

# ***Liminality, Sacred Landscape and Spirit Possession: A Case Study of Thala Bohrianwala, Bilote Sharif***

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The paper employs the notion of 'liminality' as a framework of studying the relationship between spirit possession and holly landscape at Thala Bohrianwala located in the historical sacred complex of Bilote Sharif. The place is renowned for the practice of Jattrra, a kind of the rite of passage performed by those undergoing the experience of spirit possession. As a ritual, it has a tripartite structure involving exclusion, transition and re-integration of ritual participants. It further shows how the building of sacred landscape and process of pilgrimage further add to various dimension of liminal experience at Thala Bohrianwala particularly and Bilote in general. The built physical and sacred landscape, comprised of discrete and divergent religious traditions, enables ritual participants in healing and self-reintegration.*

## **Introduction**

This paper is primarily aimed at studying liminal aspects of religious identities, sacred landscape, spirit possession and performance of healing ritual (*Jattrra*) at Thala

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Bohrianwalawhich is a joint Hindu-Muslim holy place located in the regional sacred complex of Bilote Sharif, a small town of Dera Ismail Khan District in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province of Pakistan.

For this purpose, the paper is mainly divided into three parts. The first part deals with the hermeneutical nature of the concept of 'liminality' to explore some central debates around its meaning and uses in anthropology, folklore, performance studies and other relevant fields of humanities. The second part introduces Thala Bohrianwala as a liminal sacred place. It divulges upon the way the sacred landscape and mythical personages and events are entangled and intertwined in the way that enable pilgrims transcending the established order of religious identities in the locale. The last and third part deals with the phenomena of spirit possession and healing rites as they are performed at Thala Bohrianwala. It shows how the liminality of various beliefs and practices of spirit possession and healing rites involving trance music and dance result into liminal states as well as the construction of in-between and trans-religious identities, particularly at the level of folk theology.

### **Limes of Liminality: History of the Idea of Liminality and its Uses**

The intellectual origin of the term 'liminality' goes back to the seminal anthropological work of Arnold Van Gennep on the "*Rites of Passages*" published in the French language in 1909. However, for the next six decades, the concept could not get any significant place in the emergent fields of sociology and anthropology. In other words, it existed at the margin of these emergent modern disciplinary formations and hence underwent the status of ambiguity before its discovery, re-articulation and uses in the mainstream anthropology by Victor Turner in the mid-1960s.

It is now considered one of the master concepts being used across disciplinary boundaries in socio-cultural and political studies. To paraphrase it, the concept/term of 'liminality' had

to traverse a precarious passage before its terminal place in what we call the western academy.

The concept was initially meant to describe the middle stage in the ritual passage. According to Van Gennep, our social and cultural life is characterized by a series of manifest transitions and changes. At the individual level, we do generally pass on from numerous transitions and transformations in our personal life including birth, puberty, betrothal, marriage, parenthood, death, etc. Similarly, regular transitions can be observed at the level of group dynamics concerning membership, status, class, occupation, etc. Periodicity and temporal shifts (such as seasons, harvests, occasions of pilgrimage, etc.) also bring about the varying states of transition and change.

Rites of passages are socially and culturally designed to guide and facilitate the process of transition. Liminal is thus considered the middle stage, mainly representing the actual and proverbial threshold or limit, in the passage from one state, group and situation to another. Hence, not surprisingly, Victor Turner termed it a dynamic state of being in-between and betwixt in ritual process and, to a large extent, experiences of our personal and collective life.

Three points need to be noted before any further venturing into the elaboration of Gennep's underlying universal tripartite structure of different rites of passages. First, he limits his study of rites to pre-modern societies which, according to him, have more elaborate and marked groupings compared to modern societies.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the lack of systemic and unblemished group classifications renders the role of rituals in modern societies almost unfeasible and ineffectual. This claim leads us to his second assertion which foregrounds this societal distinction into the opposition between the categories of sacred and profane.

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1 Following the vogue of his period, Arnold van Gennep uses the terms semi-civilized and civilized societies to designate the difference between pre-modern and modern societies respectively. However, his distinction appears less loaded with value-judgment which we generally observe in the case of his contemporaries.

