

# Cultural Property and the Right of Interpretation: Negotiating Folklore in the Islamic Republic of Iran<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** In this paper I discuss how the longstanding patterns of foreign-local interaction in Iran affect attitudes toward previously collected folklore materials. On the one hand, my discussion contributes to ongoing explorations of the consequences of colonial and postcolonial positions in folklore studies; on the other, it illuminates how cultural property can be conceptualized and employed. After a brief introduction to some of the ways that folklore has been collected in Iran, I present three case studies from my own experience. The first addresses issues of cultural property and authenticity: who has the right to speak about/represent culture? The second deals with the expectations of field collaborators: what happens to the collected materials? How are publishing rights negotiated and communicated? In the third case study I suggest how institutional expectations change with regard to archive access. Each case study concerns communication between foreigners and locals, particularly with regard to different expectations about how to deal with historically recorded documents of verbal art that are seen as important constituents of traditional culture.

SINCE THE NINETEENTH century, folklore studies in Iran have often profited from a close cooperation between foreigners and locals (Radhayrapetian 1990, 13–83). The structural organization and consequences of this cooperation in terms of fieldwork or publication probably do not differ substantially from situations in other countries in which foreigners and locals have interacted. To a certain extent, the encounter between a researcher and an informant is determined by general phenomena, such as differences in regional, cultural, linguistic, and intellectual backgrounds. Still, it is useful to keep in mind

that this kind of cooperation involves multiple dichotomies: researcher versus informant, method versus data, foreign curiosity versus indigenous competence, and so forth. Particularly in colonial contexts—and primarily from the perspective of the colonizers—cooperation between foreigners and locals ultimately posited foreign superiority (bolstered by what was seen as analytically achieved knowledge) and local inferiority (perceived to be based in the preservation of and apparently uncritical attachment to traditional beliefs and customs) (Jedamski 1996; Naithani 2006, 2010).

Iran has never been submitted to colonial rule in the strict sense of the word. Even so, the historical situation in Iran in the nineteenth and up to the middle of the twentieth century is comparable to that of the European colonies in Asia and Africa. Until the event of the 1979 Revolution, Iran had been the target of various foreign interests and interventions. In the Qajar period, the Russian empire had struggled with Iran in order to enlarge its own zone of interest, particularly in Iran's northwestern region, and Britain had sought influence so as to facilitate access to its colonies in the Indian subcontinent; early in the twentieth century, both Britain and the United States heavily interfered with Iranian politics in order to secure their interests in the exploitation of Iranian oil. Against the backdrop of this experience, the country's official position since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979 is comparable to that of other regions coping with the postcolonial trauma of foreign interference. To say the least, post-Revolution Iran has decided to declare and practice a radical independence from foreign powers, a decision that affects virtually all aspects of political and cultural activities.

In Iran, as elsewhere, the practical consequences of cooperation between foreigners and locals in the field of folklore has most often resulted in a clear division of responsibilities: foreigners handled the collection, analysis, and publication of collected data, while local Iranians were mostly reduced to 'native informants,' people whose collaboration or contribution was central to the research but who went more or less without mention. In accordance with the neo-romanticist attitude prevalent in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, foreign folklorists saw the collected data as the product of a collective tradition in which the individual counted at best as a spokesperson, not as a unique creative force—an attitude that, to a large extent, still prevails in Iranian folkloristics today. Anonymous informants supplied

the ‘raw materials,’ whereas the foreign researchers published the ‘refined results’ and earned national or international recognition.

In this paper I discuss how these longstanding patterns of foreign-local interaction in Iran affect attitudes toward previously collected folklore materials. Such a discussion is relevant to recent international initiatives for the preservation of intangible heritage (e.g., Bendix and Hafstein 2009; Hemme et al. 2007; Smith and Akagawa 2009). On the one hand, my discussion contributes to ongoing explorations of the consequences of colonial and postcolonial positions in folklore studies; on the other, it illuminates how cultural property can be conceptualized and employed (e.g., Bendix et al. 2010). Scholars of Persian folklore have so far rarely participated in these debates, yet there is much to learn from the ways these issues play out in contemporary Iran. Here, after a brief introduction to some of the ways that folklore has been collected in Iran, I present three case studies from my own experience. The first addresses issues of cultural property and authenticity: who has the right to speak about/represent culture? The second deals with expectations of field collaborators: what happens to the collected materials? How are publishing rights negotiated and communicated? In the third case study I suggest how institutional expectations change and are changing with regard to archive access. Finally, in my conclusion I draw attention to the contentious practice of ‘editing’ (Persian *virâyesh*), a post-Revolution practice that from a Western point of view is tantamount to pre-publication censorship. Particularly in the case of folklore texts, this practice risks heavily distorting the originally recorded wording, thus jeopardizing an adequate understanding and interpretation of a given performance in its cultural setting. All of the issues discussed here concern communication among foreigners and locals, particularly with regard to different expectations about how to deal with traditional verbal culture.

