



HEDAYAT, SADEQ III. HEDĀYAT AND FOLKLORE STUDIES

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iii. Hedayat and Folklore Studies

In addition to his outstanding stature regarding modern Persian literature in general, Hedayat is acknowledged as a major contributor in twentieth-century Iran to the growing awareness devoted to the collection and study of various aspects of everyday culture, particularly verbal art. Since the related academic disciplines were only just emerging, he is variously acclaimed as “founder of modern Iranian anthropology” (Shahshahani, 1986, p. 68) or “architect of Iranian folkloristics” (Fazeli, p. 62). Several Iranians before him—such as [Mirzā Ḥabib Eṣfahāni](#), [Mirzā Āqā-Kān Kermāni](#), [‘Ali-Akbar Dehḵodā](#), or [Mohammad-Ali Jamalzadeh](#)—had already been aware of the importance of expressions of Iranian popular culture (Katirā’i, 1978, p. 131), while yet others—such as [Moḥammad-‘Ali Foruḡi Dokā’-al-Molk](#), Ebrāhim Serāj, Lotf-‘Ali Ṣuratgar, and Ġolām-Rezā Rašid Yāsemi—had already embarked on the collection and documentation of Iranian folklore (Farsiu and Vakiliān, pp. 23-26). But it was Hedayat’s fame as a well-known writer in combination with the unprecedentedly systematic methodology of his publications that made him the founder of the movement to collect and study folklore in Iran (Katirā’i,



1978, p. 131) and a pioneer (Massé, I, p. 14) among Iranians “to study folklore and outline the methods of scholarship” (Radhayrapetian, p. 94).

From the days of his youth, Hedayat is said to have cultivated a particular interest in the traditional beliefs and verbal expression of the “common people.” Besides his mother, credit for having served as Hedayat’s informant goes to the household maid “Omm-e Leyli,” who had been born from a black, that is, slave, mother (Katirā’i, 1969, p. vi). Later, Hedayat collected information about the folklore of different towns or regions when people from other cities came to visit his family, or through correspondence with friends and acquaintances about their town or region (Katirā’i, 1978, p. 132; Fazeli, p. 68). In a particularly interesting testimony, Moḥammad Parvin Gonābādi relates that, in fulfilling a request from Hedayat which had originally been directed at Moḥammad-Žiā Haštrudi, he had supplied information on popular customs and beliefs collected from an old woman in the province of Khorasan who, besides possessing great narrative skills, was well-versed in popular medicine (Katirā’i, 1978, p. 137, note 13).

Hedayat’s activities in the field of Iranian folklore can be assessed from various angles. In terms of categories, he contributed to the three fields of collection, methodological and theoretical discussion, and usage of folk language in literature (Fazeli, p. 65). In terms of chronology, his folklorist contributions can be assigned to three periods (Dālvand, pp. 178-92): (1) in his early work until 1936, when he left for India, Hedayat was heavily influenced by contemporary Iranian nationalist sentiments, including a “passionate Aryanist and strongly anti-Semitic” inclination (Fazeli, p. 63); (2) between 1936 and 1941, he devoted his main efforts to studies, publishing only a few essays; (3) after 1941, he completed his mature work.

Besides his own publications, Hedayat is credited with collecting proverbs and folktales that were used and/or published by others. According to Mojtabā Minovi, Hedayat supplied Dehḵodā with a monograph of 200 pages in which he had collected some 2,000 proverbs (Katirā’i, 1978, p. 132-33; Radhayrapetian, p. 100); since Dehḵodā never mentioned Hedayat’s contribution, it is unclear to what extent he made use of it in his seminal compilation *Amṭāl o ḥekam*. Similarly, the nature of Hedayat’s collaboration with the radio storyteller and broadcaster Fażl-Allāh Šobḥi has been a matter of debate. Ḥasan Qā’emiān (quoted in Etteḥād, pp. 212-15) goes to great length to accuse Šobḥi of exploiting the material collected by Hedayat during his time at the *Majalla-ye musiqi* (1938-41) without ever so much as acknowledging



Hedayat's contribution; meanwhile, Maḥmud Omidsālār has supplied abundant proof that this accusation is unfounded, since Šobḥi acknowledges his indebtedness to Hedayat at various instances in his publications. Hedayat's two monograph publications *Owsāna* and *Neyrangestān* both belong to the first period of his folklore studies, when he was mainly concerned with collecting folklore data and publishing outlines so as to instigate public and scholarly attention for the task of preserving and studying Iranian folklore.