Like Emile Durkheim, he emphasizes that the sphere of holy is much more pervasive in pre-modern societies and thus forms the main basis for the rites of passages in them. However, rather than being abstract, he is much more specific in his designation of the sacred in pre-modern societies. It is magico-religious aspects of transition in the ceremonies which constitute his chief interest. The last and third point concerns the spatial dimensions involved in almost all kinds of rites of passage. He proclaims that, along with the symbolic dimension, spatial area of transition may be found in more or less pronounced form in all the ceremonies which accompany the passage from one social and magico-religious position to another. At one point of his discussion, he even indicates that the model of territorial passages can be used as a general framework for the study of the rites of passage. The last point will be further discussed in the context while looking at some later critical academic debates on the concept and uses of liminality.

Arnold Van Gennep identifies tripartite structure combined by three varieties of rites. According to him, this structure or, if we use his own preferable term, pattern is observable in all kinds of the rites of passage in general and particularly initiation rites. He terms these three varieties "the rites of separation from a previous world, *preliminal rites*, those executed during the transitional stage, *liminal (or threshold) rites*, and the ceremonies of incorporation into the new world, *postliminal rites*."<sup>2</sup>

While interpreting Gennep's *Rites of Passage*, Victor Turner elaborates that preliminary rites are predominantly constituted by the symbolic practices of the separation or detachment of ritual subjects from their prior social states or conditions. In this stage, the ritual subject undergoes something analogous to symbolic death. Most often, his/her daily routine is disrupted through different forms of segregation and seclusion. The second category is the stage of

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2 Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*(Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1909), 12.

ambiguity/transition/in-between in which the ritual subject carries no attributes of either past or coming state. It is the moment when prevailing structure is dissolved and new one is not yet born. To paraphrase it, liminality is a kind of “striving after new forms and structures, a gestation process, a fetation of modes appropriate to postliminal existence.”<sup>3</sup>The last and third category of rites involves the re-incorporation of the ritual subjects into society at large after the process of transformation. It paves the way for him/her to acquire new status, rights and obligations.<sup>4</sup>

It is now well-recognized story how Victor Turner had re-worked and elaborated the Gennep’s original framework to make its forceful entry possible into mainstream anthropology and cultural studies. Not only had he applied it in his own analysis of rituals but expanded its scope to make it relevant to complex industrial societies<sup>5</sup> and a wide range of other phenomena such as the study of pilgrimage, communitas, literary texts and theatre performances.

Victor Turner was though academically trained into structural-functionalist and Marxist anthropology during his doctoral studies in England very soon, he became disappointed with them.<sup>6</sup> The discovery of *Rites of*

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3 Victor Turner, Dewey, Dilthey and Drama, “An Essay on the Anthropology of Experience,” in *The Anthropology of Experience*, ed., V. Turner and E. Turner (Chicago: Urbana 1986), 42.

4 Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*(London: Cornell University Press, 1967), 47

5 For more details, see Victor Turner, “Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 6, no. 4 (1979).

6 Victor Turner completed his Ph.D. in June 1955 from Manchester University under the tutelage of the renowned British anthropologist Max Gluckman. Later on, he published his doctoral ethnographic work entitled *Schism and Continuity in An African Society: A Study of Ndembu Village Life* (1957). Predictably, under the influence of his mentor Max Gluckman, the study was mainly concerned with the processes of conflict and the resolution of conflict in the Ndembu social organization. However, very soon, his interest turned to the symbolic significance of rituals in religious processes. After some years, he shifted to America and joined Cornell University in 1964. It was the period when he came across the English translation of Arnold van Gennep’s *Rites of Passage* which proved very influential in shaping his

