

Storytelling as a Constituent of Popular Culture

Folk Narrative Research in Contemporary Iran

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Introductory Note

The following essay draws on the author's personal experience as a folk narrative researcher over the past thirty years.¹ Since shortly before the Iranian Revolution of 1978–79, I have aimed to stay in close contact with Iranian colleagues active in the field of folk narrative research. The essay deals with four topics. First, it provides a short definition of folk narrative research as a discipline situated between the fields of folklore and anthropology. Second, it sketches the discipline's historical development in Iran. Third, it identifies the major issues in Iranian folk narrative research. In conclusion, it proposes a tentative assessment of current problems and their solutions.

Defining Folk Narrative Research

Folk narrative research deals with folk or popular literature – two terms I will be using indiscriminately (Cejpek 1968; Marzolph 1993, 1999a, forthcoming a and b; Bolukbâshi 2000; Rahmoni 2001). In terms of literary genres, popular literaturstanding designates a relatively fixed canon of genres, such as myths, historical, demonological and religious legends, heroic and romantic epics, narrative songs (ballads), fables, fairy tales, jokes and anecdotes as well as shorter forms of literature such as popular sayings and idioms, children's rhymes, lullabies and riddles.

At the beginning of the third millennium, international and particularly Western folkloristic research regards this restriction to a predefined and limited set of specific genres as reducing the creative and receptive constituents

of popular imagination to an inadequate representation of the true circumstances and meanings of popular literature in its living context. Consequently, it strives to define popular literature in relation to the circumstances of its presentation or performance rather than its formal content. In this understanding, popular literature is conceived as the sum of all creative verbal activities, whether oral (in recent research often termed 'verbal art') or written (corresponding to the narrow definition of literature as a form of expression in writing).

Popular literature is distinguished from elite literature in that it is transmitted by other than the dominant elite channels of tradition, whether orally or in writing. The procedure of transmission does not, however, exclude formal or informal education of authors or performers. Though they are often illiterate, performers are required to possess special skills and training. Furthermore, popular literature is appreciated and/or practised through collective consent by a considerable number of people, conveniently termed the 'folk'. In this understanding, folk narrative research combines the approaches of both folklore and anthropology as a discipline focusing on storytelling as a pivotal constituent of human communication.

The History of Folk Narrative Research in Iran

While an early occupation with Persian folklore dates back as far as the Safavid period, the actual beginning of Persian folklore studies coincided with the keen interest taken in Iran by early Western travellers starting in the seventeenth century (Radhayrapetian 1990). Besides their curiosity, the main impetus for the developing field of Persian studies resulted from the strategic interests of the European powers. In India, where British rule was instituted in the mid eighteenth century, the Persian language maintained its position as the language of court and an intellectual lingua franca. Neighbouring Iran to the north, the Russian empire also held a vital interest in the region. Initially, and especially since the discovery and translation of the *Avesta*, Western scholars had focused on religious studies. But by way of linguistic interest in dialect specimens, they soon turned to collecting items of folklorist relevance, such as folktales, riddles, songs or narratives of everyday life. Pioneers in the field include Polish diplomat Alexander Chodzko (1804–1891),² Russian scholar Valentin Zhukovski (1858–1918),³ British consuls D.C. Phillot (1860–1930)⁴ and D. L. R. Lorimer (1876–1962),⁵ Danish scholar Arthur Christensen (1875–1945)⁶ and French scholar Henri Massé (1886–1969)⁷. For most of these authors, folklore and popular literature constituted a pleasant distraction from their 'serious' linguistic, religious or historical concern; folklore data were rarely studied in their own right.

The nineteenth century witnessed a strong orientation of the Iranian elite towards the scientific achievements of the West. At the beginning of the twentieth century folklore, owing to its quality of maintaining traditional ways of life, was regarded as anti-progressive and hence not deserving of serious study. Only in the constitutional period in the third decade of the twentieth century did Persian scholars begin to devote themselves to the study of folklore. It was then that strong patriotic feelings met with a growing awareness of the phenomenon of the ‘common’ (*‘âmmeh*) people, mingled with a Romantic urge for unspoiled tradition. Iranian intellectuals such as Mohammad ‘Ali Jamâlzâdeh ([1922] 1962), ‘Ali-Akbar Dehkhodâ (1959–60; Sa’îdî Sîrjânî 1996), Sâdeq Hedâyât (1933, 1956, 1963; Katirâ’î 1971), and later Samad Behrangi (Behrangi 1970; Behrangi and Tabrizi 1978; and Jalâl Âl-e Ahmad (1958, 1960, 1973; Clinton 1985) began to prefer plain colloquial Persian to the previously practiced, refined and highly artificial language. Hedâyât also was the first Iranian to study folklore and outline the methods of scholarship in his *Neirangestân* (1933) and his essay ‘Folklor yâ farhang-e tude’, originally published in 1945 (1965).

