

## AN ANALYSIS ON FOLKLORE IN IRAN

Dr. Latifeh Salamatbavil  
Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran  
Email: salamatlatifeh@yahoo.com

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### Abstract

Culture is basically one of the expanded and more complicated issues in human life raised from the interaction between human, nature and the evolution of social concept. Folklore is considered one of the building blocks of culture including: traditions, customs, ethics, celebrations, habits, literature, arts, etc. The folklore of every society indicates the thoughts, ideals, cultural values and moral principles all around the world. Moreover, it is directed into a better recognition of different nations. From the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the scientific studies of folklore scientifically started which examined the beliefs, verbal literature and the behaviours of people considered so as to identify social realities. The current essay is based on a descriptive-analytical method presenting some of the folkloric elements. It is concluded that getting acquainted with the folklore of different societies is led into recognizing their social facts. Holistically, attempting to comprehend the folkloric concepts of certain societies can make nations get closer to one another.

**Keywords:** Folklore, Culture, Sociology, Ethics, Celebration

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### 1. Introduction

Folklore is embedded in the life and cultures and nations. It is also reflected in various patterns. Significant aspects of human life are consciously and unconsciously joined by folklore. Folklore has been rooted in nations with rich historical background. Furthermore, folklore has been emerged by social customs and traditions, the interpretations of ancestors of natural and life events. However, modern and contemporary concepts cannot be applied to interpret the folklore of ancient nations. Based on modern concepts, folklore has been originated from ignorance and nescience. Today, human knowledge can define and clarify many of the superstitions, beliefs and our ancestors' false imaginations. Although many people unconsciously believe their ancestors' beliefs, their customs and traditions have shaded their life. Hence, it implies the similarity of the human's present culture to the ancient culture. As a matter of fact, folklore embraces the history of civilization, sociology and anthropology illustrating all the ethics and specific traditions of any nation. The present essay is going to provide a comprehensive definition of folklore, point out the primary studies on folklore and introduce some of the folkloric elements such as Iran's celebrations and some folk beliefs.

### 2. Folklore

The term 'folklore' consists of two words: folk means people and lore means knowledge which is mostly synonymous with unprofessional opinions and knowledge. This expression was first used by William John Thames, the British archaeologist and antiquarian, instead of general archaeologist. This expression is referred to the way of human life in nature, behaviors and in common concepts that most people deal with in their daily life. (Osturi, 2007, P. 17)

"Folklore is a general expression for some of the human culture transferring through observation, experience and imitation." (Tamimdari, 2011, P. 11)

Researchers primarily thought that folklore only included stories, fables, songs, lyrics, proverbs, riddles, and etc. Gradually, people explored that folklore also holds the traditions

learnt verbally and whatever people learn beyond elementary school. Later, beliefs, illusions, predictions about time, astrology, natural history, medicine and whatever called people knowledge added to this science. As time dragged on, customs and traditions related to any stage of life also counted as parts of folklore such as: birth, childhood, marriage, senescence, mourning, national and religious celebration, as well as habits related to daily life like skills and careers. Folklore is briefly defined as “the science of acquainting with the unofficial nurturing of majority of people against formal training institutions among one certain civilized nation.” (Hedayat, 2006, P.17)

Contemporary studies indicate that folkloric knowledge is part of anthropology which is a sub-branch of social science. Researchers believe that folklore is not only limited to rural communities, but also expanded in civilized communities and developed cities. Today, a wide range of folklore is reflected on humanism and social science tendencies, especially in literature and customs. A major part of human knowledge and training in society is related to folklore. Hence, folklore studies are regarded as a significant source to recognize the history of human life.

### **3. Primary studies on the World's Folklore**

“ Since long ago, many researchers and authors were amazed by collecting various parts of folklore literature beside formal literature. Within the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Taboro, An Italian author, published a collection of humorous and disrespectful stories derived from verbal literature. Fransoa Rable who was a French doctor, author and bishop could gather jests and satires common among usual people in 15<sup>th</sup> century (Tamimdari, 2011, p. 12).

