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FOLKLORE STUDIES II. OF AFGHANISTAN
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Folklore may be defined as roughly comprising the oral-traditional component of culture, complementary or competitive with an official, canonical “written” culture, but this definition presents certain problems. In Afghanistan in the 20th century, as in Persia until recently, a predominantly oral culture has long mingled with an established, elaborate literary tradition, both religious and secular, including prose and verse forms of verbal art. Additionally, most forms of traditional technical knowledge, as well as values, customs and beliefs in daily life, are primarily mediated orally (e.g. in proverbs and aphorisms) and by shared social practice and formal and informal apprenticeships, rather than by documents. Traditional formal education, purveying various forms of reading and writing competence, is or was also heavily dependent on oral memory techniques; thus, what might be deemed “folklore” or oral tradition is pervasive in daily life and implicated in literary practices. Oral and literary traditions may both depend on and support one another, with much overlap in form and content. Some written forms, such as *robāʿī* and *dāstān*, have clear oral analogues or co-traditions; in the case of *robāʿī*, the corresponding oral form, called *čār-baytī* (or *čahār-baytī*) in Afghan Persian (Darī) language, or *do-baytī* by literary observers, is an epigrammatic

quatrain, usually rhyming aaXa, but operating with a stress meter system rather than the quantitative meter of the literary quatrain. *Čār-baytī* forms are ubiquitous in Afghan Persian dialect traditions, as free-standing occasional verses, as verse forms used in ritual contexts such as wedding songs, and as the discourse of heroes and heroines, embedded in some of the popular, multi-episodic prose romances called *dāstān* (see FICTION i) in literary circles.

Non-literates and literates have had access to written literature through mosque and shrine sermons and study groups (primarily for men; women do not usually attend the mosque in Afghanistan) and recently through cassette tapes of such activities, or through *ketāb-kʷānī*, recreational reading aloud in homes, if a reader and a book are available. Things heard are then quoted in conversations, assuring the mutual permeability of oral and written traditions (Mills, 1991, chapters 6, 8, 12). Reciprocally, high literature has engaged oral traditional materials from the earliest times to the present (Mills, 1994).

In the case of knowledge of crafts, there exist “folk books,” inexpensive lithographs in Persian, Pashto, and perhaps other languages dedicated to certain crafts (e.g. pottery, blacksmithing), giving traditional history and koranic verses and dedicatory and protective prayers for different stages of the work, rendering its profits *ḥalāl* (religiously permitted; Olesen; Rye and Evans, Appendix 5). Individual craftsmen vary in reading skills; their access to such a book might be direct, by reading and learning the prayers, or indirect, with prayers read by another memorized for future use. Other writings supporting oral traditional practice include dream interpretation books, still popular and for sale on the *besāṭ* (sidewalk display cloth) of a bazaar bookseller in Herat in the 1990s, and more specialized works such as compendia of *taʿwīḏ* (written charms) with directions for their use, taken as authoritative by traditional healers and diviners. In one case known to the author, an illiterate woman who had been possessed by *jinn* (spirits) was healed by a traditional religious healer (*šayḵ*) through prayer and exorcistic negotiations with the spirits that were afflicting her. After her cure, for a time she herself divined and prescribed *taʿwīḏ* through controlled interaction with the *jinn* who visited her. With the permission of the *šayk*ò who had healed her, and with reference to a book of *taʿwīḏ* he had furnished her as a kind of “license to practice,” she consulted women clients and prescribed *taʿwīḏ*, which her teen-aged, school-going son would then copy out of the book for the clients, since she herself did not read or write.

Despite efforts at mass education by recent governments, literacy remains a

minority skill much more available to men than to women (in the 1970s, prior to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, male literacy rates were estimated at 15-20 percent, while female rates were estimated in single digits), implying varying degrees of literacy in Arabic (for prayer or recitation of the Qurʾān, without general fluency in Arabic language) and Persian or Pashto. Afghans' oral fluency might be in any of twelve or more languages, some unwritten, in multiple dialects, in which many language-specific poetic forms and whole bodies of knowledge (e.g. embroidery, Paiva and Dupaigne; or local traditions of vernacular architecture, Szabo and Barfield) remain orally mediated.

Thus in a predominantly oral environment, such as Afghanistan's, the domain of "folklore" becomes nearly coextensive with "culture" or "knowledge" itself. The marginalization and nostalgia which literate people read into the concept of folklore are dubiously applicable in such environments. Nor is stasis or stagnation particularly characteristic of oral tradition, despite the value put on accurate memory in a memorial culture. Only with the recording devices of the 20th century did it become possible to compare individual performance texts, and directly assess the stability, or often lability, of oral traditions, revealing that the alleged fixity of oral memorial "texts" may be part of an authority claim in a memorial culture, not an objective fact. Stories and poems like buildings may rely on consistent compositional techniques and materials, but in specific form and content be highly responsive to local conditions of placement (whether a poem in a conversation or a house in a village). A large component of oral traditional aesthetic is "collage competence," in which verbal skill and cultural competence are revealed by one's rapid strategic deployment and interpretation, in an emerging social context, of an item of prior, relatively fixed knowledge (e.g. a proverb, short poem or story, or formulaic descriptions within a story; Mills, 1991). In some forms (e.g. the Pashto *landḍay*, a pithy two-line poem with 14 to 17 syllables in the first line, 7 in the second; K̲ārwaray), improvisation may be valued as well as the knowledge of a body of tradition, and may articulate protest or criticism of traditional conditions as well as celebration (see also Baghban's masterful dissertation on Herātī folk drama). Oral narrative and poetry may respond to conditions of war and displacement; *čār-baytī* in particular are recycled, using their common theme of love, loss, and longing to address by name loved ones lost or separated in the war (Mills, 1996).