As official institutions became interested in the preservation and study of folklore, the Iranian Academy (Farhangestân) in 1938 publicized its intention to collect regional (*velâyati*) words, expressions, poetry, proverbs, tales, stories, songs and melodies. Meanwhile, in the 1940s Fazlollâh Mohtadi, called Sobhi – probably by applying a method first attempted by the British journalist (and later Iranist scholar) L. P. Elwell-Sutton (1912–1984) – initiated a radio programme of folktales, asking his listeners to send in their tales and eventually publishing a series of booklets of Persian folktales (Rahgozar 1994; Pflaum 1993; Omidsâlâr 2002). Sobhi’s prime concern, however, was to entertain. Accordingly, his publications (see also Sobhi 1947a, b, c), although still today constituting pleasant reading matter and even having been reprinted recently (Sobhi 1998, 2005) do not adhere to scientific standards.

At the same time leftist journals such as *Payâm-e nou* (*The New Message*, founded in 1944 by Sa’id Nafisi and later edited by Bozorg ‘Alavi) started to publish short articles on various genres of popular literature (Amir-Ebrâhimi 1946a, 1946b, 1947; Keshâvarz 1944, 1945a, 1945b; Mir-Goli 1946). In 1958, the Office of Popular Culture (Edâre-ye Farhang-e ‘âmmeh), aligned with the Ministry of Culture and Arts, was founded. In 1970 it was reorganized as the National Centre for Research in Ethnography and Popular Culture (Markaz-e melli-ye pazhuheshhâ-ye mardom-shenâsi va farhang-e ‘âmmeh) and until the Revolution of 1978–79 continued to work under the name Markaz-e mardom-shenâsi-ye Irân (Centre of Iranian Ethnography). This institution and its team of researchers played a leading role in folklore research, above all through their series of monograph publications as well as

the journal *Mardom-shenâsi va farhang-e 'âmme* (*Ethnography and Popular Culture*, founded in 1976).

Sobhi's method, as of the early 1960s, of utilizing radio broadcasts for collecting and propagating folktales was successfully taken up by Abu 'l Qâsem Enjavi Shirâzi, a close friend of the late Hedâyat (Marzolph 1994a). Enjavi installed the weekly radio programme 'Safine-ye farhang-e mardom' (The Ship of Popular Culture), educated a considerable number of assistants and founded an institution named Markaz-e farhang-e mardom (Centre for Popular Culture) within the National Broadcasting Company. In order to publish the collected texts, he established the series *Ganjine-ye farhang-e mardom* (*A Treasury of Popular Culture*), to which he himself contributed ten volumes of annotated texts. Not only was Enjavi a captivating orator, but he also had a great talent for organization. Along with a pencil, preprinted paper and envelope, his nationwide contributors also received his booklet *Tarz-e neveshtan-e farhang-e 'ammîyâne* (*How to Document Popular Culture*, 1967), which contained general guidelines. Until the early 1980s, when his radio programme was discontinued, Enjavi succeeded in collecting an archive of several hundred thousands of manuscripts on numerous aspects of folklore, everyday life and popular literature in Iran. His archive is a mine of information on traditional language, customs, beliefs, tales, oral history and the like, unparalleled in any other Middle Eastern country.

Due to the strong national interest and considerable support of both official institutions and the imperial family, folklore studies were thriving in Iran during the 1970s. The International Congress of Iranian Popular Culture (Majma'-e beinolmellali-ye farhang-e 'âmme-ye Irân), organized in Isfahan in summer 1977, was attended by a large number of qualified scholars from Iran and various Western countries. The Revolution of 1978–79, after a period of social and political upheaval, resulted in a complete rupture of contacts between Western scholars and Iranian publications in folklore, and many years passed before folklore and popular literature once again attracted major interest. An institutional result of the reassessment of cultural values after the Revolution was the foundation of the Organization for the Country's National Heritage (Sâzmân-e mirâs-e farhangi-ye keshvar) in 1986. The responsibility of this centralized institution today includes the supervision of all kinds of cultural activities, encompassing archaeology, anthropology and folklore. Its ethnographic department (Daf-tar-e pazhuheshhâ-ye mardom-shenâsi), which until 2007 had been headed for many years by Mohammad Mir-Shokraei, has not only educated junior folklorists (up to the MA level), but has also conducted various fieldwork research projects, including one on popular literature (*adabiyât-e 'âmme*) in 1994–95. Several monographs based on this research project have been

