Encyclopædia Iranica

GILAN XVI. FOLKLORE
Article by **Christian Bromberger**

Published: March 4, 2011
Last Updated: January 31, 2014

GILAN XVI. FOLKLORE

GILAN

xvi. Folklore

The folklore of Gilān is a striking example of the intricate ties between pre-Islamic practices and Islamic rituals.

TREE, OX, AND EGG IN REGIONAL FOLKLORE

This syncretism is particularly striking in the location of the sanctuaries (*emāmzāda* and *boqʿa* for the Shiʿites, and *torba* for the Sunnite minorities of Ṭāleš), and the significance of natural elements in the performance of devotions. In this vegetable world, trees can, by themselves, be objects of worship; they are sometimes identified as descendants of Imams and, more often, they flank sanctuaries. Such sacred trees, sometimes called *bozorgvār* "eminent", or *pir* "spiritual master", or *āqā dār* "lord tree" (see Rabino, 1915-1916, p. 37; Sotuda, I, p. vii; Bazin, 1978, p. 97), display remarkable characteristics: large trunks (older oaks, elms, maples), erect postures and smooth barks (Siberian elms, *Zelkova crenata,* Pers. *derak̲t-e āzād*), evergreen foliage (yews and especially boxwood, locally called *kiš*), and murmur-like sounds (the wind rustling through an ashes' leaves; Bazin 1978, p. 96). Among these trees, boxwood and Siberian elm are the most prized; Aleksander Borejko Chodźko comments: "the bark of their trunks," to which "mistletoe, lianas... and other parasites never attach, has the flawlessness, polish and color of a lead plate. That is probably why they are called *āzād*, free,

independent" (pp. 65-66). The sap of these majestic trees is reddish in color, and thus Gilānis identify it with the blood of the Imams. Even today, old women believe that cutting down an *āzād* tree is an act of sacrilege. Whether they are themselves objects of worship or simply grow near the tombs of saints (see inventories and maps in Bazin, 1978, pp. 98-100; idem and Bromberger, p. 85 and map 40; Sotuda, II, pp. 54-59, 194-95, 202, 204, 212), near cemeteries or inside mosques (as in Bijārbastsar), these trees are places of devotion, each one dedicated to a specific type of wish (*naẕr*), such as the desire to have a child or to be cured of a disease. Pilgrims attach small pieces of fabric to the trees, place candles or small lamps around them, perform sacrifices near them (the sacred tree of Lowšān is significantly called *qorbān-dār* "tree of sacrifice"), or lie down in circles around them on Thursday evenings. These practices do not meet with the approval of Islamic authorities, especially when they depart from references to Imami Shiʿism. It is for this reason that the rites performed around the Jān-e ʿAli *āzād* in Gāziān, next to the tomb of two children, were publicly condemned in June 1999 during a television program, but to no avail. The faithful come here to give water to two snakes nested in the tree, snakes which they believe to be reincarnations of the dead boys (Ḥasanzāda, pp. 524-25).

Forest vegetation is also associated with important Shiʿite ceremonies or rites of passage. During the *ʿāšurāʾ* processions, large metal banners called *ʿalam*s (see ʿALAM VA ʿALĀMAT), traditionally carried by penitent groups, are decorated with boxwood branches. Boxwood is also used to cover tombs during mourning ceremonies. The importance of trees and plants in worship, beliefs and the collective imagination is undoubtedly a major characteristic of Gilāni folklore, an area known for retaining pre-Islamic myths and rites. According to a long-lived legend, the White Div's cave (*ḡār*), accessible only through a deep woodland, is located in the heart of a forest, above Dāniāl, at the border of Māzandarān. The forest thus appears as a place at once hospitable and threatening; its sacred trees are revered, and the persecuted may find refuge there. (Today the lure of the forest is called *jangalzadagi* "forestoxication"; it is unlikely that this is an old expression.) At the same time, these dark wooded areas are reputedly populated by evil *jenn* (spirits) and *pari* (fairies), who are viewed as a source of danger. The forests also shelter wildlife, in particular bears *(ḵers)*, with significant status in local folklore.

High or distinctly shaped mountains are also places of worship (Bazin, 1978, pp. 100-03; idem and Bromberger, p. 85). Among the high mountain tops are

the peaks located on the crest-line separating Ṭāleš from Azarbaijan. Shah Moʿallam, above Māsula, Pir Baqrow to the west of Lisār, Barz-kuh between Asālem and Ṭāleš Dulāb, and Bābā Bolandi ("father height") in the district of Āstārā are a few of the distinctly shaped mountains. Here, sanctuaries, where people may go during the summer, take the form of buildings or simple stone circles and are dedicated to the memory of saints, like Shah Moʿallam, or the mountains themselves are revered as patron saints.

This wild world of forests and mountains is also where supernatural protectors appear and intervene, such as Siāh Gāleš ("the black herdsman"), who punishes ill-behaved animals, rewards deserving herdsmen, and achieves miracles (Hedāyat, p. 165; Massé, pp. 365-66; Ḥasanzāda, p. 27; Arakelova; Asatrian). This stockbreeders' guardian (*ḥāfeẓ*) is a supernatural character common to all pastoral populations in the area, and may have roots in Indo-Iranian mythology. Theriomorphic figures on Amlash and Marlik ceramics (1000-800 BCE; see Negahban 1964; idem, 1965; Biscione) testify to the importance of oxen in ancient representations, while today the range of folk practices that include bovines remains a characteristic element of the Caspian populations' culture (see Bromberger, 1997, p. 123; see below). While cattle are essential in Gilāni culture (beef is a traditional food, oxen are familiar as draft animals and, as mentioned above, they have a specific status in local folklore), eggs are also important and, in fact, even more central to Gilāni culture, if only for their extensive use in cooking (q.v.), games and propitiatory practices. Together with the popular Gilāni combat sports (*košti gilamardi*), it is bullfights (*varzā jang*) and "egg wars" (*morḡāna jang*) (see below) that are, symptomatically, the two most widespread performances and games in the area. Other characteristics of the regional folklore are the rites surrounding rice, and to a lesser extent, sericulture.

Such are the most remarkable features of folk traditions in Gilān; they will be considered in more detail in the following references to the rites of passage, seasonal ceremonies, propitiatory practices, premonitory dreams, supernatural beings, and finally, games and performances. These practices also reveal recurring elements of Iranian folklore, including fear of the "evil eye" and of other people's envy, of threats associated with "quarantine" (*čella*; q.v.), the importance of wishes (*naḏr*), the use of metal objects (needles in particular), and talismans written by exorcists (*doʿā-gar*) to ward off ill fortune, and the divination (q.v.) of signs and portents.

RITES OF PASSAGE

Pregnancy, childbirth and early childhood. Inability to bear children is a curse for which women are held responsible. They are said to be “extinct hearths” (*ojāq-e kur*) or “washers of the dead” (*morda-šur*; Pāyanda, pp. 19-20). To relieve the shame, it is necessary to find its cause. The misfortune may be the result of a spell cast by evil-intentioned acquaintances who, by closing a safety pin (*sanjāq qofli*), “locked the couple” (*qofl zadand*), i.e., have prevented them from having sexual intercourse. In order to “loosen the pin,” one must go to the *doʿāgar* (“exorcist”) who summons (*eḥżār mikonad*) the spirits to identify the source or sources of the spell, and attempts to break the lock by tying the enemies’ tongues (*ʿaqd al-lesān, zabānband*). A woman’s sterility may also be the revenge of a spectral twin (*hamzād*), a spirit (*jenn*) upon whom she may inadvertently have thrown boiling water. The *doʿāgar* then appeals to the *jenn*s (*eḥżār-e jenn*), apologizes to the victim for the inconvenience, recites and writes appropriate prayers on a piece of paper which the woman then drinks with a glass of water. A woman’s sterility may also arise from the fact that the “quarantine” which followed her wedding or a previous childbirth, “fell upon her” (*čella be u oftāda, čella dakata*), which is why she is surrounded with a great deal of care during this period and above all, not left alone, especially at night. The threats hanging over her can be contagious. If two new brides or two new mothers cross paths, they must at once exchange the needles and pins that protect them, for fear that one’s quarantine will “fall upon” the other, as if happiness were a limited good and prey to the jealousy and rivalry of others. If, in spite of all these measures, the woman does not become pregnant, they turn to other traditional remedies that make use of the symbolism of fertilizing water and fruit trees, of the number forty “to cut off the quarantine” (*čella-bori*). The most frequent ritual is that of *čella ṭās*, “the cup with forty (keys),” a brass container, with a bulging bottom, covered with Koranic verses and prayers, to which forty keys are attached and which dervishes, soothsayers, beggars, midwives, and employees of public baths use. An old woman fills the cup with water, blows above it while reciting prayers and praising the prophets, hands it to the young woman who, after having spoken pious words, drinks a small quantity and pours the remainder at the foot of a fruit tree. Maḥmud Pāyanda (p. 21) describes similar traditions of aspersion to ward off the quarantine. The sterile woman sits under a fruit tree and pours on her head the contents of a small pot filled with water mixed with coins hammered by a blacksmith, or the juice of forty plants that she has collected.

