



ORAL LITERATURE IN IRAN

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INTRODUCTION

Oral literature (sometimes called “verbal art”) comprises many genres, narrative and lyrical, poetry and prose, sung and spoken. In the Iranian languages a huge variety of material—heroic poetry, improvised lamentation, folktales and much more—has been recorded, though much remains uncollected. Despite the great literary traditions of the Iranian cultural area, literacy levels remained for the most part low in the pre-modern period and much literary and historical material was orally composed and transmitted. The interplay between oral and written is complex and varied; written compositions may pass into the oral sphere and be memorized and transmitted orally. Oral traditions, especially epic or romantic themes, may inspire highly literary works, which draw on their storylines, characters, and images. The concept of “folklore” (of which oral literature is the verbal part) has become deeply rooted in the national identity of the various Iranian peoples. The story of “folklore studies” in Iranian languages is highly charged with the politics of Orientalism, post-colonialism, and identity formation. It is no coincidence that scholars of folklore in Iran (and neighboring countries) have had a sensitive and at times troubled relationship with their national governments, as well as lively academic debates amongst themselves. Moreover, many of the ideas used by (predominantly European) early folklorists have found fertile ground in contemporary discourses of identity. Not only is the idea that



“folklore” expresses the unique soul of the *volk* accepted in many parts of the Iranian world, but also, in a cultural environment where genealogy has long played an important role, the search for origins inspired by Indo-European philology was seen as a worthy enterprise by Iranian specialists, as by Westerners.

THEORETICAL APPROACHES

Theoretical approaches to oral literature have varied enormously (see Finnegan, 1992, pp. 25-52). The 19th and early 20th centuries saw not only the development of the concept of the *volk*, heralded by the brothers Grimm, but also of anthropological theories which posited primitive origins for folktales. These often used evolutionary theory to explain the development of folktales, such as in the work of Andrew Lang, who indeed translated Grimm’s tales (1884) though he did not espouse their theoretical standpoint. Other theorists of comparative philology and mythology, such as Max Müller, saw a close relationship between myth and Aryan language. Later developmental theories linked literary genres to certain stages of society (e.g., H. M. and N. K. Chadwick, 1932-40). Such approaches eventually culminated in the influential work of [Georges Dumézil](#) (q.v.) but were primarily concerned with finding *Ur-* or ‘original’ forms of tales used by primitive societies, in parallel with the techniques of Indo-European philology.

The historical-geographical “Finnish” school, which sought to collect, analyze, and classify narratives, remained an important scientific approach for much of the 20th century, with Antti Aarne’s index of tale-types, first published in 1910, expanded by Stith Thompson into further editions in 1928 and 1961. However, others wearied of the lack of attention paid to the context of individual variants. Carl Wilhelm von Sydow (e.g., 1948) developed the concept of the *oikotype* or group of variants specific to a region. Vladimir Propp (1928) proposed a general analytical model for the folktale in terms of “functions” rather than “types;” his influential work, along with that of Claude Lévi-Strauss, paved the way for structuralist and narratological analyses which developed strongly in the 1960s and 1970s. As with other types of literature, oral literature has been studied from various perspectives, including the psychological (Bettelheim, 1976), and feminist (Jordan and Kalčík, 1985; Abu-Lughod, 1986). Recently, much scholarly work has placed a strong emphasis on the role of performance, an approach which perhaps grew from the formalist emphasis of mid-twentieth century anthropologists. The principles of “ethnography of speaking,” an area of sociolinguistics which



emphasized the study of the communication event within context (Hymes, 1974; Bauman and Sherzer, 1974) led also to discourse-centered analyses (e.g., Sherzer, 1987) and to “ethnopoetics” that placed more of an emphasis on poetic creativity and style (Cancel, 1989; Hymes, 1981).