## Foreign Studies of Iranian Folklore in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

Up to the beginning of the twentieth century, Western publications on Iranian folklore often—though not exclusively—bespoke the cultural arrogance of the foreigners who produced them. Pioneers in the study of Persian folk narratives—such as British consuls Douglas Craven Phillot (1860–1930) and David Lockhart Robertson Lorimer

(1876–1962; Vahman and Asatrian 2009)—would not have dreamt of mentioning the names of their informants. Lorimer and his wife, for example, present their *Persian Tales* (1919) as a product of anonymous Iranian tradition, without any substantial commentary. Besides the English translation of the “Kermani” and “Bakhtiari” folktale texts they had collected in southwestern Iran, the only additional information their publication contains is a short note on “The Pronunciation of the Persian Words” (349) and a “Vocabulary” (351–54). The latter serves to explain Persian terms in their perceived cultural or ethnographic context. For instance, the glossary in *Persian Tales* offers this explanation of “*mullâ* or *âkhund*”: “A Muhammadan holy man, able to read and write, and knowing a great deal about religion. For this reason he is usually a teacher. He can also perform burial and marriage ceremonies, and write divorce certificates. . . .” (353). Some of the information given in the Vocabulary is quite banal (“*qalian*. A pipe in which the smoke is cooled by passing through cold water. It is sometimes called ‘hubble-bubble’ in English from the noise it makes”; 353), but the section may be read as a simple yet serious attempt to inform English readers about the specifics of the tales’ cultural background. However, this consideration of the audience’s sensitivities is countered by a total neglect of the storytellers: the editors do not say a single word about the circumstances that brought their collection into being, nor do they mention who performed the tales for them.

In his pioneering study of the tales narrated by a professional storyteller, Phillot (1906) exemplifies the approach to indigenous storytellers that was common among his peers. For instance, he conceives of both the stories and their tellers as alien, implying a familiar ambivalence toward the unexplored and exotic that ranges between fascination and disgust. He implicitly admires Iran for its vibrant oral tradition, the knowledge of which, he believes, will help foreigners understand the local people. Phillot served as a colonial officer; thus, for him, coming to know and understand a foreign culture was a natural first step toward governing. At the same time, he expressed outspoken disdain for moral standards and modes of behavior (or, in this case, performance) that he perceived as incongruous with (and, in good cultural-evolutionist fashion, inferior to) his own. He admires the stories he collected as being “highly dramatic” and “often adorned by fine quotations from [the] most esteemed writers”—but he also warns his readers that the tales “generally contain many passages that

are, according to European ideas, indecent or immoral.” Here, Phillot aligns himself with the “European ideas” of the Victorian age, ignoring the well-established Indo-European tradition of misogynous tales as well as the sexually explicit novels of, say, Medieval German or Italian Renaissance literature. And while Phillot admits a “great fluency and rapidity” in the performance of the Persian storytellers, he immediately goes on to criticize narrators for their inability to adjust to his own requirements. In particular, he complains that the storytellers are not able to “dictate slowly: if interrupted they miss the point and become incoherent: Hence the same story has to be repeated many times before the recorder can accurately fill in all the numerous blanks that occur after a first narration” (1906, 375). A psychologist today might conclude that Phillot externalized his dissatisfaction with his own inability to cope with the recording situation by portraying a shortcoming on the performers’ side of the interaction.

In contrast to these culturally arrogant colonial attitudes, Danish scholar Arthur Christensen (1875–1945; Asmussen 1991) and French scholar Henri Massé (1886–1969) were the first foreign researchers to acknowledge the individuality of a Persian storyteller. During his sojourn in Tehran in 1914, Christensen had made the acquaintance of a certain Feizollâh Adib Nadim al-molk. As Christensen recounts, Nadim al-molk did not want to profit from the government pension he was entitled to as a *seyyed*, a descendant of the prophet Muhammad, instead preferring to earn his living by teaching Persian to foreigners (1918, 3–5). Christensen hired this “Seyyed Mo’allem” as his teacher of colloquial Persian and soon noticed that he commanded a vast treasury of tales and anecdotes. The Danish scholar decided to write the narratives down so as to make them available for teaching contemporary colloquial Persian in European universities. His ensuing *Contes persans en langue populaire* (1918)—which publishes the tales in the original language, using Persian script, and in a French translation with comparative comments—is the first study of Iranian folklore to supply a fairly detailed biographical account and, thus, to attest to the individuality of the informant.

Christensen’s work was complemented several years later by Henri Massé (1925), who also published a fair number of anecdotes told by the same storyteller, here too in both the original Persian (in Latin-script transliteration) and in a French translation. Massé moreover succeeded in convincing the narrator to tell at least three fairy tales,

even though he quotes Christensen's mention that the storyteller had a strong aversion to this genre. Massé also added to Christensen's detailed description of the storyteller's individual character by pointing to the latter's good-natured character and his pronounced sense of humor, including a predilection for obscene anecdotes (these, Massé refrained from publishing). With regard to due acknowledgment of contributions made by local informants, Massé's seminal study of Persian beliefs and customs (1938; Omidshar 1993) also deserves notice. In this work, Massé names several individuals who collaborated with him in Iran in 1923. Most of them were not members of the lower strata of society who actually practiced the beliefs and customs under investigation. Instead, Massé relied on evaluations and assessments by well-known Iranian intellectuals such as 'Ali-Akbar Dehkhodâ, Sâdeq Hedâyât, Sa'id Nafisi, or Malek al-sho'arâ' Bahâr (1938, 15). Together, the studies Christensen and Massé published about the tales of their teacher constitute a corpus that was to remain exceptional for a long time. As the earliest available substantial collection of Persian narratives transcribed from the native-language oral performance of a single individualized storyteller, these works document a vivid and unusual joint venture between a native Iranian informant and European scholars.