*Passage* helped him to explore new horizons of thought and hence free himself from the shackles of a variety of then popular structural theories. For example, he wrote in the foreword of his book entitled *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* that it “represents an attempt to free my own thoughts, and I hope that of others in my field as well, from grooved dependence on “structure” as the sole sociological dimension.”<sup>7</sup> His larger argument is that well-bonded human groups experience both structural fixity and liminality. The structural fixity is mainly imposed through both verbal and non-verbal classifications which help to assign every part a particular place in the larger system. Therefore, it gives some regularity, repetition, stability and order to the chaotic state of affairs.<sup>8</sup> While, on the other hand, liminality, again created by both reflexive and structural means, provides these groups with the opportunity to create spaces and times in the calendar and cultural cycles that are difficult to grasp in classificatory regimes of society. Most of these liminal times and spaces comprise of rituals, carnivals, pilgrimages, dramas and, most recently, films. In brief, his explanations and interpretations of *Rites of Passage* were chiefly driven by his pursuit to create an alternative to the theoretical predominance of structuralism in anthropology and hence liberate it from “a systematic dehumanizing of the human subjects of study, regarding them as the bearers of an impersonal “culture,” or wax to be imprinted with “cultural patterns,” or as determined by social, cultural or social psychological “forces,” “variables,” or “pressures” of various kinds.”

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academic theoretical turn to symbolic and cultural anthropology. Some of the main theoretical antecedents, by which support he constructed his self-styled field of anthropology, include the concepts like liminality, social drama, symbols, *communitas*, pilgrimage, etc.

7 Victor Turner, *Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (London: Cornell University; 1969), viii.

8 Victor Turner is here making a point against Kantian and Neo-Kantian belief that human experience is essentially chaotic and hence cannot be fully grasped without superimposing rational categories of thought and systems of classifications in knowledge production.

For him, the concept of 'liminal' had hermeneutic significance to highlight and explain inter-structural positions and situations lying outside of identified socio-cultural spaces. This position or situation in rites of passage is necessarily ambiguous and involves relative invisibility in structural, if not physical, terms. Therefore, Turner says that liminal or transitional beings in ritual process have two-fold character. They are at once no longer classified and not yet classified.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, owing to this structural invisibility and ambiguous character, they are also culturally meant polluted and hence considered dangerous to society.<sup>10</sup>

However, the concept of liminality for Victor Turner was not merely the way to go beyond structural-classificatory identifications but it does represent an *experience of transformations* as well. It should not be therefore surprising that his late project was outlining the main contours of the anthropology of experience. Like the idea of liminality, which he endowed from van Gennep, his concept of experience was derived from the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey.<sup>11</sup> In fact, he was so fascinated by him that he aspired to reorient and rebuild his theoretical-anthropological enterprise in terms of Dilthey's notion of "lived experience"

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9 Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, 96

10 Victor Turner formulated this proposition in the light of the works of Mary Douglas on purity and danger. According to her, the concept of pollution in different cultures is meant to provide protection to the most cherished principles and categories from contractions. As a result, the unclear is considered unclean having potential dangers to society.

11 Wilhelm Dilthey was a German philosopher who was born in 1833, just two years after the death of G. W. F. Hegel. Not only had he pleaded the distinction between human and natural sciences in terms of their varying subject matter and methodology but he also imagined his intellectual enterprise as the reformulation of Kant's cognitive 'Critique of Pure Reason' into a 'Critique of Historical Reason' in order to evolve the hermeneutics of lived experience. For him, the understanding of meaning in history necessitates both 'an inner articulation of the temporal structure of our own inner experience and the interpretation of the external objectifications of other'. For more details, see Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi, *Wilhelm Dilthey: Selected Works-Volume 1-Introduction to the Human Sciences* (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1989).

and started to compile a book entitled "Anthropology of Experience", which was posthumously published in 1986.

Wilhelm Dilthey is amongst those pioneer philosophers who pleaded for the distinction of natural and human sciences. For him, human reality cannot be divorced from the original facts of consciousness. In other words, objects don't have merely representational value in human consciousness but they are perceived and known through the faculty of reflexive awareness.<sup>12</sup> It involves a direct knowing without any subject-object distinctions that characterize the representational world of perceptual cognition. He asserts that, "The inner, pertaining to self, and the outer, pertaining to the objects, belong to each other and exist as facts of consciousness only in relations to each other."<sup>13</sup> He infers from this position that, "Reality is comprised of experience and its correlate, the real world." Consequently, the analysis of experience is an analysis of the real world and vice versa. To paraphrase it, our lived experience is a kind of indistinguishable totality and it should be an authentic basis of any inquiry of human sciences research.