A key theoretical question in this field of study, also of great importance for the Iranian milieu, is that of the “great divide” between “written” and “oral” societies, and thus, whether oral literatures are qualitatively different from written ones, necessitating a different theoretical approach. To accept the term “oral literature” at all is to take a stance differentiating oneself from scholars who prefer such terms as “orature,” originally coined as a parallel to *écriture* in response to the colonialist European associations of the word “literature” (e.g., Ngugi, 1986). The oral-formulaic theory of Milman Parry and Albert Lord (Lord, 1960), analyzed techniques of composition in performance of illiterate Yugoslav bards, who used an extensive repertoire of formulaic elements with known metrical values, as a model for the Homeric epics. This undoubtedly productive approach inspired many studies which applied the analysis to popular epics from the *Song of Roland* to Kurdish *destan* (Chyet, 1991) and even to such “post-oral” works as the *Šā h-n ā ma* (Davidson, 1985, 1994, 2000). However, as Ruth Finnegan noted (1976), it also gave rise to the idea that the only oral poetry, and perhaps the only oral literature, was oral-formulaic poetry. Moreover, certain studies (McLuhan, 1962; Goody, 1977; Ong, 1982) suggest that the acquisition of literacy changes thinking in predictable and uniform ways, with the overt implication that civilization and literacy go hand in hand. Such theorizing has now been convincingly challenged by many, including Ruth Finnegan (1988); Brian Street, who used a study of village life in Iran as part of a demonstration that “literacy” is an “ideological” rather than “autonomous” concept (1984); and Graham Furniss, who moreover makes the point that, whatever their uses of literacy, all human societies are oral (2004). The “Great Divide” is in any case a difficult concept to sustain in the milieu of Iran, where literacy has been known and put to various uses for thousands of years, where the interfaces between orality and literacy are complex, and the politics of literacy are also not uniform—in some contexts, central government attempts to bring “development” and “progress” to subaltern groups by enforced schooling may be perceived by the target populations as attempts to erase traditional culture (see Scalbert-Yücel, 2005m on Kurds in Turkey and Sabahi Seyed, 1999, for the “literacy corps” in Iran).



Other key debates in the field revolve around the concept of “text” versus performance—that is, whether one can say that a “text” exists in some sense or whether it is recreated in every performance (see Dundes, 1964, and Baumann and Briggs, 1990, for a discussion of the process of “entextualization,” a framing of material that can apply to both written and oral literatures). Another important question is that of the role of individual creativity in performance versus collective tradition. This is also a pertinent topic in Oriental studies, as it is open to accusations of “romanticization” of the capacities of traditional singers, or of “orientalism” on the part of those who minimize individual artistry, and has been treated in the Iranian context (e.g., Mills 1978, 1991 on the strategies of Afghan storytelling).

ORAL LITERATURE IN IRAN

Pre-Islamic Iran. By definition, the oral literature of the past is not documented, but in some cases extant sources presuppose its existence. It is now generally agreed that the corpus of texts known as the *Avesta* (q.v.), was transmitted orally until well into the Sasanian period. Important distinctions in oral transmission are those between (1) fixed and free transmission, and (2) poetry and prose. Poetic compositions are often based on storylines which are also handed down informally in prose. This suggests that legends and storylines that are referred to in the so-called Young Avesta (notably in the Yashts) formed part of the communal memory of the peoples concerned. As long as these texts were understood, they can be defined as “oral literature.” It has been argued (Kreyenbroek, 1996) that Avestan ceased to be understood by the majority of Zoroastrians in the Achaemenid period, when the center of Zoroastrian culture shifted to Western Iran, where other languages were spoken. These developments must have led to the inclusion of many storylines of Zoroastrian origin in the corpus of stories that were transmitted in Western Iran. We know little about other stories that were current there at that time. There is evidence to suggest, however, that the Achaemenids used storytellers to spread information among the people, thus helping to construct a version of history that was widely known and accepted regardless of its veracity. If, as is widely supposed, the story of Bardiya/Smerdis, that the person defeated by Darius was not Cambyses’ brother *Bardiya* (q.v.) but the Magian *Gaumāta* (q.v.) who pretended to be the legitimate king, is not based on historical fact, a plausible explanation for its general acceptance is that it was spread by professional storytellers who were hired for this purpose by the Achaemenid court.