### Laurence Paul Elwell-Sutton, Collector of Persian Folklore

During his residence in Iran in the 1940s, as well as during various subsequent research trips to the country before the 1979 Revolution, British scholar Laurence Paul Elwell-Sutton (1912–1984; Bosworth 1998) managed to document what constitutes the largest collection of Persian folk narratives outside of Iran. Elwell-Sutton's archive holds more than one hundred tales narrated by an elderly Iranian woman in Tehran known as Mashdi Galin Khânôm and written in the collector's own hand (Elwell-Sutton 1980). In addition, his materials include a substantial number of tape recordings collected during field trips to various locations in Iran (Elwell-Sutton 1982).

After Elwell-Sutton's untimely death in 1984, I inherited his archive—along with its associated responsibilities and dilemmas. Thus, in the several years after Elwell-Sutton's passing, I have worked to publish the greater part of the tales he collected, specifically aiming to serve the needs of both scholarly Western and popular Iranian

audiences. The tales narrated by Mashdi Galin were first published together with a detailed commentary in Germany in 1994, prepared with the assistance of Iranian collaborator Âzar Amirhosseini-Nithammer (Marzolph and Amirhosseini-Nithammer 1994). The next year, an Iranian edition was enthusiastically welcomed by the general public (Marzolph, Amirhosseini-Nithammer, and Vakiliyân 1995); this slightly adapted selection of texts, prepared with the cooperation of Iranian folklorist Ahmad Vakiliyân, is still available more than fifteen years later: it was published in its seventh edition in 2011, having sold more than 24,000 copies. After the work achieved by Christensen and Massé, this is the third publication acknowledging the individuality of a Persian storyteller, and it is the first effort to publish the repertoire of a Persian storyteller in a comprehensive manner.

In making Elwell-Sutton's archived material publicly accessible, various scholars have collaborated with me. In 2004, Elwell-Sutton's collection of tales from the western Iranian region of Vafs, recorded in both the regional language of Vafsi and in parallel Persian translations narrated by the very same performers, was published in an English-language edition by American scholar Donald L. Stilo (2004); an Iranian edition of this book is currently being prepared by Iranian folklorist Mohammad Ja'fari Qanavâti. Finally, most of the tales from Elwell-Sutton's tape recordings were diligently transcribed by Ahmad Vakiliyân and his wife Zohre Zangene and published in a Persian edition in 2007. Today, the tales of Mashdi Galin are available in both a complete Western and a selective Iranian edition; the Vafsi tales are at present only available in a Western edition, while the published tape recordings are only available in an Iranian edition.

Considering the unique histories of collaboration that gave rise to the publication of Elwell-Sutton's material—involving individuals in roles that ranged from informant and collaborator to collector and editor—it has been fascinating to witness the response the books elicited in Iran. My interest here is not with popular reception, even though the tales of Mashdi Galin in particular have been credited with reopening the market for folk- and fairy tales in Iran.<sup>2</sup> I propose instead to discuss the responses that the two editions published in Iran (Marzolph, Amirhosseini-Nithammer, and Vakiliyân 1995; Vakiliyân and Zangene 2007) elicited from the individuals involved in their genesis, at different times and in different roles.<sup>3</sup> These responses bespeak concerns that differ from those of both the researcher (whose

interest lies in making the unpublished material accessible to the scholarly public in a version as close to the original performance as possible) and the general reader (who simply wants to enjoy a good tale). Furthermore, they shed light on the complex relationship between (native) informant and (foreign) researcher, particularly under the present political circumstances of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

### The Impact of the Iranian Revolution

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 was triggered, to a large extent, by political interference and foreign exploitation in the country. The immediate cause was local experience with the autocratic rule of Mohammad-Rezâ Shâh, the second monarch of the short-lived Pahlavi dynasty, who had been in power since 1941. The twentieth century had also seen a substantial number of aggressive, foreign acts of interference in the region, such as the 1953 coup d'état that removed Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq from office. Funded and masterminded by the British and US governments, the coup had clearly aimed at securing foreign commercial interests, since Mosaddeq had been the architect of the nationalization of the Iranian oil industry. From the Iranian perspective, that intervention was just one link in a chain of outsider interference. Previous incidents had included the politically feeble monarchs of the Qajar dynasty giving foreign nations exclusive rights to collect Iranian import taxes, to exploit Iranian natural resources, or to tax Iranian tobacco in return for large grants that funded the monarchs' extravagant lifestyle.

As a direct result of these intrusions, foreign activities in Iran after the Revolution were regarded with a high degree of suspicion, resulting at first in a complete rupture of relations with the West and, later, in their slow and cautious reorientation. While the rejection of Western influence affected many political, commercial, and cultural activities, folklore and folk narrative research suffered from a double verdict: according to the new 'Islamic' standards, folklore studies were deemed superstitious, misleading, and in conflict with officially propagated values. In addition, because the study of folklore had been strongly supported by members of the imperial regime, folklore scholarship became suspect, seen as intent on re-establishing approaches to popular culture that the new regime had regarded as abolished once and for all (Marzolph 1999).