Owsāna, initially a booklet of just 36 pages, was first published in Tehran in 1931. Towards the end of the preface, Hedayat states that he saw *Owsāna* as the first installment of a comprehensive treatment of Persian folklore that in a second installment would proceed to discuss Persian beliefs and customs (which he published in his book *Neyrangestān* two years later). The book's title is a dialect version of the modern Persian noun *afsāna*, meaning legend and myth as well as tale. It opens with Hedayat's strong introductory statement, lamenting the disappearance of Iranian folklore in the process of modernity, thus reflecting "the dual attitude of intellectuals ... towards the modernist social and political trends of the early Reza Shah period, ... drawing attention to the costs in cultural terms" (Katouzian, p. 85).

Moreover, Hedayat regrets the widespread disrespect for traditional culture that, rather than calling for documentation and research, would regard folklore as a dispensable remnant of bygone times that "ought to be forgotten." Whereas he considers the works of many a traditional poet outdated since they do not respond to modern literary taste, he regards popular poetry as the verbal expression of the common people (*tuda-ye 'avām*) and of timeless value. In contrast to ethical writings in prose that he considers dull, popular poetry would convey basic philosophy and ethics in an attractive form that would particularly appeal to children. Songs composed for special occasions tend to go out of currency once the related event has been forgotten, but popular songs have been around since times immemorial, some of them probably constituting relics from the pre-Islamic period. Implicitly adhering to an evolutionary theory, he regards poetry as humanity's primordial expression, whereas prose would only become predominant the more the development of society demanded exact expression to formulate the results of intellectual and scientific progress. Against the backdrop of these assumptions, Hedayat goes to some length to demonstrate the perceived continuity between Avestan verse and contemporary popular poetry. The documentary section of *Owsāna* presents numerous specimens of nursery rhymes, songs of nursemaids and



mothers, games, riddles, and folksongs, albeit without any detailed documentation or further analysis.

Partially translated into French in Henri Massé's *Croyances et coutumes persanes* (II, pp. 492-99) and praised as a "pioneering effort in folklore studies in Iran" (Radhayrapetian, p. 98), *Owsāna* has been heavily criticized as a "rather haphazard collection of folk songs and traditional children's tales" (Katouzian, p. 85) that lacks "distinctive classifying criteria," such as "information about fieldwork, informants, or regions in which the songs are popular" (Radhayrapetian, p. 97; see also Fazeli, pp. 65-66). Informed as this critique may be, it disregards the fact that Hedayat never received an academic training and that he developed a more scholarly attitude only at a later date.

Hedayat's second folklorist publication, *Neyrangestān*, was first published in 1933 but was banned immediately upon publication; it became widely known only as of the second edition published in 1955. The publication was most probably delayed because of passages the censors found to be offensive to public morality. According to Mojtabā Minovi, a case in point were the verses addressed by unmarried young women to the "Brass-top Minaret" (*menār-e sar-berenji*; Hedayat, 1955, p. 158) in Isfahan, in which the minaret is likened to the "handle" (*dasta*) of a "man ready for action" (Katouzian, p. 86, and p. 281, n. 42).

Neyrangestān takes its title from the Middle Persian name of the old Zoroastrian manual of ritual (ed. Kotwal and Kreyenbroek), which was commonly characterized as a collection of superstitious rites and beliefs (Fazeli, p. 67). As the "first serious book in Persian on Iranian folklore" (Elwell-Sutton, p. 250; Radhayrapetian, p. 97; Fazeli, p. 68), the work, besides an extensive introduction, contains a fairly unsystematic conglomerate of data on popular beliefs and customs arranged in a total of 22 chapters, whose content ranges from marriage and pregnancy through sleep and death to ancient festivals and specific elements of popular tales.