published (Beihaqi 2001; Jaktâji 2001; Nâderi and Movahhedi 2001; Vakiliyân 2000; Khazâ'i 2006; Rezavi 2006).

The Markaz-e farhang-e mardom, whose founder Enjavi died in 1993, is at present aligned with the research department of the national radio institution Sedâ va simâ-ye Jomhuri-ye eslâmi-ye Irân (Islamic Republic Iran broadcasting [IRIB]). Enjavi's former house was acquired by this institution in 2005 and has subsequently been turned into a research institute housing the archive of textual data collected by Enjavi as well as a small but exquisite museum of artefacts of popular culture that his admirers had sent him. The few major publications from the archive's materials since the Revolution deal with popular sayings and proverbs and popular customs in the month of Ramazân (Vakiliyân 1987, 1991). In spring 2002, a new scholarly Iranian journal of folklore, the quarterly *Farhang-e mardom* (*Popular Culture*), was initiated by the prominent Iranian folklorist Seyyid Ahmad Vakiliyân.⁸

Key Issues in Folk Narrative Research

As for folk narrative research in the Iranian context, several points bear mentioning. First, cooperation and interaction between foreigners and locals has been a constant characteristic of folk narrative research in Iran. The historical development suggests that this cooperation initially existed between foreign researchers and local informants. Whereas the research method was determined by the West, indigenous participants either supplied material or applied methods developed in the West. It remains questionable, or even dubious, to what extent the application of theoretical implications and assumptions involved in this cooperation will succeed in understanding the meaning of Iranian folk narrative in its living context. One of the many reasons that Western researchers focus on Iranian folklore might be that it appears easier to study than, say, Turkish or Arabic folklore. It is 'alien' enough to be studied as the 'other', yet through its Indo-European backdrop it is also attractively familiar, somewhat like an 'Oriental' cousin of Western cultures. Considering ancient Iranian history as well as its aftermath in religious and cultural concepts, such as cosmic dualism, Iranian folklore was regarded as preserving ancient customs and beliefs and hence mirroring the roots of Western civilization. On the other hand, Iranian researchers have never taken advantage of their superior familiarity with local folklore to emphasize an indigenous autonomy similar to that stated by other Asian, African or American cultures. As for theory, at least up to the Revolution, Iranian researchers appeared to be quite content with developing their ideas within the guidelines projected by Western research. After the Revolution this strand of research continues, albeit in a certain competition with the

new ideological foundations – which themselves, at least to a certain extent, constitute a reaction to the previously experienced cultural transgression practised by the West. The implications of the new ideology for folklore and folkloristic research have been, to say the least, not very fruitful. A particularly devastating effect has been wrought by recent prepublication interference with texts that in a curious manner of ideological understatement is being labelled as ‘editing’ (*virâstâri*).⁹

Second, and closely related to the previous point, are questions concerning methods and texts. The published results of folk narrative research in Iran are restricted to texts. Even though some of these texts have been collected by fieldwork according to modern scientific standards, few collections mention any amount of contextual data (Hasanzâde 2002). Aspects of performance and interaction between the storytellers and their audience – brilliantly discussed for the case of prewar Afghanistan by U.S. scholar Margaret Mills (1990, 1992) – have so far been widely neglected. Even though Enjavi Shirâzi introduced in his publications the custom of mentioning at least some basic data about his informants (e.g. the storyteller’s name, place of origin, age and profession), the first publication reproducing the storyteller’s photograph and thus supplying an individual image to this collective tradition is the dissertation of Japanese scholar Shin Takehara (Takehara 2001, Takehara and Vakiliyân 2002).¹⁰ Even the first-ever monograph presentation of a Persian storyteller, Elwell-Sutton’s informant Mashdi Galin Khânôm, a highly influential book that invigorated the publication of folk- and fairytale collections after the Revolution, lacks any substantial contextual data; however, in this case the lack results from the fact that both the researcher and the storyteller were long deceased at the time of publication.¹¹ The textual dominance of folk narrative research is further underlined by modern anthologies such as ‘Ali-Asghar Darvishiyân’s comprehensive *Farhang-e afsânehâ-ye mardom-e Irân* (1998–2005).¹²