Meanwhile, recent years have witnessed a steady reorientation toward traditional Iranian values that are not necessarily linked to Islam. The most prominent example is the recent activity associated with the Persian national epic *Shâhnâme* (Book of kings) and its creator Ferdousi—particularly during 2010, the UNESCO-approved millennium anniversary of the *Shâhnâme*'s compilation. Folklorists prided themselves, at least for a number of years, on the establishment of the Khâne-ye farhang-e mardom (House of popular culture), the folklore research section of the state broadcasting institution; it was housed in the former private residence of Seyyed Abolqâsem Enjavi Shirâzi, the most prominent propagator of folklore and folk narrative before the Revolution (Marzolph 1994).<sup>4</sup> The suspicion of folklore that began in the post-Revolution era appears to have turned into a self-conscious attitude of controlled appreciation. Its effects are felt at both the institutional and personal levels. This self-consciousness bespeaks pride; a strong appreciation of Iranian cultural values; independence (including independent judgment); and a careful monitoring of researchers, with special attention to the involvement of foreigners. The three case studies presented below highlight the tensions regarding folklore materials that arise from this specific history.

### Case Study I: Mashdi Galin Khânom

My first example relates to an essay titled “Two Words about Mashdi Galin Khânom and her Tales” (2005), published by Farid Javâher-Kalâm in the literary journal *Hâfez* in response to the second edition of *Qessehâ-ye Mashdi Galin Khânom* (Marzolph, Amirhosseini-Nithammer, and Vakiliyân 1997). The short review essay begins with a biting satire in the vein of Persian writer Jalâl Âl-e Ahmad's famous essay “Gharb-zadegi” (often translated as “Westoxication” or “Occidentosis”; see Âl-e Ahmad 1982, 1983; Hanson 1983). Extending Âl-e Ahmad's critique of Iranians who naively admire everything ‘Western,’ Javâher-Kalâm ridicules the uncritical esteem that some Iranians award to Western professors solely on the grounds of their regional origin and supposed intellectual superiority. Without referring to any of the Western professors involved in producing the book under review, Javâher-Kalâm takes particular pleasure in making fun of Persian writers and/or speakers who use Western terms—such as *genre*, *parameter*, *action*, *postmodern*, *feminism*, and *effect*—while being unable to explain or voice those

concepts in Persian (2005, 44). The obvious focus of his critique, though he never mentions it directly, is the uncritical and unquestioned emulation of Western concepts by Iranian researchers.

The review's author proceeds by introducing himself as the son of Elwell-Sutton's journalist friend 'Ali Javâher-Kalâm, in whose house Elwell-Sutton got to know the female storyteller Mashdi Galin, meeting her at regular intervals to write down her tales. The author characterizes his own role as the person who "dictated" the tales to the collector (Javâher-Kalâm 2005, 46); that is, he acted as a mediator by breaking the storyteller's flow of words at intervals in order to allow Elwell-Sutton to catch up in his writing. In addition, he claims to have explained the numerous colloquialisms and unusual expressions that the collector, with his limited command of the modern Persian colloquial, did not understand. Mentioning *The Wonderful Sea-Horse and other Persian Tales* (Mashdi Galin Khânôm 1950)—an English-language translation and literary adaptation of some of Mashdi Galin's tales that was later retranslated to Persian (Elwell-Sutton 1962)—Farid Javâher-Kalâm then begins his review of the second edition of *Qessehâ-ye Mashdi Galin Khânôm* (Marzolph, Amirhosseini-Nithammer, and Vakiliyân 1997). He erroneously believes that the book, like Elwell-Sutton's 1962 publication, is a translation from English. Implying carelessness and assumption, he criticizes the editors for quoting Elwell-Sutton's second given name as "Paul" instead of "Peter" (2005, 45), and goes on to point out further mistakes and inadequacies in the book's introduction, such as the fact that his father is quoted as having been the Iranian ambassador to Russia (46). He devotes a major part of his critique (47–49) to a discussion of the tale of *'Ali bune-gir* ('Ali who always found a pretext to criticize his wife), an Iranian version of international tale-type 1408B: *Fault-Finding Husband Nonplussed* (Marzolph 1984; Uther 2004, 2:202). The author analyzes the tale's language (as reproduced in the book) in great detail, finding it completely inadequate and prone to distort the charming flow of the original performance. He claims to remember the tale's original wording verbatim: not only had he been present when the tales were performed for Elwell-Sutton, he observes, but he had also heard the tale performed on various other occasions. His critique of the tale's published rendering hinges on his assertion that the wording he himself remembered and reproduced was the only legitimate rendering.

Upon reading the review, I felt at first tempted to respond tit for tat: there were a great many points I could refute. First, all available

bibliographic resources—including the biographical entry in the *Encyclopædia Iranica* compiled by Elwell-Sutton’s close friend Clifford Edmund Bosworth (1998)—quote Elwell-Sutton’s given name as “Laurence Paul” and not, as the reviewer would have it, “Laurence Peter.” Second, the erroneous information about the career of the reviewer’s father is contained in a note based on information contributed by the storyteller’s grandson, Hosein Khâki—information that, incidentally, had been added by the publisher without my authorization, beginning with the second edition. Third, the book is not a translation, but rather an edition that reproduces Elwell-Sutton’s handwritten transcript of the storyteller’s performance as faithfully as conditions in the Islamic Republic of Iran then allowed (Marzolph 1998). Changes to content and language were implemented in response to the suggestions voiced by the Ministry of Islamic Guidance, to whom each and every monograph publication had (and has) to be submitted for review. Moreover, I sincerely doubt that Farid Javâher-Kalâm—or in fact anybody else—would remember an oral performance word for word after a period of more than half a century. Additionally, the preserved written documentation proves beyond doubt that Mashdi Galin did not reproduce the very same structure, content, or wording every time she performed a given tale. To name but one example, the published documentation includes three performances of tale-type 1741: *The Priest’s Guest and the Eaten Chicken* (Marzolph and Amirhosseini-Nithammer 1994, 2:57–62). The variant texts are identical in structure, but their lengths range from a condensed basic version of just over 350 words, to a medium-sized standard version of 525 words, to an extensively elaborated version of almost 1200 words.

