A Tale of an Amulet

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Series Editors' Preface

Suffering, Healing and Women's Agency

*Andrew Strathern & Pamela J. Stewart**

"Women as healers" is a well-established category of writing in medical anthropology, ensconced within the gendered classifications of personhood and agency of many different societies. Ariela Popper-Giveon has contributed notably to this genre with her study of the complexities of the therapeutic activities of Arab women healers in Israel. As happens to minorities everywhere, a layered set of constraints and difficulties surrounds the lives of these healers. They belong to a minority group, and in addition they experience difficulties in negotiating their healing practices against a backdrop of male power in their society. Ariela Popper-Giveon's study explores in detail how the healers whose work she got to know manage all these complexities of their lives and perform valuable services that are not met in any other ways.

In the course of her sensitive exposition, Popper-Giveon makes clear a number of points that fall into line with findings from elsewhere. The first point is by now well established, but still worth highlighting: change does not necessarily obliterate the work of traditional healers; rather, it causes them to transform and adapt to new conditions. On Jinmen Island in Taiwan in 2010 we found that female shamanic experts on the island had discovered bigger market outlets for their specializations on the nearby Mainland of China in the city of Xiamen, a burgeoning site of economic development and also of growing social problems that the shamans could help to address by harnessing the help of spirit agencies or repelling the attacks of hostile spirits. Shamans often deal with ailments and concerns that biomedicine is not equipped to handle, so whether biomedical services are available or not does not really matter for the work of shamans. Also, while it is obvious that shamans and other traditional healers work with patients whose conditions would be treated by psychiatrists in a biomedical context, their manner of handling those conditions does not involve an epistemological disjuncture between themselves and their patients. Both healers and patients subscribe to the same putative life-world of spirit agencies and their proclivities and demands. Hence they can quickly come to grips with the problems of patients on the same basis of ideas as the patients themselves hold to. Modernizing influences often conduce to rupture, treating traditional ideas as incorrect, ignorant or a product of erroneous superstition. Such influences get in the way of effective therapies that draw on the strength of local ideas rather than decrying them.

This observation applies well to Popper-Giveon's own study. She shows that women healers deal with issues of witchcraft and curses and fears of the evil eye between people, arising out of conflicted relationships and disparities of economic status within communities inflected via gender inequality.

Another topic that Popper-Giveon faces squarely is how to conceptualize the workings of gendered domination in the Arab society she is studying, without arguing that women are simply victims without agency. Her focus on women healers enables her to explore every side of gender relations and to reveal how women healers are able to cleverly negotiate their standing in society through the exercise of their healing craft. For example, they incorporate into their repertoire certain aspects of diagnosis and treatment that derive from the male world of the Koran and Islam. The female healers also are involved in the shadowy and secluded world of manipulating female body substances for the production of health or harm. They perform services for women to gain a hold on the affections of male partners. Interestingly, the types of magic stones they use for such purposes are of the sort found in folk mythologies and ritual practices around the world. Their diagnoses of the use of food sorcery to target victims whom they treat are paralleled by examples from Papua New Guinea (see, e.g., Stewart and Strathern, 2001). They operate also in the world of fears of djinns, spirits that can cause illness and have to be appeased or sent away. Djinns are thought to attack those who are in a vulnerable state either because of fear or because of anger. This last point again raises parallels with ideas about anger and its expression in Papua New Guinea. Anger leads to the possibility of becoming sick, and this is the physiological basis on which cultural ideas and practices have been built.

Throughout the study Dr. Popper-Giveon reveals much of her own feelings about the area and her position as a researcher. As with many anthropologists, she finds that by adopting the informants' worldview sufficiently to understand it, she has learned as much about herself as about the women with whom she worked. Knowing oneself through knowing others offers an interesting pathway for lifelong learning. Compassion for suffering also leads to an identification with those who suffer that bridges the difficulties of conflicting identities present in every field situation and very marked in Israel, where this remarkable study was carried out.

References

Stewart, Pamela J. & Andrew J. Strathern (2001). *Humors and substances: Ideas of the body in New Guinea.* Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey.