Other methods based on principles of analogy (the law of similarity in Frazer’s terminology [p. 41] according to which “like attracts like”), or on the principle

of contagion ("objects that have been in contact continue to act upon one another"), are used to cure sterility. Traditionally, during the wedding ceremony, a child is placed next to the bride, either on the horse that carries her to the residence of her parents-in-law, or at her side when she receives the guests' congratulations. Women who wish to bear children can make a wish while hanging a small cradle to the branch of a sacred tree, or place two stones or two pieces of wood in the shape of a cradle in the courtyard of a sanctuary, or blow into a bottle as she would during childbirth (see below). She may also be asked to drink water used to soak her husband's belt (see Miršokrāʾi, p. 440; Pāyanda, p. 291). Other customs are combined with Shiʿite rituals, such as the practice of the "seven" or "forty plates" (*haft* or *če*[*he*]*l kāsa*). The day before *ʿāšurāʾ*, the woman must take food out of seven or forty dishes offered in mosques and sanctuaries, while she expresses the purpose (*niyat*) of her wish. Whatever the context, she may add to her wish a promise to take her child to Imam ʿAli al-Reżā's sanctuary in Mašhad, or to give him the name "servant of Imam so-and-so" (Ḡolām-ʿAli, Ḡolām-Ḥosayn, etc.,) or to give him the duty of a *saqqā* (water distributor) during the month of Moḥarram.

A pregnant woman has cravings (*iša-kuni*) and with her family tries to predict the sex and physical characteristics of the expected child. In particular, she craves sour tasting foods and so her mother prepares soups of wild pomegranate or green plum. She eats clay willingly (the practice of geophagy among pregnant women is frequently mentioned, for instance by Schlimmer, pp. 45, 299). Positive and harmonious signs are interpreted as omens of a baby boy. Those who look upon a pregnant woman, as well as those the pregnant women looks upon, can influence a child's distinguishing features. If the expectant mother stares at a solar or lunar eclipse and scratches herself, the child will have dark spots on his or her body and a hairy mole, called *māh bagite* ("lunar eclipse"). If she stares at a rose, her child will have a pimple on his or her forehead. If she stares at a dead body, her child will bring an evil eye. By the same principle of analogy, her acts can have an influence on the fetus or the newborn baby.

In the seventh month of her pregnancy, a pregnant woman's mother and her neighbors prepare the cradle's (*gahvāra*) accessories (Plate I) and the newborn baby's clothing: the cover (*rukaš*), the mattress (*gil gili*), with a hole in the middle for the pot (*ḵala*) intended to receive the excrements, the first dress (*ḵešt-a sari pirhan* "the childbirth shirt"), the headband (*lačak*), the protective strip for the navel (*nāf dabud*), etc. In the ninth month, the accessories are

taken on large trays to the son-in-law's house.

Childbirth (*zākčin*, lit. "gathering of the child") is traditionally supervised by a midwife (*mumā, mum-e zanāk*). The parturient woman sits astride the spread knees of an experienced woman, who herself sits on a low stool. To make pushing easier, she blows in a bottle. A large round copper tray is placed underneath her on the ground to receive the newborn baby. If the woman who supports her becomes tired, the parturient woman can go through labor by herself, leaning on superimposed bricks. Some say that girls (*lāku, kor* in Gilaki, *kila* in Ṭāleši) are born facing their mothers; boys (*rikā* in Gilaki,, *za, zoa* in Ṭāleši) turn their back to them, out of decency. The birth of girls is hardly celebrated (a fifth daughter is named *Kefāyat* "sufficiency", the sixth girl *Vassa* "enough"), while the birth of a boy is cause for rejoicing. To help restore her strength, a new mother is given plenty of "hot" dishes (*garm*) (about the opposition between *garmi* and *sardi*, "hot" and "cold," see Bromberger, 1994): sweets, cumin, roast meat, and clarified butter, but she is not allowed to drink water for ten days. The reason for this proscription is the potential threat, during that period, of the *Āl* (q.v.), an evil female spirit and enemy of new mothers and newborns (Massé, p. 44), who lives in springs (see Pāyanda, pp. 26-27; Miršokrāʾi, p. 426; for an equivalent female liver-eating monster in the Turkish world, see Gökalp, pp. 102-03).

The role of the midwife does not end with delivery. She cares for the child and supervises the mother's hygiene, performs a ritual bath on the mother and child on the tenth day following the birth, and then purifies the new mother following recovery (this "fortieth day wash" is called *čehella šuri*). On such occasions, the midwife uses the ritual *čell-e ṭās* ("cup with the forty [keys]") to rinse the mother and the infant. A small celebration is organized to thank her for the midwife's services; she receives gifts (*ḵalʿati*) of money, henna, soap, and fabric. By the attribution of special powers, midwives ensure the transition from nature to culture, from the biological to the social and religious. Significantly, it is they who put the child in his cradle and hand him back to the mother at the time of the *gāradanāʾi* (or *gavāradanāʾi* "placing in the cradle") ceremony, or on the eve of the seventh day following birth. It is revealing that this primarily female celebration should be traditionally reserved for boys. It is punctuated by dance, song and ritual gestures performed to protect the child against the fear of thunder or arguments between his parents. On this occasion, delicacies and bread made with rice by the new mother's own mother are served. It is traditionally the day when the

child is given a name and officially enters into society. He is then laid down in his cradle, a position which causes the back of his head to flatten, thus creating what could be named the "Gilāni flathead shape."

The time-honored tradition of *gāz fašān* (or *dandun forušun*) celebrates the emergence of the infant's first tooth with specially prepared foods. A tablecloth is spread out and various objects (a mirror, scissors, the Qurʾān, a comb, gold coins, a book, a pen, a needle, etc.) are placed upon it. The baby's future vocation is predicted according to the type of object he or she picks up first: if he chooses the Qurʾān, he will be a cleric, if he picks up the scissors, he will be a hairdresser (or a tailor), if he first touches the gold coins, he will be a goldsmith (if the baby is a boy) or spendthrift (if the baby is a girl), etc.

Now performed at hospitals after birth, circumcision (*sonnat sari, ḵatna*) was once practiced by the *salmāni* (hairdresser/barber, and, more generally, the man in charge of body care) when a child was only a few years old (three, five, or seven). The operation was performed, along with a small celebration "during the medlar (*kunus*) season" in autumn, after agricultural labor had been completed and the weather turned cooler (which helped heal the scar). On this occasion, a collection (*dorān*) was taken for the young boy. When several circumcisions took place at the same time, the number of children submitting to the rite had to be odd (here, as in many cultures, odd numbers are considered auspicious, a criterion which also exists with regard to the boy's age at time of circumcision; see Massé, p. 52). When it was impossible to gather together an odd number of children, a rooster (*tella*) whose crest had been shorn was sacrificed to create a symbolic balance (Miršokrāʾi, p. 440). The foreskin, like teeth, is often buried in the hen house, in a safe place out of the fox's reach. This custom reflects the good-luck status of the rooster (Chodźko, March 1850, p. 293), whereas a fox's reputation is inauspicious (Massé, p. 193), but it also expresses the need to protect the child against evil curses and to preserve intact, through burial, all parts of the body for resurrection. Except for the *gāz fašān*, coming-out ceremonies and celebrations are the exclusive domain of boys and emphasize their superior status. Significantly enough, the young girls' ear piercing ceremony, during their first year of life, is not regarded as an occasion for a celebration.

In the past, birthdays were not celebrated. Today, however, they are major occasions for celebration, gift giving and ostentatious receptions, at least in well-off circles. The importance of these festivities reflect a "Westernization" of traditions and a focus in Iranian society on children, who have become the

essential component of family life, often to the detriment of elders.

Choice of spouse, engagement, marriage. See GILĀN xiii. KINSHIP AND MARRIAGE.

Death. Analogical premonitory signs may foretell the death of a relative. Dreaming about losing a tooth or one's shoes is thus interpreted as a bad omen. Dreaming about cutting a Siberian elm (*āzād*) means that one of the village chiefs will soon die (Pāyanda, p. 281). To prevent doom, it is necessary to be protected against the evil eye—a cause for endless worry—but possibly also against the malevolent intentions of those who would harm you through magic (*jādu*) by, for instance, throwing a mixture of camphor (*kāfur*, a substance diluted in water to wash the dead) and soap (*ṣābun-e morda*, used to clean the dead) on your threshold.