Although there is substantial evidence to refute most of the author’s claims, I concluded that a discussion of these matters in direct personal communication would promise little gain. The main conflict Javâher-Kalâm voices in his critique appears to one of property. The reviewer criticizes both the original collector and the later editors (none of whom are ever named) of meddling in matters beyond their purview. The concept of storytelling rights often claimed by traditional storytellers (Dégh 2004) is relevant here, though in a highly complex temporal and intercultural context. In her micro-analysis of oral and written texts in a peer-group setting, Amy Shuman (1986) has studied who is entitled to use stories among junior-high-school adolescents. In her words, “[T]he right of an author to own a story is as essential

to storytelling in everyday life as it is to writers who copyright manuscripts prepared for publication” (1). In a similar manner, Javâher-Kalâm’s critique may be understood as his claim to be the sole person rightfully entitled to remember, retell, or even interpret the stories originally performed by the deceased storyteller, one to whom both he and the collector had listened.

In the Iranian climate of post-Westernization, matters of cultural and intellectual ownership play a crucial role in sentiments expressed about the rights and properties of storytelling, as well as about who is entitled to edit, publish, and comment on folktale collections. Javâher-Kalâm took a full ten years after the publication of the book’s first edition to voice his 2005 critique. Incidentally, his critique was published just two years after he had edited his father’s recollections (Javâher-Kalâm 2003), and so it appears likely that his own recollection of the events experienced in his childhood triggered his response to our book. His review is neither balanced nor fair. Indeed, because the first part of the essay is a satire modeled on Jalâl Âl-e Ahmad’s classic piece of modern Persian literature, there is not even the pretense of fairness. Rather, his review is a commentary on property and authority, set against the backdrop of a long period of foreign interference, misuse, and exploitation. It is motivated by a strong consciousness of a vividly remembered and highly cherished personal experience—one that, in his perspective, no other individual (much less a foreigner) had the authority to reproduce or even speak about. Given his goals, it is not surprising that the author did not include perspectives from the deceased collector’s family. It is worth mentioning, however, that the storyteller’s grandson, Hosein Khâki, did not voice any critique, nor did he propose any changes to the publication during his personal communications with the publisher; instead, he was rather grateful for the attention given to the memory of his grandmother (Marzolph, Amirhosseini-Nithammer, and Vakiliyân 1997, 8–9).

### Case Study II: *Topoz-Qoli Mirzâ*

My second case study concerns the publication of Persian tales from Elwell-Sutton’s tape-recorded collection, *Topoz-Qoli Mirzâ* (Vakiliyân and Zangene 2007). This book is a detailed and faithful transcription of the tales as Elwell-Sutton recorded them from oral performance,

even taking into account background noise and other sounds not related to the stories themselves. Just as the publication of Mashdi Galin's tales was unprecedented in its celebration of the Tehran vernacular, *Topoz-Qoli Mirzâ* is the first Persian-language publication to reproduce an oral performance in such detail and without attempting to polish the tales in deference to literary taste or to the Ministry of Islamic Guidance's expectations. The vast majority of published Persian folktales emphasize the beauty of language and readability, rather than attempting to replicate the original oral performance. *Topoz-Qoli Mirzâ* reproduces tales Elwell-Sutton collected from various regions in Iran—particularly from the region of Natanz in western Iran, as noted in the collector's handwriting on the cover of the archived audiotapes.

Not having had access to secondary information, I was unaware of how the tales had been collected, and it was here that another conflict arose. In a discussion that started in private communication between the editor Vakiliyân and the critic Kâzem Sâdât-e Eshkevari, and that continued in public interviews and statements published in various newspapers and internet magazines, Sâdât-e Eshkevari revealed that Elwell-Sutton's voyage to the villages in the Natanz region had been organized by the Edâre-ye farhang-e 'âmme (Bureau for Folklore), an institution founded in 1958 in order to conduct and supervise folklore research and activities.<sup>5</sup> Elwell-Sutton had been guided and assisted during his field trip by Sâdât-e Eshkevari himself, and it was this local collaborator who, after the book's publication, raised his voice in protest. Sâdât-e Eshkevari is today a well-established poet and writer. As a young man, he had accompanied Elwell-Sutton on his field trips to Natanz and had kept a copy of the tape recordings for himself. He claims that a written contract between the Bureau for Folklore and Elwell-Sutton stipulated that the British researcher would be entitled to publish the tales in English, while the institution that had provided Sâdât-e Eshkevari as the collector's assistant (and, by extension, Sâdât-e Eshkevari himself, as the Bureau's former collaborator and present representative) held sole right to publish the tales in Persian. Consequently, he accused the book's editors of violating his rights and even threatened to substantiate his claim in an official appeal to the Iranian writers' guild (Âftâb-e Yazd 2007; ISNA 2007a, 2007b). While Sâdât-e Eshkevari explicitly stated that his protest was not motivated by commercial interest, he nevertheless insisted that the Natanzi tales should be deleted from the book's second and subsequent editions. Because he has never

furnished any written proof for his claim, however, the substance of his allegation remains unclear.

