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vi. The Esbandi Festival

An elaborate festival held in the Kashan region on the eve of the month Esfand, as counted in the old Jalāli calendar (see calendars ii), Esbandi (or Esfandi) has roots in ancient Iranian traditions connected to the deity Spandārmad (see armaiti).

The rites and beliefs connected to Esbandi are mainly known through the extensive collections of the eminent Persian folklorist Abu'l-Qāsem Enjavi Širāzi (q.v.) from the late 1960s, when the festival was already moribund. His publication has been echoed widely in the popular literature on Kashan Province, although a few brief, independent accounts are published as well (e.g., Zargari, pp. 27, 169); yet little is known about the fate of the Esbandi under the Islamic regime. Kalāntar Żarrābi Kāšāni, who compiled a monograph on Kashan in the late 19th century, only alludes to the festivity without mentioning the name (p. 248); apparently he thought that it was known nationwide. Somewhat surprisingly, however, the traditional Persian dictionaries remain silent on Esbandi.

Geographical domain. The Esbandi was celebrated consistently throughout Kashan district. This includes the town of Kashan itself, and, to its north,

Bidgol, Ārān, and Nušābād; to the south, Gabrābād, Aznāva, Qamṣar, and Jowšaqān-e Qāli (q.v.), and farther down to Meyma on the Isfahan-Qom highway; to the southwest, Niāsar, Nešalj, Maraq, Barzok, and Āzarān; to the west, Fin, Rāvand, Jowšaqān-e Estark, and, farther west, Sineqān in the Ardahāl valley, and across the latter, Narāq; from here north into the Jāsb valley, the villages of Karugān, Vārān, and Harāzjān. In the southern district of Naṭanz, the festival was held in Naṭanz, Risa/Riza, and Ḵāledābād (in Bādrud district), but is not reported to have been held in the Barzrud valley. Outside of Kashan, the festival is reported to have been held only in neighboring Maḥallāt to the west, although not as Esbandi per se, but as the Eve of Esfand (*šab-e Esfand*; Enjavi, I, pp. 43-51). It is notable that a Kashan cultural province can be delineated by the Esbandi festival, which was not held in Isfahan, to which Kashan is an administrative dependency.

The calendar. Esbandi was held on the eve and the first day of Esfand, the last month of the traditional Jalāli solar calendar, corresponding to 25 Bahman (14 February) in the official Persian calendar. The divergence arises from the fact that in Kashan the solar year consisted of twelve thirty-day months, supplemented with five epagomenal days, called *panja* (see calendars ii). The twelfth month of the year was locally known as the “peasant Esfand” (*Esfand-e raʿiyati* or *Esfand-e zerāʿati*) to distinguish it from the nationwide Esfand (Enjavi, I, pp. 43, 86, 91; II, p. 163). Esbandi, therefore, suggests that the solar calendar had been current in the Kashan area for agricultural and festivity purposes, even before the official adoption of the solar *hejri* calendar (*taqwim-e hejri-e šamsi*) in 1925. Moreover, the traditional calendar by which Esbandi was celebrated was characteristic to Kashan Province, but not to Maḥallāt, which also observed the celebration; a confusion would arise every year in Maḥallāt as to whether to calculate the first day of Esfand according to the national or the “Kāšāni” calendar; the two would be five days apart.

RITUALS AND BELIEFS

The rituals of the Esbandi were almost as rich as those connected with the Nowruz, at least in some localities. The preparation would begin several days early, with a complete spring cleaning (*ḵāna-takāni*), a visit to the public bathhouse, and the cutting and buying of new clothes. Villagers would travel to Kashan to procure the necessary provisions. There, in the bazaar, shopkeepers would elaborately decorate their merchandise and illuminate their shops (see ČERĀḠĀNI).

Gift giving. Exchange of gifts played a central role in Esbandi. Peasants would bring dairy products, eggs, and vegetables to their landlords and receive in return rice and ghee; so would fabric workers from the owners in the rug weaving and textile industries. The apprentices of various professions and the *maktab* students would award their teachers *esbandi*, usually in kind, which was replaced with cash in the new school system under the Pahlavis. Households would send trays of food to public workers, such as public bath keepers (*garmgun, ḥammāmi*). Fathers occasionally would offer their children gifts of money or other *esbandi*s. Some families would also visit the cemetery with offerings.

