



BĀBĀ-YE DEHQĀN

BĀBĀ-YE DEHQĀN (Boboi Dehqon “Forefather Farmer”), also known as K̄vāja Dehqān, Bābā-ye Ādam, K̄vāja ‘Abd-Allāh Dehqān, Šāh ‘Abd-Allāh, K̄vāja Kežr, and Šoguni, a mythological and ritual character whose cult has been reported in agrarian communities of mountainous and lowland Tajikistan, North Afghanistan and adjacent rural areas of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan.

As a mythological figure, Bābā-ye Dehqān is believed to be the first man and the first farmer who taught his profession to mankind through a chain (*selsela*) of his successors. As such he is identified with Adam (Bābā-ye Ādam) and his story refers to the apocryphal Islamic versions of the myth of creation, combined with elements of the Iranian mythology of origin. According to the myth, Adam was banished from paradise after having eaten a grain of wheat, given to him by Satan. The archangel Gabriel transferred a pair of labor oxen, as well as farming tools (plow and yoke) to the exiled First Man and taught him how to use them, giving him the seeds of “pure” barley instead of “sinful” wheat. Mother Eve (Bibi Ḥawwā), who seems to have been conceived as a personification of Mother Earth, emerged from a furrow. The first oxen could speak and understand the human tongue, but since they were complaining of their hardships, God ordered Gabriel to strike them dumb; various species of edible plants are believed to have originated from parts of their bodies (for different local versions of the myth, see Mukhiddinov, 1973, pp. 99-100; idem, 1975, pp. 91-2; Dzhakhonov, pp. 103, 117; Krasnowolska, pp. 124-25). These narratives bring to mind not only the myth of *Gayōmart* and his First Bull



(texts in Christensen, I, pp. 7-106), but also that of *Jamšid* (Av. Yima Xšaēta) and his magical objects aimed at the broadening of the earth (*Vd.* 2.7, 10, 14, 18), and the Scythian myth on the three brothers and golden objects sent down from the heaven, as recorded by Herodotus IV.5-7 (cf. Dumézil, 1968-73, I, pp. 446-49; idem, 1978, pp. 171-203).

The gestic of the First Farmer were ceremonially re-enacted by his living representative on earth, that is, a man chosen by a rural community as their leader in farm work, also referred to as *Bābā-ye Dehqān*. He had to be a well-off farmer of unblemished reputation, of a certain age but physically fit, and successful in his work; in some localities it is required that he should have many children. In the Isma'ili villages of *Badakšān*, the role of *Bābā-ye Dehqān* was played by a religious leader (*pir*, *kalifa*), and in Soviet times it was sometimes entrusted to the president of a *kolkhoz*. The function of *Bābā-ye Dehqān* stayed in close relationship with the farmers' professional brotherhoods and associations, once flourishing in Central Asia and similar to craftsmen guilds: They had their holy patron, their rites, and their professional codex (*resāla*), which included a legend on the origins of the craft (Andreev, 1927, p. 323; idem, 1928, p. 167; Peshchereva, p. 358; Mukhiddinov, 1975, pp. 90-92; Sukhareva, pp. 196-97: cf. Krasnowolska, pp. 122-23, 125). The leader's role consisted in scheduling and initiating seasonal farm work for all the community, in particular the spring tillage and sowing, and then the harvesting and threshing. It was believed that anybody who would begin his work before *Bābā-ye Dehqān* would bring bad crops and other disasters to the whole community (Andreev, 1928, p. 167; Kisliakov and Pisarchik, pp. 115-16; Dzhakhonov, p. 111). As a guild master, *Bābā* would introduce a young farmer to his job, put him behind the plow, and instruct him on how to use it. According to Pierre Centlivres (pp. 166-67), in North Afghanistan *Bābā-ye Dehqān* is the patron not only of farmers, but also of urban flour vendors. The rites of *Bābā-ye Dehqān* concentrated around two crucial points of the agricultural cycle, that is, the beginning of farm work at spring (plowing, sowing) and its end (harvesting, threshing) at the end of summer.