Funeral rituals are similar, with a few variants, to those practiced elsewhere in Iran (see BURIAL iv). Women are buried in pits slightly deeper than those for men, another sign of their inferior status. The cemetery (Plate II) is usually located next to the mosque, equidistant from the various hamlets; young children are sometimes buried in a special cemetery, close to an *emāmzāda*. Graves vary somewhat: paupers and the less fortunate have no tombstones, the wealthier have tombstones topped by small chapels built to look like regular houses (perched on four stakes and covered with roofs of two or four slopes), where keepsakes of the deceased are placed. Tombs of the Prophet's descendants, the *sayyed*s, are covered with green fabric. Today, the tombs of the *šohadā* (martyrs of the Revolution of 1978-79 and of the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88) are the most ornate as they are decorated with commemorative writings and tulips depicted as shedding tears of blood and topped with chapels containing objects and photographs testifying to the martyrs' sacrifices (Plate III). The cemeteries in Ṭāleš have specific characteristics: on the one hand, it was customary to plant trees next to the tombs (preferably Siberian elms, *āzād*, boxwood, *kiš*, and pomegranate trees, *anār*; Miršokrāʾi, p. 442), but on the other hand some of these cemeteries are likened to a sacred wood, enclosed by stone walls, where tombs covered with monoliths are sheltered by huge, venerable trees.

During the funeral ceremony at the cemetery, sweets are served (usually dates and *ḥalwā* (q.v.) or *tarak*, a pastry made of rice starch, sugar, saffron and rosewater); close relatives then gather for a meal of *qeyma polo* (rice with split peas). Death is an occasion for the display of grief and several religious

gatherings, such as funeral processions and the reciting of the Qurʾān, on several specific days after the demise (Plate IV).

Dreams and spiritualism are the means by which one communicates with the dead. The disaffected dead may disturb one's sleep, and to ease the resentment *ḥalwā* is distributed to the poor of the neighborhood in the deceased's name (Pāyanda, p. 281; see also below). For news of the dead, one must interrogate the deceased's soul (*eḥżār-e ruḥ*); to identify and locate it (in hell or in heaven), one places a tea glass upside down, a saucer or a gold coin on a sheet of paper where the words "Yes," "No," or some other conventional initials have been written with a big enough space between the two. Under pressure from the fingers, the glass or the coin is supposed to move, guided by the soul, towards the appropriate word or letter, thus providing answers to the questions. These spiritualistic practices are recent and are borrowed from Western cultures: the *doʿā-gar*s (exorcists) of the younger generation control them, whereas their elders are unaware of them.

Depending on how close a relative the deceased was, the period of mourning ranges from one week to forty days for men, and forty days to one year (or longer if the deceased was young) for women. During this period, the men keep their collars open and grow a beard, while the women abstain from using henna or plucking their facial or body hair (Miršokrāʾi, p. 448). The women wear black until an elder, male or female, or a close relative of the deceased gives them a colored piece of clothing or fabric: a shirt (for men), a scarf or a piece of fabric (for women). This gesture officially marks the end of mourning.

PERIODIC CELEBRATIONS

As elsewhere in Iran, two calendars govern the annual cycle: a solar calendar marks the dates of the main holiday activities and celebrations, and a lunar calendar regulates the religious year.

Celebrations of the solar calendar. The thirteenth day of the year (the *sizdah bedar)* marks the beginning of most agricultural tasks, of irrigation, and, in the Ṭāleš and Gāleš areas, the departure of the herds to pastures located at intermediate altitudes (*miān-kuh*); on the contrary, the autumnal equinox heralds the end of harvests, the progressive return of the herds, a peaceful period, a time to slow down and take advantage of earned income (spring is, on the contrary, a difficult period of making ends meet, which peasants significantly call *gedā bahār* "spring begging"). This equinoctial rhythm is

underscored by the density of the festive rites that precede, accompany, and follow the beginning of the New Year. These are similar to European folk traditions celebrating spring renewal; this cultural proximity is more obvious in Gilān than in the more southern areas of Iran. To a lesser degree, the solstices also regulate the year. The winter solstice is celebrated with the *šab-e čella bozorg* (“night of ‘the big’ quarantine”), *pil-a čella* in Ṭāleši, *pil-a berār* (“big brother”) in Gilāki; this period precedes the small quarantine (of 20 days; *ruk-a čella* in Ṭāleši or *kuji berār* “the younger brother” in Gilāki; see ČELLA i). The time of year when seasons change is especially favorable for divination.

In the weeks preceding Nowruz the mood is for games, tricks, and jokes. In the past, traveling jugglers and actors put on shows in rural areas. Bear tamers (*ḵers-a bān*) made their animals climb up trees or climb to the top floors of houses; the tenants would give them rice as a reward and would then give the leftovers to a sickly child to give him strength. Here and elsewhere, the bear, a hibernating animal, symbolizes spring revival and earthly fertility. Songs accompanied the bear tamers’ show and evoked “the old woman” (the “old woman’s chill,” *sarmā-ye pirezan*, referring to the last days of winter, usually ice-cold, reminiscent of the “days of the old woman” in European and Mediterranean folklores). Fire-eaters, called *ʿayyār* or *ḡul-e ātešbāz*, “ogres or ghouls playing with fire,” their faces blackened and their heads covered with pointed hats, displayed their skills. The *lafanbāz* (“funambulist”) also performed in village squares—the *yālānji* (an originally Turkish term, meaning “liar or smooth talker”), chanting his jokes to the rhythm of the *pahlavān*’s acrobatics. Today, in markets or on narrow streets, youngsters and peasants still play *morḡāna jang* (egg-knocking; lit. “egg-war”), a game played by banging two eggs, sometimes colored, while placing bets (on variants of this popular game, see below). This practice and the symbolism of spring revival associated with eggs are very much alive in the alpine world, the Balkans, and the Russian plains. The *ḡul* and eggs are also a favorite theme in the jokes and mimes performed by itinerant actors. In the *ʿarusgule(y)*, a *ḡul*, wearing a rice straw hat and holding a stick and small bells, challenges a *pirbābu*, a beardless young man disguised as an old man, to win the *nāz ḵānom’s* heart, a girl dressed as a bride interpreted by a boy in disguise (see additional accounts in Enjavi, pp. 169-71). The triumph of the *ḡul* over the *pirbābu* symbolizes the victory of youth over old age, and of the New Year over the old one. In the *āhu čāra*, practiced in eastern Gilān until the 1970s, a juggler wrapped in a bag wears a fake doe’s head; a singer begs for eggs to feed the doe (*mi āhu morḡāne ḵore, sad tā be kamtar naḵore* “My doe eats eggs, it eats no less than one

hundred"). The doe has fainting fits as long as it has not been given eggs, as well as cakes and rice (Miršokrāʾi, pp. 427-28). In the *āʾina takam*, introduced to northern and eastern Gilān by traveling entertainers from Ardabil (q.v.), a kind of puppet representing a goat with movable limbs was shown in many various positions; its dance steps were accompanied by songs announcing Nowruz (Miršokrāʾi, p. 429). But before these jugglers came to liven up rural areas, traveling singers (*nowruziḵᵛānān* or *nowsālḵᵛānān*) went from house to house, interpreting songs and poems about spring, love, and social problems, from the very beginning of the month of Esfand (Pāyanda, p. 119; Miršokrāʾi, p. 454; Rafie Jirdehi, p. 70).

Some practices traditionally signal a new beginning and a new (*taḥwil*—change of) year: a spring cleaning (*ḵāna tekāni*), the purchase of new clothes, the most typical gifts (*ʿaydi*s) exchanged on Nowruz day, or bowls (*gamaj*), emblems of kitchens and female culture, which bring good luck when acquired at this time of year.

