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ISFAHAN XVI. FOLKLORE AND LEGEND

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xvi. ISFAHAN IN THE MIRROR OF FOLKLORE AND LEGEND

Systematic collection of the folklore of Isfahan is mostly due to Amirqoli Amini, whose first publication was a collection of Persian dicta entitled *hazār o yak soḵan*. He followed this book with a more extensive collection of Isfahan's narrative folklore, which led to his best known publication, *Dāstānhā-ye amṯāl*. Amini's approach was to interview mostly illiterate informants, whom he asked about any proverbs or stories associated with proverbs that they might remember; he would then record the data in writing. During eighteen years of research, Amini managed to collect 3,000 proverbs, of which nearly 250 were associated with some explanatory narratives (Amini, 1954, pp. 4-5). In 1935, Amini brought his entire collection to the attention of ʿAli-Aṣḡar Ḥekmat (q.v.), then the minister of education, who concluded an official contract with Amini and charged him with preparing both proverbs and folktales of Isfahan for publication by the Ministry of Education (Amini, 1954, p. 5). Amini arranged his data into three volumes, and turned over the manuscripts to the Ministry of Education in the fall of 1937. Shortly afterwards, however, Ḥekmat was replaced, and Esmāʿil Meršāt, the new minister, showed no interest in having them published. Amini tried for several years to persuade the ministry to either honor its contract and publish his

book, or to return the manuscripts to him so that he could arrange for their publication himself. The officialdom finally relented after seven years, and returned his manuscripts. Eventually, two volumes of his *Dāstānhā-ye amṯāl* were published by the Eṭṭelāʿāt Press (Tehran, 1945), but they soon became difficult to find due to their popularity and also a fire at the press, in which many of them perished. The enlarged second edition containing 277 proverbs and tales (i.e., 34 more than the 1st ed.) was published in 1953. A year later, Amini published another revised edition with 10 additional items, all arranged in alphabetical order. Each proverb was followed by a story that purported to explain its origin and was also provided with the context in which it may be used. Amini also published a collection of thirty Eṣfahāni tales (*Si afsāna*), a number of which he recorded in literary Persian rather than in the dialect he had heard (Amini, 1960, p. ii).

It is true that almost all Iranian studies of folklore name Āqā Jamāl Ḵᵛānsāri (d. 1121/1709 or 1125/1713), a Shiʿite cleric of the 18th century, as the first one to collect the folklore of Isfahan's women (e.g., Enjavi 1972, p. 13; idem, 2002, pp. 234-35; Katirāʾi, pp. 136, n. 3), but in reality Ḵᵛānsāri's short treatise, called *Kolṯum Nana*, is a satirical work in which the author intended to ridicule these beliefs rather than collect them. The book was Ḵᵛānsāri's way of combating superstitious customs and practices, which he, a respected theologian, disliked (Bolukbāši, 1961, no. 19, p. 177). Therefore, one cannot always distinguish between factual folk practices and their caricatures in his account. Authors, such as Mirzā Ḥabib Eṣfahāni (d. toward the end of the 19th century in Istanbul, q.v.) and Moḥammad-ʿAli Jamālzāda (1895-1997), who are often mentioned in connection with the folklore of Isfahan, are in reality novelists and social critics, who either peppered their writings with folk expressions as a matter of prose style, or used folklore as a vehicle for expressing social and cultural criticism.

Isfahan's folklore has the rich diversity of the folklore of those areas of Iran where different cultures and populations made contact. Natives of Isfahan have themselves become objects of general Persian folklore from very early on. They have been portrayed in folklore as being very clever, business-minded, and thrifty. The association of Isfahan's population with thriftiness must have been a popular notion at least as early as the 10th century, since, according to the 10th-century geographer Moqaddasi, they had been referred to as one of the most tight-fisted people in a text where the Sasanian monarch Qobād described the character of the lands under his rule (Moqaddasi, pp.

257-58, tr, II, pp. 372-73).