*NOTE:
Pamela J. Stewart (Strathern) and Andrew J. Strathern are a wife-and-husband research team who are based in the Department of Anthropology, University of Pittsburgh, and co-direct the Cromie Burn Research Unit. They are frequently invited international lecturers and have worked with numbers of museums to assist them with their collections. Stewart and Strathern have published over 47 books and over 200 articles, book chapters, and essays on their research in the Pacific (mainly Papua New Guinea and the South-West Pacific region, e.g., Samoa and Fiji); Asia (mainly Taiwan, and also including Mainland China and Japan); and Europe (primarily Scotland, Ireland and the European Union countries in general); and also New Zealand and Australia. Their most recent co-authored books include *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors, and Gossip* (Cambridge University Press, 2004); *Kinship in Action: Self and Group* (Prentice Hall, 2011); *Peace-Making and the Imagination: Papua New Guinea Perspectives* (University of Queensland Press with Penguin Australia, 2011); *Ritual: Key Concepts in Religion* (Bloomsbury Academic Publications, 2014); and *Working in the Field: Anthropological Experiences Across the World* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). Their recent co-edited books include *Exchange and Sacrifice* (Carolina Academic Press, 2008) and *Religious and Ritual Change: Cosmologies and Histories* (Carolina Academic Press, 2009, and the Updated and Revised Chinese version: Taipei, Taiwan: Linking Publishing, 2010). Stewart and Strathern's current research includes the topics of Cosmological Landscapes; Ritual Studies; Political Peace-making; Comparative Anthropological Studies of Disasters and Climatic Change; Language, Culture and Cognitive Science; and Scottish and Irish Studies. For many years they served as Associate Editor and General Editor (respectively) for the *Association for Social An-*

thropology in Oceania book series and as Co-Series Editors for the *Anthropology and Cultural History in Asia and the Indo-Pacific* book series. They currently edit three book series with Carolina Academic Press: *Ritual Studies*, *Medical Anthropology*, and *European Anthropology*; and they are the longstanding Co-Editors of the *Journal of Ritual Studies*. Their webpages, listing publications and other scholarly activities, are: http://www.pitt.edu/~strather/ and http://www.StewartStrathern.pitt.edu/.

Preface

I stopped my car alongside a concrete bus shelter. It was just before dawn and still dark outside. The night air was heavy and thick and the desert stars twinkled brightly, undimmed by artificial light. It was September; there was a hint of autumn in the air, but the skies were still free of clouds. A lone soldier stood at the shelter, the closest one to Training Base No. 1—home of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) Officers' Candidate School. I had just left my home in Mitzpe Ramon—a small town in the Negev desert—and still had a long way to go to reach Jerusalem. I was looking for a traveling companion to help pass the time more pleasantly and keep me alert. The old VW beetle did not have electric windows. I leaned towards the passenger seat and made an effort to turn the recalcitrant handle. Eventually, I succeeded. The glass barrier descended somewhat and the soldier approached the car. "Where are you heading?" I asked him. The soldier responded: "I'll show you—it's on the way," and before I could say anything, he opened the back door and tossed his long and heavy duffel bag inside.

The soldier then sat himself down in the front seat, gripping his rifle. Getting into the small car required some complex maneuvering on his part, so I just sat silently and waited until I saw that he had stopped squirming and was sitting comfortably. I started the car and turned on the radio. The soldier said nothing, as if waiting for me to initiate conversation. The car, which already had a faint hint of cigarette smoke, was redolent with new and unfamiliar aromas. After some time, I broke the silence and asked him something—I no longer recall exactly what it was. It happened about ten years before I wrote this preface. When he answered me, I wondered about the trace of accent in his voice. We kept on talking and I started asking him a few questions about himself. It's something I'd done many times on nighttime journeys from Mitzpe

Ramon to Jerusalem in those days. The soldier was fascinating and well-spoken; the conversation flowed and I was drawn into it easily.