Women engaged to be married (*nešānda*, *nāmzad*) would receive ample gifts from their fiancé's household on the last day of Bahman. These would often include fruits, nuts, smoked fish, fine fabrics, clothes, suits, shoes, ornaments, and silver or gold coins, naturally with considerable variations, depending on the wealth of the family. On occasion a lamb, dyed with henna and fully ornamented with gifts, a mirror affixed to its forehead, would also be presented to the engaged woman (Enjavi, I, p. 93). The gifts were set out in large trays (*k̲ʷānča, k̲um*), which would be covered with velvet and illuminated by a light in the middle. These were carried on the heads of bathhouse workers and barbers, who would fumigate the passersby and, in some localities, would be followed by a procession of female relatives of the engaged woman, dancing and ululating along the way. A mirror and a brazier with wild rue burning inside would be carried at the front of the procession, and musicians and drummers sometimes played an accompaniment. In Barzok and Ārān, the procession would consist of eleven trays carried by eleven young women, while the tradition in Jowšaqān-e Estark required seven trays full of gifts to be sent to the woman fiancée. Upon arrival at the fiancée's home, the procession would be received with jubilee and the burning of wild rue, and an egg, already blessed, would be thrown onto the gate by a member of the household before the procession would be allowed to enter the house. The *k̲ʷānča*s would then be returned with gifts, usually clothes, for the fiancé (idem, pp. 88 f., 92 f., 94-102).

On the eve of Esfand. Cooking and feasting were the most important aspects of the Esbandi. At night family members would stay home; visiting with relatives was considered inauspicious. The house would be fully illuminated, and the lights would be kept on through the following day. Women would be busy the whole day with cooking. Rice was considered an indispensable dish, which

was so expensive that the poor of Kashan would be able to afford it only three times a year, specifically, on the eves of the Feṭr, Nowruz, and Esfand (Kalāntar Żarrābi, p. 248). The type of the pilaf varied with the family and locality: *rešta polow* was the most common, but rice with lentils or raisins, or plain (*čelow*), was also popular. The rice would be eaten with smoked fish (fresh fish was rare), *kuku* (q.v.), or stews such as *qorma-sabzi* (with herbs and green vegetables), spinach, and a local stew called *natār*. In some places such as Aznāva and Vārān women would cook *āš-e esfandi*, a frittata with herbs, greens, or other vegetables; it would be set to boil for up to one whole week. *Āš-e rešta* (with noodles) was served in other places, with cheese and yogurt as side dishes. In Niāsar fermented (*māyadār*) foods (such as yogurt or cheese), halva, bread, rose water, and vinegar would be served, for the prosperity of the household (Enjavi, I, pp. 87, 91, 97, 99, 102, 105). The evening snack (*šabčera*) would include fruits, particularly watermelon, as well as dried fruits and nuts (see ājil) to keep away noxious creatures, especially the infamous scorpions of Kashan (idem, pp. 87, 101).

Sofra-ye esfandi. This is a tablecloth that would be spread out on the floor. It is called *sofra-e haft-bija* in Ḵāledābād (Enjavi, I, p. 104), but most commonly referred to as *sofra-ye haft sin*, which is otherwise spread for the Nowruz (see haft sin and nowruz ii). Esbandi tradition mandated the eating of seven things with names starting with the letter *sin* "S," to keep away scorpions. While the incorporation of the modern Haft Sin into the Esbandi customs seems to be contemporary, the Haft Sin used in Kashan included two items of its own. One was *sangak*, a hard, pea-like grain cooked for a long time to be made edible (idem, pp. 87, 90). Another peculiar *sin* item, used in Jowšaqān-e Qāli, is *sek*(*ar*), a sweet-and- sour syrup (idem, p. 102). The *sofra* sometimes included water and a mirror and dyed vegetables and eggs. The tradition held that eggs should not be eaten in the Esbandi but were to be kept in the house. Holding eggs in the hand (idem, p. 87) and keeping money in the pocket are believed to generate prosperity of the family in the entire year to come. Families in mourning would not hold the Esbandi. To keep their hearth (*ojāq*) burning, however, an aged female relative would clean their house and cook the Esbandi meal (idem, pp. 89, 94). The first day of Esfand was considered an opportunity to end the mourning period and join the happiness offered by the rituals (idem, pp. 99 ff.).

Children would particularly enjoy the Esbandi, busy as they would be with various play and games. They would recite rhymes, one of which was common

throughout Kashan Province: *Emšab šab-e Esfand a[st]* //*Zāyidan-e gusfand a[st]* // *Anār*/*Nāranj ṭaraf-e Fin a[st]* // *Jowzeqand če širin a[st]* (“Tonight is the eve of Esfand; bearing of the ewe; pomegranates/bitter oranges are toward Fin; how sweet is the sugar-nut!” see Enjavi, I, pp. 93, 95, 96, 99, 101). In Gabrābād and Āzarān a Halloweenlike trick-or-treating ritual (though without a costume) was a customary celebration for children on Esbandi. In Aznāva, a child would perform the custom of *angena boridan*: while holding a knife in his hand he would move around the house, pretending to kill all insects, such as bedbugs, fleas, lice, and ants, and would recite while doing so (*sās mikošam, kak mikošam*, etc.), which recitation would be repeated by all others present (idem, pp. 100 f.).