Wilhelm Dilthey's notion of 'Imaginative Metamorphosis' in the context of lived experience is especially pertinent to the concept of liminality and drama, both of which have been extensively employed by Victor Turner in his analysis of ritual, theatre and other performative actions. According to him, our images/imagination built upon and through our life's experiences is subject to the process of change and transformation, most often guided by three rules. As per the first rule, we are not passive recipients of the impressions of the outside world we encounter in our ordinary life. Rather, we filter and exclude those images and impressions that are

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12 Wilhelm Dilthey distinguishes between reflexive awareness and reflective act. For him, reflexive awareness is self-given, pre-reflective state in which the dichotomies of form and content, subject and object don't yet exist. For more details, see Makkreel and Rodi, *Wilhelm Dilthey: Selected Works*, Vol.1-Introduction to the Human Sciences.

13 See Makkreel and Rodi, *Wilhelm Dilthey: Selected Works*, Vol.1-Introduction to the Human Sciences, 107

not psychologically worthwhile for us. It involves an act of apperception. In the second phase, the preserved images are transformed through the process of expansion or contraction in correlation with decreased or increased sensation of which they are constituted and composed. The last and third stage comprises the completion of imaginative metamorphosis, by which Dilthey means a process "by which something outer is enlivened by something inner or something inner is made visible and intuitable by something outer."<sup>14</sup> The completion of such imaginative metamorphosis is generally evidenced by the organic placement of the transformed images into the whole acquired psychic nexus. In his later works, Dilthey made this tripartite structure of imaginative metamorphosis, namely exclusion, intensification and unifying completion, as a general basis of lived human experience.

What is most interesting is the comparability of Dilthey's tripartite structure of imaginative metamorphosis with van Gennep's tripartite structure of rites of passage. Perhaps, it was this high level of comparability which did prove tempting for Victor Turner to reorient his theoretical works as well as founding the anthropology of experience. Moreover, he tried to understand the structure of lived experience in terms of the triadic, sequential and processual structure of rites of passage.

At this juncture, it might be pertinent to divulge upon the typologies of liminality in order to gauge its full range of application in a variety of experiences. According to Bjørn Thomassen, the experiences of liminality can be divided in terms of different subjects, temporal and spatial dimensions. For instance, experiences of liminality can be related to single individuals, social groups (minorities, local groups, etc.) and whole, societies, entire populations and civilizations. Similarly, temporal dimensions of liminality include moments, periods and epoch. The types of liminality

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14 Makkreel and Rodi, *Wilhelm Dilthey: Selected Works*, Vol.1 - Introduction to the Human Sciences, 104.

in terms of spatial dimensions can be broadly divided into areas, regions, countries, continents, etc.<sup>15</sup> Another crucial point articulated by Bjørn Thomassen is the permanent nature of liminality in very specific situation. Liminality is though concerned with the states of transitions but it sometimes acquires relatively stable position in the process of change and transformation. Building upon van Gennep's tripartite structure, Szokolczai contends that there are three types of permanent liminality, critically originating in the three phases of the rites of passage. "Liminality becomes a permanent condition when any of the phases in this sequence [of separation, liminality, and re-aggregation] becomes frozen, as if a film stopped at a particular frame."<sup>16</sup>

Given the fact that liminality has been employed in a variety of way, I like to use it in the general sense of states and locations marked by the characteristic of 'in-between' and 'anti-structure'. More specifically, looking at liminal dimensions of sacred landscape and performances related to spirit possession in Bilote Sharif.

### **Sacred Landscape, Communitas and Experience of Pilgrimage at Bilote Sharif / Thala Bohrianwala**

A sacred landscape is not simply a backdrop for action, but rather a place filled with names, associations and memories that link together everything present there. Humans become linked to the rocks, trees, animals, rivers, mountains and these bonds guide future human interaction with that place.<sup>17</sup>

This section is mainly concerned with the description how Bilote Sharif in general and Thala Bohrianwala in particular are constructed as transition geography and sacred landscape to enable devotees and pilgrims to undergo a variety of liminal experiences. However, before I venture into

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15 For more details, see Bjorn Thomassen, "The Uses and Meanings of Liminality," *International Political Anthropology* 2, no. 1 (2009).