At the very beginning of the introduction, Hedayat takes a strong nationalistic stance in characterizing Iran as a "caravansary," where numerous "foreign" people—Chaldeans, Assyrians, Greeks, Romans, Jews, Turks, Arabs, and Mongols—had left traces of their beliefs. He acknowledges in principle the importance of "superstition" as an indispensable constituent of the human condition, quoting the (anonymous) dictum that "man is a superstitious



animal.” He then proceeds to quote an extensive passage from the German Darwinist Ernst Haeckel’s (1834-1919) *Die Weltr thsel* (1895-99) to the effect that human superstition is the logical offspring of the behavior of their animal ancestors. Hedayat’s evolutionist perspective is further underlined by quotations from the British anthropologist Edward Tylor’s (1832-1917) *Primitive Culture* (London, 1871); both works are quoted from their French translations. The bulk of the following exhortations are devoted to the fact that Hedayat applies a clear-cut “Cultural Dualism Theory” (Fazeli, p. 214) to contemporary superstition in dividing it into good and useful elements deriving from ancient Iranian tradition, on the one side, and bad as well as harmful foreign elements that are detrimental to contemporary society, on the other. Positing ancient Iranian religion against those of the “foreign” cultures, he takes a particular stance against the “bloodthirsty god of the Semites” and repeatedly accuses the “foreign” cultures of having contaminated and degraded Iranian tradition. Even so, he acknowledges the fact that cultural progress leads to the gradual annihilation of superstition, opining that nothing can be more harmful to misguided superstition than its publication and the resulting public discussion.

As for his sources, Hedayat claims to refer solely to oral sources, leaving aside such popular booklets as those on the interpretation of dreams. He explicitly acknowledges the help of a number of friends and colleagues, above all Mojtab  Minovi, who generously supplied him with his notes. Even so, he appears to have used Pahlavi and Avestan sources, literary texts such as  q  Jam l K v ns ri’s seventeenth-century treatise *Kol tum nane*, travel accounts, and religious books (Fazeli, p. 68).

Neyrangest n has been praised as “the first systematic study of folklore in Iran,” in which “an Iranian scholar used modern anthropological theories, methods and sources to examine a cultural issue, directly influenced by European anthropology” (Fazeli, p. 68). The work’s systematic research report, the application of a theoretical framework, research questions, literature review, and argument for the significance of the research are considered particularly noteworthy (ibid.). In terms of scholarly rigor, *Neyrangest n* is still found deficient (Katouzian, p. 86). In particular, the author is criticized for not supplying “the requisite information about time, place, informants, interviewees, sources and techniques used in his research” (Fazeli, pp. 65-66), thus leaving it up to the readers to assess the context and reliability of the quoted information.



From a modern perspective, the range of European scholarly sources Hedayat used is fairly limited; moreover, one wonders whether he was well advised to quote at length from the work of Haeckel, a scholar whose uncompromising evolutionary racism contributed to the rise of Nazism in Germany and paved the way for eugenics. But then again, Hedayat's use of the work only reflects the *Zeitgeist* of the era.

Some critics see the introduction to *Neyrangestān* as a clear statement of Hedayat's political ideology, revealing him to be "a zealous nationalist and an anti-Islamist" (Fazeli, p. 63), even a "xenophobic" (Shahshahani, 1986, p. 68) who regarded the religion of Islam as "an alien faith imposed upon Iran by an inferior civilization" (Radhayrapetian, p. 96). In slightly more balanced terms, Hedayat is characterized as being "obsessed with what he believed to be the baneful influence" of the foreign conquests and invasions of Iran (Elwell-Sutton, p. 250). Despite the methodological shortcomings of *Neyrangestān* (which he probably did not conceive as such), Massé used some of the material presented in Hedayat's "remarkable" work in his *Croyances et coutumes persanes* (see I, p. 14).

At the beginning of the second phase of his folkloristic work, Hedayat traveled to Bombay, where he apparently was further influenced by the writings of the "nationalist Constitutionalist" (Fazeli, p. 63) Mirzā Āqā-Kān Kermāni and other similar views (Katirā'i, 1978, p. 140, note 21). After his return to Iran in 1937, he worked at the newly instituted Office of Music (*Edāra-ye musiqi-e kešvar*) and served as a member of the editorial board of its journal, *Majalla-ye musiqi*. It is here that he issued a public call for cooperation (Radhayrapetian, p. 100) as a result of which he received a substantial number of folktales, some of which he passed on to Šobḥi. Hedayat's folkloristic publications during this period are modest, and include only two theoretical essays comprising documentary sections, and two folktales.

