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## Folk Narrative and Narrative Research in Post-Revolutionary Iran

In world consciousness, the Iranian revolution of 1979 has been associated primarily with the downfall of an imperial dynasty cherished above all by Western yellow press. It left its deepest mark in Western consciousness when the hostages were being held in the American embassy in Teheran. Its political image has been coined by labels such as "Islamization" or "theocracy," and its popular apprehension has been mirrored by best selling literary production such as Betty Mahmoody's (1987) alleged personal experience novel *Not Without My Daughter*. Since the revolution, Iran has opted for a self chosen reclusion, unwillingly making itself available as a paradigm screen for Western imagination and projection. In subsequently reviewing "Folk Narrative and Narrative Research in Post-Revolutionary Iran," I propose to supply some data on the actual course of events and the current state of the art in a region of the world which for the hosts of this scholarly meeting probably is much more intimate than for most of its participants. In addition, I suggest to discuss aspects of the Iranian experience of general interest for international folk narrative research.

As for the historical developments that led to the revolution of 1979, in the course of the twentieth century, Iran has experienced at least three eminent re-evaluations of political, social, and moral values following decisive changes in political leadership. At the beginning of the century, the degeneration of Qajar rule was accompanied by the so-called constitutional movement aiming at establishing democratic rule and wishing to further the free exchange of ideas between Iran and the West. However, the constitutional movement was superseded by another imperial dynasty, father and son, who both sought to push Iran from the state of a rural society dominated by tribal and relational structures to becoming a competitive industrialized nation. Their ambitions led to the Iranian revolution of 1979, when large

masses of people first forced the Shah to leave the country, then made the last government installed by him resign, and eventually voted for the establishment of an Islamic republic.

Whether the revolution of 1979 may justly be called an "Islamic" one is discussed since, not only outside the country by Iranian exiles and Iranist scholars, but also within the country where present circumstances regulate political discourse. On the other hand, there is little doubt that the events of 1979 constituted a revolution in the original sense of the term: they not only resulted in the abolishment of monarchy in Iran for good, but also in the establishment of a completely new system of values. The leaders of the revolution, above all the Ayatollah Khomeini, were and still are explicit about their basic goal of establishing perfect Islamic rule in all fields of life. This goal has been most influential for the development in Iran since and may today, almost 16 years after the actual event of the revolution, be judged in a historical perspective.

Looking at the revolution of 1979 as probably the most decisive event in Iranian history in the twentieth century, from the point of view of folk narrative research the question arises as to how and how much this event influenced the object as well as the field of study. Before embarking on this question, it may be useful to remember the development of folk narrative research in Iran in the years before the revolution (for a general survey see Marzolph, 1993). Folk narrative research before 1979 was dominated by two major currents, one of a more private, the other of a more official nature. The former current consisted in the activities of the recently deceased Seyyed Abolqasem Enjavi Shirazi, who worked in the state broadcasting institution and managed to assemble a huge archive of written texts on all aspects of Iranian folklore, including several hundred thousand narratives (see Marzolph, 1994). The latter current, constituted mainly by the official activities of the National Center for Ethnology and Folklore founded in 1958, resulted in a number of collecting and publishing activities reaching their peak in the mid 1970s. Both currents were encouraged and sponsored by the empress Farah, who also took personal interest in celebrating a large international congress on Iranian folklore in 1977—just a year and a half before the revolution—in Shiraz and Esfahan. Traditional folk narrative itself before the revolution was thriving, especially in rural areas of Iran, though Iranian folklorists advertised it as being highly pressurized by modern media of communication.

With the event of the revolution, it appears as a matter of course that all previous activities were interrupted and re-evaluated. What exactly happened, is an extremely delicate affair to judge, since foreign research in the humanities at present is not encouraged in Iran, and official guidelines for legitimate activities in the field of folklore are not available. Though Iranian folk narrative research is one of the

very few disciplines enjoying a published survey of scholarship (Radhayrapetian, 1990 [1987]), it is significant to note that this survey, a dissertation at UCLA prepared at least five years after the revolution, neither mentions the actual event nor analyzes its impact on the further development of research activities. The following remarks are the result of repeated field trips to Iran in the past two years as well as a close survey of secondary evidence.