Sine the 19<sup>th</sup> century, folklore studies began to be scientifically scrutinized. In fact, pursuing the views, verbal literature and the actions and behaviors of commoners were not prescribed or instructed, instead, they were practiced to identify the social realities. (Roholamini, 2003, p. 230)

John Babtists, the French author, wrote the very first books on folklore titled “A Treatise on Superstitions”, published in 1679.

John Aubrey, a British antiquarian, wrote another book in 1696 titled as “Miscellaneous” containing beliefs, customs and traditions, fortune telling and predicting, interpreting dreams, believing in ghosts, commending spirits, etc.

Henry Bourne, a British clergyman, wrote the first folkloric work entitled “Antiquities of The Common People” in 1725. This book mainly described the customs and traditions of religious celebrations by people.

Thomas Percy, the British poet, antiquarian and bishop, wrote another book in three volumes tilted as “Reliquiaes Of Ancient English Poetry”. This work embraces the Scottish and British songs.

John Brand, the British clergyman and antiquarian, wrote a book entitled “Observation on the Popular Antiquities of Great Britain” in 1777. This is considered as a reference book of many traditions and customs.

John Gottfried Herder, a philosopher and linguist, and Grimm Bothers (Wilhelm and Jacob) also collected books about folklore and national and ethnic fictions.

#### **4. Folklore in Iran**

Folklore studies are generally divided into five major categories:

Beliefs and opinions, narrations, folkloric speeches, folkloric arts and traditions.

##### **4.1. Beliefs and opinions**

People's opinions determine their behavior and thought. These opinions are usually related to ideology, schools, scientific theories and religions through which it is possible to contemplate people's opinions about origin and eschatology, force and authority, creation of world, especially life after death. There are often effects of folklore on literature. It is important to learn verbal literature because this type of literature embraces people's social life, customs and traditions, the verve and aesthetics, human good act and the history of human evolution. Folklore studies can help societies develop. Community development delays without review and learn of folklore

##### **4.2. Narrations**

Fictions, stories, fables and anecdote are classified as narration. People hear the best narrations and verbal literature. They keep the best of them in mind and narrate them for others. Thus, there are always some changes in narrations. The most important characteristic of narrations and folkloric stories is their issuing. This issuing makes it possible to transfer verbally from generation to generation and from culture to culture. Fairy tales and epics are identified as the most common folkloric stories which they sometimes mix with each other. It is obvious that the objective and historical events differ from whatever created by people's minds and language. For example; animals' tales are usually moral and cautionary like the tales written by the French author, Jean de La Fontaine, (1621-1695).

##### **4.3. Folkloric speeches**

Folkloric speeches include proverbs, lingual expressions, simple rhythmic poems, magnificent speeches, puzzles, riddles, etc. One of the most important sources of proverbs are religious books. Proverbs imply a lot in brief and a wise person and layman can use it. There is a collective and historical wisdom behind each proverb. Language connects people to one another. Language facilitates expressions, proverbs and understanding. (Tamimdari, 2011, p. 16-20)

Proverbs not only reflect our today life, but also present the culture and concepts of our ancestors. As a matter of fact, societies with richer cultural background have more proverbs. Proverbs of every culture perfectly indicates the habits, concepts and tastes of that nation. Proverbs basically reveal the normal and abnormal behaviors and social values that people have accepted or rejected. Poems and literature have specific authors, whereas proverbs are made by commoners and transferred generation to generation and they show the society and history of every nation (Zolfaghary, 29, p. 2007)

##### **4.4. Commoners' Arts**

From the sociological view of art, the art related to the people's culture has been embedded in the society yarns. Art is faithful to people and their life. Furthermore, the artist is loyal to the people's culture by his art. Artists participate in happy ceremonies or the funerals. Public art means the art relying on the public ideology which is not separated from their life. Hence, it has been mixed with the main texture of their life. Public arts include carving, painting, embroidery, making food decorative dishes and other manual works of artists. Public arts have been found in all cultures either in the past or present. Immigrants of any country are also counted as the creators of public arts. These include Handicraft and industries, architecture of

Africa and South and North America, Canada, western, central and eastern Europe, Australia, etc. Handicrafts and native crafts are very important in Iran. (Tamimdari,2011, p. 21)

#### **4.5. Traditions**

Traditions can be observed in celebrations, games, gastronomy, costumes, feasts and funerals. Traditions also include: national and religious celebrations, banquets, commemoration of social figures, important days related to important events like independence day, end of war and peace, death of national and religious figures.