Ceremonies on the eve of the last Wednesday of the month of Esfand open the New Year's festivities (see ČAHĀRŠANBA SURI). In the evening, one or more bonfires are started, the number of which must be odd in order to attract good luck. Depending on the area of Gilān, rice straw (*kuluš*), or bushes (*gavan*) are piled up, as well as old brooms, symbols of the outgoing year. In order of age, the members of the household jump over the blazing fire (*kul-kule* or *gul-gule čāršanbe* in Gilāki, *kilikili čāršamma* in Ṭāleši), and pronounce propitiatory ritualistic formulas: *Čam bedar, ḡoṣṣe bedar, gule-gule čāršanbe, be ḥaqq-e panjšanbe, nekbat beše, dawlat bāqe* ("Sorrow out, anguish out, embers' Wednesday, upon the sanctity of Thursday may misery leave, may happiness remain!"; Rabino, 1915-16, p. 36) or *mi zardi beše tiro, ti suri bāyi miro* ("Take away my paleness, give me your radiant redness"). The ceremony takes place in an atmosphere of jubilation, with firecrackers exploding. Other rites traditionally performed to bring good fortune were practiced on Wednesday eve. Women who wished for better fortune (a child, their husband's affection, etc.) asked a young boy to untie the belt of their pants and thus to release their problems (see Rabino, 1915-16, p. 37). In pastoral areas, shepherds brought well-fed lambs to houses after coating their backs with henna, and wrapping their necks with bright colored scarves. These visits were considered as good omens. Several customs resemble carnival runs. The *qāšoq-zani* ("banging of spoons") consists in hiding near a house and making noise by banging a spoon on a bowl. The house owners fill the bowls with sweets, in particular *ājil-e*

čāršanba (“Wednesday’s dry fruits and nuts”), which are supposed to chase away difficulties. Young people may seize the occasion to seek out a girl or a boy in the house. The *šāl-andāzi* (“throwing of the scarf”) may also be used to declare one’s love and find out if the sentiments are mutual. The young man slips a piece of fabric to which he ties a flower under the door, or lets down a basket from the roof; it is returned with a little food, a silver coin or perhaps an object belonging to the girl. Ritual thefts in stores, performed while making a wish, may occur during this period of merrymaking. If the wish comes true, the young thieves refund the storeowner. The evening of the last Wednesday is also a privileged moment for divination: at crossroads, for example, it was common practice to eavesdrop on passers-by and predict, depending on what one hears from snatches of their conversation a good or bad future (this practice, common to most parts of Iran, is called *gušāmanda* “prediction through the ears” in Ṭāleši).

Whereas fire is prevalent as a symbol of passage from one year to the next, the symbol of water as a source of fertility is also widespread. In eastern Gilān, young people used to fill a jug with water, spray their faces with it for good health and then pour some of the water on the fields to ensure a good harvest. It was also a tradition to jump over streams to ward off misfortune and disease. In Ṭâleš, food was left for the *čāršamma-ḵātun* (“the Wednesday fairy”), a supernatural creature living in water and seen only at night, at the bottom of the oldest well in the area. Satisfied with the received attentions, the *čāršamma-ḵātun* brought prosperity and made wishes come true (see Miršokrāʾi, p. 456; Rafie Jirdehi, p. 71).

The *kul-kule čāršanba* festivities end with a meal that suggests the arrival of spring: rice with herbs (*sabzi-polow*), stew made with chives (*tara*) and fish. The day before the equinox, a tablecloth (*sofra*) is set and on it are placed the *haft sin* (q.v.). Next to the seven or more *haft sin*, are placed foods symbolizing spring renewal (watercress, painted eggs, etc.), sweets (*nun-e berenji*, “rice bread” which are consumed in large quantities during this period, a gold fish in a jar, which is supposed to make sudden revolving move at the turn of the equinox, signifying the advent of the New Year, a mirror, a Qurʾān and two candlesticks. The arrangement displayed on the tablecloth reveals the combination of Iranian national traditions, regional habits, and the influence of Islam in local folklore (Plate V).

New Year’s day is celebrated with a family meal, which may include *zaytun parvarda* (olives aromatized with nuts and pomegranate), fresh spring herbs,

polow zerešk (rice cooked with barberries), and *māhi-fefij* (stuffed fish). The advent of the New Year has a prophetic value, as does the first day of each month. A close relative known to be light footed (*sabok pā, ḵᵛoš qadam*, *pāhdamuj*), is invited to walk over the house floor, to bring good luck. He traditionally comes with a container filled with water that he throws on the front entrance, boxwood or other evergreen branches that he hangs on the front door, flowers that he places in an alcove, and a Qurʾān and mirror that he places on the tablecloth (Pāyanda, pp. 168-70; Miršokrāʾi, p. 456). To attract good fortune, the parents place bills in *sabza* after cutting their extremities with scissors. The weather on the first four days of the year is supposed to forecast that of the four seasons to come. Visit upon visit of close relatives are punctuated by the words *šimi ʿid mobārak! Karbalāʾi bāšid!*" ("Happy holidays to you! May you make the pilgrimage to Karbalāʾ!"), etc., until *sizdah bedar* (see above), which marks the end of the period of New Year celebrations. It is a time for courteousness, reconciliation and gift giving (in eastern Gilān, the children, each carrying a stick with a bag at the end, make collective rounds of the village for the occasion). These holidays are also the most popular time for weddings and pilgrimages to the *emāmzāda* (q.v.). But for all that, the dead are not forgotten and plates with wheat grass grown from sprouts are placed on tombs. The arrival of swallows also heralds the New Year; they are called *ḥāji-ḥāji* locally, like pilgrims who might have wintered in Mecca before migrating to colder climates at the beginning of the mild season.

To ward off the ill fortune associated with the number 13, families leave their houses on the *sizdah bedar* and go picnicking outdoors. This joyful alfresco meal includes rice, roasted meat, and, as a sign of spring, salad powdered with sugar, soaked in vinegar and aromatized with *delār* (a salted mixture of grass and several varieties of mint; it also includes a dish made with wild cornelian cherries [*aḵte*], morello cherries and dried plums cooked with salt, known for its energizing properties). This day, spent outdoors, is also a time for games and a privileged moment to declare one's love. Young people may take an oath by tying blades of grass together. This ritual gesture may also accompany an individual wish to untie personal difficulties, acquire a house or find a husband. "*Sizdah bedar, sāl-e digar, bačča be-baqal ḵuna-ye šowhar*" ("Out with the thirteenth, next year, a child in [your] arms, in [your] husband's house") is said to girls who take a long time to find a husband. To signal the end of a cycle, the wheat grass is thrown in the sea or in a river and the tablecloth where the *haft sin* were placed is put away. The following day, the painful work begins of cleaning the irrigation canals and preparing the seedbeds that

are usually fertilized with ashes from the fire set on the eve of the last Wednesday (Bromberger, 2008, pp. 51-54).

More than the summer solstice, the winter solstice sets off the great quarantine (*čella-ye bozorg*) and is a time for ritual gatherings. On the evening preceding the solstice (the night when the quarantine begins: *šab-e čella*) the family gets together and shares a meal; they eat "cold" food: watermelons, to remember the summer, medlars (*kunus*) previously soaked in water to remove their bitterness, oranges, etc. The consumption of cold food is meant to protect them against the excessive heat that they are likely to endure during the summer to come. This night is also a privileged moment for divination, in particular for *fāl-e Ḥāfeẓ* (a poem by Ḥāfeẓ is picked at random and considered as an omen). The *tirmāsinza*, the 13th day of the month of Tir, in the Gāleši calendar, corresponding in the Iranian calendar to 27 Ābān, and in Gregorian calendar to 18 November, is also a traditional time for the practice of fortunetelling in eastern Gilān. Each participant drops a personal object (a ring, a pearl, a barrette, a button, etc.) in a container filled with water while making a wish. The Master (*ostād*) picks up the objects successively, while singing a quatrain that provides a positive or negative answer to the wish that was formulated (on this rite of divining fate widely performed in Mediterranean societies, see Cirese). During the *tirmāsinza* the *lālšuszani* ("hitting with sticks in silence") was also practiced. A member of the family gently strikes people, animals and buildings to invite prosperity.

Ceremonies of the lunar calendar. The first day of the lunar month has a premonitory significance, just like the first day of the solar month. As soon as one sees the crescent moon, one should turn one's eyes to a person known to bring good luck or to an object or to natural elements that represent light and purity such as a mirror, a Qurʾān, running water, vegetation, etc. On this occasion, *ṣalawāt* (invoking of blessings on the Prophet and his House) are voiced, prayers said, and wishes made. Arrangements are made for a privileged relative (*ḵ*^{v}*oš-qadam*) to walk the floor of the house, though sometimes he is asked not to return at the beginning of the next month if luck was not good (another good-luck charm must then be performed; Pāyanda, pp. 168-70; Miršokrāʾi, p. 449). But the lunar calendar is above all a calendar of religious rites, with the traditional high points on *tāsuʿāʾ* and *ʿāšurāʾ* (9 and 10 Moḥarram), the pain inflicting celebrations of the martyrdom of the third Imam, Ḥosayn, and his family; *arbāʿin*, the commemoration of *ʿāšurāʾ*, forty days after (20 Ṣafar); the anniversary of the death of the Prophet and of Ḥasan,

the second Imam (28 Ṣafar); *ʿOmar-košun*, the carnivalesque account of the murder of the usurping caliph according to Shiʿites (9 Rabiʿ I); the anniversary of the birth of ʿAli, the first Imam (13 Rajab); the anniversary of the sending of the Prophet on a mission (27 Rajab); the anniversary of the birth of the Twelfth Imam (15 Šaʿbān); the fast during the month of Ramadan, which includes the anniversary of ʿAli's death (21 Ramadan) and ends with the *ʿId-e feṭr*; the *ʿId-e qorbān*, the celebration of sacrifice (10 Ḏu'l-ḥejja); and the *ʿId-e qadir*, the commemoration of the Prophet's appointment of ʿAli as his successor (18 of the same month). Obviously, the rites honoring Imams are not celebrated by the many Sunnites in Ṭāleš (Bazin, II, pp. 196-201; idem and Bromberger, map 40), but these differences do not cause serious disagreements in the villages where two mosques often coexist, one for the Sunnites, the other for the Shiʿites: during the celebrations of *tāsuʿā*ʾ and *ʿāšurā*ʾ, the Sunnites usually stop working in consideration of their Shiʿite neighbors (Bromberger, 2009). On the other hand, relations with the Ahl-e Ḥaqq (q.v.), stigmatized under the name ʿAli-elāhi, who perform their rites in a specific room, the *jām-ḵāna*, are much more tense. However, in villages where they live together with Shiʿites, the Ahl-e Ḥaqq make up a specific group of penitents and join the mourning procession in the month of Moḥarram.