The first day of Esfand. A series of visits by relatives and associates (*did o bāzdid*) would occur on this day. The fiancé would be invited for lunch, and the fiancée’s female relatives would be called in to view the gifts she had received. In Narāq, engaged couples would go to the holly trees together in order to light candles. In villages, the bathhouse keeper and barber would pay a call on the landowner (*arbāb*) and village headman (*kadḵodā*) to receive gifts, a rite called *bahmani o esfandi* in Niāsar. Many families would cook and share an *āš* dish, *haft-sin āš* in Sinaqān and *āš-e esfandi* in Jāsb (Enjavi, I, pp. 44, 86, 97, 103 f.).

It was believed that a wind would blow on the first day of Esfand to impregnate trees (idem, p. 101). Wedging pebbles between branches of fruit trees, especially if done by pregnant women, is believed to make them more fruitful. A rite was reported in Āzarān, with a melodic calland- response in the local Rāji dialect (see kāšān ix): *aši kā?* “Where are you going?” *ašun raz* “I am going to the orchard,” *kedum raz?* “Which orchard?” *nun raze ālujāra* “That plum orchard,” *aši čekār bakeri?* “What are you going to do there?” *ašun deraḵtun âvira bakerun* “I am going to make the trees fertile” (idem, pp. 101-3).

Variations. The Jāsb valley had more particular customs. On the eve of Esfand children would bring bunches of *marḡ* “couch grass” or *keleys* (Pers. *karafs*) “wild celery, smallage” from farms and fasten them above the entrance of their houses, as well as on the *korsi* (q.v.). These plants were believed to be consumed by the horse of Esfandiār, who supposedly would visit the houses overnight. Children would place barley stalks on the door latch for the same reason (Enjavi, I, pp. 43 f., 46 f.; from Harāzjān, and Maḥallāt villages).

A series of remarkable feminine rites were observed in Vārān, a village in the Maḥallāt district. On the first day of Esfand, a newly married woman would be taken to a women's festivity held in the dressing room (*bina*) of the public bathhouse to become "enthroned" by her motherin- law. Women and girls would visit their brothers' houses and stay overnight. The period from the first day of Esfand to Nowruz was considered a holiday month, particularly for women and unmarried girls, who would go to an alley called Mārvā (Pers. *morvā* "good omen"), where no man would be allowed, and spend the day playing and dancing; this would be repeated every day, weather permitting (Enjavi, I, pp. 46 f., 50).

Beliefs connected with Esbandi. (1) Keeping harmful creatures away lies behind several Esbandi customs: eating certain dishes and foodstuffs, reciting certain rhymes, and performing certain rituals, as well as avoiding certain deeds, such as sweeping the house on the first day of Esfand, on the grounds that insects and reptiles would take over the house (Enjavi, I, pp. 89, 91). (2) Women and fertility were pivotal to the customs. It was believed that a wind would blow on the first day of Esfand to impregnate trees (idem, p. 101). It was desirable in Karugān, a village in Jāsb district, for a woman in labor on this day to give birth to a girl; giving birth to a boy was considered unpromising (idem, p. 45). The legend of old Bābā Zāl, told on the eve of Esfand, centers around the theme of an abandoned wife. Every year, on the eve of Esfand, Bābā Zāl's wife cooks and waits for her husband, but falls asleep short of his arrival. Bābā Zāl eats the meal and goes away, only to appear again on the next Esbandi. It was believed that, if his wife ever saw him, the world would come to an end (idem, p. 92). (3) Wealth and prosperity were invoked by eating *ājil* (various nuts and fruits; q.v.). Eggs symbolized wealth; they were kept in the house and held in the hand at supper, but not eaten. Keeping money in one's pocket also meant prosperity in the upcoming year. Bābā Zāl was believed to prefer the wealthy over the poor when he visited each house (idem, pp. 87, 92). It was believed that he prayed for the rejoicing family members that the coming year might be bountiful for them. Working hard on the first day of Esfand was common, especially among female spinners and weavers, who held the belief that the first day's work would set the pace for the entire coming year. (4) Folktales were told in Jāsb about Esfandiār. He was believed to act against the deeds of his frost-causing brothers Ahman and Bahman (idem, pp. 46 f.), characters associated with other winter festivals in central Persia. (5) A variety of other beliefs were held, including those related to the wild rue, cats, and leopards (idem, pp. 92, 97, 99). The tale of Korde in Jowšaqān-e Qāli (p. 102, cf. pp. 7-9)

derives from the *Šāh-nāma* legend that alludes to the ethnogenesis of the Kurds (see *Šāh-nāma*, ed. Ḵāleqi, I, pp. 56-57, ll. 29-37).