To begin with, after a short period of uncontrolled freedom of the press, monograph publication in folk narrative after the revolution almost absolutely ceased. The large series of folklore texts established by Enjavi Shirazi was discontinued, the texts already prepared for an enlarged revision of the second volume in his standard collection of Iranian folktales was not processed for publication. It was to take eight years until the series could be revived by one of the founder's former students, Seyyed Ahmad Vakiliyan, with books on proverbs and the folklore of Ramazan, the Muslim month of fasting. About seven years after the revolution, a concise survey of folklore scholarship was published in Iran (Beihaqi, 1986); much the same as the almost exactly contemporary survey prepared by Juliet Radhayrapetian. No mention whatsoever is made of the revolution, let alone its impact on the field. The author supplies basic definitions of terms such as culture and folklore, besides enumerating relevant publication activities, while largely refraining from any analytical or judgmental statement. Not even half a dozen folktale collections appear to be published after 1979, the earliest one available to me dating from 1988. On the other hand, accessibility of basic Western analytical literature in folk narrative research, virtually non-existent before the revolution, since about 1985 has considerably increased with translations of works by Marguerite Loeffler-Delachaux, Mirca Eliade, and Vladimir Propp. Publications of minor relevance include general surveys of Iranian folklore or folklore surveys of specific regions, often containing chapters on folk narrative have also appeared.

As for institutional activities in the field of folk narrative research, the former National Center for Ethnology and Folklore has ceased to exist. Its archives and library now are incorporated within the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization, a heavily centralized institution responsible for all kinds of cultural activities. According to its own definition, it is concerned with scholarly research in the fields of archaeology, ethnology, and traditional arts as well as fulfilling the tasks of identifying, restoring, reconstructing, and reviving cultural and historical artifacts. The Organization, formerly attached to the Ministry of Culture and Education has recently been delegated to the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, a powerful body supervising just about every cultural activity and statement in Iran in its relevance for and correspondence with the given system of Islamic values. Within the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization, folk narrative research forms a minor responsibility

in the department of ethnology. Besides the education of future folklorists, the first relevant enterprise after the revolution has been a general field survey of folk narrative in the country, performed by trained graduate students from all provinces and major cities in the current year 1373/1994-95. This survey, to be published from 1995 onwards, is expected to document the present state of folk narrative in the country.

The only other major institution concerned with folk narrative research is the archive originally founded as the Folklore Museum, then and still now aligned to the national broadcasting institution. Its outward activities after the revolution have come to a complete standstill, though inward activities of sorting and organizing its materials result in a high degree of perfection. In September 1994, the Folklore Museum has been moved to new locations in a central building housing various research and documentation departments of the national broadcasting institution. A number of recent discussions with the presently responsible management makes it appear doubtful whether further publication and research concerning its archived texts would be encouraged under the present circumstances.

It becomes obvious that folk narrative research in post-revolutionary Iran is in quite a deplorable state. Previously thriving activities have been abolished and have not—or at least not yet—been replaced by appropriate substitutions. On the other hand, traditional folk narrative still is well alive, though it is relegated to the private sphere even more than previously.

Considering this evaluation, a number of questions arise: In the first place, one probably wonders about the moving force behind the current state of the art. The positive answer, as supplied by the official Iranian point of view, is that the religion of Islam is to determine all fields of life. People are to be educated in such a way as to voluntarily and lovingly practice an Islamic way of life as defined by theologian elite scholars. While it has to be noted that Islam in the Iranian interpretation is not representative for the religion of Islam in general and the cultural developments it furthered. From an analytical point of view such a statement prompts memory of not all too distant experiences in the change of political systems such as in early twentieth century Russia or in mid twentieth century Germany, when socialism and fascism aimed at accomplishing basically comparable objectives. In the Iranian case, the intelligent utilization of previously successful mechanisms in the education of society is synchronized with substituting their contents by those of a currently acceptable nature.

