his helping spirits, the *bitan* selects the site for the seance, usually the polo field of Altit or Baltit (see fig. 2). On the appointed day the ground is swept clean, mats and chairs are provided for dignitaries, and the musicians take their position at one end of the clearing where the shaman is to dance. Once the Bericho are seated they begin to play popular dance tunes. Men, women, and children from the surrounding villages soon gather around. Women, girls, and young boys congregate along one side, while men and older boys form a circle around the clearing. There is always a festive mood about these affairs. The musicians play enthusiastically, and urge the spectators to stand up and display their dancing skills. The Hunzakut love to dance; soon several men enter the clearing, encouraged by friends who clap, shout, and place bank notes in the folds of their caps. Only adult males participate in such dancing; women, girls, and adolescent boys act only as observers.

The dancers first raise one heel slowly off the ground and, lifting their hands to face level, strike a pose. Then they begin their dance with a series of slow and fluid gestures, moving in a wide circle. At the end of each sequence of gestures the dancers pause for a few seconds and strike a pose again, anticipating the approval of the audience. After twenty to thirty minutes of such dancing and merrymaking the *bitan* arrives, accompanied by two attendants. He is dressed in traditional Hunza clothing: loose shirt and pants, and a *choga*, or robe. The musicians stop playing, the dancers resume their seats, and the eager spectators turn their eyes toward the *bitan*. The attendants fetch the *chato* goat from a shed and tie it to a tree behind the spectators.

The *bitan* now produces a small pouch containing *gal*, or juniper leaves. A few days earlier the *bitan* had climbed high above the valley

to gather these leaves. As he picked the juniper branchlets he had uttered incantations to propitiate the *pari*, without whose cooperation, *bitan* say, their prognostication ceremonies would be certain to fail. The attendants take some of the juniper leaves and sprinkle them over burning charcoal on a tin plate, which they then place on the ground near the musicians. They seize the *bitan*, put a handful of juniper leaves into his mouth, and forcefully hold his head over the plate of burning juniper, so that the smoke enters his nostrils (fig. 1).

As the *bitan* inhales the sacred smoke, his head starts to move from side to side and he begins to shake violently. *Gal thomal*, the fumes of burning juniper, induce violent fits in the *bitan*, making it necessary for the attendants to physically restrain him until he has inhaled a sufficient quantity of the smoke. (So far as I was able to determine, only *bitan* are affected in this way by juniper smoke.)

As the *bitan* breathes the sacred smoke and chews the juniper leaves, one Bericho musician picks up a pipe on which he plays the special *bitan* music; the *dadang* player joins in with a slow and steady beat on his drum. The *bitan*, by now in a state of ecstatic trance, abruptly breaks free from the clutches of his attendants, who withdraw from the clearing to a position alongside the musicians. Once free from his attendants, the *bitan* walks to the center of the clearing and strikes a pose by raising one foot off the ground and stretching one arm upward (fig. 2). Then he leaps high into the air as the crowd cheers and claps. The *dadamel* player begins to pound his drums, accelerating the tempo with each beat.

The *bitan*, smiling and wild-eyed, his head turned skyward, begins to whirl around, swinging his arms rapidly back and forth. "The *bitan* smile when they dance because they see their guardians descending from the mountaintops and flocking overhead like birds," I was told by several practitioners (fig. 3). Next the *bitan* jumps on alternate feet, leaps into the air, and bolts around the clearing; each movement draws cheers and applause from the delighted audience.

"It is not we who are dancing," *bitan* maintain, "it is the *pari*; they control our every move." As the dance continues, more and more *pari*—which only *bitan* can see—fly down from the mountains and sit on the branches of nearby trees and rooftops; others float to the ground and find comfortable spots among unsuspecting human spectators. "The *pari* are in some ways like humans," Ibrahim once explained. "On short notice, only a few come when we dance, but given a few days notice, they flock down from the mountains in great numbers." Some enter into the *dadang* and the pipe. For this reason, after each two or three rounds of dancing and leaping, the *bitan* goes to the minstrels, leans over, and places his ear next to the instruments, "awaiting the



FIGURE 1. *Bitan* forced to inhale burning juniper leaves.