There can be no doubt that verbal artistry played a significant role in the lands of Iran between the Achaemenid and Sasanian periods. The importance of minstrels in the transmission of communal memory in Parthian times was stressed by [Mary Boyce](#) (1957); remnants of popular stories about the hero Rostam have been found in Sogdian manuscripts (Sims-Williams, 1976). [Alexander the Great](#) (q.v.), though execrated in the Zoroastrian priestly tradition, was evidently the subject of a popular heroic tradition in Iran and elsewhere, which led to the genesis of the Alexander Romance (which in itself provides a striking example of the interplay between oral and written literary traditions, see [ALEXANDER IN THE ZOROASTRIAN TRADITION](#)). Similarly, a Zoroastrian [apocalyptic](#) (q.v.) literature developed as a result of the fall of the Achaemenid Empire. Other legends, such as those about the birth and life of Zarathustra, may also have developed during this period.

The culture of the Sasanians appears to have been characterized by a marked predilection for storytelling on the one hand and by the increasing use of the written word on the other. Sasanian Iran was a center where storylines from various parts of the world formed part of literary culture. Storylines from the Indian *Pañcatantra*, for instance, reached the Middle East via Middle Persian. Many tales of heterogeneous provenance are found in the later Arabic *Thousand and One Nights* (see [ALF LAYLA WA LAYLA](#)), which is thought to go back to a Middle Persian corpus referred to as *Hazār Afsāna(g)*. As in the case of Darius and Bardiya/Smerdis, a certain amount of misinformation about the early Sasanians and about Mazdak was spread among the people, presumably by storytellers. The oral literature of the Sasanian period must have included romantic tales, religious legends, heroic epics, wisdom literature and wise sayings, stories of social significance, factual and mythical accounts of history, fairy tales, and animal fables.

In an oral narrative culture, anecdotes of different types were probably told as part of various independent traditions, at different venues. Heroic and historical tales may have been told in the marketplace, love stories perhaps in more intimate surroundings, and Zoroastrian legends at religious gatherings. In oral culture, groups of related stories are typically ordered in cycles, rather than in a linear sequence. Each anecdote is told in a separate session, and little attention need be paid to linear chronology (see [FOLK POETRY](#)).

Various factors, such as the influence of neighboring Byzantium and the increased use of writing, apparently led Sasanian society to feel the need for a



national history. Such a “history” was apparently conceived of as comprising the various strands of the narrative traditions known to the public, organized along linear lines as in a written book. The difficulty of creating such a work is habitually underrated. It seems unlikely that once unified, authoritative work materialized at once. Rather, storytellers probably began to combine elements of traditional narratives in novel ways, so that tales about ancient kings alternated with more appealing stories about heroes and lovers. In the course of time, a more or less fixed framework emerged, based on histories of the kings known from the Avesta; a condensed version of Achaemenid history (personified by the one King Dārā son of Dārā, as it was no doubt represented in traditional oral accounts); tales about Alexander; some references to his successors, the Seleucids; and detailed accounts of Sasanian history. The complete suppression of information about the centuries of Parthian rule in Ferdowsi’s *Šāh-nāma* suggests that the Sasanian state controlled the genesis of the national history at least to some extent (on Iranian history, see [IRAN ii. IRANIAN HISTORY](#); on its mythology, see [IRAN iv. MYTHS AND LEGENDS](#)). It is possible that the term *Xwadāy-nāmag* referred first and foremost to this novel genre of oral storytelling, rather than to one particular written text.