16 See Szokolczai, *Liminality and the Modern: Living Through the In-Between* (New York: Routledge; 2014), 93.

17 Christopher Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape: Places, Paths and Monuments* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1994).

this subject, it is imperative to provide with some basic details of the locale as a necessary background.

Bilote is a small town in Dera Ismail Khan District of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in Pakistan. It lies at Chashma-Mianwali road, with a distance of about 48 kilometers from the main city of Dera Ismail Khan. The town is located in the foothills of Khisor Range which closely runs along with the Indus River, in north-east to south-west direction. It is also one of the historical crossing-points of the Indus River trekked by invaders, traders and pilgrims since the ancient time. It connects to a number of mountain passes leading to Afghanistan and Central Asia.

The physical geography of Bilote entails many dimensions of liminality. Hilltops, outcropped rocks and stones, banyan and pipal trees and the panorama of the Indus River from rugged mountain peaks all together constitute quite unique transitory geography. The scopic view that is generally obtained by the concurrent presence of such diverse elements of various geographical systems gives the impression to viewers of something that is simultaneously eternal as well as transitory. Another factor which further deepens the sense of liminality is the presence of an ancient fort along with numerous old decaying building structures of temple, court rooms, etc., built over the hilltop bordering to the Bilote town from the southern side.<sup>18</sup> History and traditions have material and iconic representations which make the experience of temporality both transcendental and immanent for the viewers. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Bilote is a place where the complex of nature-sacred-history-memory happens to be arranged in such manners that turns it into a liminal landscape par excellence.

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18 The ancient fort and associated temples and citadels constructed over the nearby hill-top are popularly named as 'Kafir Kot' meaning the fort of infidels. They are considered a part of the Indus/salt range temple complex built from 6th to 11th centuries A.D. In terms of architectural history, it represents proto Gandhara-Nagara tradition found in most of the Northwestern India. For more details, see Michael W. Meister, *Temples of the Indus* (London, Brill Publications; 2010), 63-72



There are a number of holly sites in Bilote which are venerated and regularly visited by thousands of devotees and pilgrims from far off places. The most conspicuous site is the shrine of Shah Essa Qatar who is considered the chief saint of the sacred complex. His lineage is associated with the Bukhari Sayyd of Uch Sharif in Bahawalpur region. According to diverse historical record, Essa Shah Qatar visited Bilote during the reign of Sultan Bahlol Lodi and decided to settle there. He was granted a large estate and his descendants are now main landowners of Bilote. A number of miracles are associated with him. The annual

*mela* of Essa Shah Bilote is held in the month of *Chayth* (*Bakrami* calendar). It continues for three consecutive Sunday but the second one is considered the most important and preferable.

Thala Bohrianwala is a temple-cum-*Samadhi* (rest place) of Hindu saint Sati Kaivalram. It is considered as one of the most sacred Hindu places in the upper Indus flood plain areas.<sup>19</sup> It was constructed and inhabited by Sati Kaivalram who was the 17<sup>th</sup> century Hindu saint of the Eighth *Gadi* of *Pushtimarg* order of Krishna Bhakti in the northwestern India.<sup>20</sup> Before partition, it was regularly visited by the

