



FOLKLORE STUDIES I. OF PERSIA

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The term folklore denotes, in a very broad sense, the traditional cultural expression of any notable group of people, not necessarily belonging to a specific social stratum. It encompasses a wide field of varying notions, ranging from popular beliefs and customs to myths, legends and other genres of oral literature. Since folklore studies are a comparatively recent phenomena in Persia, a generally accepted standard term for the discipline does not exist yet. Terms proposed besides more specific ones such as

'aqāyed o rosūm and *ā'inhā wa bāvardāsthā* include the (now mostly outdated) general denominations *tūda-šenāsī*, *farhang-e tūda* (*'amma*, *'ām[m]iāna*, *'awām[m]āna*). *Farhang-e mardom* has probably become the most widely accepted equivalent for folklore (see also Omīdsālār, 1986).

Historical Development. The present survey focuses on folklore in its narrower meaning of verbal art. For general folklore aspects of material culture see [ANTHROPOLOGY](#) and [ETHNOGRAPHY](#), for traditional customs besides specific entries see [FESTIVALS](#), for games and pastime activities see [BĀZĪ](#).

In his short sketch of the historical development of folklore studies in Persia,



Abu'l-Qāsem Enjavī Šīrāzī, himself a noted folklorist, in 1970 traced the origins of the field as far back as Āqā Jamāl K̄vānsārī's (d. ca. 1703) *Koltūm nana* (see Katīrā'ī, 1970), a Safavid treatise on women's customs and beliefs. This is, of course, an exaggeration, since the author did not intend to study folklore, while he nevertheless preserved a rare document of prime importance.

The beginning of folklore studies can be detected in the keen interest early Western travelers took in Persia since the 18th century. Apart from the curiosity of individuals the main impetus for the then developing field of Persian studies resulted from the British rule in India since the mid-18th century, where Persian was the language of the court and the intellectual lingua franca, and from strategic interest the Russian empire held in the region (see Shvarts, 1974, pp. 8-21). While the initial focus of Western scholars since the discovery and translation of the Avesta was on religious studies, by way of linguistic interest in dialect specimens they soon turned to collecting items of folklorist relevance, such as folk-tales, riddles, songs, or narratives of everyday life. Pioneers in the field include the Polish diplomat Aleksander Chodźko (1804-91; Chodzko, 1842), Russian scholar Valentin Zhukovskii (1858-1918; Zhukovskii, 1902), British consuls Douglas Craven Phillot (1860-1930; Phillot, 1905-07, 1906, 1907) and David Lockhart Robertson Lorimer (1876-1962; Lorimer 1919), and the Russian consul Basil Nikitin (1885-1960; Nikitin, 1922, 1923, 1929). The eminent Danish scholar Arthur Christensen (1875-1945) not only produced a large amount of important contributions to linguistic, religious, and historical studies, but also excelled in Persian folk narrative studies (Christensen, 1918, 1923, 1936, 1958). Although these scholars authored major studies, only few were trained folklorists. For most of them folklore and folk literature was only a pleasant distraction from their "serious" linguistic, religious or historical concern, and folklore data were seldom collected for their own sake. Thus, their scholarly attitude towards folklore data must be characterized as heavily biased, even though with a decidedly sympathetic touch. There are rare exceptions, however, including Bess Allen Donaldson's study of Muslim magic, based on information collected mainly from women in Mašhad (Donaldson, 1938), and the remarkable general survey *Croyances et coutumes persanes* by the French orientalist Henri Massé (1938), who drew his information from local informants and was helped by a number of renowned Persian intellectuals, such as Moḥammad-Taqī Bahār, 'Alī-Akbar Dehḳodā (qq.v.), Sa'īd Nafīsī, and Šādeq Hedāyat. He classified his data in accordance with the system established by Arnold van Gennep (1922-33; see Senn, 1974), treating a large



variety of topics ranging from pregnancy and childbirth, folk meteorology and divination to magic, folk medicine, games and folk tales. On the other hand, later comparative studies such as those by Wilhelm Eilers (1979) or Fritz Meier (1967, 1974) might define themselves as originating from a traditional philological background, and certainly do not draw on fieldwork experience, yet they too are of prime importance for appreciating the genetical context of Persian folklore.