Meanwhile, just a few weeks before the publication of *Topoz-Qoli Mirzâ*, Sâdât-e Eshkevari (2007) himself published a booklet of tales from the area of Barzrud. In the introduction to his publication, he explicitly acknowledges that he relies on material he collected in the region with Elwell-Sutton in 1973. Had I known about this critic's claim at an earlier stage, we might have negotiated the content of these publications. However, since I had not learned about Sâdât-e Eshkevari from Elwell-Sutton's materials, we had not anticipated possible restrictions on the material. After comparing the content of the two publications I was surprised to see that roughly twenty tales (out of a total of sixty-four in *Topoz-Qoli Mirzâ*, and some fifty in *Afsânehâ-ye Barzrud*) correspond to each other, whereas each publication has a number of tales not contained in its counterpart. Moreover, the texts in Sâdât-e Eshkevari's publication have undergone what the author calls a certain "improvement" (*hakk va eslâh*; 6), referencing the well-established editorial process in Iran that aims to produce a fairy-tale style acceptable to literary taste. The texts in *Topoz-Qoli Mirzâ*, in contrast, reproduce the taped performance as closely as possible, even including occasional grammatical mistakes, repetitive wording, and vernacular pronunciation.

Whatever the provocation that brought about the collaborator's anger, it had certainly not been my intention to disregard or downplay his role in the original fieldwork activity. While the collaborator's participation will be acknowledged in future editions of *Topoz-Qoli Mirzâ*, it remains unclear whether this concession will assuage his concerns. Again the conflict appears to be fueled by a claim of property, here voiced in an unambiguous manner and even addressed in legal terms. Moreover, Sâdât-e Eshkevari asserts the sole and, in fact, exclusive right to possession by the local collaborator—and, by extension, his culture. This dispute is similar to numerous conflicts in the fields of anthropology and ethnography (see Noyes 2009), such as the well-known appropriation of the Peruvian folk song "El condor pasa" by the American singers Simon and Garfunkel. It boils down to claiming items of intangible cultural heritage in their tangible materializations—in this case, taped performances of folk narratives—as individually owned cultural property that may be displayed, interpreted, and commercially exploited solely by members of the ethnic

or national group from which they derive. Meanwhile, this conflict again suggests that it should be read as more than a personal dispute; rather, at issue are signifiers of cultural identity. The interpretation and use of these cultural properties by foreigners understandably calls up concerns for those who keenly feel the longstanding trauma of foreign exploitation in Iran.

Both of the case studies discussed thus far prove that the relationship between informant and researcher—and particularly between native informant and foreign researcher—can be a highly sensitive one. As the editor of the contested publications, I am disappointed to realize that an act I had intended as a good-will effort—transferring back to Iran the popular narratives that were recorded long ago—has resulted in seriously harming the feelings of some of the collaborators in the original research. Additionally, the property rights so strongly voiced by concerned members of the local scholarly community remind us that foreign scholars and local collaborators must negotiate the collection and publication of folklore in great detail if one is to avoid causing offense. Such negotiations are particularly important in circumstances, as in Iran, in which a strong—and, one should stress, perfectly justified—local consciousness of a history of foreign exploitation prevails. It also demonstrates that scholars must submit their methods, as much as any other part of their research, to a constant process of negotiation. Particularly in relation to historical collections, this process implies openness to various sensitivities, as well as a general readiness to re-evaluate the historical data in the light of changing awarenesses.

### Case Study III: Folktale Archives in the Islamic Republic of Iran

Extending my considerations to the institutional level, I will now turn to the situation of folktale archives in Iran. Archives are the treasure troves of our discipline. They serve to store collections of tales, fieldwork notebooks or manuscripts compiled by researchers, correspondence between specialists of the discipline, and numerous other documents. Their mandate is to preserve this material for the future. However, achieving this end involves more than mere preservation: the stored material must be made available to the interested public. This secondary responsibility involves sorting, cataloguing, and arranging the stored material, and each of these tasks involves a high

degree of expertise. But the ultimate goal of this process is—or perhaps, one should say, ought to be—accessibility to interested individuals or groups so that they may read, copy, compare, and eventually publish the results of their findings. It is only the public presentation of the inherently ‘dead’ archived material in verbatim quotations or analytically prepared studies that serves as an archive’s ultimate justification. These projects return to the public the considerable funds and energy invested in the archive’s organization and upkeep in a manner that attempts to further intellectual insight and aesthetic enjoyment. Any archive that closes its doors to the curiosity of interested researchers risks being questioned about its necessity and devalues the private initiative or public support invested by generations of previous collectors and researchers.

The establishment, upkeep, and accessibility of archives are decidedly political issues. Any use of archived materials is bound to result in interpretations that may or may not align with the desires and interpretations of the caretaking institutions or individuals. In other words, as long as the material is stowed away in an archive, its justification lies only in the promise of future use. Once this promise is fulfilled, it may be that only highly self-conscious, liberal, and themselves curious and inquisitive keepers will tolerate the consequences of unrestricted access to and interpretation of the archive’s data, which may generate conclusions not congruent with their own understanding.