Among them, traditions can be observed in various celebrations, games, gastronomy, costumes, different feasts and funerals, etc.

This section is going to introduce some of Iranians' celebrations and ceremonies. In Iran, from ancient time, every month one celebration was held in the name of the month. Few of these twelve celebrations are still celebrated. Every month, one celebration was held. The most important ancient celebrations of Iran include; Tirgan, Sadeh, Mehregan, Yalda, Esfandegan, Chaharshanbeh Suri, Nowrouz and Sizdeh Bedar.

### **5. Celebrations**

#### **5.1 Tirgan Celebration**

In Iran's myth, there is a man called Arash, the lancer, who throws a dart to determine the border of Iran. He does it so powerfully that he is dead. After a day and half, this dart hits a walnut tree which is the frontier between Iran and Turan. People celebrate that day to appreciate the expansion of Iran's border. "New researchers point out that Tirgan has also been the celebration of water, rain, felicity and fertilization(Esmaeelpur,2002, p. 79)

This celebration is held in some of villages in Iran. Traditionally, thirteen types of nuts are eaten after having dinner. "One of the customs of this ceremony is to keep silent, one of the rural ones colors his face black, puts a handkerchief on his head and wears a costume, he become a deaf like one and doesn't talk to anyone. It is reported that he sometimes steps into a cold water pond to stop speaking. He holds a wand in his hand and hits some of the rural ones "specialy sterile women, unmarried girls, sterile animals and even infertile trees so as to be fertilized next year"(Roholamini,1997, p.111).

#### **5.2. Sadeh Celebration**

Sadeh celebration is counted as one of the major ancient Iranian celebrations. It is also known as the celebration of fire emersion celebrated on the fifth day of February. It has been reported that, "Hushang", the first king, has created fire. It has been narrated in the epics of Iran that Hushang and his companions passing through a mountain came across a snake. Hushang throws a big stone toward the snake. This stone is hit to another stone and a sparkle is appeared igniting the teasel nearby the stone. Until then, his companions had never seen fire. They are astonished and Hushang sets up fire at night. Abureyhan Biruni has written in his book, Asarolbaghieh, that the word Sadeh is the equivalent of the number one hundred. According to his view, on that day, the number of the ones rebirthed from Kiomars-the first father- is one hundred and selected one among themselves as king. Some people have claimed that the only difference is that it is one hundred days sooner than harvesting the crops. This is while others consider that Sadeh means emerging and this celebration is for the sake of the fiftieth birthday of sun. "In this ceremony, firewood, brushwood and teasel were provided. while others were singing and dancing, Zoroastrian Pries have a bight light and the Avesta reader went around these woods when singing fire song and prayer burns fire woods and started setting up fire" (Biruni,1974).

### **5.3. Mehregan Celebration**

This celebration was held on the 8<sup>th</sup> of October. It is regarded as the most important ancient Iranian celebrations after Nowrouz. Mehregan is celebrated just as the cold season begins. This celebration takes six days. Ancient Iranians believed that the spirit has been blown into the body of all animals and creatures due to God's decree in this day. The Sassanid kings put a crown likesun on their heads. In one of the cities, it was customary to donate autumn and winter cloths to the militias. Some Zoroastrians regarded it as a familial celebration. In Kerman, the Zoroastrians sacrificed a hen and filled it with cereals and plum to commemorate their beloved ones.