While the 19th century witnessed an intensive orientation of the Persian elite towards the scientific achievements of the West, Persian folklore did not count as a serious discipline of study and accordingly was not developed. Folklore studies by Persian scholars did not occur until the third decade of the 20th century, when strong nationalist feelings coincided with a growing awareness of the phenomenon of the “common people,” mingled with a romantic urge for unspoiled tradition, for which the Western researchers had paved the way. About a century ago Persian intellectuals began preferring colloquial Persian to the refined and highly artificial language. Jamālzāda in his famous collection of short stories *Yakī būd, yakī nabūd* (Berlin, 1921) combined unadorned everyday language with a love for colorful and proverbial phrases and folk narratives. Other writers such as ‘Alī-Akbar Dehḡodā, Šādeq Hedāyat, and later Šādeq Čūbak, Šamad Behrangī, and Jalāl Āl-e Aḡmad followed the same vein. Dehḡodā in 1922-29 published his comprehensive collection of proverbs and proverbial phrases, *Amtāl o ḡekam*, still unsurpassed today, while Hedāyat was the “first Iranian to study folklore and outline its scholarly methods” (Radhayrapetian, p. 94). Hedāyat in his *Neyrangestān* (1933) published a survey of superstition and folk beliefs and practices, while in his essay “Folklor yā farhang-e tūda” (1945), following Pierre Saintyves, he supplied first general outlines on the collection and documentation of folklore. Hedāyat’s agenda, though highly influential in the subsequent Persian attitude towards folklore, was only put to practice by Šādeq Homāyūnī in his field work study on the folklore of Sarvestān (1970).

Eventually official institutions became interested in the preservation and study of folklore. The Persian Academy in 1938 publicized the intention to collect “regional (*welāyatī*) words, expressions, poetry, proverbs, tales, stories, songs and melodies” (text in Jamālzāda 1962, 92 ff.). Journals such as *Payām-e now*, founded in 1944 by Nafīsī and later edited by Bozorg ‘Alawī, took up the thread, publishing a large number of minor articles on rhymes, riddles, songs and other genres of popular literature. In 1958 the Edāra-ye farhang-e ‘amma,



aligned with the Ministry of Culture and Arts, was founded and reorganized in 1970 as Markaz-e pażūhešhā-ye mardom-šenāsī wa farhang-e ‘amma (later renamed Markaz-e mardom-šenāsī-e Īrān). This institution and its team of researchers were to play a leading role in folklore research. They published a series of monographs and the journal *Mardom-šenāsī wa farhang-e ‘amma* (founded in 1976). Between 1968 and 1974, the field investigations conducted at the institution resulted in the survey of almost four hundred villages and the publication of more than twenty monographs studies (see Radhayrapetian, p. 106 f.).

Meanwhile, activities of another nature had been pursued by Fażl-Allāh Mohtadī, called Şobḥī. While already Hedāyat had proposed radio broadcasts in order to promote the collection of folklore data, Şobḥī in the 1940s initiated a radio program of folk tales, asking his listeners to send in their tales, and eventually published a small series of booklets of Persian folk tales (Rahgoḍar, pp. 13-20). It must be noted, however, that Şobḥī’s primary concern was to entertain; his publications accordingly did not aim at scholarly standards. In the early 1960s Enjavī began performing the radio program Safīna-ye farhang-e mardom, which aimed at collecting and preserving Persian folklore. Enjavī educated a considerable staff of co-workers. He also founded the Markaz-e farhang-e mardom and established the series of publications Ganjīna-ye farhang-e mardom, to which he himself contributed ten volumes of texts and comments on popular customs and tales. Enjavī was not only a gifted orator, but also had great talent in organization. His nationwide contributors received not only pencils, forms, and envelopes, but also his booklet *Ṭarz-e neveštān-e farhang-e ‘am(m)īāna* (1967). The instructions given in this brochure are close adaptations of Hedāyat’s original outline, in much the same as the ultimate organization of Enjavī’s resulting archive in the Markaz-e farhang-e mardom follows Hedāyat’s instructions. Until the early 1980s, when his radio program was discontinued, Enjavī succeeded in collecting an archive of several hundred thousand manuscript texts on numerous aspects of folklore and everyday life in Persia, a mine of information on traditional language, customs, beliefs, tales, oral history, and the like, unparalleled in any other Middle Eastern country.

As a result of the strong national interest and a considerable backing by official institutions including the royal family, in the mid-1970s folklore studies in Persia were thriving. An international congress on folklore held in Isfahan in summer 1977 was attended by a large number of scholars from



Persia and various Western countries.

