



CHILDREN II. IN MODERN PERSIAN FOLKLORE

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Childbirth (*zāymān*, formal *wazʿ-e ḥaml*) in traditional Persian society, as in many other cultures, has generally been associated with magical practices and superstitions. From the moment of conception the woman is in a state of transition from one status to another, with one foot in this world and one foot in the next (Massé, *Croyances*, p. 35); she is thus in one sense on the periphery and vulnerable to a host of supernatural beings. For this reason she and her community must observe certain rules in order to protect her and her fetus.

Pregnancy. During pregnancy particular attention is focused on the woman's appetite (*vīār* "craving," *zervane* in Khorasan, *ārme* in Fārs, *tāse* in Isfahan) for great amounts or special kinds of food, which often manifests itself in the third month (Šakūrzāda, p. 129; Katīrā'ī, pp. 10-11). According to one folk belief, when she awakens each day the broom trembles behind the door, saying, "She is sure to eat me today" (Massé, *Croyances*, p. 32; Hedāyat, p. 33). Furthermore, if she is denied food that she has seen and desired, it is feared that her child will be born with green eyes (Šakūrzāda, p. 129; Mūsawī, p. 39) or cross-eyed (Nāšerī, p. 93) or will sleep with his or her eyes open (Pāyanda, p. 292). Severe cravings may require treatment with freshly baked baklava (*bāqlavā*) or a



concoction made from three fried and pounded sparrows (Šakūrzāda, p. 130; cf. Katīrā'ī, pp. 11-13). In many parts of Persia it is believed that the sex of the fetus can be predicted from the kind of food that the pregnant woman craves; a desire for sweets means a boy, for sour or spicy foods a girl (Hedāyat, p. 33). A woman who wants a boy should thus eat foods considered “hot,” like chicken, honey, and other sweets.

There are many other methods for ensuring the birth of a boy. As soon as she learns that she is pregnant the woman may ask a male relative to write the name Moḥammad on her right side or have a magician (*do'ānevīs*, see [charms](#)) draw a picture of the patriarch Solomon (Solaymān) on that side (Šakūrzāda, p. 130). If she is active and good-tempered during her pregnancy she will give birth to a boy, whereas sluggishness and bad temper will ensure the birth of a girl (Pāyanda, pp. 295-96). If she starts on her right foot in answer to a summons her child will be a boy, on the left a girl. A number of tests may also be administered to determine the sex of the fetus. For instance, the woman may be blindfolded and told to choose between a knife and a pair of scissors placed in front of her; choice of the knife indicates a boy, of the scissors a girl. Or the knife and scissors may be placed under her pillow while she is asleep; the direction in which she first turns her head will indicate the sex of her child. Another common test involves pouring some salt on the woman's head without her knowledge; if the first part of her body that she touches afterward is her hair, she will have a girl, but, if it is her lips, she will have a boy (Massé, *Croyances*, p. 33; Šakūrzāda, p. 131; Donaldson, p. 26; Hedāyat, p. 33; Katīrā'ī, pp. 14-15). If her right breast swells first the fetus is male, if the left female. Males are also believed to move a great deal in the womb, in contrast to females. A woman who happens to find a needle in the street will have a girl, but finding a pin presages a boy (Massé, *Croyances*, p. 33; Donaldson, p. 26; Hedāyat, p. 33).

Labor and delivery. It is widely believed that saints or benevolent supernatural beings must be present when a woman gives birth. In Tehran, for instance, it is believed that the imam 'Alī must be present, and often the laboring woman invokes the name of Keẓr and Elyās (Katīrā'ī, pp. 24-25). Natives of Khorasan believe that both 'Alī and his wife Fāṭema (daughter of the Prophet Moḥammad) must be present. It is for this reason that a barren woman or one who is seeking a specific favor may attend the birth. After the child is born she blocks the doorway, reciting “O Amīr-al-Mo'menīn, O Fāṭema-ye Zahrā, grant me my wish, or I shall not let you leave the room” (Šakūrzāda, pp. 608-09; cf.



Jazā'erī, p. 87). On the other hand, women whose husbands have more than one wife, epileptic women, and those believed to be possessed by the jinn are not permitted in the room during labor. Should a virgin enter, the hem of her skirt is ripped in order to ensure that the birth will not be difficult (Šakūrzāda, p. 135; Donaldson, p. 27; Katīrā'ī, pp. 26-27).

