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ĀL

ĀL, a folkloric being that personifies puerperal fever; the name apparently derives from Iranian *āl* "red." Although belief in a child-stealing witch that fits the *āl*'s description is attested earliest in ancient Mesopotamia, where it was called Lamaštum, the name *āl* does not derive from Babylonian *ālu*, a kind of demon. The *āl* is found in folklore throughout the Iranian world and also outside it; amongst the Georgians of the Caucasus, it is called *al-i*, and amongst the Turkic peoples of Central Asia *al-basṭï*. In Jewish tradition Lilith, Adam's first wife whose place was taken by Eve, is considered the enemy of women and a child-stealing witch. Jewish talismanic texts against Lilith, which are hung above the bed of a woman with child, contain a garbled version in Hebrew letters of the name of the Christian saint Sisianus, as well as the names of harpies mentioned in the *Works and Days* of the Greek writer Hesiod; it is therefore thought that the talismans are based upon similar texts used by Byzantine Greeks. The Armenians also have such scrolls, called *hmayil*s (seemingly from Arabic *ḥamāʾel*, although there is a derivation also possible from Armenian *hmay-eal*, past participle from a base *hmay-*, from Middle Iranian **hu-māy–* "charm"); in them the help of Sts. Cyprian and Sisianus is invoked against the *āl* and other demons. In popular Armenian legend the *āl* is said to have been Adam's first companion, a fire being with whom he was unable to live. Armenian *hmayil*s often contain painted miniatures of the *āl*, a stunted, rudimentary black humanoid who holds in one claw the bronchial tubes of a human being. Sometimes the saint is shown vanquishing the demon.

In Iran there is no consensus on the *āl*'s appearance or shape, except that it only shows itself to a woman who has newly given birth to a child. Some believe that it may visit the woman during the first six days after childbirth, while others hold that she is in danger until she has gone to the public bath. The *āl*'s actions are not specified, but everyone agrees that the result of its visit will be sickness (*āl-zadagī*) and the death of the mother. According to some folklorists, the *āl* appears in the form of a weak and wretched woman; according to others it is a "female devil." According to one account, the *āl* is a tall creature covered with hair. People of Šīrāz describe it as "white, tall, with cotton-like hair, long beard, long teeth, and white eyebrows and eyelashes." But this seems to be a misunderstanding on the part of the collector of the account, because others always give its color as red, as one would expect from the literal meaning of the name.

Āqā Jamāl Ḵᵛānsārī (d. 1125/1722-23), whose *ʿAqāʾed al-nesāʾ yā ketāb-e Kolṯūm Nana* is the oldest collection of Iranian popular superstitions, describes the *āl* as having red hair and a nose of clay, adding that if you seize it by the nose, it will not attack the mother. It is interesting to note that a clay nose was originally one of the characteristics of Baḵtak, whose attack can also be neutralized by grabbing its nose; Āqā Jamāl may have confused the two. In any case he was no folklorist, but was trying to poke fun at the superstitions of the women of his age; he could well have joined unrelated material on purpose. Nearly three hundred years have passed since the time of the composition of *ʿAqāʾed al-nesāʾ* and one might expect that its extraordinary fame could have changed the popular image of the *āl*, but this has not been the case. During research in a variety of regions the present writer (A. Šāmlū) came across not a single account in which a nose of clay is mentioned as a feature of the *āl*. However, W. Eilers has noted that the *āl* is also called *bīnīgelī* and *damāğğelī* "the one with a nose of clay," and that women in childbed are advised to seize it by the nose, since it fears its nose will break off and it will die.

The work of the *āl* is described in a variety of fashions. According to the people of Gīlān, it puts the liver of the mother into a basket and carries it away. In Bīrǰand and Torbat-e Ḥaydarīya it is said to take away the placenta, dip it into a stream, and thus cause the death of the mother. Āqā Jamāl writes that it steals the mother's liver and carries it across a stream, but as long as it has not crossed water, rescue is still possible.

According to all accounts, the *āl* flees from iron instruments, coal, black color,

and the smell of onions. It will only attack in the middle of the night, when the mother is alone, or when the nurse and relatives are asleep. In most cities of Iran it is believed that if the placenta is immediately interred in such a way that the *āl* can not find it, there will be no danger of the *āl*'s attack. Therefore, the placenta is buried along with a needle, a piece of coal, and a few grains of rue. In Gīlān people fix three to five onions on a skewer and hang them from the wall above the head of the mother; or they stick an onion on the tip of a sword and place it on the wall or under her pillow. On the day that the new mother goes to the public bath, the onion is placed on the steps of the bath and she steps on it to crush it. In Kurdistan the mother wears an iron bracelet, and in Māzandarān a piece of coal is placed next to her bed. In the western parts of Iran a yellow horse is led around the house in order to repel the *āl*'s harm. Putting one or several naked swords in the room of the new mother is another device. Āqā Jamāl writes that the sword should be drawn partly out of its scabbard and placed under the mother's pillow until the day she goes to the bath. He has also mentioned other beliefs that are still put into practice today: The bed of the new mother should not be red, and the midwife should take a sword and draw a line along the four sides of the room, chanting special verses. It is also useful to bring a horse and make it eat barley placed on the lap of the new mother; to put a black woolen rope around her bed; to place twelve cotton wicks blackened by the soot of a pot around the room; to put a rifle in the room. Immediately after the child is born a woman passes a spit through an onion and seven times draws a line around the bed, saying, "I am making a fortress." Other women ask, "For whom?" She replies, "For Mary and her child." Then everyone joins in, saying, "Draw, may it be blessed." Then she places the spit and the onion under the new mother's bed until the day that she goes to the public bath where she crushes the onion under her feet. This last custom is also recorded by Ṣādeq Hedāyat, but the line is drawn with a sword and the crushed onion is thrown into a stream.

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