The twelve-page essay "Tarānahā-ye 'āmiāna-ye fārsi" (Persian popular songs; *Majalla-ye musiqi*, 1/7, 1939, pp. 17-28) is essentially a sequel to *Owsāna*. Hedayat starts by reiterating his assessment of popular songs as basic expressions of humanity, since they respond to the two elementary needs of poetry and music. Witnessing the obvious similarity between the popular songs of cultures wide apart convinces him that they must derive from an extremely ancient period in which the cultures that were later separated were still in close contact. Since the transmission of the essential values preserved in folksongs is threatened by the onslaught of modernity, he regards it as a



national duty (Fazeli, p. 71) to preserve them by documenting them from the oral tradition of the “common people” and villagers. Hedayat further stresses the primacy of oral tradition for all genres of folklore and unambiguously advocates an appreciation of the “natural attraction” (*girandegi-e ṭabi'i*) of popular poetry, which, even though lacking artistic polish, is certainly enjoyed by the common people as much as artistic creations are by the educated. In general terms, he qualifies folklore as the “soul of a nation,” its “inner voice” that can only be studied seriously by having recourse to the “book of nature” (*ketāb-e ṭabi'at*), that is, living tradition. In the latter half of his essay, an “excellent piece of research” (Fazeli, p. 70), Hedayat discusses a number of popular Persian songs in a comparative perspective, discussing them in relation to similar songs from other nations.

Short as the essay is, it has been assessed as a “studious and mature piece of research” (Katouzian, p. 87). The greater detail in presenting his ideas certainly reflects Hedayat’s “development as a folklorist and researcher” (Radhayrapetian, p. 99). While Hedayat still follows the argument of “nineteenth-century European nationalist evolutionary discourse” (Fazeli, p. 70), the comparative perspective he develops documents a more nuanced (and less nationalist) approach.

Hedayat’s progress as a folklorist is further witnessed in his short essay “Matalhā-ye fārsi” (Persian Tales; *Majalla-ye musiqi* 1/8, 1939, pp. 25-30), a two-page introduction to Persian folktales followed by the text of two folktales. According to Hedayat, Persian folktales are so lively, varied, and pertinent as images of permanent values that they constitute an ideal means of teaching ethics to children. Besides *Persian Tales* (London, 1919), published by [David L. R. Lorimer](#) in cooperation with his wife Emily M. O. Lorimer (1881-1949), Hedayat knows the work of [Arthur Christensen](#) (*Contes persans en langue populaire*, Copenhagen, 1918) and Henri Massé (“Contes en persan populaire,” *Journal Asiatique* 206, 1925, pp. 1-157), even though he fails to specify that both researchers specifically documented the narratives of a single individual Iranian storyteller (Marzolph, 2012, pp. 5-6). He duly acknowledges the fact that folktale studies were inaugurated by the German brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm and stresses the fact that folktales have given rise to the work of great writers such as Danish writer Hans Christian Andersen and to what he sees as an extraordinarily beautiful artistic creation, Walt Disney’s animated feature film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937).

Essentially, Hedayat even regards folktales as the main source for modern



literary production. As he had previously mentioned in relation to folksongs, he reiterates the fact that the authors of folktales remain unknown and that the texts have been passed down through oral tradition. His short introduction culminates in the plea that folktales should not only be collected from old and illiterate people, but must be documented word by word without any alterations and that, in order to assess the “original version” (*matn-e ašli*) “several variants of the same narrative should be recorded” (Radhayrapetian, p. 101). The two texts he appends to his theoretical considerations are versions of the widely known Persian folktales *Āqā Muša* (Marzolph, 1984, pp. 257-59, tale-type 2032) and *Šangul o Mangul* (ibid., pp. 49-50, tale-type 123), unfortunately without any further discussion.