When contractions begin the woman throws a clod of earth (*kolūk*) in water, saying, “O clod of earth, I wish to finish my labor by the time you disintegrate in water.” She then lies on a bed prepared for her by a woman who has had a good marriage, and a midwife (*māmā*, *māmāča*, *qābela*) is summoned. Formerly there were two or three midwives, Muslim and Jewish, in each quarter of Tehran (Katīrā'ī, p. 23). The midwife first claps her hand loudly several times to scare away evil spirits and jinns, doses the woman with several glasses of a laxative, and massages her belly with almond oil to ensure that the fetus is in the proper birth position. On the floor two stacks of three or four mud bricks (*kešt*) are arranged about 30 cm apart, flanking a metal tray filled with fine ashes or earth and covered with a piece of cloth. Once the labor pains become intense the woman squats (*sar-e kešt raftan* “to climb the bricks”) with her feet on this “birth stool” (Donaldson, p. 26; Šakūrzāda, p. 132; Katīrā'ī, p. 24; cf. Exodus 1:16; and note Polak's comments, I, p. 219). In Khorasan she grips the shoulders of a female relative seated in front of her while the midwife assists from behind. In Gīlān labor pains are classified in groups; the early, less serious, pains are called *kāla dard*, the more intense pains *sīr o pīāz dard*, and those as the baby's head emerges from the birth canal *čār dard* (Pāyanda, p. 24). The woman is given a bottle to blow into and some dried rice to bite on while in labor (Pāyanda, p. 25; Katīrā'ī, p. 25). One of the women present drives a nail into the door frame in order to bring on the final contractions quickly. No one is allowed to leave the room before the baby is born, lest she take the contractions away with her. To facilitate birth, all the knots in the clothing of the laboring woman are untied and all the buttons undone, a practice also reported among the Saxons of Transylvania, Lapps, ancient Indians, and Romans (Massé, *Croyances*, p. 38; Frazer, III, pp. 294-95).

If the contractions are not strong enough, onions mixed with salt may be inserted into the woman's anus, and her vagina may be rinsed with water in which some pomegranate has been boiled (Donaldson, p. 27). She may also swallow an herbal concoction the ingredients of which vary with the locality. Further assistance may be sought through magical rites. For example, a pair of shoes may be placed in a sieve, which is then rotated above the woman's head



several times. Her husband's shoes may be washed in water, which she then drinks. A young boy may be sent to call the prayer (*adān*) from the roof, regardless of the hour; passersby who hear it understand that a woman is having difficulty in labor and pray for her speedy delivery. Sometimes the midwife addresses the fetus, saying, "Come out; we have prepared everything for your arrival." In an especially difficult childbirth the woman's mother may walk around a well or along a stream bank with a Qur'ān on her head. Because in one popular legend Mary is supposed to have grasped a cyclamen (*panja-ye Maryam* "Mary's hand") to help her tolerate the pains of bearing Jesus, in Persia sometimes a dried cyclamen is thrown into a dish of water; it is believed that, as it absorbs the water and swells, the woman will give birth (Šakūrzāda, pp. 132-34; Hedāyat, p. 35; Katirā'i, pp. 26-27; K'ānsārī, p. 14; Donaldson, p. 27; Pāyanda, p. 26). Sometimes members of the woman's family go to the local school and pay the teacher to let the children out for the day, or they pay to have a petty criminal freed. Captive birds may also be set free. All these measures are believed to free the woman from her difficult labor.

After birth. In the 13th/19th century Johan Polak reported a high rate of infant mortality; he found it not uncommon for a woman to have borne five or six children and lost all of them (Polak, pp. 216-17). Owing to the absence of proper hygiene and modern medical care, especially in rural areas, the mortality rate remained high, as attested by a popular saying reported by B. A. Donaldson (p. 28) in the 1310s Š./1930s: "The first child belongs to the raven, the second to the water, the third to the earth, the fourth to the wind, and the fifth to its mother." Concern for the survival and health of the infant manifests itself in a variety of magical practices designed to ward off harm. Once the baby has been delivered, the midwife takes special care to see that it touches the earth on the platter beneath the mother (Šakūrzāda, p. 135). If the newborn is blue or not breathing properly because of a difficult birth and lack of oxygen, a chicken is brought and its beak inserted into the child's anus; the chicken is then struck several times beneath its tail feathers in the belief that it will give breath to the baby. When this ritual is finished fire is thrown on the afterbirth, and the chicken is given to the poor (Šakūrzāda, pp. 137-38). After the placenta appears the midwife cuts the umbilical cord about four fingers from the baby's navel and ties it with a blue-and-white thread. If the baby is a boy or a longed-for girl born after several boys the midwife is paid or presented with gifts (*sar-e nāfi* lit. "before the cord") before she cuts the cord. The baby is then wrapped in a piece of cloth (*pīrahan-e qīamat*, lit. "the shirt of resurrection" because on Judgment Day it will protect the wearer from the