THE ROOTS OF ESBANDI

Esbandi has evaded the attention of scholars in their diachronic study of Persian festivals. In fact, it resembles the festival of Spandārmad, not only in its characteristic observances, such as gifting women and attacking noxious creatures, but also in many other details, as related by Abu Rayḥān Biruni around 1000 CE and as practiced by the Zoroastrians in the ensuing centuries. As a word, "Esbandi" may be a contracted form of *Spandārmadagān, the "name-day" celebration of Spandārmad, observed at the coincidence of the day and month dedicated to this Zoroastrian deity, that is, the fifth day of the twelfth month. In the chapter on the month of Spandārmad (Esfandārmaḏ māh), Biruni states: "on the fifth, or Spandārmad rōz, there is a feast on account of the identity of the names of the month and the day. . . . Spandārmad is charged with the care of the earth and with that of the good, chaste, and beneficent wife who loves her husband. In past times this was a special feast of the women, when the men used to make them liberal presents. This custom is still flourishing at Isfahan, Ray, and in other districts of Fahla. In Persian it is called Moždgirān ["receiving wages"]. . . . On this day common people eat sun-raisins and the kernels of pomegranates. . . , believing that to be an antidote against the bite of scorpions" (Biruni, *Āṯār*, p. 229; cf. tr. p. 216). Biruni goes on to describe the preparation of a charm to fend off reptiles from the house. Shorter versions of the custom of women receiving gifts on the feast of Spandārmad appear in other works of Biruni (*Qānun* I, p. 266; *Tafhim*, p. 260) as well as in Gardizi (p. 247). The Zoroastrian *Rewāyat* of Kāmdin Šāpur, dated 1558, prescribes on the Esfand day of the Esfand month maintaining "cultivators' feast" (*Jašn-e barzigarān*; cf. *Esfande raʿïyati/zerāʿati* in Kashan), which involved dying the cock, cattle, and sheep (cf. the Esbandi custom of dying and decorating the sheep sent to one's fiancée's house) and fumigating the house by burning wild rue, among other things, so that "the poison of noxious creatures would not be deadly during the year and they would perish" (apud Dārāb Hormazdyār, pp. 526-27; tr., pp. 341-42). The same authority advises writing of a *nērang* "charm" in the Pahlavi script, with the principal statement: "I tied the (evil) tongue of all noxious creatures and demons" (*bastom zafar [ī] hamāg xrafstarān ud dēwān ud drōjān*; Dārāb Hormazdyār, p. 526). This persianized verse accords well with the rhyme recited in Qamsar in the eve Esbandi: "We tied the tongue of snakes and scorpions" (*bastim zabān-e*

mār o ʿaqrab; Enjavi, I, p. 92).

Mary Boyce's fieldwork reveals that the Zoroastrian community of Yazd kept the festival until the early decades of the 20th century. It had by then been extended to a ten-day feast, with the first five days of the month of Esfand forming *Sven-i mas* "the Greater Spand[ārmad]" and the last five days of the preceding month, Bahman, *Sven-i kasōg* "the Lesser Spand[ārmad]," the terms specific to the Zoroastrian dialect of Yazd and Kermān (see behdinān dialect; Sorušiān, p. 104). Boyce surmises that the extension of the celebration to ten days grew from an initial confusion among the Zoroastrian community due to official calendar reforms throughout history (Boyce, 1970, pp. 535-36; idem, 1977, p. 201). This helps explain not only why the Esbandi was celebrated on the first instead of the fifth of Esfand by the Muslim community of Kashan, but also why the ten-day Zoroastrian feast accords well with the continuation of Esbandi until Nowruz in Vārān, as described above. Moreover, the Zoroastrian custom of visiting *daḵma*s during the *Sven-i kasōg* is in agreement with visiting the cemetery on the eve of Esfand in the Kashan region.

All this suggests a relatively fresh Zoroastrian substratum in the Kashan region. This is supported by the existence of such mythological figures as Bābā Zāl, Esfandiār, and Ahman (probably from Akōman "evil mind") and Bahman in the beliefs connected to Esbandi. The Esbandi of Kashan preserved the characteristics of the original feast even more completely than those reported for the Zoroastrians by Biruni, Kāmdin Šāpur, Boyce, and Sorušiān; the Esbandi not only observes the cult of Spandārmad through the praising of women, but her immanence on the earth was also reflected in Esbandi customs such as gifting peasants, repulsing reptiles and insects, orchard magic, and spring cleaning. The etymological link with Spandārmad was extended to the *espand* "wild rue," *gusfand* "sheep," and Esfandiār, all having a part in Esbandi. Lastly, Esbandi is remarkably similar to Valentine's Day, both of which fall on February 14, though this exactness is mere coincidence.

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