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- 19 L. P. Vdyarhi was the first anthropologist who put forth the concept of sacred complex in the backdrop of his study of a great traditional Hindu city Gaya. According to him, Gaya is a place of pilgrimage reflecting a level of continuity, compromise and a combination between the great and little tradition. Sometimes, he refers it as "Nature-Man-Spirit Complex". For more details on 'sacred complex', see L. P. Vidyarthi, *Sacred Complex of Hindu Gaya* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House; 1961); L. P. Vidyarthi, *The Maler: A Study in Nature-Man-Spirit Complex of a Hill Tribe* (Calcutta: Bookland Private Ltd; 1963.); L. P. Vidyarthi, *The Sacred Complex of Kashi: A Microcosm of Indian Civilization* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing; 2005).
- 20 Pushtimarg is a Hindu Vaishnava-Krishna devotional order established by a medieval philosopher Vallabha Acharya (1479-1531 CE). He was the main exponent of Sanskrit/Vedantic school of Shuddhadvaita (pure non-dualism) and author of numerous books and commentaries. His son Vithalanatha was the main architect of establishing Pushtimarg mainly revolved around the worship of the images of Krishna in his childhood. He discovered a number of sacred hills, trees, wells, ponds groves and thickets in order to establish a route for annual pilgrimage. Owing to his extensive efforts, the order firmly established herself especially in Gujrat and Rajasthan. In his old age, he presented his seven sons separate deities of Shrinathji in order to found seven *Gadis* of the order. The grandfather of Kaivalram-Shri Lalji- was also part of the household of Vithalanatha as a servant appointed to fulfill *Jal Sevea* (water-fetching services) for the temple and family. However, Vithalanatha considered and treated him as a part of the family and he played with his sons. When the deities were presented to seven sons, Lalji was disappointed as not being given one as well. According to hagiographic literature, Krishna asked Vithalanatha to give a deity to him with the forecast that he would become a great spiritual leader responsible for the salvation of many souls. As a result, he was given a deity called *Gopinathji* and instructed to go to Sindh for the establishment and propagation of Pushtimarg. He settled at Dera Ghazi Khan, constructed a temple with the financial help of Hindu merchants and succeeded to establish the Eighth Gadi which had considerable followings in the trans-Indus belt, Multan and Bahawalpur region. Kaivalram was his grandson who opted to migrate from Dera Ghazi Khan and settled in Bilote Sharif. He

majority of both Hindus and Muslims of this region. Its most distinctive feature was the annual festival of Vasaakhi. However, the migration of Hindu population from Dera Ismail Khan, Mianwali, Kalabagh, Essa Khel and other adjacent areas made it less significant. Subsequently, the event of Vasaakhi was also disrupted.

The story of its reclaiming as Hindu sacred place in the recent period is very curious case. According to local accounts, the abandoned place was continued to be looked after by a local Muslim devotee but no formal functions were arranged here. However, after the return of democracy in the late 1980s, different Hindu groups from Balochistan, Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa started to visit the area and again arranged holding of the annual Vasaakhi event. They were cooperated by local Makhdooms, the descendents of the chief saint Shah Essa, who saw additional economic benefits in this process. Later on, Hindu pilgrims constructed a new building complex by using their own resources. Since the reclamation, the annual congregation of Hindus has now become a regular occurrence.

The phenomena of liminality at Bilote Sharif /Thala Bohrianwala are manifested at many levels. First, the process of pilgrimage itself incorporates many liminal aspects which are typical parts of any such experience. As we know that the practice of pilgrimage is much ancient and a part of all main world religions. Not surprisingly, it has been studied, documented, analyzed and interpreted in a variety of ways. However, Victor Turner was the first anthropologist who elucidated the relationship between pilgrimage and liminality in his last years' works. His three formulations are critical to understand the relationship between liminality and pilgrimage. First, pilgrims are like novices in ritual process traversing transition, albeit temporary, from mundane to divine space. Secondly, pilgrimage site acts as a sort of 'center out there'. Thirdly, pilgrims constitute a sort of

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constructed there Thala Bohrianwala which later on became the major spiritual center of the Eighth Gadi in the upper Indus flood plains.

communitas which is relatively non-hierarchical and devoid of normal, everyday positions, statuses and identities.

The experience of pilgrimage involves travel and movement across time and space; the characteristics which enable us to get unhinged from our routine life and undergo changes necessary for any encounter with something new and, sometime, divine. Many people interviewed by the researcher during his fieldwork had confirmed that they were feeling some inner changes in their usual sentiments and moods. One of the participants said: "I am no more the same person. Before I came here, I was very sad and burdened with a lot of anxieties of everyday life. I had the sense as if I was dead and finished. The last year, my son died. Moreover, I am experiencing difficulties in my business. So, I thought to visit the *dargah* of Shah Essa and other saints to get their blessing. For the last three days, I am here and my worries and fears are gone." Such countless stories narrated by the pilgrims indicate as how the pilgrimage constitutes a kind of passage from the anxieties of mundane routine of life to an experience of quietness, reconciliation and settling down. Liminality is certainly a part of such rite of passage.