FIGURE 2. *Bitan* beginning his dance (the Mir's fortress of Altit can be seen in the background).



FIGURE 3. Smiling *bitan* beckons the mountain spirits to descend.



FIGURE 4. Listening for the voices of the spirits.



FIGURE 5. *Chato* for the oracle.



FIGURE 7. The ecstatic shaman converses with the *pari*.

FIGURE 8. Blood-smeared shaman receiving *pari* messages emanating from the drum.



FIGURE 6. Drinking blood from the goat's head.



FIGURE 9. The *bitan* collapses suddenly and is carried off by attendant.



FIGURE 10. Hunzakut child wearing a protective charm.

FIGURE 11. *Bitan* making *tawiz*.



voice of the *pari* from within" (fig. 4). As he listens, the music slows down and the *dadamel* player stops altogether. After listening to the instruments for a few seconds, the *bitan* jumps up and resumes dancing; the audience applauds in unison and the drummers begin pounding their drums faster and faster.

The *bitan* is now thought to be in a mystical state, able to see not only the *pari* but also the one-eyed diabolical spirits known as *bilas* and *futt*, creatures said to sit on the shoulders of unfortunate people who have been bewitched or who are about to die. *Bitan* are sometimes known to rush unexpectedly at a member of the audience and begin pummeling him, in order, they say, to dislodge the malignant *bilas*. Fearing what the *bitan* can see, some spectators become very uneasy whenever he approaches them too closely during his dance.

The shaman continues dancing for about thirty minutes, with all eyes focused on him. Meanwhile, his attendants lay the goat on the ground in preparation for the sacrifice. As the *bitan*'s dance reaches a climax, one of the attendants slits the goat's throat with the knife and then severs its head (fig. 5). The *bitan* cannot see the activities of his attendants, but he seems to know what is going on, for he rushes in their direction the precise moment they decapitate the goat. Breaking through the lines of onlookers, he snatches the goat's head and races back into the clearing. The *dadamel* pauses, but the bass drum maintains a slow rhythmic beat accompanied by pipe music.

Standing amidst the clearing, the *bitan* starts to quaff the blood that oozes from the goat's severed head (fig. 6). "We drink the blood because the *pari* love the *chato*," one *bitan* explained. "Although it goes into our mouths and tastes just like milk, it is the *pari* who are actually drinking the blood, which to them is like water to us." Once *chato* is given, the *bitan* is ready to foretell the future. With the bloody goat's head dangling from his mouth, he resumes his dance. He glides around in a wide circle, his eyes still turned upward and his face partially hidden by the goat's head. The spectators cheer, whistle, and scream each time the bloodsmearred *bitan* passes them.

All of a sudden, the *bitan* throws the goat's head up into the air. He appears now to be in a heightened state of ecstasy, as he begins an intense conversation with the unseen spirits (fig. 7). After dancing in this state for several minutes, the shaman rushes again toward the musicians. He leans over and places his ear next to the *dadang*. The other musicians cease playing and the assembly is silent. Now the *pari*, said to be inside the drum, begin to speak to the *bitan*, who, in a high-pitched chant, conveys their message to the audience (fig. 8). Members of the audience repeat the *bitan*'s remarks in chorus fashion. Then the

bitan rises swiftly, dances in a circle around the clearing and, once again, dashes toward the musicians, this time lowering his blood-smeared face next to the pipe. Again the other musicians pause as the oracle commences to chant predictions he is said to have heard from the *pari*. Once again members of the audience repeat the *bitan*'s remarks in unison. The oracle alternates between listening to the pipe and to the drum, each time relaying the *pari*'s messages to the audience.

Upon conveying all that the *pari* have to say, the *bitan* abruptly springs up and resumes his dance, as the drums begin to pound faster and faster. He continues to dance, round and round, until he is about to collapse from exhaustion. One of his attendants now rushes forward, seizing him with both arms, and lifts him off the ground (fig. 9). This is said to break the hold the *pari* have on the *bitan*, who faints and slides to the ground, lying unconscious until his other attendant brings cold water to splash on his face.