I did yawn once, however. The soldier expressed concern about my weariness and invited me to his family home for a cup of coffee. The road to Beersheba is indeed dotted with villages, but at that time they were all but invisible to me. "Where is it?" I asked. "Slow down," he said quickly, "there will soon be a right turn onto a dirt road." Before I could even hesitate, there was the turn. I was unable to slow down sufficiently and the car was jostled repeatedly because of all the potholes in the dirt road. The headlights revealed that there were stones strewn all about. The soldier guided me confidently as a deep-seated fear, mingled with excitement, made my heart race. We drove on for a few minutes and I concentrated on my driving. "Here!" he said suddenly. "Stop!" I parked the car. We were surrounded by dark shadows. Somewhere, a baby was crying. Before me stood a tent, its inclined walls extending to the ground. In the darkness, it appeared to blend into the building behind it. A powerful chemical smell hit me. We were near Ramat Hovav, home of Israel's largest hazardous waste disposal facility.

The soldier rolled up the tent flap and went inside, carrying his weapon and bag and inviting me to follow him. Inside the tent, he put down his belongings and switched on an old emergency lighting device, which emitted a weak circle of light. Several minutes later, the soldier emerged from the darkness, accompanied by a very young and very pretty woman, wearing a long, dark dress and looking somewhat sleepy. The woman, who was evidently in a hurry, poured water into a blackened kettle and resuscitated the recently-extinguished fire, all without looking at me or talking to me. It was only later that I realized that this beautiful but tired woman was forced to rise from her sleep and putter about because of my hasty consent to the soldier's polite invitation. I was so embarrassed.

It was 4 a.m. and there I was in an unrecognized—and unfamiliar—Bedouin village, burning with curiosity, confusion and apprehension. "What am I doing here?" Doubts flashed through my mind, but interest and excitement riveted me to the earthen floor. "If I go now, they'll be even more insulted," I rationalized. As a compromise, I promised myself that I would leave as soon as I finished my tiny cup of bitter, strong coffee. I smoked to keep from appearing flustered as the soldier, whose name was Salman, slipped silently through the dark areas surrounding the circle of light. We said almost nothing. He had things to do and the lovely woman was tending to the baby who had woken up crying. I waited for an opportunity to say goodbye. Salman sensed this and appeared somewhat alarmed, straining to keep the tenuous thread of conversation going. I felt uncomfortable remaining and uncomfortable leaving. To make him feel better, I jotted down his cell phone number, promising to call him soon, although I'm not sure I meant to keep that promise at the time. I wanted to get going, but was not at all confident that I could find my own way to the main highway. That's when Salman returned to the passenger seat, this time to guide me over the bumpy path and get me onto the road to Beersheba. Again I felt embarrassed: Because of my incompetence, he'd have to walk all the way back home from the highway. We both remained silent and the atmosphere was somewhat tense.

On a paved road once again, with the Beersheba city lights glimmering on the horizon, I was overcome by thoughts that stayed with me all the way to Jerusalem. I wondered just who this Salman is, a Bedouin who lives in a tent and is taking an officers' course in the Israeli army. Who is that beautiful and weary woman whom he aroused from sleep to tend to me? A window opened before me, leading to another world that filled me with wonder. The coffee kept my heart racing. This time, there was no possibility that I'd fall asleep behind the wheel. Two days later, when I returned to Mitzpe Ramon, I told a friend about my nighttime encounter with the Bedouin cadet. The excitement in my voice apparently got through to him as well. "Did you keep his number?" he asked hopefully. I rummaged through my bag until I found the crumpled slip of paper. Salman's captivating image sparked my friend's imagination and he wanted to visit the place himself.