terrible heat of the descending sun) about 60 x 30 cm with a slit in the center for the head. This cloth must be worn by a girl for seven days and by a boy for ten. Sometimes a simple white shirt (*raḡt-e tū kešt* “grave garment”) is put on over the *pīrahan-e qīāmat* in order to trick evil forces into believing the child already dead (Šakūrzāda, pp. 137-38; Katīrā’ī, pp. 27-28). Precautions must also be taken against harm to the placenta. As soon as it appears it is pierced with needles and buried. It is particularly important that a cat not be allowed to steal it, for then the mother will become barren (Šakūrzāda, p. 139; Donaldson, p. 28); in Tehran it is also believed that if a cat steals the placenta a male baby will die from swollen testicles and a female from swollen genitals (Katīrā’ī, p. 28).

In Persian folk belief the greatest danger is from the female demon *Āl*, also known as *Omm-al-Šebyān* (“mother of the children”), who steals the liver of the woman in childbirth and harms the child. Jinns are also believed to lurk ready to inflict harm on the child or to substitute a weak and sickly changeling (*hamzād*). To defend against these dangers a fire is kept burning in the room; iron tools, weapons, or gunpowder are stored near the mother and her infant; and a kind of symbolic diagram of a fortress is drawn around them (*hešārkašī* “drawing a fortified wall”). The midwife or another woman may also draw a line around the bed with an iron spit (Šakūrzāda, pp. 138-39; Katīrā’ī, pp. 30-31; K̄vānsārī, pp. 14-16; Donaldson, pp. 28-29; Hedāyat, pp. 36-37; cf. Penzer, II, pp. 166-69; Polak, pp. 222-23). In Gilān a large onion is peeled and a face is drawn on it; it is then skewered and placed, along with a Qur’ān, pins and needles, and a knife, over the bed in order to protect the newborn against the evil eye and the jinns (Pāyanda, p. 29). Among some villagers in Fārs the child is “sealed” (*bačča mohr kardan*) immediately after birth: Cuts are made on the face, cheeks, and chest with a new knife or blade as protection against jinns and fairies who might attempt to steal the infant (Mūsāwī, p. 36). *Āl* is especially dangerous during the sixth night after birth, called *šab-e šeš* in Tehran and *šow-šiša* in Birjand, which is reserved for a noisy all-night party during which the infant is passed from person to person amid singing, merrymaking, and firing of weapons. In accordance with traditional Muslim practice as reflected in many prophetic traditions (Wensinck, p. 13), on this night the call to prayer is recited in the baby’s right ear and the *eqāma* (the convocation before prayer in the mosque) in the left (Aḡmadī, p. 341; Katīrā’ī, p. 31; Pāyanda, pp. 28-29; Šakūrzāda, pp. 140, 142-47; Donaldson, pp. 29-30; Nāšerī, p. 97; cf. K̄vānsārī, p. 15; Penzer, II, pp. 166-67). Should the mother, despite all precautions, be afflicted by *Āl*, she may still be saved from death.



She may drink the urine of a sexually excited male goat (Nāṣerī, p. 94), or a horse may be allowed to eat barley from her skirt (K̄vānsārī, p. 15; Hedāyat, p. 36).

A number of folk beliefs are focused on the umbilical cord. When the vestiges have dried up and fallen off the child, a piece of it may be placed in a mouse hole to ensure that the baby will become clever and active. If it is buried in a corner of a school or mosque the child will accordingly be studious or pious. Sometimes it is thrown into stagnant water so that the child will become quiet and patient. The dried umbilical cord may also be kept until the baby is older; a child who manages to untie it during play will be prudent and well behaved. If however, the cord is lost the child will grow up to be a wanderer (*sargardān*; Šakūrzāda, p. 141; Pāyanda, p. 228). In addition, the dried umbilical cord may be used to treat some diseases, including eye ailments (Katīrā'ī, p. 37; Šakūrzāda, p. 141).

In Muslim tradition a woman who dies in childbirth is considered a martyr whose sins are all forgiven (Šakūrzāda, p. 153; Wensinck, p. 147; Massé, *Croyances*, p. 36). Should both mother and child die a chicken is slaughtered and buried between their graves so that the number of the dead is greater than two; otherwise it is believed that another member of the family will also die (Šakūrzāda, p. 153).

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