Each locality has its own mosque—where a preacher comes for the most important ceremonies—and most of them have a sanctuary containing the remains of an *emāmzāda* or, in Sunnite areas, a *torba*, the tomb of a hallowed religious figure. The typical landscape selected to erect these small sanctuaries was mentioned above. At the height of ritual celebrations, and according to the season, crowds of the faithful flock to the great centers of devotion. A centers' prestige is due to one or several factors: their situation in large cities (Dānā ʿAli's tomb in Rašt, Čahār pādšāh "the four kings' tomb" in Lāhijān): their location on main roads: Emāmzāda Qāsem on the road to Āstārā, Emāmzāda Ḥamza in Lowšān, and especially Emāmzāda Hāšem on the road between Rašt and Tehran, where most of the gifts from the faithful are collected, after Āstāna; their location as a wooded mountainside site, combining devotions with a pleasant stay in the country: Shah Milarzān, Emāmzāda Esḥāq, and especially, Emāmzāda Ebrāhim, whose administrator (*motawalli*) built a small commercial city and "hotels" out of wood to accommodate tens of thousands of pilgrims each summer (Bazin, 1977, p. 209); the prestige of the deceased: the Gilaki poet Pir Šarafšāh who is buried in the Haft Daqanān forest near Reżwānšahr, or Shaikh Ebrāhim Zāhed Gilāni, the spiritual master of Shaikh Ṣafi-al-Din Ardabili, the founder of the Ṣafawiya Sufi order, whose body was

taken from Ardabil in 1457 to the Shaikh Ḵānbār mausoleum, near Lāhijān, thanks to Solṭān Ḥaydar the Safavid, and especially, Solṭān Sayyed Jalāl-al-Din Ašraf, a descendant of the seventh Shiʿite Imam Musā b. Jaʿfar, whose coffin, it is said, was set adrift on the current of the Safidrud river and buried where it landed, in keeping with the deceased's will. The Solṭān Sayyed Jalāl-al-Din Ašraf mausoleum, Āstāna Ašrafiya, gave its name to the town of Āstāna, which, thanks to its central location in the province, appears as the religious capital of Gilān. It is where the greatest number of the faithful gathers during the ritual periods of mourning in the month of Ramadan, etc. During the *tāsuʿāʾ-ʿāšurāʾ* ceremonies, peasants from Qāsemābād, the easternmost part of the province, mingle with townspeople from Langarud, Lāhijān, or Rašt.

Islamic ceremonies organized by specific institutions, and subjected to elaborate sets of laws are, for the most part, outside the field of folklore even when they blend with popular traditions more or less severely condemned by clerics. We shall therefore only present the main characteristics of these rituals and the regional variants that make them unique.

During the first ten days of Moḥarram, pain inflicting rituals take place here as elsewhere in Iran, and reach a climax on the eve and the day of *ʿāšurāʾ*. In the mosques, in the *ḥosayniya*s (q.v.; places devoted to the memory of the third Imam), in the courtyards of the *emāmzāda*, preachers commemorate mourning (*rawẓa-ḵᵛāni)* while relating the tragic events of Karbalāʾ. *Taʿzia* ("mourning demonstrations"), stage performances of the drama (Plate VI), are organized.

Their tie to Ḥosayn, the "prince of martyrs," is fervently expressed during processions of groups of penitents (*dastagardāni*; Plate VII). Each group generally brings together men from the same hamlet (*maḥalla*), the basic space and social unit in Gilān. In the cities, groups can be made up of men of the same profession or affinities.

At the end of the celebration, during the *šām-e ḡaribān* (the "suppertime of the strangers"), young people dig up a hole with spades (*čelāru*) to offer Ḥosayn a grave. The following day, 72 loaves of bread are traditionally distributed to the poor as a way to symbolically feed the famished captives.

These rites of affliction, just like those of the fortieth day (*arbāʿin*) and of 28 Ṣafar, create a singular emotional and relational atmosphere that contrasts with the hardness of everyday interaction. They also make it possible to state

periodically where one belongs: those who emigrated continue to join their original *dasta*; preachers are often "local people" who return to the village, with a prestige acquired in the city; during *tāsuʿāʾ* (the ninth day of Moḥarram) and *ʿāšurāʾ* (the tenth), the *dasta* visit sanctuaries in neighboring villages and small towns, and emphasize, through ostentatious demonstrations, the ambiguous character of neighborhood relations. On the one hand, these visits show a common belonging to a territory, on the other hand they reveal the competition between local groups: fighting with chains between young people of different *dasta* is not uncommon. The ceremonies also give boys an opportunity to handle heavy chains and practice *qama-zani*, a practice which has been prohibited in 1994 by the clerics. Let us note, as mentioned earlier, that the large *ʿalāmat*s are decorated with boxwood branches (*kiš*). It is a revealing example of the intricate mix of "orthodox" rituals and regional traditions.

The atmosphere of the traditional *ʿOmar-košun* festival is very different. The usurping caliph comes to life as a burlesque rice straw (*kulaš*) mannequin with a hideous mask on his face, and an eggplant between his legs. He is placed in lavatories, while *ʿOmar ṣawṭ-ḵʷān* (ʿOmar singers) fustigate the despised character with crude gestures and words (see examples of these songs in Pāyanda, pp. 196-97).

In the lunar months of Rajab and Šaʿbān, the celebrations commemorating the birth of ʿAli b. Abi Ṭāleb, his marriage, and the birth of the Twelfth Imam, the Mahdi (on this occasion the village streets are decorated) are followed by the Ramadan fasting. In the villages, a horn (*šeypur*) is blown to announce the time for *saḥari* (meal taken before dawn) and *efṭār* (the breaking of the fast shortly after sunset). Two heavy meals are served before and after daylight during the fast, and the day ends with long lively evenings spent eating sweets. The month of Ramadan is punctuated by ceremonies that commemorate the death of ʿAli. The third day following his birthday, the angels are supposed to come to earth to make wishes come true for the supplicants, and to relay back to heaven information on people's behavior. The traditional dish on this occasion is a propitiatory soup (*āš-e Fāṭema-ye Zahrā*) made with chickpeas and lentils.

At the time of *ʿId-e qorbān*, which commemorates the sacrifice of Abraham, those who can afford it slaughter a sheep, or sometimes a cow, by cutting its throat or they have it slaughtered by someone else and share the meat with their neighbors and with the poor. The less fortunate get together and buy an

animal or kill a rooster. The sacrificed animal must be healthy and whole. If a sheep is bought several days ahead, it is entrusted to the care of children who cover its fleece with henna and look after his food. An animal whose horns have been decorated with flowers is a favorite gift from the fiancé's family to the future bride's family at the time of ʿId-e qorbān (Miršokrāʾi, p. 454). During the ritual killing, the animal's head must be turned towards Mecca; before its throat is slashed, the animal's mouth is coated with sugar to make death sweeter (on the obligation to treat victims with dignity, see Brisebarre, p. 108). The blood shed by the animals must not be soiled (that is why it is buried) because it is considered as pure and known to have beneficial virtues (as a cure for nail and foot disease, for example; Pāyanda, p. 178). On the Day of Judgment, the sacrificed animal is believed to carry his owner on his back across the *pol-e ṣerāṭ*, which leads to heaven (Plate VIII).

The *ʿId-e qadir*, the last celebration in the lunar year shows some similarities with Nowruz. It is a day of gift giving (given particularly by the *sayyed*s, descendants of the Prophet and the Imams), and of visits to important members of the family. Soon after the celebration, the mourning and tears of the month of Moḥarram will start the new annual cycle of ceremonies.