Isfahan's reputation as a land of abundance, has been explained by the legend of the refusal of its people to assist Nimrud in his rebellion against God. According to other legends, Nimrud's army was destroyed near Isfahan, whose natives were blessed by Abraham, and thereby the city will always have thirty men to whom God grants every wish they ask for (Abu Noʿaym, I, p. 40; Ebn Rosta, tr. pp. 179, 190; Moqaddasi, p. 397, tr., II, p. 593; Māfarruḵi, pp. 35-36, tr. pp. 80, 82, 144). It is said that ʿAbd-al-ʿAziz ʿEjli in the 10th century found in a village of Isfahan a fully armed man in a tomb, whose body had remained intact. The tomb also contained various artifacts that were turned to dust as soon as they were touched, though the corpse stayed intact (Māfarruḵi, p. 11, tr. p. 22). This is a well known motif that has been related about the Safavid Shah Esmāʿil I (q.v.) and others (Balāḡi, II, p. 24).

Many prominent historical and legendary figures are said to have hailed from Isfahan or to have met their end at or near the city. According to these legends, Anōširvān was born in Ardestān, a village near Isfahan (Ebn Rosta, p. 153, tr. p. 181), as was Moses' pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, Bahrām Gōr, and the Prophet's companion Salmān Fārsi (Māfarruḵi, pp. 22-23, tr. pp. 66-67). The legendary king Kay Ḵosrow is said to have been the first king to have held his coronation ceremony there and to also have disappeared in snow near Isfahan at the end of his reign. Likewise, Ardašir Bābakān, the founder of the Sasanian dynasty, was crowned king of Iran there and it was also he who named the city's famous river Zarrinrud (i.e., Zāyandarud) and established the system for the orderly use of its waters in irrigation (Enjavi, 1975, pp. 276, 279, 283, 292; Ebn Rosta, pp., 155, 196, tr., 183, pp. 232-33). Of the heroes of the Šāh-nāma, the chief hero, Rostam, lived in Isfahan as a child and Gōdarz (q.v.) held the region as a fief (Māfarruḵi, tr., p. 79; Enjavi, 1975, p. 100). The tomb of the legendary king Ṭahmuraṯ is said to be atop a mountain called Bandarāb near Isfahan, where there is a room of lapis lazuli in which Adam's ring and Eve's diadem are kept (Hama-dāni, p. 187).

Many festivals and folk ceremonies held in Isfahan have been reported. One, associated with the Nowruz celebration, was held in one of the bazaars near the city at great expense. The varieties of food, dress, and unusual decorations associated with this festival, which continued for seven days, amazed the Arab traveler, Ebn Ḥawqal, in the middle of the 10th century (Ebn Ḥawqal, p. 364, tr., p. 107). Later on, the Buyid monarch ʿAżod-al-Dawla (q.v.), tried to recreate this festival in Shiraz because of his fond childhood memories of it (Māfarruḵi,

pp. 93-94, tr., p.17; Faqihi, p. 594). Gardizi in the 11th century reports a popular water festival in Isfahan that commemorated the relief from some ancient draught (Gardizi, pp. 239, 247).

Nowruz festivities in the more recent times involved many folk entertainers such as *ʿamu nowruz*, *ādam-e čubi*, bear and monkey handlers, and wondering musicians who would entertain people for small fees (Moʿezz-al-Din Mahdawi, p. 66). Religious festivals have also been observed with great relish in Isfahan. Mourning ceremonies associated with the martyrdom of Imam Ḥosyan b. ʿAli (q.v.) were publicly held in a number of predominantly Sunni cities such as Isfahan during the Saljuq period (Faqihi, pp. 452, 457; cf. ʿAbd-al-Jalil Qazvini, p. 371). Under the Qajars, groups of thugs, who had friends in the city jail would go to the governor's house and vigorously self flagellate with of a small sword called *qama*. They used to vow to continue until either they die or the governor would agree to release their imprisoned comrades. It has been reported that this was no idle threat as some of these would continue the flagellation until fainting or death from blood-loss. Sufis would publicly demonstrate their piety during some of these holy periods by placing chains around their necks and limbs while strolling in the streets. Many would use the occasion to extort money from the passers by (Moʿezz-al-Din Mahdawi, pp. 50-51, 66).