As for folk narrative research, the example of traditional narrative texts in school books is especially revealing. Primary school books before the revolution mainly included three kinds of narrative texts: epic tales with a close link to Iranian history, such as those from the national epic *Shah-name*; fables of a general moral

nature, taken from the heritage of classical Persian literature; and traditional folk narratives or literary folktales, adapted from various sources worldwide. After the revolution, all texts of a dominant national or international character were abolished. They were substituted by tales propagating moral and religious values, such as the one about the friendship between an Iranian and a Palestinian school boy. It is to be noted that traditional Persian folk narrative never formed a major constituent in the narrative repertoire of educational literature, neither before nor after the revolution. While the employment of different kinds of narratives may easily be explained by changing trends in the setting of political and educational conditions, the propagation of traditional folk narrative from an educational point of view obviously never was regarded as appropriate. Yet on a general level, folk narrative before the revolution, was venerated as a constituent of national heritage. After the revolution, both the object and the field of study, appear to have suffered from a triple verdict.

First, they are condemned because of their close affinities to the detested imperial family: Folktales tell of kings and queens, of rulers and princes; folk narrative research, on the other hand, before the revolution was propagated and sponsored by the monarch and his family. Second, they 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 glorious imperial past; folk narrative research in this respect is seen as supporting the ruling system. Third, they are suspected to embody and encourage elements contradicting the presently propagated Islamic values: Folk narratives tell of love and hate, of illicit and morally objectionable acts, of extra marital sexual activities and the consumption of alcoholic beverages; folk narrative research dealing with these facts is understood as implicitly authorizing their actual performance.

Another question arising from the above evaluation is concerned with the further development of folk narrative and folk narrative research in Iran. Tendencies in research obviously can be encouraged or discouraged by official authorities according to desirable or undesirable results. In this respect, taking 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.

As for the actual telling of tales, it may be challenged whether folk narrative can be made to develop according to given directives. Obviously, certain elements of traditional folk narrative today are judged as contradicting the officially propagated objectives, or, as the responsible manager of the Folklore Museum had it, there exist certain components "one ought to get rid of." On the one hand, the future generation

of children who have grown up internalizing the new frame conditions are bound to memorize those texts whose 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. And since classical Persian literature, whose cultural value is recognized beyond doubt by the present authorities, contains a large amount of traditional narratives, these are bound to survive. Yet, if popular romance and jocular literature of the Molla Nasroddin kind, abundant before the revolution, meanwhile have almost completely disappeared from the repertoire newspaper stands and sidewalk peddlers. Does this also imply they are not known and told orally any more? Or, to voice just one suggestion, will the relegation of narrative tradition to an underground atmosphere rather serve as another stabilizing factor?

After all, Iranian identity since several millennia has grown to be a unique amalgamate of criteria of the most diverse origins in terms of ethnicity and religion. None of the numerous ruling classes in history of foreign origin, Greek, Arab, or Mongol, has yet succeeded in supplanting traditional Iranian values. Besides, Iranian society never has formed a solid block and today, sixteen years after the revolution, it may be seen as living in a state of prolonged and advanced schizophrenia. While the economic setting requires a high degree of outwardly practiced adaptation to the dominant system, activities pursued in the seclusion of a private atmosphere are bound to differ if they do not correspond with the dominant system. In this respect, the sixteen years which have elapsed since the event of the revolution, have not left any decisive mark in Iranian society. Even the passing of a whole generation, probably even of two or more generations, might not be enough to attain the set goal of perfecting ideal Islamic rule in all fields of life. What may easily be reached is an outwardly perfect presentation, not flawed by the numerous imponderabilities of human existence, such as the centralized hypocrisy of Iran's megalopolis Teheran.

If there is any lesson international folk narrative research could learn from the events after the Iranian revolution of 1979, it is to ponder about the relation between religion and the propagation of political objectives. We all realize that the romantic lament for times and tales gone by does not correspond to contemporary requirements in our field. Rather on the contrary, witnessing a revolution and the ensuing societal changes, whatever their cause or aim might be, constitutes a unique opportunity for folk narrative research not to be missed.

### References

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\* *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*  
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