Mehregan celebration is considered as the time of harvesting and storing the crops, paying the tax and storing the provisions of winter. Like other phenomena, the customs and celebrations have been changed and evolved within centuries, but this celebration is symbolically held and reminds one of the myths of Iran. The myth of Kaveh, the blacksmith, which symbolizes the poor and oppressed people-against Zahakis- who is the symbol of cruelty.

### **5.4. Yalda Night Celebration**

This celebration is held at the last night of autumn and the first day of December. Yalda means rebirth. The primitives believed that this night is the end of darkness and defeating the Ahriman, the lightness is won and sun is rebirthed. "The rebirth of sun and the beginning of December has been the beginning of the year in many ancient cultures and traditions. Thus, the European New Year is Yalda Night at which Christ is rebirthed."(Tamimdari,2011, p. 249). The custom and tradition of Yalda is still held among families according to the following reasons:

1. Due to the ancient religious beliefs, night rebirths sun.
2. The longest night of the year means the longest darkness which is the symbol of nastiness and unluckiness which is getting shorter by the day after.
3. It is the end of the summer and the beginning of resting in farming society.

Yalda is also known as a family celebration. At this night, relatives get together at the home of the oldest family member and eat fruit and nuts like watermelon, pomegranate, apple and cucumber. It is implied that all summer fruits are eaten and nothing will be remained for the day after that is Winter. As a result, people eat fruit and nuts on Yalda night, not food.

### **5.5. Esfandegan Celebration**

Esfand means humbleness and sacredness. Ancient Iranians celebrate the 24<sup>th</sup> of February as a token of woman's day and earth. On this day, men sit women on thrones and obey them and gifthem and as the celebration continued for a long time and held very magnificent then respect for women always be reminded for men. This celebration was an opportunity for men to appreciate their mothers and wives. Iranians regarded this day as woman's day, mother's day and lovers' day, in general. This day is equal to the Europeans' valentine's day.

### **5.6. Chaharshanbesuri Celebration**

Nowrouz is the most important Iranian celebration. Traditionally, people cleaned up their homes, bought new clothes and enjoyed the last Wednesday of the year by Chaharshanbeh Suri Celebration and refreshed themselves. In the evening of the last Wednesday of the year (at the sunset of Tuesday), people set up fires outside their homes and jumped over them and said:" I give you my pale yellow color and you give me your red lively color."" In this way, they symbolically abandoned diseases from themselves. Another ceremony of this night is to do eves



dropping. some of young people covered their faces and stood at a place, the first sentence they heard by the first a passing pedestrian was the answer to their wish.

People eat nuts at this` night which is a combination of pistachio, wall-nut, dried peach and fig. Iranians also make some special foods at this night like Ash Reshteh(Broth) and Reshtehpolo. This ceremony is still held in various forms in Iran.

### **5.7. Nowruz Celebration**

Nowruz is identified as one of the ancient Iranian ceremonies. Since long ago, many social and political events haven't been eliminated or vanished it away. Nowruz is the combination of two words: Now meaning new and Ruz meaning day. It is referred to the first day of the first month of the solar year. This celebration is counted as the most eminent national celebration in Iran indicating the sense of enjoyment of this ancient nation. The prominence of this celebration is that it is held at the very best time of the year. Its message is renewing time and end of winter. During old time, it was held twenty-one days. In each day, a special program was conducted.

This celebration has become immanent. It is held almost the same in different regions of Iran. All Iranians buy new dresses and shoes, clean up their homes, wash the curtains, paint the house and grow a plant. Setting SofrehHaftseen is one of the most significant ceremonies. The items used for Sofrehhaftseen are somehow engaged with social customs and they remind specific tokens rooted in traditions.

„This Sofreh (setting) brings welfare and felicity. Sofrehhaftseen is actually the combination of Seven items which in Persian literature start with the sound of [s] like Sabzeh (a green plant), Sib(apple) and Senjed (sea-buckthorn). Number seven has been a sacred number from long ago and it also denotes the seven angels of Mazdyasna.“ (Purdavud, 1975, p. 357)

According to tradition, the whole family members get together and sit around this Sofrehhaftseen. The seven items of this Sofreh(setting) symbolizes agricultural products such as apple, green plant, sea-buckthorn, sumac, vinegar, malt, coin, mirror, candle, water, colored egg, red fish in jar, Quran (the holy book of Muslims) or Avesta (the holy book of Zoroastrians). This Sofreh (setting) is set for thirteen days in most houses.