Besides his own prolific output in folklore studies, Enjavī was fully aware of activities by Western orientalists. He collected a solid research library in Tehran and might have influenced the further course of folklore studies in Persia decisively, had the development continued. However, the Revolution of 1978-79 resulted in a complete rupture, and the ensuing reevaluation of previous activities can best be judged from such publications as a series of collected essays issued by the (then still existing) Markaz-e mardom-šenāsī Īrān (*Majmū'a*, 1983-87). It took until 1985 to found the Organization of Cultural Heritage (*Sāzmān-e mīrāt-e farhangī*), a now heavily centralized institution supervising all kinds of cultural activities, encompassing archaeology, anthropology, and folklore (see Haag-Higuchi, pp. 23-27). The organization, originally aligned with the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education, since 1993 has been delegated to the supervision of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Its relevant activities besides the publication of its journal *Mīrāt-e farhangī* (since 1990) include the organization of a first scientific meeting on anthropology and folklore in 1990 (*Majmū'a*, 1992). The anthropology department, besides educating junior folklorists (up to M.A. level), is conducting field work research within the country on various topics such as water usage and irrigation, children's games, folk medicine, traditional clothing, and storytelling. One of the most recent research projects, conducted for a period of two years, was concerned with a detailed general survey of popular literature (*adab-e 'amma*). No monograph publications have yet resulted from these research projects.

The Markaz-e farhang-e mardom, whose founder Enjavī died in 1993, is now aligned with the research department of the state broadcasting organization (*Šedā wa sīmā*). Most of the former researchers resigned, and publication ceased after the revolution. Some scholars used the archives to produce minor monographs dealing with popular poetry (Banī-Asadī, 1980), divination through the *Dīvān* of Ḥāfeẓ (Rūḥ-al-Amīnī), popular customs in the month of Ramaẓān (Wakīlīān, 1991), and riddles (Wakīlīān, 1996). Rapid changes in directorship of the research department as well as general ideological distrust of the folklore sources have prevented long term projects aiming at preservation and better accessibility of the folklore materials. A minimized work schedule initiated in 1995 consisted in rewriting selected manuscripts sources from the folklore archives for use in the preparation of radio broadcasts. Since the political changes of 1997, the Markaz-e farhang-e



mardom once again enjoys considerable official support, and, if recent promising developments continue, it might soon result in becoming an active and powerful folklore research institution.

Fields of Study. The following short survey of activities in folklore research is mainly concerned with monograph publications (see Zamānī). For article publications see *Fehrest-e maqālāt-e mardom-šenāsī*, Tehran, 2536=1356 Š./1977; Ī. Afšār, *Fehrest-e maqālāt-e fārsī*, 5 vols., Tehran, 1348-74 Š./1969-95; the relevant sections in *Fehrest-e maqālāt-e fārsī dar rūz-nāmahā-ye Jomhūrī-e eslāmī-e Īrān* (quarterly since 1361 Š./1982); and the index journal *Nemāya* (since 1370 Š./1991).

Resulting from the historical development of folklore studies in Persia, the field of study from the beginning was and still is to a high degree concerned with popular language and verbal expression (Katīrā'ī, 1978). Milestones include a dictionary of popular language (Jamālzāda, 1962) and Dehḡodā's comprehensive collection of proverbs (1922-29). Proverb studies until the present have remained a major branch of research, from Amīrqolī Amīnī's pioneering study on the stories connected with proverbs (1945) to the publication of texts drawn from the Markaz-e farhang-e mardom (Enjavī, 1973; Wakīlīān, 1987) and other recent publications (Partovī Āmolī, 1990; Šahrī, 1991; 'Afīfī, 1992; Šakūrzāda, 1993; see also Marzolph, forthcoming, and the faulty and incomplete, though still useful bibliography on proverb studies in Īzadpanāh, 1983, pp. 147-81).

Probably the best researched category of Persian folklore is that of folk narrative (Radhayrapetian; Marzolph, 1993). Early major publications besides those already listed include the ones by Kūhī Kermānī (1935), Amīnī (1960) and Faqīrī (1970). The major collection still is the one published by Enjavī (1973-77). It is in this branch of folklore studies that the impact of foreign research is most productive (see Boulvin, 1971, 1975; Marzolph, 1984). The few post-revolutionary publications of higher standard are either republished (Homāyūnī, 1993) or comparatively small (Moḡarrer, 1986; Mīr-Kāzemī, 1988, 1995; Ravānīpūr, 1990; Mīhan-dūst, 1991). The collection of tales originally collected in the 1940s by the British orientalist Laurence P. Elwell-Sutton (see Marzolph et al., 1994, II, pp. 3-5) from the oral performance of a certain Mašdī Galīn was finally published in 1994, constituting the largest available documentation of a Persian storyteller's repertoire (Marzolph et al., 1996).