In Islamic times. Narratives belonging to the *Xwadāy-nāmag* / *Šāh-nāma* genre continued to be performed in Islamic times by professional *Šāh-nāma kvāns*. The prominent *Šāh-nāma-kvān* Kārāsi held a position at the Buyid court before moving to that of [Maḥmud of Ghazna](#) (q.v.), who is said to have greatly enjoyed his performances. According to [Abu’l-Faḥl Bayhaqi](#) (q.v.), storytellers were normally present at court in Ghaznavid times, narrating “evening stories” in the princes’ private quarters (de Bruijn, 1987; Yamamoto, 2003, pp. 58-60). Generally, however, there was a trend among the elite towards art forms based on written texts, such as classical poetry, which presumably led to the genesis and popularity of Ferdowsi’s written *Šāh-nāma*. The people, on the other hand, continued to enjoy verbal artistry, both prose storytelling and poetry of a pre-Islamic type.

In practice, moreover, elevated and popular verbal art usually interact. Wā‘eẓ Kāšefi’s written work *Rawẓat al-šohadā’* (16th century) has inspired performances of various kinds, often by illiterate performers for an equally non-literate public. Ferdowsi’s *Šāh-nāma* is a major point of reference in the performance of *naqqāli* (q.v.), while elements from the oral tradition found their way into the *Šāh-nāma* after Ferdowsi’s death (Maḥjub, 1958; Yamamoto,



2003). Interaction between oral and written literature is also thought to have informed such works as the *Book of Samak-e 'Ayyār* (Gaillard, 1987).

Safavid culture seems to have promoted popular performances, particularly of a religious character. In the Qājār period, the repertoire of non-literate storytellers included the *Greater Šāh-nāma* (including Ferdowsi's work as well as stories based upon such texts as the *Garšāsp-nāma* (q.v.), *Borzunāma* (q.v.), and similar works); *Samak-e 'Ayyār* (q.v.); *Qa š ida-ye Ḥ amza*; *Abu-Moslem-nāma*; *Dārāb-nāma* (q.v.); *Eskandar-nāma* (q.v.); *Kāvarān-nāma* [q.v.]; *Moktār-nāma*, and some works of later origin, such as *Ḥosayn-e Kord* (q.v.) and *Amir Arsalān* (q.v.; Yamamoto). Written versions of these texts based upon oral transmission existed at this time, but the storytelling tradition retained a strongly oral character. Several of these storylines are still popular in Iran and Afghanistan. Other forms of oral literature, such as religious legends, folk and fairy tales, and animal fables continue to form part of popular culture in Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan.

Prose narratives are usually told in plain language, but often with characteristic formulae, especially at the beginning and the end of the narration. A variety of terms are used for such narratives (e.g., *afsāna*, *qeṣṣa*, *hekāyat*, *latifa*), whose precise meanings and connotations differ according to the region. On Tajik performances of epic cycles about the Central Asian folk hero Gorughli, see [FOLK POETRY](#) and [KÖROĞLU](#).

In Iranian languages other than Persian. Epics, religious legends, romantic narratives, folk- and fairy tales, animal fables, wise sayings, and folk poetry also play a prominent role in the cultures of the Kurds, Pashtuns, Baluch, and Ossetians. Knowledge of the oral literature of one's region or ethnic group often enhances the individual's sense of cultural identity. Certain forms of oral literature in fact help preserve the culture's awareness of its past, its religious traditions, and its ideals and values. Thus, the main subject of the traditional Baluchi epic cycles (known as *daptar*) is the history of the Baluch people, their origin, genealogies, and tribal conflicts, at times interwoven with love themes (see [FOLK POETRY](#)). In Pashtun culture, professional storytellers traditionally served as tribal genealogists and historiographers, while their repertoires also included moral tales and stories illustrating the values of Pashtun society.