THE ORACULAR PREDICTIONS OF THE *BITAN*

Nowadays few *bitan* are able to foretell the future with any degree of accuracy, the Hunzakut say, so people no longer have great faith in their magical powers. But such, they add, was not the case with the *bitan* of the past. The Hunzakut continue to recount oracular predictions made by powerful *bitan* centuries ago. For example, they still talk of the *bitan* who made predictions for Mayori Thum, who ruled Hunza sometime between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They tell of how Mayori Thum became embroiled in a power struggle with a clan named the Diramheray. People say that the members of this clan were the descendants of Moghul Titam, "a general of Alexander the Great" and among the first five men said to have settled Hunza.

By Mayori Thum's time these Diramheray had grown very prosperous and influential because, it is said, they enjoyed an especially favorable relationship with the mountain spirits. Mayori Thum, jealous of their powers and annoyed by their conceit, conspired with other clans to exterminate the Diramheray. Through trickery he lured their menfolk away from their village in Shispar and slaughtered them all. At the same time, he sent armed men to the Diramheray village, where they slew all the women and children. The Hunzakut recount how even pregnant women were put to the sword.

Following the bloody massacre of the Diramheray, the crops of the Hunzakut began to be affected by a strange disease. For five years in succession the barley crops were ruined and the people went hungry. Realizing that this must be the consequence of their having shed innocent blood, the Hunzakut offered public prayers, distributed alms,

and sacrificed many goats, but all to no avail. Finally, Mayori Thum sought the aid of a *bitan*, asking him to dance and to reveal a solution to his people's misery. Entering into a trance, the oracle disclosed that the crops had been destroyed by the mountain spirits, who were angered by the slaughter of their favored Diramheray people. Moreover, the *bitan* went on to foretell that the *pari* would continue to ruin any crops not sown by Diramheray hands.

On hearing the *bitan*'s revelation many began to despair, believing that every member of the Diramheray had been slain. Nevertheless, people began to make inquiries and soon discovered that a woman, pregnant by a Diramheray man at the time of the massacre, had been away at her parents' home in the neighboring kingdom of Nagar when Mayori Thum's men had struck, and had thus escaped the massacre. The Hunzakut sought out this child, brought him to Hunza, and made him broadcast the barley seeds over their fields. In due course, the crops emerged disease-free. Since that time, the Hunzakut say, members of the Diramheray clan, descendants of that sole-surviving Diramheray child and still the people most cherished by the mountain spirits, must initiate the agricultural season by casting the first barley seeds during a ceremony called Bopfau.

Another revelation by a *bitan* of the past, still widely recounted in Hunza, is that made by Shun Gukur, who served Mir Silum Khan (1790-1824). At the Mir's command, Shun Gukur predicted Hunza's future. According to one informant, this is what Shun Gukur said:

There will come a time when people will fly in the sky like birds, and they will ride on metal horses. The people of Hunza will traverse rivers without touching water. The high will become low, and the low will become mighty. The palaces of the kings will one day be empty, and latrines will be built where the high and the mighty dwell. During the reign of your grandson, Hunza will be overthrown. There will be a dreadful battle in Gujarab [a place near Khunjerab, on the Chinese border], where the forces of this side will battle with the forces of the other side, and blood will flow like rivers, and the blood will rise up to the stirrups and saddles of the warriors' horses.

Social, economic, and political developments in Hunza over the past several decades have convinced many Hunzakut of the truth of Shun Gukur's prophecy. "People flying like birds," Hunzakut say, refers to airplanes, the "metal horses" to automobiles, and "traversing rivers without touching water" to the bridges that have been built in recent

years. The prediction that "the high will become low and the low will become mighty" refers to the fact that the Mirs and Wazirs (prime ministers) have lost their power and the Bericho, the lowest caste in traditional Hunzakut society, have been able to find new economic opportunities in Pakistan that allow them to claim equality with other Hunzakut. As Shun Gukur predicted, Hunzakut point out, the Mir's fortress is empty today and the descendants of the princes have put up tourist hotels with modern toilets and sewers on their estates. The prediction that "Hunza will be overthrown," people say, refers to the dissolution of the former princely state by the government of Pakistan in 1974. But the "dreadful battle in Gujarab" predicted by Shun Gukur has not so far come true, the Hunzakut aver.