The second aspect of liminality is the public identity of Sati Kaivalram as the shared saint of both Hindus and Muslims. There are many folk narratives which tell us how Sati Kaivalram held contestation with Shah Essa and then accepted him as his guru. On the contrary, we do also hear similar stories from Hindus which establish the supremacy of Sati Kaivalram. However, both Hindus and Muslims of local area are in the agreement over their higher spiritual status. What does lend more credibility to shared or joint identity of Sati Kaivalram is widely accepted and popular story of the disappearance of his dead body in the wake of communal controversy over funeral rites. There are similar stories related to the death of Bhagat Kabir, Guru Nanak and some other South Asian saints whom rites of death terminated into the permanent ambiguity of their final religious status. Not surprisingly, this public ambiguity in their rites of death assigns them liminal position which makes it

impossible to construct their religious identities in definite terms.

The performance of *Jattra*, a public ritual for the healing of spirit possession, is another arena which brings the incidence of liminality into full circle. It is performed at many shrines in Bilote Sharif but Thala Bohrianwala is the most popular sacred place. Held in the spring season-the period of transition and change, it is attended by thousands of Muslim devotees and sick believed to be possessed by a variety of spirits.

### **Liminal States of Spirit Possession and Healing Ritual of Jattra**

Possession is a broad term referring to an integration of spirit and matter, force, or power and corporeal reality, in a cosmos where the boundaries between an individual and her environment are acknowledged to be permeable, flexibly drawn, or at least negotiable.<sup>21</sup>

Every year, especially in the spring season, thousands of people, who are believed to be possessed by a variety of spirits, visit Bilote Sharif and Thala Bohrianwala in order to seek blessing of saints and healing of their ills. The place is very old cultural center of the annual public performance of *Jattra*, an ancient healing and divination ritual in the Indus Valley.

The phenomena of spirit possession, *albeit* in varied forms and contexts, are almost a kind of cultural universal.<sup>22</sup> In South Asia, we find its extensive references in the ancient

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21 Janice Boddy, "Spirit Possession Revisited: Beyond Instrumentality," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 23 (1994): 407.

22 The wide-spread existence of different 'possession states' across various cultures have been thoroughly explored, described and interpreted in the field of anthropology and other related cultural studies disciplines. One of the classical and, to some extent, authoritative cross-cultural survey was undertaken by Erika Bouruignon in her book entitled *Possession*. According to her, about ninety percent of all societies have some sort of institutionalized forms of altered states of consciousness and that fifty-two percent of these are related with the spirit possession. For more details, see Erika Bouruignon, *Possession* (San Francisco: Chandler & Sharp Publishers, 1976).

classical Sanskrit literature, regional languages and folk cultures. Fredrick M. Smith provides us with very detailed and wide-ranging description of the phenomena of deity and spirit possession in South Asian literature and civilization. According to him, we can linguistically and textually trace back the existence of the idea and practice of possession since the early Vedic era which, in turn, continued to evolve, transform, overlap and diffuse into diverse classical philosophico-medical traditions and folk cultures in the later periods.<sup>23</sup> The spread of Islam in the region had not brought any rapturous change in this belief in spirit possession because the idea of *genies* and instances of their human possession were already part of Islamic cosmology.

There is also a good deal of ethnographic literature which gives us the details how spirit possession is variously performed in different contemporary popular cultures of South Asia. Moreover, it offers us diverse academic / critical interpretations of spirit possession from the perspective of psychoanalysis, gender, social control and resistance, ecstatic religions and shamanism, phenomenology and performance studies.