Prominent themes in Kurdish oral literature are also concerned with the



culture's ideals. The epic *Dimdim* describes the fate of a chief who seeks to assert his independence in the face of opposition from the surrounding states and dies in the attempt. The storyline of *Memê Alân*, which inspired Ahmad Kāni's *Mem u Zin*, the Kurdish "national epic," deals with the theme of ideal and impossible love and is somewhat reminiscent of *Romeo and Juliet*. Other Kurdish narratives and ballads deal with local or regional history, describing tribal battles or fights against the state authorities, at times focusing on the way in which such conflicts affect personal relations. Some religious groups in Kurdistan, notably the [Yazidis](#) and [Ahl-e Ḥaqq](#) (qq.v.), preserve their religious knowledge as well as their constructs of history of history by means of storylines which are told as prose narratives, and alluded to in sacred hymns. Oral versions of parts of the *Šāh-nāma* also exist in Kurdish (see, e.g., MacKenzie, 1962, pp. 92-93; and more fully Chaman-Ara, 2015). The Ossetic epic cycles about the Narts, a race that lived before humans in the Caucasian mountains, have often been discussed. There are three clans of Narts: the *Æxsærtægkatæ*, who are primarily warriors; the *Borætæ*, who are husbandmen; and the *Alægatæ*, who seem to fulfill the traditional functions of priests. This is regarded by some as confirmation of Dumézil's theories on the tripartite nature of Indo-European society.

THE STUDY OF ORAL LITERATURE

Several academic centers in the West are now actively engaged in the study of oral literature in Iranian languages (see Kreyenbroek and Marzolph). Archives of material concerned with oral artistry are found in Dushanbe, Göttingen, Suleymaniya, and in various centers in Iran.

Many works of verbal artistry in Iranian languages, however, became known in the West through the efforts of linguists, who recorded them as specimens of a language or dialect. Under British colonial rule, for instance, the need to teach colonial officials the local languages led to the publication of works of oral literature in print. Early collections of Pashto folk narratives in particular tended to be published for this purpose; Pashto folk poetry was first collected by the French Orientalist [James Darmesteter](#) (q.v.; 1849-94). In the case of Baluchi, the seminal work of M. L. Dames helped to define verbal artistry as literature (see [FOLK POETRY](#)). These developments affected perceptions of the value of this type of literature in Afghanistan and British India in the course of the 19th century. See further, [FOLKLORE STUDIES ii. OF AFGHANISTAN](#).



In Iran, scholars such as ‘Ali-Akbar Dehkodā (q.v.; d. 1956) and Šādeq Hedāyat (q.v.; d. 1951) began to develop a romantic interest in the popular culture of their people in the 1920s. In 1938, the Iranian Farhangestān (q.v.) announced its intention to collect and publish various forms of oral literature, and in the 1930s and 40s further efforts were made to collect and study folktales (e.g., in *Payām-e Now*). This trend continued in the following decades. From the early 1960s onwards, the late Abu’l-Qāsem Enjavi Širāzi (q.v; d. 1993) was a central figure in this field. In the Islamic Republic, periods of official sponsorship of the study of oral literature alternate with times when such activities are discouraged. See further [FOLKLORE STUDIES i. OF PERSIA](#).

In Tajikistan, Russian folklorists engaged in the study of the oral literature of the region from the late 19th century onwards, and Tajik scholars showed some interest in the subject in the 1930s. In the 1950s concerted efforts were made to collect oral Tajik literature. Transcripts of recordings are held in the “Folklore Archive” at the Rudaki Institute of Language and Literature in Dushanbe. From the 1970s onward, insufficient funds have been available for the study of Tajik folk literature, though some important works have been published.

In the Kurdish lands, interest in oral literature is closely linked to nation-building processes and, particularly in Turkey and Syria, to the search for national identity. The journal *Hawar* (1932-45), which came into being when Kurdish hopes of a nation-state had come to nothing, stressed the importance of oral literature. Over the 20th century, Kurdish folklorists in Iraq, Iran and the Caucasus collected a large variety of material, which in Iraq and the Soviet Union was taught and studied at university level. Broadcasters such as Radio Yerevan preserved archives of material. Since the early 1990s, the Kurdish media in both Iraq and Turkey have presented many examples of oral literature, seen as authentically Kurdish, and the trend towards retelling traditional material in other forms (such as the novel) has intensified.

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