Even archives preserving nothing but folktales are not as harmless as they may appear at first sight (see Culture Archives 2012). For example, during research for his motif and tale-type catalogues of folktales in the Arab world, Indiana-based folklorist Hasan El-Shamy (1988) experienced both the utterly disillusioning incompetence and, at best, ambivalent or indifferent attitude toward folklore data reigning in some archives of the region. The Archive of Turkish Oral Narrative at Texas Tech University, established by Warren and Barbara Walker, has given rise to a highly charged emotional debate about the origins and authenticity of its material (Başgöz 1998; Conrad 1998; Crowley 1998; Dégh 1999). The large archive collected by Turkish folklorist Pertev Naili Boratav, who for many years lived in exile in France by his own choice, was only accepted in his homeland after political attitudes toward both the material and its deceased collector had changed, making it possible to appreciate the archive’s value as a desirable monument to Turkish popular culture (Öztürkmen 2005). It is clear that even today



folktales can constitute highly volatile material whose use and accessibility risks restriction due to socio-political concerns.

Considering the political and socio-political developments in Iran after the Revolution, it comes as little surprise that the issue of folktale archives in the Islamic Republic of Iran is a sensitive one. Regional archives exist in a number of the country's provinces, while the Iranian capital of Tehran once housed at least two large folktale archives. The smaller archive in Tehran was originally established by the Bureau for Folklore before the Revolution and until recently (2010?) was housed by the Folklore Department of the *Sâzmân-e mirâs-e farhangi* (Institution for national heritage), now located in the city of Shirâz. For many years, it led a fairly quiet existence. Authorities have addressed it with a mix of tolerance, disregard, and negligence. Recently, as the result of a national-level fieldwork survey of traditional folk narrative conducted in the late 1990s under the supervision of folklorist Mohammad Mir-Shokrâ'i, the archive published new collections of folktales from various regions (Arji 2006; Jaktâji 2001; Vakiliyân 2000). These collections were the first in a long time to draw on data from a public archive; due to publication requirements in today's Iran, however, each of the texts has been submitted to a process of pre-publication adaptation in terms of content and/or language.

The second, and larger, archive in Tehran is the one established in the 1960s, prior to the Revolution, by the late Seyyid Abolqâsem Enjavi Shirâzi, the most prominent Iranian folklorist of the twentieth century (Marzolph 1994). Enjavi collected these materials while he worked on a radio program broadcast by the national Iranian Radio and Television Corporation. The archive comprises a tremendous amount of manuscript material mailed to Enjavi from informants all over the country, totaling probably some two million pages of text. The manuscripts include not only folktales, but also legends, jokes, and anecdotes, as well as collections of oral history and book-length personal recollections of the history of specific towns and regions in Iran. The archive may justly claim to constitute the largest of its kind in any country of the Middle East. Soon after the Revolution, however, the radio program was discontinued, Enjavi was dismissed from his position as director for ideological reasons, and most of his former collaborators in the institution chose early retirement. For many years, the archive's fate was undecided. During one of my first visits about two decades ago, I conducted an interview with the then-current director, who was not a

folklorist; after an extensive interview regarding the role of religion in traditional Persian folktales, he explicitly warned me that “some of the files ought to be disposed of.” He did not specify which materials he referred to, nor did he say why these materials were deemed inadequate or even threatening.

The archive assembled by Enjavi exemplifies issues related to both the internal and the external negotiation of folklore in present-day Iran. The internal process of negotiation occurs when officials encounter the body of archived material, much of which was collected and archived in the period before the Revolution. Since all cultural activities were subjected to a conscious re-evaluation following the Revolution, for a long period the safest way of handling the material was to relegate it to near oblivion, thus avoiding any ideologically objectionable activities.

Today, more than thirty years after the Revolution, the keepers of the archive have made an uneasy peace with the material inherited from the previous regime. A few years ago, the archive was even transferred to Enjavi’s former private residence, which became known as the Folklore House. For several years the newly established archive served as a well-equipped research institution whose main activity was scrutinizing the archived data for use in radio and television programs. The keepers of the archive were and still are reluctant to grant unrestricted access, often regarding with a certain suspicion local and foreign researchers interested in studying the material with their own research questions in mind. This suspicion is fueled in part by the fear that the results of unrestricted research might contrast with politically desirable goals in a society that, even after thirty years of conscious ideological and socio-political education, still does not correspond to the ideals of its most powerful politicians and ideologues.