Hedayat’s most mature contribution to the study of Persian folklore is his long essay “Folklor yā farhang-e tuda” (Folklore, or culture of the people), originally published in four installments in the journal *Soḵan* (2/3-6 Esfand 1323-Ḵordād 1324 Š./1944-45; repr., *Majmu‘a-ye Neveštahā-ye parākanda-ye Šādeq Hedāyat*, Tehran, 1965, pp. 448-83). The essay’s second installment is his “Ṭarḥ-e kolli barā-ye kāvoš-e folklor-e yek maṭṭaqa” (A general sketch for the study of the folklore of a region), which is sometimes, albeit erroneously, regarded as a separate piece (Fazeli, p. 72; Nadjmabadi, p. 128). The genesis of this important essay is related in an interesting anecdote (quoted by Homāyuni, p. 92). According to this testimony, Parviz Nātel Ḵānlari had asked Hedayat to revise an essay Ḵānlari had been writing on general aspects of folklore; since Hedayat appears to have had difficulties producing an adequate revision, Ḵānlari gave him some books, borrowed from the library of the Faculty of Letters and Humanities of the University of Tehran, that subsequently enabled Hedayat to complete his task. This anecdote is highly revealing, since it points to the clue for an adequate assessment of Hedayat’s essay.

In fact the essay is a revised version of the initial chapters of the *Manuel de folklore* (Paris, 1936) compiled by French ethnographer and folklorist Émile Nourry (1870-1937), who published his works under the pen name Pierre Saintyves. Following Saintyves’ presentation step by step, Hedayat’s main achievement lies in the fact that he ingeniously adapted the model text’s general statements, and particularly those relating to European cultures, to the Persian context—a fact that is most obvious in the subsections of the “Ṭarḥ.” Even though Hedayat mentions Saintyves (as Saint Yves) prominently at the beginning of his essay, the true extent of his indebtedness remains to be studied. Although the essay is a landmark regarding the introduction of



folkloristic methods to Iran, Hedayat's achievement in compiling "a handbook on what to look for in a comprehensive anthropological fieldwork" (Katouzian, p. 217) must be seen in a proper perspective by a careful assessment of its relationship to the *Manuel de folklore*. Without going into much detail here, already a minor slip of attention right at the essay's beginning calls for attention. Here, Hedayat qualifies the term "Folk-lore" as having been coined by Ambroise Morton in 1885. Saintyves (*Manuel*, p. 21), on the contrary, clearly states that "Ambroise Morton" was the pseudonym of British antiquarian William John Thoms who died in 1885, and that the term was coined by him in a letter to the journal *Athenaeum* in 1846.

The essay starts with a thorough introduction discussing "the definition, scope, history and significance of folkloristics in general and with some reference to Iran" (Fazeli, p. 72) and proceeds with the "General sketch for the study of regional folklore." This sketch divides folklore into the three main sections of (1) material life (*zendegi-e mādi*), (2) spiritual life (*zendegi-e ma'navi*), and (3) social life (*zendegi-e ejtemā'i*). Sections (1) and (2) are further detailed in two levels of subdivisions in which Hedayat has taken great care to adapt the facts listed by Saintyves to the Persian context. For instance, Saintyves' subdivision (1.1.2) "Food and alimentation" is now (as subdivision 1.1.3) supplied with many details of Persian food culture and table manners. While Hedayat at times changes the sequence of the subdivisions, introduces new subdivisions, and adds numerous details, he even renders Saintyves' short "Appendix" on items and topics related to sexuality with great faithfulness. Following the "General sketch," a number of relatively short, specified considerations deal with topics related to ethnographical fieldwork. The essay ends with instructions on how to apply the system of transcription/transliteration of words and terms in non-standard Persian as devised by Kānlari and Roger Lescot (Radhyrapetian, p. 102; Etteḥād, p. 231).

Even though Hedayat's indebtedness to Saintyves needs to be taken into account for a more balanced assessment of his work, his essay without any doubt supplies the "first comprehensive methodological guidelines for the discipline in Iran" (Fazeli, p. 65) and is "of great importance to Iranian folkloristics" (Radhayrapetian, p. 101). A major achievement in Hedayat's mature attitude is to be seen in the fact that, following Saintyves (as we need to remind ourselves), he has abandoned his initial dualist, nationalist, and racist approach to Persian folklore, now emphasizing "the importance of being objective and impartial as a folklorist" (Fazeli, p. 73) and strongly advocating



the fact that “collecting ... is not the end of research. Folklorists must analyze the functions of folklore and contextualize it within its socio-political fabric” (ibid., p. 74).