At the beginning of spring plowing (around the vernal *Nowruz*, in *Badakšān* called *Šogun* or *Šawgun*), a local *Bābā-ye Dehqān* with his pair of yoked oxen was expected to make a few furrows and to throw a few handfuls of seed-corn, before the others could start their work. Prior to this, adorned oxen were ceremonially introduced into the house of their master and treated to human food. A special kind of bread called "ox's tongue" was baked for the oxen in



memory of their heavenly origin and of their lost ability to speak (according to Andreev, 1958, p. 62, the custom was known all over Central Asia; cf. Kisliakov, 1948, p. 369; Monogarova, p. 75). If some manure was left by the oxen in the house, it was carefully collected and used for agricultural magic, for instance, to shape a pot, in which “Adonis gardens” were sown (for magic uses of the dung in Pamiri valleys, see Andreev, 1958, pp. 83-84; Andreev and Polovtsev, p. 23, n. 10; Rozenfel’d, p. 116; Mukhiddinov, 1973, p. 102; idem, 1975, pp. 96-98, 104-5; for “Adonis gardens” see Frazer, pp. 194-216). At the same time, the spiritual Bābā-ye Dehqān was invoked at the beginning of every stage of work, and offerings of sacrificial food were made to him.

The Earth was believed to die at the end of harvest, and its soul to emerge when the last sheaf of corn was cut. In Badaḡšān and in other parts of Tajikistan, the cutting of the last sheaf was accompanied by mourning songs and cries of the reapers. The soul of the Earth was identified with the spirit of Bābā-ye Dehqān, believed to enter the field during the spring sowing and to leave it at the harvest. The heap of threshed corn was called “Bābā’s body.” It was shaped as a human figure or face, ceremonially “girded” and topped with a “cap” made of a piece of dung, a clod of earth, a fruit, etc. In this role Bābā-ye Dehqān was considered a representative of ancestral souls and identified with the prophet Kežr, the patron of vegetation and fertility. Many taboos and ritual rules were in force at the threshing floor, referred to as Bābā-ye Dehqān’s tablecloth (*sofra*). He may have revealed himself to the reapers in the form of a white snake, a hare, or a beggar asking for his share of the crops (Andreev and Pisarchik, pp. 75-76; Kisliakov and Pisarchik, pp. 143-46; Mukhiddinov, 1971, p. 125; idem, 1975, pp. 102-7; idem, 1986, p. 89; Rakhimov, p. 84; Dzhakhonov, p. 114; Basilov, p. 22; Karmysheva, pp. 62-65; Snesev, 1969, pp. 221-24). James Frazer (V/1, pp. 130-305) described similar customs and beliefs for Europe.

Bābā-ye Dehqān seems to have been unknown in Iran under his Tajik surname, yet many features characteristic of a fertility patron are common to him and the prophet Kežr, who is worshiped throughout Iran. The rites of the last sheaf, and of shaping the heap of corn into a human form, which in Central Asia belong to Bābā-ye Dehqān’s cult, have been recorded for Khorasan, Kermān and the Caspian provinces (see Massé, I, pp. 164, 189; ‘Anāšeri, pp. 27-28; cf. Krasnowolska, pp. 128-29, 136-37 nn. 45, 53); folk chain poems from Khorasan which are, apparently, a recapitulation of the farming cycle (Šakurzāda, pp. 361-67), do not mention Bābā-ye Dehqān by name, but are almost identical with those from Afghanistan, in which he is named



(Ĥanifi, 1973, p 78; 1973-74, p. 36; Puyā, p. 72).

In searching for the origins of Bābā-ye Dehqān's cult, one should look for a character who combines the features of an ancestor of mankind and founder of civilization (Gayōmart and Jamšid in Iranian mythology), with those of a dying and resurrecting god of nature like Siāvoš, whose cult in Bukhara was reported by Naršaḳi (pp. 23-24, 32-33, tr. pp. 17, 23) in the mid-10th century CE. A Sogdian mural painting excavated in Panjikent in 1982, dating from about 7-8th century CE, represents a male god seated against a scene of threshing, weighing, and loading corn. Boris Marshak and Valentina Raspopova believe it to be an early testimony to the existence of the Forefather Farmer's cult in Central Asia.

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