Third, a point well known to social anthropology but rarely taken into account by folk narrative research concerns ethical problems relating to fieldwork, research questions and ensuing publications. Why document what, under which circumstances and for which purpose? How to elicit meaningful information from informants without exposing them to unwanted reactions resulting from the publication of their information? Even though folk narratives have often been, and sometimes still are, regarded as bespeaking simple minds, they are not at all meaningless, let alone insignificant. A telling contribution in this respect is Erika Loeffler-Friedl’s publication (2006) of Luri folktales, which for the first time supplies the texts along with a thorough ethnographic (and sociological) analysis. At times, folk narratives might even constitute a powerful medium of expression for the popular mind, and the extent to which they may serve as an outlet of frustration on

the one hand or as a medium of popular resistance and propaganda on the other may be closely connected. Furthermore: to whom do folktales belong? A recent competition between publications partly based on the very same fieldwork, one prepared by the former local organizer, the other published by a Western orientalist scholar, might serve to further the discussion as to the various sensibilities publications of folk narrative data will have to take into account in the future (Sâdât Eshkevâri 2007; Marzolph 2007).

Fourth, which directives are to be followed at present and in the near future? The state of folk narrative research in postrevolutionary Iran is closely connected with the presently propagated evaluation of folktales in general. Three points are important in this respect. As I have discussed elsewhere (Marzolph 1994c, 1995b, 1999a) folktales today are regarded with a certain amount of criticism and suspicion because of their affinities to the now-detested system of royal rule: folktales tell of kings and queens, rulers and princes. In addition, folk narrative research before the Revolution was propagated and sponsored by the Pahlavi monarch and his family. Also, folktales are distrusted because they deal with a fundamental pillar of national consciousness: folk narratives, especially hero tales, draw on the collective memory of Iran's imperial past. Folk narrative research therefore is seen as endorsing the previously ruling system. Finally, folk narratives are suspected to embody and encourage elements contradicting the presently defined Islamic values: folk narratives tell of love and hate, and of all kinds of illicit and morally objectionable acts such as extramarital sexual activities and the consumption of alcoholic beverages. In dealing with these issues, folk narrative research risks being understood as implicitly authorizing their actual performance. A case in point is the textual interference practised in editions of the *Arabian Nights* (*Hezâr-o yek shab*) published after the Revolution (Marzolph 2004: 286–90).

On the other hand, considering the general attitude in contemporary Iran that favours supervising all cultural activities in terms of their accordance with the presently propagated system of values, one should remember that the complexity of lived reality never corresponds to the theoretical assumptions of superimposed framing conditions. Researchers would learn a lot more from being able to study popular expression under unrestricted circumstances than do all of the people cooperating in the study and publication of folklore under restrictive regulations.

Contemporary Folk Narrative Research in Iran

As for an assessment of contemporary circumstances of folk narrative research in Iran, tendencies in research obviously can be encouraged or dis-

couraged by official authorities according to desirable or undesirable results. Taking the religion of Islam as determining all fields of life also means propagating Islamic religion and the historical process of its spread as the major topic for research. Accordingly, after the Revolution, the number of collections of religious tales, of tales about venerated persons from Islamic history and of tales and research about religious duties and religious customs has considerably increased (Vakiliyân 1991; Vakiliyân and Sâlehi 2001). The 'revival' of scholarly interest in the dramatic art form *ta'ziye*, which has often been labelled the 'Persian passion play', may also be seen against this backdrop.¹³ In this connection it is particularly revealing to witness the gradual changes in reading matter in Iranian primary schoolbooks since the Revolution, where national and international folktales have been eliminated in favour of tales of moral and religious concern (Marzolph 1994c, 1995a).

As for the actual telling of tales, it may be challenged whether folk narrative can be made to develop according to given directives (Marzolph 1998). Obviously, certain elements of traditional folk narrative today are judged as contradicting the officially propagated objectives, or, as I heard being voiced in a slightly rash judgment by one of the post-Revolution directors of the research department of the National Broadcasting Company, there exist certain components 'one ought to get rid of' (*'bâyad rikht dur*'). On the one hand, the future generation of children who have grown up internalizing the new conditions are bound to memorize the texts whose reading, listening and telling they have grown accustomed to. On the other hand, the interaction between literature and oral tradition is known to serve as a stabilizing factor in the growth and existence of collectively memorized narrative repertoires.