The impact of Hedayat’s adapted translation of Saintyves’ essay was considerable. While the first Iranian to put the “Ṭarḥ” into practice was Šādeq Homāyuni in his *Farhang-e mardom-e Sarvestān* (Tehran, 1970), the systematic categorization of Persian popular culture it introduced also served as a basis for the classification applied to the folklorist data amassed in *Ganjina-ye farhang-e mardom* (Treasury of popular culture), edited and published by Abu’l-Qāsem Enjavi, which includes ten volumes on tales and local customs (see Enjavi, 1992, pp. 193-253). To the present day, numerous ethnographic assessments of local or regional culture in Iran have taken the outlines of Hedayat’s work as their starting point.

A final field to be discussed in connection with Hedayat’s folkloristic activities is the usage of folklore and folk language in literature. Modern scholarship agrees that Persian folklore had a strong influence on Hedayat’s literary production (Katirā’i, 1978, pp. 135-6; Ḥasan-zāda Mir-‘Ali and Aḥmadi Lafuraki). Even though Hedayat was second “in the use of ordinary folk and colloquial language in literary work” (Fazeli, p. 65) after Jamalzadeh, his “ear for the turns of the ordinary speech was far superior” (Elwell-Sutton, p. 251).

Hedayat, in particular, is credited with employing the language and customs of the “common people”—such as colloquial expressions, popular beliefs, and folk narrative—in his writing “not only as an established but a natural mode of literary expression” (Radhayrapetian, p. 93). To name but a few examples, the collection of satirical sketches, *Vaq Vaq Sāhāb* (Mister Bow-wow), is told “in the style of the itinerant storytellers and narrators of popular verse epics” (Elwell-Sutton, p. 251); his most famous novella, *Buḥ-e kur*, is a “veritable mine of folkloric and mythical motif” (ibid.); and his pamphlet *Āb-e zendegi* (The water of life) is cast “in the form of a fairy tale and based on a traditional legend” (ibid.).

After Hedayat’s early death, a collection of his short writings was edited (with a list of handwritten notes intended for a second edition of some of his work) by Ḥasan Qā’emiān in *Neveštahā-ye parākanda*. The *Farhang-e ‘āmiāna-ye mardom-e Irān*, edited by Hedayat’s nephew Jahāngir, not only reprints a collection of his folklorist writings but also for the first time reproduces a fair number of folktales with whose collection Hedayat is credited.



In order to do justice to Hedayat's folkloristic writings from a modern perspective, we need to consider first and foremost that Hedayat never received a scholarly education. His admirable talent as a writer included a remarkable interest in Persian popular culture as a primary source, but his related academic reading appears at best eclectic. Judging from the (rare) footnotes to his publications, he mostly read French publications and therefore had a limited (and somewhat biased) access to the scholarship of his day. In a similar vein, it is true that he "never applied the methodological rules" (Fazeli, p. 65) that he had advocated himself; but then again we need to consider the gradual development of a young man from a stout nationalist adherent to contemporary Aryanist theories to a more judicious follower of the leading European folklorist theories of the day. Hedayat developed a more or less methodological approach only after his initial publications (Katirā'i, 1978, p. 135). In many ways, his well-intended folklorist publications are as eclectic as his readings, and only gradually does he appear to have developed a critical stance of his own, by adding a distinctly Persian perspective to the works that he studied. Even so, Hedayat's impact on subsequent Iranian scholarship can hardly be overestimated (Āryanpur, pp. 364-71, 461, 466; Enjavi Širāzi, 2002, pp. 481-94; Nadjmabadi, pp. 115-37).

Besides Enjavi, who is said to have been a close friend of his, others in the first generation of Iranian folklorists such as Ḥosayn Kuhi Kermāni, Amir-Qoli Amini, and Abu'l-Qāsem Faqiri were all much influenced by his work. Without Hedayat and the attention he created "to establish the credibility of folklore as a scientific field of study, equal to other established fields of inquiry" (Radhayrapetian, p. 103) while acknowledging the creative power of folklore as an important constituent of Iranian culture (Homāyuni, 1973, p. 85), the field of Persian folkloristics would certainly be very different today.

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