WARDING OFF ILL FORTUNE, ATTRACTING GOOD FORTUNE, READING THE FUTURE

Religious celebrations, ceremonies, and pilgrimages to the *emāmzāda* are privileged moments to make wishes (*naḏr*) for happiness (*ḵošbaḵti*) and to offer propitiatory prayers to ward off bad luck. Watchfulness against the dangers of evil, however, is not limited to certain periods of the year. It is an everyday business as the omnipresent *čašm-e šur* ("the salty eye," "the evil eye") threatens human beings, animals, plants, etc. Watchfulness is at its highest point in the presence of individuals known to bring bad luck, of a man or a woman suspected of failing to purify themselves after sexual intercourse, of foreigners, or of whoever praises the beauty of a child, a particularly fragile creature, because such comments imply desire and jealousy (*ḥasudi*) which bring an evil eye. To avoid it, ritual formulas are said, some religious (*Māšāʾ Allāh*, "What God wills!"), some not (*čašm-e ḥasud kur beše!* "May the jealous eye be blinded"). Here, like elsewhere in Iran, a current practice to ward off the evil eye is to burn wild rue (*esfand*) seeds and spread the fumes around the head of the one who needs protection or to burn a thread discreetly pulled out of the suspicious person's clothes. These gestures are accompanied by a phrase

such as *čašm-e došman/ḥasud betarake* “May the eye of the enemy/the envious burst” or by a *ṣalawāt*, naming all those suspected of guilt. The egg is very often used to avert these dangers and bring in happiness. It is heated in a pot without water until it bursts, thus destroying the evil eye. To determine the culprit, one black line is traced on the shell for each suspect; each part of the egg is pressed above a bowl or a tray until the first breaking point reveals the culprit; the bubbles in the egg white are then isolated and burst, thus blinding the evil eye. To complete the process of warding off the curse, the victim must bind the eggshell to his arm and wear it for three days. Eggs are broken when new cycles begin, to guard against misfortune and to bring good luck: they are crushed under the wheels of a newly acquired car or a car that has just been repaired; as well as on the ox’s forehead before plowing and, in the old days, on the bull’s forehead before the bull fight, *varzā jang* (Bromberger 1997, pp. 123, 127). Eggshells are placed on branches in the gardens (Plate IX) and in the nurseries. Other methods are used to blind or chase away the evil eye: cow horns are planted in the rice plantations after transplanting (*nešā*); a horse or a boar’s skull may be hung in the fields or near beehives; a medallion, a good-luck charm holding a Qurʾān verse may be attached to a child’s cradle or around his neck, or even a shiny blue pearl whose color attracts the “salty eye” (*čašm-e šur*) and keeps it off the small child. If the effect of the magic spell persists, a visit to the village or nearest town’s “exorcist” (*doʿā-gar* in Gilaki, *neveštasas* in Ṭāleši) may be necessary. He, too, resorts to the virtues of eggs to fight off the curse. He writes a Qurʾān verse or draws a talismanic drawing on the shell before breaking it or bursting it.

Another nuisance threatening everyone is the evil spirits (*jenn*, *pās* in Gilaki) who inhabit the dark, roam the forests, live under houses or in gloomy, rundown buildings. These creatures of the night appear in various forms; sometimes they are strangers who cross one’s path and disappear at once; they may be wrapped in large veils (*čādor*; q.v.), or have characteristic features (large rounded toeless feet, receding chins) or let their hair hang down or display their hair-covered bodies; sometimes they appear as animals, such as snakes, black cats, ants, chicks, or horses. To see a *jenn* and—worse—to treat him badly, especially if he is your twin—*hamzād*—(each individual has a *jenn* since birth), will get you into serious trouble. Countless precautions not to inconvenience them must therefore be taken. In the evening, one must not throw boiling water in the courtyard for fear of harming them; should it happen accidentally, the *besmellāh* phrase must be uttered at once (In the name of God, the merciful and forgiving) to dispel their anger. Objects made of

iron, a metal feared by *jenn,* are placed around the house. These evil spirits' revenge can cause small marks on one's body (such as spots on thighs) and can go as far as possession (*jennzadagi* "*jenn*-struck"), which results in a change of appearance and behavior (a tendency to laugh, a widening mouth, epileptic fits, madness sometimes associated with psychic powers). The *jenn*s may also get their revenge by substituting one of their children with his human twin. To stop these aggressions, various objects are used: pins, whose protective power was mentioned earlier, shells from the Persian Gulf called *šomuqā,* which are filled with water for the possessed victim to drink. But it is often necessary to turn to the Saints (by going on a pilgrimage to an *emāmzāda*) or to the exorcists. In the latter case, the *doʿā-gar* appeals to all *jenn* (*eḥżār-e jenn*) and begins by praising their king; the *jenn* who harassed the victim then appears in the reflection of water or in a mirror; he gives the reasons for his anger and reveals the cure. The *doʿā-gar* places a seed of tare (*māš*) on the *jennzada*'s head, wets his face with rosewater and gives him the texts of the prayers that he will soak in water and drink or whose smoke he will breathe when burning them.

Several methods—general or more specific—are used to influence fate, to protect loved ones, to neutralize enemies (see Massé, pp. 291-328). Here are some examples. To protect a traveler, facilitate healing, or guard against the harmful effects of a premonitory dream, one must make three or seven circles around the head of the person in need of protection or help with a cup filled with rice. The content of the cup is then given as a gift (*sar ṣadaqa*: "gift of the head") to the poor. Wishes (*naḍr*) often made during meals (*sofra*) in sanctuaries also come with promises of recurrent gifts or engagements. Rites performed under the guidance of a *doʿā-gar* have more specific goals such as finding a missing person by asking a pre-pubescent child placed in front of a mirror (the *doʿā-gar* appeals to the mirror beforehand; *eḥżār-e āʾina*) to describe the images appearing to him; or recover one's memory by reading from the Qurʾān, the 36th chapter (Yā-Sin), five times a day and by consuming five dates a day before meals; or drive away troublesome people by throwing, in their path or on the thresholds of their houses, the text of an invocation soaked in water; or put an end to malicious gossip (*bad-guʾi*) by tying, with an invocation known as *zabān-bandi* ("tying of the tongue"), the tongue of the slanderer; or cure the excessive sensuality of those who overindulge in sexual activities (*šahwatrān*) by making them drink from a bowl on the rim of which the invocation was written.

Original propitiatory practices are used to help make agricultural work trouble-free. These rites are particularly intense at the beginning of farming cycles and at the most sensitive times of year, when failure to achieve difficult tasks could endanger the whole process. At the beginning of the New Year, when the peasants started plowing, they used to throw sugar, coins or nuts on their ox and, as mentioned earlier, they crushed an egg on its forehead or under its leg. Nuts were the symbolic representation of large rice grains that everyone wished to harvest. To ensure success, *varzā muš* ("the ox's handful"), the last handful from the preceding harvest set aside and hung from the ceiling of the house, was also given to the animal. But ritual watchfulness is most intense in the nurseries (*tumbijār*), where the young seedlings are likely to yellow. After sowing, the women usually plant a rush, or the branch of a flowering or evergreen tree in the center of the nursery: a branch of alder (*tusa; Alnus barbuta*) in the area of Langarud, or quince tree (*beh*) which bears one of the fruits of paradise, in the southern plain of Rašt, or boxwood (*kiš*) in the northern area. This auspicious plant, which helps foliage growing green, is regarded, here and there, as the young wife of the nursery (*ʿarus-e tumbijār*). As an additional protective measure, it is sometimes covered with an eggshell. To ensure favorable conditions during transplanting, a new bride, a *sayyeda*, or a *sayyed*'s wife is asked to launch the operation. After the second weeding (*dobara*), the women traditionally plant a green branch of *tuska* (*Alnus subcordata*) on one of the small flood-banks in the rice plantation and wish the ears (*gūša*) good life.

Silkworm breeding was also the object of propitiatory rites and specific precautions. An egg was placed near the containers where the newly hatched (*toḵm-e noqān*) caterpillars (*vor)* were stored. Women were prohibited from coming close to the silkworm nurseries during their menstrual periods. The presence of a grass snake (*Coluber aquaticus*) in the building, or in the house, is always interpreted as a sign of a good harvest to come (on the beneficial role of the snake, see Abbott, fol. 27; Lafont and Rabino, p. 79; Massé, pp. 201-2).

In order to perform agricultural work or ceremonies, or to travel, weather conditions must be favorable. Popular weather forecasting is based on several types of indicators. Animal behavior is closely watched: a flight of winged ants (*pardār pitār*) or flies flying around a lamp, or green tree frogs (*dār-e qurbāġa*) croaking, or fretful ducks (*bili*) flapping their wings in the pond, etc., are signs of imminent rain. On the contrary, a howling jackal echoed by a barking dog is a sign of a sunny day ahead. A short heavy shower under clear skies is viewed

as the result of the marriage of a jackal or its mother (*šoqāl mār-e ʿarusi*). The order of animals leaving their stable is supposed to indicate the weather of the season to come: if black animals come out first, winter will be harsh; if black and white or light colored animals are first, winter will be mild. The opposite is true when the cattle return to the stable: if the black ones are ahead of the lighter ones, winter will be mild. Plant conditions also provide a myriad of clues: if the tree buds come out early in the spring, if their leaves fall prematurely in the summer and fall, winter will be harsh. Body feelings are also the basis for predicting the following day's weather: if the right ear itches, the weather will be nice, if the left one does, it will rain, etc. More weather clues come from observing dishes while they cook: a strong steam coming out of *polow* announces rainy weather (see Pāyanda, pp. 344-49).