Yet another well-known prophecy of the past was made by Bitan Gulo in the late nineteenth century. He foretold that a great tragedy would befall Mir Ghazan Khan (r. 1865–86) and his family. Subsequently, the Mir was murdered by his son, Safdar Ali Khan (r. 1886–91), who usurped the throne. Later Safdar Ali was himself defeated by the invading British and fled to China, spending the remainder of his days there in poverty and disgrace.

Another example of Bitan Gulo's oracular powers is also widely told in present-day Hunza. The circumstances are said to have taken place in the time of Mir Ghazan Khan. The Khurukutz clan had arranged for Bitan Gulo to dance on the great polo field of Baltit. A large crowd gathered for the event, at which the Mir, the Wazir, and other high officials were present. Bitan Gulo appeared in his white robes, inhaled juniper smoke, and began to dance.

Meanwhile, one of his attendants dispatched a man named Tali to fetch cold water to be used to revive the *bitan* after the seance. According to the informant who related the story to me, as Tali was walking to the Barbar irrigation channel above Baltit with a bucket, he thought to himself, "I wonder if this Gulo is a real *bitan*?" And so he decided to put the oracle to the test. He filled the bucket with water, and then the rascal washed his penis in it, saying to himself, "Let's see if this *bitan* can guess what I've done." Returning with the bucket of contaminated water, Tali found that Gulo, having received *chato*, was making predictions in the Shina tongue. Then, quite unexpectedly, Gulo switched to Burushaski, announcing in a loud voice, "Tali foto maal" (Tali has put his penis in water). This took everyone by surprise. The Mir, astonished by what he had heard, called for Tali to come forward, and the spectators began looking around hoping to spot Tali and find out what was going on. Eventually, Tali reluctantly stepped out from behind a group of spectators and stood before the Mir and his officials. The

ruler asked, "Tali, what is the meaning of this? Why has the *bitan* said such a thing?" Tali, with red face, grinned sheepishly and remarked, "Majesty, all I can say is this: Gulo is unquestionably a great *bitan*."

BITAN AS HEALERS

In the past many diseases were attributed to the *pari* and to such demonic entities as the *bilas*. *Bitan* are able to see malicious spirits in the act of assaulting the souls of their unwitting human victims, it is believed, and are thus able to prevent these supernatural entities from carrying out their malice. An incident said to have occurred in the 1930s at Aliabad involved Bitan Mano of the Burong clan of Baltit. During the seance Bitan Mano danced, spoke to the *pari*, danced some more, and then suddenly rushed toward Mohamad Ghani Khan, a member of the Hunzakut nobility and a nationally famous polo player. Bitan Gulo began to pull Ghani's hair and beat him about the head and face. Upon seeing her son assaulted in this way, Bibi Angir, Ghani's mother, cried, "O people of Aliabad, what has happened to you that you let a great one be beaten so by a *bitan*?" The people replied, "He is not beating your son, but the *pari* who are oppressing him and endangering his life." Bibi Angir still demanded angrily that Mano be stopped. So the Aliabadkut poured water on the *bitan*, who quickly came out of his trance. He remained silent for a moment, looking surprised, even stupefied, and then cried out: "Mother, I was striking the evil creatures who were on your son." He paused, then, pointing toward Ghani Khan, shouted in dismay, "But look, your son's head has been taken by the *pari*." The performance then ended. That same year, while Ghani Khan was playing polo in the village of Gulmit, he caught pneumonia and died. Everyone attributed his untimely death to the influence of the *pari* that Mano had been prevented from dislodging.

Today the Hunzakut seek the services of the *bitan* for a variety of medical problems: diseases that do not respond to medical treatment, psychiatric ailments, demonic possession, marital difficulties, impotence, infertility, and so forth. Usually patients who do not respond well to Western medicine are referred to the *bitan*.