Before looking at the relationship of liminality and *Jattra*, it might be however pertinent to describe some of the basic facts / patterns of spirit possession as the researcher observed in the field. First, majority of possessed persons were women, particularly young girls. They almost constitute more than eighty percent of the pilgrims who claim to be possessed and seek their healing in one or another way. The overwhelming majority of them are uneducated, poor and rural by their background. Secondly, the stories of their possession start with some kind of event such as visit to wild and deserted place, encounter with a stranger or going

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23 Some of the most often used Sanskrit terms to denote 'possession' include 'avesa' (to enter); *grahana* (to seize or grasp) and *bhuta-preta* (ghostly creatures). Moreover, there are countless anecdotes and narratives of deity and spirit possession in Sanskrit and folk literature. For more details, see Fredrick M. Smith, *Self Possessed: Deity and Spirit Possession in South Asian Literature and Civilization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

outside in the darkness. Most curiously, majority of them are possessed by male spirits (or *genie*). Thirdly, a large number of them do not experience the state of possession all the time. In most of the cases, spirits come to possess them during the change of seasons, namely spring and autumn. In other words, there are two seasons when the experience of possession is most extensive and it becomes very difficult for the so called possessed persons to perform their daily tasks. Most often, they experience fits of rage, absent mindedness, hearing of voices and many other such symptoms. Finally, the possession is generally categorized into two ways. Some forms of possessions are considered afflictive and should be healed to regain the agency of the possessed persons. However, in some rare cases, possession is viewed beneficial as it is imagined to be related to divinity of saints and other good powers in nature.

### Conclusion

As it has already been indicated that spirit possession is a kind of cultural universal and hence variedly interpreted in different academic disciplines including anthropology, folklore, psychology and psychoanalysis and religious studies. Janice Boddy classifies different kinds of interpretations in spirit possession research into two major trends. According to her, the first trend is reductive, naturalizing and rationalizing spirit possession. It is mainly driven to render or translate the phenomena of spirit possession into western commonsense or terms of modern science. On the other hands, there is a trend that contextualizes it and adopts different phenomenological perspectives in its explanation and interpretation.<sup>24</sup> In other words, it is more sensitive towards epistemological questions and uses local terms and classifications in the analysis.

Rather than indulging into these old interpretative issues, the researcher had rather argued to look at both spirit possession and *Jattra*—the healing ritual—as liminal state performatively / ritually realized in cultural setting which, in turn, are

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24 Boddy, "Spirit Possession Revisited: Beyond Instrumentality," 410.

favourable to induce it. The liminality of spirit possession is evident by the fact that it assumes multiple personality syndromes. One is not of oneself in the state of possession. Rather, the boundaries between self and other are here blurred and hence it is not easy to mark clearly the agency of the possessed persons. The liminality of spirit possession is further established by the fact of the possibility of traversing the established religious and gender boundaries in the instances of trance.

The common observation is that the majority of the women are often possessed by male spirits. Similarly, it is possible to be possessed by the spirits which are identified with other religions. For example, majority of Muslim possessed persons visiting Thala Kaivalram are believed to be occupied by Hindu genies. Hence, the blessing of a Hindu saint is considered crucial in luring or compelling Hindu genie for the purpose of healing.

The phenomena of spirit possession acquire more liminal (and dramatic) character when it is performed through the traditional healing ritual of *Jattra*.

The literal root meaning of *Jattra* is pilgrimage. However, in popular folk tradition, it is a ritual involving music, dance and dialogue of the medium with spirits. It was once used to be widely performed in the middle Indus Valley. It was not only practiced in shrines but there were also certain places in small and big towns separately designated for this purpose. Though it is not as much prevalent now as it was used to be practiced a few decades ago but its performance can be still observed in many of the renowned shrines of the region. They include the shrine of Shah Shamas (Multan), Khawja Ghulam Farid (Kot Mithan), Rajan Shah (Layyah), Shah Essa and Thala Bohrianwala (Bilote Sharif). During the spring season, the daily holding of *Jattra* in a form of group is regular practice in these places. Moreover, there are always arrangements of its performance in the case of the visit of an ill-possessed person other than the spring season.

*Jattraas* a healing ritual has a tripartite structure. In the first stage, possessed persons are excluded / segregated from the larger participant group by the fact of their participation in the ritual. The actual ritual performance facilitated by music and dance help them in acquiring liminal state when they are 'neither here nor there' but rather 'betwixt and in-between'. Music and dance inculcates a kind of possession trance which is revealed by their immersion. At the end of it, water is sprinkled over their face, a dialogue between spirit and spiritual guide is initiated and hairs are bonded for the purpose of reconciliation.