To counter erratic or extreme weather conditions, various methods based on the law of similarity are used. When rain was long in coming, the village ceremonial *ʿalam* (flag) was dumped in a well or the *menbar* (the pulpit) from the mosque or a sanctuary was dropped in a river. If, on the contrary, rain would not stop—a frequent condition in Gilān—the very popular local rite of *haft kačal* or *kal* (seven bald people) was performed. The names of seven bald people from the village were written on a piece of paper or a string tied into seven knots, one for each of the seven bald people. The object was then tied to a tree or to a house post and struck with a stick. The ordeal could go so far as to reveal which one, among the bald people, was responsible for the unending rain: each blow was aimed at a bald person and, at any time, a participant could ask to stop the beating in the name of one of the bald people, if he knew for sure who the guilty one was. If the rain had not ceased the following day, the author of the erroneous verdict was penalized. The resentment against bald people, an incessant object of derision, is due to their image in the local culture and, more generally, in Iran. They are reputedly malicious and lazy; when it rains, they are ready to work, even as there is nothing to do; when the weather is nice, they refuse to make any effort, for fear that the sun may burn their heads: *havā ḵoš-e, kal naḵoš-e* ("beautiful weather, unhappy bald man"), *havā āftāb-e, kal bitāb-e* ("sunny weather, nervous bald man"), the proverbs say. But bald people are not the only remedy to unfavorable skies. To stop a pouring rain, which may be catastrophic during the preparation of the seedbeds, a spoon is tapped against a container, while a song accompanies the beat with the following words: *fardā āfto betabey / tumbijār-e tum bepise / gāleš-e čamuš bepise* "May the sun shine tomorrow / the paddy is rotting in the seedbed / the shepherd's shoes have rotted". Apotropaic gestures are used,

such as striking the ground with an axe to stop thunder and holding up a knife to stop a violent wind. As for solar eclipses (*āftāb begifte*, "the abduction of the sun," credited to *jenn*s), they cause terror; to put an end to them, a tray is pounded (see also Massé, p. 172).

In a world where destiny (*qesmat*) has a key role, the interpretation of signs that could shed light on the intricacy of fate is a common exercise practiced specially during the critical times of year (Nowruz, *šab-e čella*, Moḥarram, etc.). In everyday life, greater attention is given to the contents of dreams, the quivering of bodies or the position of objects. The imminence of death or requests from a displeased late relative, for instance, are revealed through the codified language of dreams. Beside the science of premonitory dreams (*taʿbir*), the science of body feelings is largely based on the universally widespread (see Hertz) opposition between a right side (good omen) and a left side (doomed). It is a favorable sign to find yourself lying on your right side when you wake up, whereas scratching your right hand in the evening means money is coming; on the contrary, lying on your left side when you wake up and scratching your left hand in the evening mean trouble ahead. The positions of containers on a tablecloth, or bits of tea in a glass also have prophetic meaning. Three containers unintentionally placed in a straight line announce the arrival of a guest, as does a bit of tea going up to the surface in a glass. Divination is not as common a practice and is usually left to specialists (*doʿā-gar*, fortuneteller at the weekly market). They practice bibliomancy, such as *esteḵāra*, based on verses from the Qurʾān picked at random, or *fāl*, using the same method with poetic works, in particular poems by Ḥāfeẓ; they also consult books of oracles, use dice (*raml*) to reach powers of divination or read in the palms of hands (*kafšenāsi*). "Popular" divination uses unusual animal bones, familiar objects such as needles (two are dropped in a bowl filled with water: if they touch, the boy and the girl whom they represent will be united) or a snake vertebra (*mār mohra*); the process and the intention are the same but two vertebrae are placed in a bowl filled with vinegar (see Payanda, pp. 325-27).

All these beliefs are unequally shared by the local population, and vary in kind and intensity according to sex, age, and proximity to the world of cities. They are most strongly anchored in Ṭāleš and in the mountains east of the Safidrud. Most of the believers are women. Urban elites and younger generations consider them as superstitions (*ḵorāfāt*). Others keep them at a distance but do not deny them. But very few are those who deny the concept of a destiny

outside of the individuals' control, which these practices try, in their own way, to interpret and have a bearing on.

GAMES

Four games, more or less spectacular, are predominant in Gilān and emblematic of the regional identity: *morḡāna jang* ("egg wars"), *lafen-bāzi* (tightrope walking), *košti gila-mardi* ("Gilāni wrestling") and *varzā jang*. The first, as we have seen, is associated with the cycle of Nowruz, and features two individuals who fight discreetly, even if it is sometimes practiced in public (on market days, in the village square). The other three are displays that bring together large audiences in specific places (such as the *sabze meydān* "the green place," or local commons) or in the courtyard of a house on the occasion of a marriage, a circumcision or the visit of a distinguished guest.

Morḡāna jang consists in knocking together two eggs—hen, duck, or goose, raw or cooked, depending on the players' choice. The player whose egg breaks the opponent's egg wins. Meticulous preparation is necessary for a "battle" in which sight, touch, and hearing are important factors. To make sure that the egg selected has a firm shell, it is examined, hand-felt and possibly spun on the ground like a top (a good rotation is a sign of firmness); it is helpful to be able to tell by its shape an egg containing two yellows because its shell is thicker. But the most common way to test the hardness of the shell is through the sound made by knocking the egg several times against one's teeth, unless the game is announced as *bi-gāz* ("no knocking on teeth"). The type of game played must also be decided: *sara bā sara* ("head against head"—egg's—"small end against small end"), *tāh bā tāh* (or *kuna bā kuna*) ("base against base," "bottom against bottom," "large end against large end") or *tāk bā tāk* ("side against side"). One must also decide which of the two players will strike and which will be struck. The opponent will try to minimize the blow by holding his egg tight between his thumb and his index finger, as high as possible. The winner wins the broken egg or the total amount of eggs played in the game, which can include several dozen sets. *Morḡāna jang* can also be an occasion for money bets (*šarṭbandi*), a frequent element in local popular games such as *morḡāna jang* or *varzā jang* or *aštak*, a game played by throwing nuts into holes dug in the ground (Plate X). In order to win, the least scrupulous competitors cheat, for example by making a hole in the shell of their egg and pouring resin (*vinja*) in it and by steaming it in a slow-cooking *polow*. After the hole is sealed and the shell decorated (shells are traditionally painted during the cycle of Nowruz), the egg can resist the opponent's attack. These practices, and also the

small tricks used by most, generate debates and disputes.

Tightrope walking is not a specialty of Gilān, but it is remarkably popular in this area where men are used to climbing trees and where the world of heights is treasured (Bromberger, 1989, p. 14). In spring and summer as during weddings of old, the *pahlavān* (athlete) and his assistants (a buffoon and two musicians, one playing the *dohol*—a double-side drum—the other the *sorna*—a type of oboe), give performances. While the buffoon (*yālānji*) amuses the public with his jokes, the *pahlavān* engages in perilous exercises, while holding a pole (*langar)* horizontally for balance (Plate XI). He walks and moves on the tightrope far above the ground, places a chair on a tray and sits on it, walks while balancing saucers and tea-glasses on his head, rides a bicycle without tire on the rope. To reward his performance, the *yālānji* takes a collection from the audience.

While the *lafenbāz* were traveling and anonymous jugglers, wrestling champions are well-known characters and a source of pride for their village. Some are even thought to have fought bears and won. The *košti gila-mardi* is a popular, ritualized performance following a rigorous protocol (Rabino, 1914, pp. 104-07) and dominated by the spirit of chivalry (*javānmardi*). It traditionally gives place to great combats held at the end of the summer, once the agricultural work is completed, or during the visit of public figures or at the end of religious ceremonies (such as in the court of an *emāmzāda,* during the *ʿalam vā čini*, "the removal of the flags," raised at the beginning of Moḥarram). Wrestling performances between a few athletes were also, until recently, a quasi-permanent feature of village weddings.