### **5. 8. SizdehBedar**

This celebration is held on the 13<sup>th</sup> day of Nowruz (2<sup>nd</sup> of April). After twelve days of celebrating, they go to nature on the 13<sup>th</sup> day and enjoy and they finish this celebration.

On this day, people dance and enjoy in public areas (Bahar, 1997, p. 243). In ancient beliefs, some think that it is an unfortunate day, that is why, people should leave home and amuse themselves nearby rivers or nature. In this ceremony, people throw their plant into river, eat lettuce and cook different foods specially Aash(Broth).

## **6. Public Beliefs**

Public beliefs indicate the level of culture and prominence of one certain society. The written literature is remarked as a source indicating the life of people and their culture in the past. Poets and writers living in the past have also illustrated the past life of people. These sources can help us recognize the superstitious beliefs and etymology of these beliefs. In this section, some of the public concepts related to animals are described.

### **6.1. Rooster**

If rooster crows non-stop, it must be killed or it should be given to someone else. Otherwise, his owner is dead. (Hedayat, 1973, p. 93)

## 6.2. Snake on Treasure

Snakes are found near treasure. Snakes creep around the treasure (Shamisa 2008, p. 1067)  
Enchantment:

It is said that if someone steals the enchantment, snake chases him. So, there is a proverb in Persian literature that if the loved one steals the lover's enchantments, the lover will follow the loved one forever. There are also beliefs about the imaginary and metaphysical creature as below:

## 6.3. Dragon

Dragon is a creature which is like a huge lizard and the fire comes out his mouth and it guards the underground treasures (YaHaghi 2009, p. 105).

## 6.4. Fairy

It seems that fairy was worshiped long before Zoroaster. As people became Zoroastrian and many social changes affected the Zoroastrians' beliefs, fairy became an ugly devil creature. (Mazdapur, 1998, p. 124). Although fairy has become an evil and Ahriman one, it is the symbol of beauty in Persian literature. Surprisingly, poets have resembled their loved ones to fairy. (Afshari, 2005, p. 49)

## 6.5. Devil

The term devil was originally used to refer to the gods of brightness which had been worshiped in eastern part of Iran for long. As Zoroaster emerged and his beliefs were expanded, Zoroaster introduced devil as the sinister and wicked one. (Ebrahimi, 2013, p. 61)

Commoners believe that devil is a huge creature with short wavy hair, small and flat nose, thick and hanging lips and a hairy body. They also imagine that devil has two wings and antlers. Long ago, devil had conquered the whole world and widely hurt people (Maseh, 2012, p. 571).

Devil and Iron:

Devil is afraid of iron, that is why, iron is fastened around children's elbow to be safe from devil. (Zanjani, 1997, p. 519). Devil used to be a good one, but he changed into a horrible one. However, people don't believe in devil anymore.

## Conclusions

Although folklore has been inherited from our ancestors, it still exists in present societies. It is still persistent, attractive and grandeur. This tradition has been gained from generation to generation. This is the folklore which livens up and revives our lives. The folklore of any society is like an identity that shouldn't be lost. Even though the present folklore is much different from the folklore of our ancestors, it is the heritage of our past. The fact is that the folklore of any society preserves the social and political history of one nation.

Holistically, all the nations all across the world share the same cultural roots and folkloric habits because they had been one unified race and civilization, then divided into different tribes and nations. Thus, folklore creates ethnic and racial unity. Consequently, it makes nations close to each other and prevents fight and struggle away from them. This is one of the applications of folklore in societies.

In all cultures and nations, prominent events have been rooted in one specific day or time. This event might be the birthday of an eminent person or the independent day of a country or a benedict occurrence for a nation or even the beginning of new year.

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