There are many landmarks around Isfahan that are believed to have magical power. A field, called Fās, near Harāskān village is said to have been charmed. No wild animals would bother domesticated beasts that might be grazing there. It is said that a rooster that had escaped its coop lived there for four years without being molested by any wild animals (Abu Noʿaym, I, p. 31; Māfarruḵi, p. 16, tr., p. 37; Ebn Rosta, tr., p. 188). A type of water with curative powers oozes out of one of the mountains in the ardahar region near Kāšān. The natives collect the water on the day of Tir of the month of Tir, while, according to Māfarruḵi (pp. 16-17, tr. pp. 37-38), calling upon the mountain saying: "O *Biḏ-doḵt* give me of your water, which I need for the cure of such and such a disease (cf. Moqaddasi, pp. 396-97, tr., II, p. 593; Ebn Rosta, tr., pp. 186-87). There is a different kind of magical water in one of the springs called "The spring of the locusts" (ʿAyn-al-jarād)," near Isfahan, which is used as a charm against locust infestation. When farms are attacked by swarms of locusts, two pious individuals take some of this spring's water and spray it over the infested farms; thereby thousands of birds will appear and destroy the locusts (Fozuni, p. 455). A variety of beads called *mohra-ye taḏark*, "hail

beads," found in another village of Isfahan is a potent charm against hale (Abu Noʿaym, I, p. 32; cf. Māfarruḵi, tr., p. 37). Other villages use two rings that are affixed to poles as charms against the devastating power of hailstorms. These rings have the power of turning hail to rain (Ebn Rosta, tr., p. 187). Another village in the vicinity of the city produces a special apotropaic potion that can cure the evil effects of magic as well as madness, provided that it is mixed in the milk of a reddish cow and administered to the victim in one of the three last nights of the lunar month (Māfarruḵi, tr., p. 41). In the past, Eṣfahāni girls who were seeking matrimony would have recourse to several magical practices. The most famous among these is the following: On the last Wednesday evening of the year (Čāhāršanba-suri, q.v.), they would go to a shrine (*emāmzāda*, q.v.) that had a minaret called Monār-e Sar-berenji. Once there, they would climb the staircase in the minaret, place walnuts on each of the stairs and sit on it hard enough to break the shell, while reciting a verse expressing their wishes (Hedāyat, p. 158; Moʿezz-al-Din Mahdawi, p. 92). They might alternatively draw a string across a cross-section and would wait for the passers-by to tear it while passing through (Purkarim, p. 21), or would pour water of an old bathhouse called Ḥammām-e Šayḵ Bahāʾi upon their heads, using a special bowl called *jām-e čel kelid* "the bowl of forty keys" (Hedāyat, p. 159).

Divination by the aid of the tombstone of a saint (Hedāyat, p. 159), tea-leaves (Nafisi), and by interpretation of dreams (*Ketāb-e hafta* 13, pp. 134-35), as well as by other means are common in the folklore of Isfahan. Other magical practices and beliefs, such as those associated with the protection of the newborn infant and its mother from the demoness Āl (q.v.), or protecting a frightened child against becoming a stutterer abound (Moʿezz-al-Din Mahdawi, pp. 8, 10).

Perhaps what natives of Isfahan are most famous for in Persian folklore is their sense of humor and ability to produce clever repartees. Riddles, short folktales, and satires in verse abound in Isfahan's verbal folklore (e.g., see Moʿezz-al-Din Mahdawi, p. 59, who quotes Mo-ḥammad Rāvandi's *Rāḥat al-ṣodur*).

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