"Some *pari* cause illness by making their victim's blood thick," one *bitan* explained, "and thus the patient suffers considerable distress." "Hospitals cannot cure such maladies," he added, "because doctors do not know how to diagnose illnesses of a supernatural nature. So we are called upon. We inquire why the offending spirits are oppressing the patient and ask what is needed to make them depart." The *pari* may demand the sacrifice of a chicken or a goat, or else they may ask for

clothing, butter, or flour (which the shaman keeps for himself). After sacrifice has been given the *bitan* utters incantations, thus negating the influence of the evil *pari*. If this procedure is unsuccessful and the *pari* refuse to leave the patient in peace, the *bitan* will call upon his own helping spirits. The *bitan* does this during a private ceremony, attended only by the patient and members of his or her family. The *bitan* inhales juniper smoke, enters into a trance, and contacts the *pari* on behalf of his client. He then determines the source of the patient's difficulties and attempts to remedy the affliction, either by dispensing charms and prescribing magical powders, or else by uttering incantations. Such sessions do not involve music or dancing and *chato* is not given.

Bitan are also summoned to counter the effects of charms obtained from *akhund* in order to cause misfortune or illness to an enemy. Such charms consist of a piece of paper on which magical spells or verses from the Koran are written. A person suspecting that he is the target of such magic sends a friend to the *bitan's* house. There the friend leaves a few rupees or some other token and departs. He does not reveal the nature of the client's problem, Hunzakut say. The *bitan* must determine this for himself by consulting his *pari*. One *bitan* claimed that he puts the token under his pillow and asks his helping spirits to reveal the client's difficulties to him in his dreams. The next morning, when the client's friend returns, the *bitan* divulges what he has learnt and prescribes a counter-charm that will neutralize the effects of the *akhund's* magic.

Bitan use charms not only to counteract maleficent spells but also to relieve minor ailments (body aches, pain in the joints, etc.), to act as barriers against the evil eye, and to ensure success in love, business, and even in polo games. Such charms, the Hunzakut say, are effective because of the *bitan's* *jadu* (magic) and because of the powers of his helping *pari* (fig. 10).

In order to make a charm (a *tawiz*), the *bitan* first places sacred juniper leaves on a tin plate and utters incantations over them. He then produces a thin piece of silver wire about three centimeters in length and places it next to the juniper. Bitan Ibrahim told me that silver is a pure element and, as such, it may be used to bind holy objects. Reaching inside a small bag, which he carries with him, the *bitan* pulls out rolls of colored strings. "*Pari* are believed to be partial to certain colors," Bitan Ibrahim explained, "and so the colored strings attract their benevolent influence." The *bitan* next unwinds the strings and, holding them together at one end, cuts off a few centimeters with a pair of scissors. He examines the cut strings closely to make sure that all are of even length, an indication that the charm will be effective. If

they are not even, the *bitan* must appeal for further assistance from his helping spirits. After inspecting the strings, the *bitan* ties them into a knot at one end and twists the silver wire around them (fig. 11). He then places the strings next to the juniper leaves and begins to invoke the spirits. After a few minutes he picks up the strings and sets the juniper leaves on fire. As the juniper smoke rises, "beckoning the *pari*," the *bitan* (now with eyes closed) again invokes the aid of the *pari*. Finally he wraps the charm in a piece of white cloth and hands it to his client. He gives instructions about making a cloth cover for this charm, naming a suitable color as revealed to him by the spirits.

DECLINE AND COMMERCIALIZATION

In traditional Hunzakut society *bitan* were an integral part of the state's ritual and politico-ideological apparatus. They were consulted during national celebrations, agricultural feasts, and other important state-sponsored events. These oracles always spoke of contemporary events and concerns, and their revelations were often seen as indicating supernatural approval for state activities. *Bitan* usually validated the activities of the Mirs of Hunza, who themselves were said to rule through a divine mandate from the *pari*. The *bitan*'s legitimacy, in turn, depended upon his being recognized as a practitioner by the Hunza Mirs.