The cultural value of classical Persian literature is recognized beyond doubt by the present authorities, who have even come to peace with the Persian national epic, Ferdousi's *Shâhnâme*, a work that in the early years of the Revolution was heavily contested because of its 'nationalist' impact (Marzolph 1999b, 2001, 2002). It contains a large number of traditional narratives, which are bound to survive. Yet, if popular romance and jocular literature of the Mollâ Nasroddin kind, abundant before the Revolution, have meanwhile almost completely disappeared from the inventories of newspaper stands and sidewalk peddlers, the question arises: does this also imply that they are no longer appreciated, known and told orally any more (Marzolph 1995c, 1996, 2002)? Or, to voice just one suggestion, will the relegation of certain parts of narrative tradition to an underground atmosphere rather serve as a stabilizing, even invigorating, factor?

One would not render a faithful service to either folk narrative or folk narrative research if one were to judge the present situation in terms of good or bad, let alone suggest directives for what ought to be done in an

extremely sensitive atmosphere such as prevails in Iran today. If there is any lesson international folk narrative research can learn from the contemporary situation, it is to watch, document and analyse whatever is happening. We all know that the Romantic lament for times and tales gone by does not correspond to contemporary requirements. Rather on the contrary, witnessing the societal developments in present-day Iran constitutes a unique opportunity for analysing and understanding the powerful dynamics of questions of sociological, political, religious and folklorist relevance.

NOTES

1. The present contribution draws heavily from several of the author's previous studies. As the published versions of those studies may not have reached the members of the ethnographic/anthropologist community to an extent promising a satisfactory discussion, it is here deemed permissible to practice an amount of self-referentiality higher than usual.
2. See Chodzko (1842).
3. See Zhukovski (1888–1922, 1902).
4. See Phillot (1905–07, 1906, 1907).
5. See Lorimer and Lorimer (1919) and Lorimer and Vahman (1974).
6. See Christensen (1918, 1923, 1930, 1936, 1958) and also Holbek (1979).
7. See Massé (1925, 1938) and also Omidsalar (1993).
8. Issues published so far include 1(1) (bahâr 1381); 1(2) (tâbestân 1381); 1(3–4) (pâyiz, zemestân 1381); 2(1) [2(5)] (bahâr 1382); 2(6–7) (tâbestân, pâyiz 1382); 3(8–9) (bahâr 1383); 3(10) (tâbestân 1383), 3(11–12) (pâyiz, zemestân 1383), 4(13) (bahâr 1384), 4(14–15) (tâbestân, pâyiz 1384), 4(16) (zemestân 1384), 5(17) (bahâr 1385), 5 (18) (tâbestân 1385), 5(19–20) (pâyiz, zemestân 1385), 6(21–22) (bahâr, tâbestân 1386), 6 (23) (pâyiz 1386), 7(24–25) (bahâr 1387), 7(26) (vizhe-ye Hamadân)
9. As a case in point, see for example the (unauthorized) 'publisher's remark' (*yâd-dâsht-e nâsher*) in *Qessehâ-ye Mashdi Galin Khânôm* (Marzolph, Amirhosseini-Nithammer and Vakiliyân 1997: 7).
10. A Persian (selective) version was published by Takehara and Vakiliyân (2002); an extensive Japanese version was published by Takehara in 2001.
11. See Elwell-Sutton (1980); Marzolph and Amirhosseini-Nithammer (1994); Iranian (partial) edition *Qessehâ-ye Mashdi Galin Khânôm* (Marzolph, Amirhosseini-Nithammer and Vakiliyân 1995) (second edition with an additional preface and the storyteller's photograph; third edition 2003; fourth edition 2006); German translations by Marzolph, *Persische Märchen Miniaturen* (1985), *Persische Märchen* (1990), revised and expanded in *Wenn der Esel singt, tanzt das Kamel. Persische Märchen und Schwänke* (1994b); see also Marzolph (2000, 2001).
12. Originally thirteen volumes were planned, but by 2008 the series had already published nineteen volumes. The texts include exclusively reprinted (and often bowdlerized) versions of earlier Persian publications.

13. Recent major publications include 'Anâsori (2003); Homâyuni (2001); Shahidi (2001).

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