While national boundaries cross-cut cultural or linguistic maps, such that much oral tradition in Afghanistan would be very familiar to Persians, the

idea of folklore as cultural heritage, bound up with national identity and the idea of national language, developed in 18th and 19th century Europe (Cocchiara), has had wide resonance in emerging nation-states elsewhere, including Persia and Afghanistan. Folklore forms have been seen as media for ideological argument, normally conservative but potentially progressive, in leftist regimes such as Afghanistan's from 1978 to the late 1980s, which seek a balance among local, national and international priorities. Given the politics of national culture, what we know of oral culture in documentary form constitutes not a direct or complete reflection of the full range of oral cultural property current in the society, but as shaped by the priorities of literate, often nationalist, projects. In Afghanistan, the mid-1960s to the early 1990s saw much folklore documentation, in cultural journal articles describing local traditions and art forms, scholarly case studies and community monographs, some limited discussions in Darī and Pashto of international research methodology and genre theory issues. As in Pahlavi-period Persia, many such publications support claims to national cultural identity, complicated in Afghanistan's case by the legal establishment of two national languages, Persian and Pashto, and by shifting political agenda affecting the documentation or neglect of other major and minor-language traditions (e.g. Turkmen, Uzbek, Kirghiz, Waḵī, Balūčī, or the various languages of Nuristan; note there are relevant publications in Balūčī, Brāhūī and Waḵī produced by local language academies in Pakistan).

The ambitious national cultural journal *Lamar,* published in Persian and Pashto from 1349 Š./1969 into the early 1970s, presented an eclectic, well illustrated mix of reports on such diverse topics as surveys of local varieties of "national" dress, of architectural monuments, archeological sites, of local marriage or seasonal festival customs, along with descriptions of genres of oral poetry and occasional folktales and positive comments on social change. Photos drawn from unidentified archives gave historical depth to some articles, e.g. on Kabul's bazaars. *Lamar* also expressed the pro-western "progressivist" ideology of its government sponsors of the time by determined if discreet, positive efforts to document women's expressive culture as such and by correlating survey descriptions of, e.g., Afghan traditional dance or drama forms, with comparative references to current and past dance or drama forms from elsewhere in Asia or Europe.

Lamar ceased publication in the early 1970s, just as the journal *Fōlklōr* (*Fūlklūr*) was initiated by the newly organized Folklore Department of the

Ministry of Information and Culture. *Fōlklōr* continued to document local traditions, especially verbal forms, customs connected with celebratory events, and, to some extent, non-religious folk healing practices, mostly from Darī- or Pashto-speaking groups, with very occasional articles on Turkic, Balūčī or Nuristani cultural elements, and little or no mention of the religious minorities (Shiʿite Hazāra or Ismaʿili Waḵī). The journal's goal was to celebrate local cultures as part of a shared national cultural identity and heritage, though it evidently lacked resources to sustain the richness of illustration of its predecessor. It observed little or no mandate for tying Afghan traditional culture to international themes and forms as *Lamar* had done. Most articles appear written by individual scholars with direct knowledge and interest in their own local, tribal, or ethnic traditions. Comparative articles juxtaposing or surveying the practices of different groups, within or outside Afghanistan, were rare. *Fōlklōr* continued publication into the mid- to late 1980s, with a politically interesting shift of titles, becoming first *Farhang-i ḵala* under the government of Ḥafīẓ-Allāh Amīn's Ḵalq party in the early 1980s, then *Farhang-e mardom* under the other major Marxist party, the Parčam, which succeeded it (see COMMUNISM iv).

During the Marxist period, the journal and an increasing number of monographs published in Persian and Pashto continued to document customs and expressive forms from different local and ethnic groups, but with some critical attention to the problem of traditional social practices in a progressivist state (e.g. Atayee 1979, 1984; Ḵāwaray; Rūḥī). Although the authors' access to recent publications is hardly complete, it is clear from the available sample that a beginning in monograph publishing visible in the mid- to late 1970s accelerated in the mid 1980s. Much of the basic research for these more recent monographs appears to date from before the Soviet invasion. One of the authors of this article (Ahrary) observed how the decline in security for government sympathizers in provincial cities sent many local intellectuals to Kabul in the early to mid-1980s. The government, concerned to build up some solidarity with diverse populations within the country, then sponsored these publications, often under the imprint of the Kabul Academy of Sciences. Their quality varies, from desultory description to well-planned, conceptually focused treatises, but the net effect is substantial cultural documentation at a most unlikely time, in the throes of the greatest social and cultural displacement the region has suffered perhaps since the Mongol invasion. Some documentary efforts for cultural survival were also published by refugee groups in Pakistan: one is a small monograph describing children's traditional

games, developed for teachers' use by Afghan elementary education teachers in a Montessori-style training project (Raḥīm, Šahābzāda, and Moḥmand). In the early 1990s, a few privately published documents also appeared. The physical survival of this whole body of work is in some jeopardy. Works for sale privately in the 1990s in Peshawar, Pakistan, included some volumes from the dispersed and badly damaged Kabul University library, as well as many single volumes from private collections or the former holdings of bookstores.

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