A wrestling performance begins with a ritual parade of fighters who greet the audience and their opponents, one foot forward and their hand touching their knee, mouth and forehead successively. In big tournaments, each village team is subject to a strict hierarchy between *pahlavān*s (experienced athletes) and *tongule*s (beginners), and each one stands in a corner of the square. Each fighter dressed in embroidered shorts, shows off his strength and flexibility while marching in music before the show. Then the competitions start, first between beginners, then between the *pahlavān*s (Plate XII). There is no weight category and no time limit for the fight, but the wrestlers may request a pause from the referee (*dāvar*) if the fight is long. The purpose of the game is to force the opponent to touch the ground using one's hands, fists, and feet (but kicking is prohibited). For that, one needs both strength and strategy. When the game is over, the winner hugs the loser, jumps in the center of the arena, and

receives a branch (*baram*) decorated with fabric, clothes, and money given by the audience during a victory lap. For big tournaments, village notables may reward a champion who eliminated all of his competitors with a cow, a horse, or a silk shawl embroidered with flowers (Rabino, 1914, p. 106).

Gilānis also enjoy games involving animals. While minor groups may have a passion for pigeon flying contests (*kaftarbāzi*), or cockfights (*ḵorusbāzi*), the main regional show involving animals is the *varzā jang* (q.v. GĀVBĀZI, including photographs), a fight between bulls. It is symptomatic that this game, once widespread in Iran, is now practiced only in the Caspian plains, where livestock remains predominantly bovine and where the ox has remained, until recently, man's animal companion par excellence.

Through the diversity of values that come together in its practice, *varzā jang* appears as "a deep game," to use an expression by Clifford Geertz (1972). It promotes a feeling of identity: the audience supports with enthusiasm, even with violence (Rabino, 1914, p. 104), the champion who symbolizes the honor of their village. Above all, a good bull symbolizes two complementary dimensions of complete manliness: it must be both strong (*qawi*) and smart (*zerang*). Clumsy animals are ridiculed as much as those expressing unnecessarily aggressive behavior, and rejected like show-offs in real life. There is a saying about agitated individuals: *ti šāḵe sir vāseʾ idi, tarā be maydān tāvedaʾ idi* ("Your horns were rubbed with garlic and you were thrown in the arena," in other words, "You've been had: someone got you excited and used you").

The modernization of agriculture, the evolution of the ways of life, along with a massive propagation of Western and Far Eastern sports (football, volleyball, judo, karate, etc.) have prompted a fast decline of traditional games during the last thirty years. The regression was accelerated by measures taken by the authorities of the Islamic Republic who prohibited the betting associated with several of these practices (*varzā jang* and *morḡāna jang*, in particular) or the games themselves when deemed cruel (see Bromberger, 1997, pp. 133-35).

Traditional games and other aspects of the local folklore are not necessarily destined to disappear. The quick process of destruction of old ways is ending and a regionally based movement promoting the preservation and revival of local traditions is taking shape in Gilān. Evidence of this interest is shown in the increasing popularity of publications dealing with ethnographic issues (*Gilevā, Gilān-nāma, Farhang-e Gilān, Gilān-e mā*, etc.), of cultural

organizations and the warm support given to this author's initiative to create an open-air museum of the rural heritage of Gilān.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Keith E. Abbott, "Narrative of a Journey Along the Shores of the Caspian Sea to Tehran, 1843-1844," MS. Foreign Office [London] 60/108.

Victoria Arakelova, "The *Siyâh-Gâlesh* and Deity Patrons of Cattle Among New Iranian People," *Stud. Ir.* 27/3, 2003, pp. 171-76.

Garnik Asatrian, "The lord of cattle from Gilân," *Iran and the Caucasus* 6, 2002, pp. 75-87.

Marcel Bazin, "Les bazars saisonniers de montagne dans le Tâlesh," in Günther Schweizer, ed., *Beiträge zur Geographie orientalischer Städte und Märkte*, Wiesbaden, 1977, pp. 201-11.

Idem, "Le culte des arbres et des montagnes dans le Tâlesh," in Rémy Dor and Michèle Nicolas, eds., *Quand le crible était dans la paille,* Paris, 1978, pp. 95-104.

Moḥammad Bošrā and Ṭāher Ṭāheri, *Bāvarhā-ye ʿāmmiāna-ye mardom-e Gilān*, Rasht, 2007.

Idem, *Le Tâlech. Une région ethnique au nord de l'Iran*, 2 vols., Paris, 1980.

Idem and Christian Bromberger, *Gilân et Ãzarbâyjân oriental. Cartes et documents ethnographiques*, Paris, 1982.

Raffaele Biscione, *Ceramica di Amlash*, Rome, 1976.

Anne-Marie Brisebarre, "'La fête du sacrifice'. Le rituel ibrahimien dans l'islam contemporain," in Pierre Bonte, Anne-Marie Brisebarre, and Altan Gökalp, eds., *Sacrifices en Islam*, Paris, 1999, pp. 93-121.

Christian Bromberger, *Habitat, Architecture and Rural Society in the Gilān*

Plain (Northern Iran), Bonn, 1989.

Idem, "Eating Habits and Cultural Boundaries in Northern Iran," in Sami Zubaida and Richard Tapper, eds., *Culinary Cultures of the Middle East*, London, 1994, pp. 185-201.

Idem, "La guerre des taureaux n'aura pas lieu. Note sur les infortunes d'un divertissement populaire dans le nord de l'Iran," in J. Hainard and R. Kaehr, eds., *Dire les autres. Réflexions et pratiques ethnologiques. Textes offerts à Pierre Centlivres*, , Lausanne, 1997, pp. 121-37.

Idem, "De la ribote en Provence au *sizdah bedâr* au Gilân (Iran).Variations sur deux modes de sociabilité conviviale," in Christian Bromberger and Marie-Hélène Guyonnet, eds., *De la nature sauvage à la domestication de l'espace* (Hommage à Annie-Hélène Dufour), Aix-en-Provence, 2008, pp. 47-55.

Idem, "La solution tâlech. Sur la transmission de l'appartenance confessionnelle dans le nord de l'Iran"*in Les vertus de l'interdisciplinarité. Mélanges offerts à Marcel Bazin*, Les Cahiers de l'IATEUR, n° spécial, Reims, 2009, pp. 105-109.

Alexandre Chodźko, "Le Ghilan ou les marais caspiens," *Nouvelles annales des voyages*, March 1850, pp. 285-306; April 1850, pp. 61-76.

Alberto M. Cirese, "Du jeu d'Ozieri au numerus clausus des Bienheureux de Dante. Essai de typologie idéologique," *L'Homme* 136, 1995, pp. 95-112.

Abu'l-Qāsem Enjavi Širāzi, *Jašnhā wa ādāb o moʿtaqedāt-e zemestān,* 2 vols., Tehran, 2001.

Sir James George Frazer, *Le rameau d'or*, Paris, 1981; tr. of *The Golden Bough. A Study in Magic and Religion*, 12 vols., London, 1911-15.

Clifford Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," *Daedalus* 101, 1972, pp. 1-37.

Altan Gökalp, "Le placenta ou l'épouse déchue du Dieu-ciel," in *Singularités. Les voies d'émergence individuelle*, Laboratoire d'ethnologie et de sociologie comparative, ed., Paris, pp. 99-107.

ʿAli-Reżā Ḥasanzāda, *Afsāna-ye zendagān*, 2 vols., Tehran, 2001.

Ṣādeq Hedāyat, *Neyrangestān*, Tehran, 1955.

F. Lafont and H. L. Rabino, *L'industrie séricicole en Perse*, Montpellier, 1910.

Henri Massé, *Croyances et coutumes persanes*, 2 vols., Paris, 1938.

Moḥammad Miršokrāʾi, "Mardomšenāsi o farhang-e ʿāmma," in Ebrāhim Eṣlāḥ-ʿArabāni, ed., *Ketāb-e Gilān*, 3 vols., Tehran, 1995-96, III, pp. 423-68.

Ezat O. Negahban, "Men and Beasts in Pottery from Marlik Burials," *Illustrated London News* 245, 1964, pp. 1011-12.

Idem, "Notes on Some Objects from Marlik," *JNES* 24, 1965, pp. 309-27.

Maḥmud Pāyanda Langarudi, *Āʾinhā wa bāvardāšthā-ye mardom-e Gil o Deylam*, Tehran, 1976.

Hyacinthe-Louis Rabino, "Les anciens sports au Guilan," *RMM* 26, 1914, pp. 97-112.

Idem, "Les provinces caspiennes de la Perse. Le Guilân," *RMM* 32, 1915-16 (complete volume).

Ali Rafie Jirdehi, "Le Tâlech et le tâlechi," unpubl. diss., Université Marc Bloch, Strasbourg, 2003.

J. L. Schlimmer, *Terminologie médico-pharmaceutique et anthropologique française-persane*, Tehran, 1874.

Manučehr Sotuda, *Az Āstārā tā Astārbād* I-II, Tehran, 1970-72.

(The contributor would like to express his thanks to Āzitā Hempartiān for her assistance in compiling this entry).