As for the connection between popular and classical literature, the remarkable



study by Badīʿ-al-Zamān Forūzānfar (q.v.) on the sources of the tales in Rūmī's *Maṭnawī* (Forūzānfar, 1954; see also Marzolph, 1995) has recently been paralleled by a similar study focusing on 'Aṭṭār's *mat̄nawīs* (Şan'atīnīā, 1990). Enjavī's three volume collection of popular renderings of the tales of *Şāh-nāma* is still in print. It is also the traditional point of start for more recent studies on the professional storyteller (*naqqāl*) and his notebook (*ṭūmār*; 'Anāşerī; Maḥjūb; Afşārī and Madāyenī; see also Omidşalar, 1984).

Comprehensive folklore studies of specific restricted localities, inaugurated by Āl-e Aḥmad's three small studies (1954; 1958; 1960), were pursued on a larger scale by E. Şakūrżāda (1967) and Homāyūnī (1970). Since then, only a few regions have been explored more thoroughly, such as Fārs (Homāyūnī, 1974; Faqīrī, 1978; Ḥabībī Āzād, 1993), Gīlan (Pāyanda, 1973, 1976; Asadiān Kōrramābādī et al., 1979), Boir Aḥmadī and Kohgīlūya (Lom'a, 1970). Recent major studies were prepared by Lahsā'izāda and Salāmī (1991), Ḥabībī Fahliānī (1992), Şarī'atzāda (1992), Atābakzāda (1994) and Panāhī Semnānī (1996). Among specific folklore topics, (children's) games appear to be most popular (Jahānşāh, 1971; Faqīrī, 1974; Şadāqat-kīş, 1981; Amīrīān, 1991). In recent years popular painting again is gaining interest (Tanāwolī, 1989; Sayf, 1990; Idem, 1992; Idem, 1998).

Outlook. Since the beginning, folklore in Persia has been connected with a notion of the "folk" as illiterate masses untouched by modern civilization who had thus been able to preserve old customs in the original, unaltered form. While this notion at certain times might have helped to intensify collecting activities of folklore in danger of extinction, it always risked at being connected with a certain backwardness and the vain wish to preserve times and customs long gone by. While the nationalist impetus of the Pahlavi period could balance a negative evaluation of the folklore by linking it to Persia's glorious imperial past, modern Persian intellectuals often strive to qualify as open-minded and regard folklore as a superfluous relic. On the other hand, since the establishment of the Islamic Republic every cultural activity in the country is assessed by the powerful ministry of Islamic guidance for its accordance with the established set of Islamic values. As a result, some topics, especially those of religious relevance (such as the *ta'zīa*; see Homāyūnī, 1989; Idem, 1976; Idem, 1998; cf. Wakīlīān, 1991) are prioritized. Other topics of folklorist interest, such as the festivities at Nowrūz (Aḍkā'ī; Honarī), risk being qualified as undesirable, either because of their origin in pre-Islamic times or because they simply lack any obvious educational value (see Marzolph, 1994).



Moreover, scientific activities in the field of folklore as elsewhere have to be scheduled in harmony with various responsible institutions, whose bureaucratic nature is bound to strangle innovative research.

Although several monographs with the ambitious general claim of treating folklore have been published in recent years (Beyhaqī, 1986; Mīrnīā, 1980; Sattārī, 1987; Idem, 1991; Enjavī, 1992), a general pragmatic outline of the field still represents a major need. On the other hand, in recent years a number of important folklore studies originating from differing methodological schools have been translated from European languages. These include, e.g., in the field of folk narrative, works of structuralist (Propp, 1989; 1992), comparative (Marzolph, 1992), or mythological (Eliade, 1983; 1995) concern, which have supplied new inspiration to Persian researchers as well as official institutions. In a general level, however, only a small group of Persian researchers strive to continue documenting the still rich traditional heritage of Persian customs, beliefs, narratives. The assault of the modern media coupled with ideological constraints not only restrict the practice of folklore as a living tradition, but also impede its documentation, archival preservation, and publication.

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