Several days later, I contacted Salman. I didn't have to remind him who I was. The excitement in his voice was evident and he quickly invited me and my friend to be his guests at his home. When we arrived on Saturday, this time during the day, Salman hosted us in the best of Bedouin tradition. We sat in his tent, reclining on colorful cushions as toddlers peeked in curiously from behind the tent flaps. The young woman came in silently and served us sage-scented tea, followed by steaming, spicy *maqluba* (a meat and vegetable dish) and then bitter, strong coffee. In fluent Hebrew, Salman told us a little about his life. He was born into a family of nomadic shepherds, not far from Ashkelon. As a young man, he was drafted into the IDF, like many others in his family. His outstanding performance as a tracker led his commanders to recommend him for officer training. At that time, he was already married to two wives and was the father of a dozen children. With humor and sensitivity, he described his experiences among the other cadets in the course, Jewish boys aged eighteen to nineteen. The conversation was lively and the food was marvelous. Our visit extended through the afternoon and when we left, we promised we would meet again soon.

This was the beginning of a beautiful friendship. Once every few weeks, I would visit Salman's home—initially accompanied by my friend and eventually on my own as well. In time, I learned how to navigate the dirt road from the highway to his home, as a trail of exuberant children accompanied the red VW beetle, announcing my arrival loudly. My conversations with Salman became more personal and intense. I felt that he enjoyed my friendship as much as I enjoyed his. I imagined that just as he opened a window to an unfamiliar world for me, I offered him a bridge to the society in which he wishes to participate. Salman visited me at my home in Mitzpe Ramon several times, although I suspect that he did not enjoy my cooking as much as I relished the collations I was served at his home. We met often during that time. We became friends.

I was then completing my graduate degree studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and decided to focus on traditional healing, specifically women healers. Many questions concerned me at the time: What role does traditional healing play in modern life? What is unique about traditional women healers and what distinguishes them from their male counterparts? Does their femininity tinge their activity with a unique hue? When I finished my degree, I had some doubts about whether to continue examining these questions during my doctoral studies as well. On the one hand, I yearned to take long and challenging trips to South Korea, Chile or Okinawa, where I knew traditional women healers practice. On the other hand, I was tired of exhausting treks that led me far from my homeland and family. I wanted to do something closer to home.

One Saturday in autumn, about two years after our first meeting, I was sharing my doubts with Salman when I saw a spark in his eyes. He told me that there are women healers among the Negev Bedouins as well, although he had never visited one himself. He went on to tell me, with much excitement in his voice, that there are more healers in cities in central Israel with mixed Jewish-Arab populations. He knew the names and addresses of several such healers, as well as those of several women who had sought their assistance. It was a chance conversation that set me on this research path, eventually leading me to traditional Arab women healers in Israel and to the women who come to them for help.

I decided not to focus on the healers alone, as doing so might depict them as eccentric and peculiar. Hence my research also covered the social context of their activity and the ways in which they help other women in their communities. In other words, I did not seek to document specific healing rituals or techniques, but rather to emphasize the social aspects of the healers' work, enabling me to discern the realities of women's life, the severe difficulties that women encounter and the special paths by which they cope with them.

Unlike most researchers who studied traditional healing, it was not my schooling and training that attracted me to the topic. At university, I majored in history and comparative religions and in time specialized in teaching. The Department of Social Work at Ben-Gurion University offered me a supportive home base during my years of research, enabling me to examine several aspects of my topic of choice. Because I was addressing an "alien" phenomenon, my research was considered anthropological in nature, with particular attention to medical anthropology that had developed considerably over the past few years. As my research focused on women, it was also linked with gender studies, particularly those concerning Muslim women in the Middle East and their unique coping paths. Furthermore, my emphasis on personal and social conceptions of suffering and well-being entailed a connection with social work and psychology as well.

I trust that the combined contribution of these varied disciplines—each with its unique and distinct perspectives, theories and concepts—will enrich the present study. The knowledge thus obtained, together with information gathered from healers and patients, will yield a comprehensive picture of everyday realities and coping paths among traditional Arab women healers in Israel and their patients in Bedouin villages and in mixed cities in central Israel. Understanding the case at hand may well result in broader insights concerning the situation of Arab women in Israel in general and those in Bedouin and urban societies in particular, underscoring the special difficulties these women encounter and elucidating the coping methods available to them. Such insights will serve students and researchers in a variety of academic disciplines—anthropology, social work and gender studies—as well as contemporary policymakers and government officials who are in contact with the Arab population.

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