As for the involvement of foreign researchers, the Iranian Radio and Television Corporation, as the responsible institution, appears to be in a state of tentative reappraisal. In the 1990s, when I proposed an international, cooperative project to preserve the archived data in microform, the official UNESCO representatives in Tehran bluntly informed me that such a project was not desirable to them, precisely because it risked becoming—and I quote verbatim here—“similar to the question of oil.” Their response clearly insinuated that my work with folklore might constitute a foreign exploitation of Iranian national resources, such as had been painfully experienced by the

country time and again in previous periods and in relation to different resources. In the meantime, however, some officials in the Iranian Radio and Television Corporation appear to have become conscious of the potential of the archived folklore data. Intending to use the material in various radio and television formats, the institution organized an extensive folktale workshop in summer 2009; I was invited to teach Persian folklore to the participants. For me, the workshop was a fascinating opportunity to participate actively in the ongoing process of negotiating folklore in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

## Conclusion

Numerous other important issues are inherent in the process of negotiating access to and interpretation and publication of folklore materials, and again several of these issues involve cooperation among foreigners and locals. The growing availability of key works of international folkloristic methodology in Persian translation is contributing to the steady growth of critical scholarship in Iran, demonstrated recently by Pegâh Khadish's (2008) application of Vladimir Propp's work to the Iranian data, and by Iraj Shahbâzi's (2007) classification of Persian miracle tales according to indigenous criteria. The first Persian-language publication to include visual portraits of storytellers (Takehara and Vakiliyân 2002) has contributed to the growing attention awarded to individual storytellers. Developments such as this have helped to overcome the neo-romanticist attitude still prevalent in Iran that regards folklore as the result of an anonymous collective and that, as a result, largely impedes an adequate assessment of the individual storytellers' creative impact.

So far only mentioned in passing, and too intricate to be discussed in detail, is the pre-publication practice labeled 'editing' (*virâyesh*). This practice is perhaps the most contentious issue of negotiating folklore in Iran today. Some might perceive this practice as 'censorship'; however, *virâyesh* is, in fact, much more than extraneous interference with materials to be published: it constitutes a kind of pre-publication censorship practiced by writers, editors, and publishers alike in an effort to anticipate criticism from the censorship bureau in the Ministry of Islamic Guidance. In any case, the practice denies readers unrestricted access to textual data, to tales as they were originally performed and recorded.

Ongoing discussions in Iranian civil society, which is at times both highly intellectual and dynamic, promise a continued negotiation of the question at the heart of this article: to what extent will folklore, as an important constituent of traditional culture, be given its due recognition? The case studies presented here relate to this question from various, yet overlapping, angles. Both the first and the second case study display a strong individual engagement on the part of local collaborators, bespeaking an equally strong claim to individual property. These individual sensitivities must be read against the backdrop of a longstanding history of disregard for and exploitation of Iranian national values by foreigners. Even though this exploitation has been experienced primarily in relation to commercial arenas (such as the exploitation of Iranian oil), the historical experience has obviously (and understandably) created a certain caution and even a suspicion that extends to all areas of national consciousness, including intangible cultural heritage as expressed in folk- and fairy tales. Moreover, the third case study underlines the fact that this sensitivity is particularly shared by officials responsible for safeguarding access to archived folklore materials.

To what extent the attitude toward folklore in Iran will develop in the future is difficult, if not impossible, to predict. The three decades since the Revolution have witnessed a variety of changing attitudes, ranging from a total exclusion of foreign interference to a cautious re-appraisal, acknowledgment, and even the conscious direct involvement of foreigners in the publication, study, and teaching of folklore. Yet if anything, these changing attitudes toward folklore demonstrate that cultural politics play out in ways that are never as linear as idealist models would have us expect. While the future of Iranian folklore is for Iranians to decide, the most important input Western researchers can contribute to this process is the mediation of analytical theory and method, based on a sensitive appreciation of the traditional values of this ancient culture and the multiple challenges it faces in the modern world.

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## Notes

1. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Seventh Biennial Iranian Studies Conference in Toronto (2008) and the Fifteenth Congress of the

International Society for Folk Narrative Research in Athens (2009). I would like to dedicate this essay to the memory of my father, chemist Herbert Marzolph, whose ashes were buried just a few days before I presented the lecture in Athens. I remember him fondly, particularly for his incredulous fascination with the fact that the study of (in his opinion, absolutely marginal) cultural phenomena such as folklore and popular literature actually earned me a living.

2. Iranian publisher 'Ali-Rezâ Ramazâni, director of the publishing house Nashr-e Markaz, repeatedly made this claim in oral communication. The market of folk- and fairy tales had been thriving before 1979, but for a variety of reasons it was essentially abandoned after the Revolution.

3. I am extremely grateful to the two individuals who voiced their concern, thus making me aware of implications of my work that I would otherwise have ignored. The actual storytellers, performers, or verbal artists are not directly involved in the conflict; rather, concern has been voiced by two individuals who had been present during the act of storytelling. In the first case, this was an Iranian collaborator involved in the act of collecting, and in the second another ancillary player, the son of the person in whose house the collector got to know the storyteller. A discussion of the storytellers' position and the recognition of their individual achievements and rights in Iranian publications is beyond the scope of this essay. At any rate, such a discussion would open up a can of worms pertaining to issues of intellectual property that—though at times vividly discussed in Iran in relation to issues of international and national copyright—have not been solved to a satisfactory degree.

4. The journal of the broadcasting institution's current folklore section, titled *Najvâ-ye farhang* (Whispers of culture), whose first issue appeared in 2006, even refers to Seyyed Abolqâsem Enjavi Shirâzi's affectionate nickname, Najvâ. (*Najvâ* also means "secret communication" or "whisper.")

5. Today the institution is probably best remembered for its series of monograph publications, *Enteshârât-e Markaz-e mardom-shenâsi* (Publications of the Center for Ethnography), as well as for the journal *Mardom-shenâsi va farhang-e âmme* (Ethnography and folklore), founded in 1976.

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