When the British invaded Hunza in 1891, they deposed the reigning Mir, Safdar Ali Khan, and installed in his place his half-brother Nazim Khan, a person more amenable to the interests of the British Empire. After this, a new ideology of legitimacy emerged in Hunza. No longer was the Mir's mandate believed to derive from the *pari*, but, more mundanely, from the British government in India. The abandonment of the belief in the Mir's *pari* mandate, which was revealed to the people by the *bitan*, appeared to have diminished the role of these oracles in state affairs. But they nevertheless continued to be valued for their gifts of second sight and their services as healers. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, however, pressure from Islamic religious authorities forced the Mir, at least for a time, to prohibit *bitan* from exercising their powers altogether. Thus a descendant of Bitan Huke Mamu who lived in Baltit during the early 1920s and was himself deemed a powerful *bitan* by the Hunzakut, was prohibited from utilizing his inherited talents. However, by at least 1934, when SCHOMBERG visited Hunza, the soothsayers were once again allowed to operate (1935, 209-12). They continued to exercise their healing powers and oracular abilities, but they never regained their former political significance. With the final dissolution of the mirdom in 1974, the *bitan*'s traditional role in the state's ritual and politico-ideological apparatus vanished as well.

Since the completion of the Karakoram Highway in 1982 and the opening of the area to foreign tourists⁴ in 1986, a number of self-professed *bitan* have appeared who earn hefty fees by putting on bogus *bitan* shows for the tourists. The Hunzakut themselves, often with a chuckle, refer to these mock soothsayers as "half-*bitan*," or "funny-*bitan*." In the eyes of Bitan Ibrahim such people are charlatans worthy only of contempt. Once, suddenly switching to Urdu, he exclaimed to me that they are *shaitan-ki-murred*, "disciples of the devil." But operators of local hotels that cater to foreign tourists encourage these sham *bitan* acts, as they are always a source of curiosity for tourists and revenue for the hoteliers.

More than a half century ago, the British political agent LORIMER, who conducted intensive ethnological research in Hunza and Gilgit, lamented the decline of this "college of soothsayers," as he called the *bitan* (1929, 536); but still they survived. Today, with no more than three or four practitioners recognized by the Hunzakut themselves as genuine *bitan*, it does seem that Lorimer's "college of soothsayers" is truly doomed to extinction. If the institution of *bitan* should disappear altogether, the Hunzakut will have lost a treasure store of traditional knowledge.

NOTES

1. I am greatly indebted to Dr. Anthony R. Walker (Department of Anthropology, The Ohio State University) for his encouragement, generous editorial assistance, and substantive criticisms of earlier drafts of this paper.

2. Similar ideas are to be found among the Dardic-speaking populations of Shinkari to the south, and have received considerable scholarly attention (e.g., BIDDULPH 1880, 37-38; JETTMAR 1961, 87-91; STALEY 1982, 178). They also appear in the "pastoral ideology" inherent in the religion of the Kalash Kafirs, a non-Islamic people who live in the Hindu Kush mountains of northern Pakistan (PARKES 1987).

3. The Hunzakut agricultural year was initiated through the Bopfau, or seed-scattering ritual, held in early February. The first barley harvest was also marked by ritual. This was the Ginani ceremony held in June. The timing of other crucial phases of the agricultural year, such as the sowing of succeeding crops and manuring of the fields, was also set by the Mir. The start of the annual transhumance cycle (in late May), was inaugurated by a ritual Odi. It was held about a week before the flocks were sent to the mountains and involved the Mir blessing the flocks. The end of the agricultural year was ritualized by the Thumushelling festival, a nocturnal torch-lighting ceremony, celebrated at the winter solstice. Following this were the six weeks of high winter when no agricultural work was possible and when the people occupied themselves playing music, telling tales, drinking wine, and dancing. The winter rest period was ended with the Apitso dance held in Baltit, over which the Mir presided and in which headmen and dignitaries from all the villages participated. In the past the Hunzakut placed great emphasis on these rituals. Failure to perform a ceremony on time and in accordance to correct procedures, the Hunzakut believed, would usher in

a period of sadness and misfortune. Today, however, the ritual calendar is no longer followed. With it has gone the precise state-management and coordination of agricultural production.

4. These tourists come primarily from western Europe, although a small number of American and Japanese tourists also visit the area.

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