

Imaginary Folkloric Beings in the Iranian People's Beliefs

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KEYWORDS Rituals. Dramatic Form. Iran. Persians. Folklore

ABSTRACT Folkloric beings have played important roles in the cultures of different countries in the world since ancient times. In Iran they have formed a part of people's beliefs and culture. They have been of great significance in the lives of the Persians. An attempt is made in this paper to study the Iranian people's beliefs in these beings; for this purpose the author has focused on the beliefs of different people located in different parts of Iran. The Persians, in the past, used to enact some of these beliefs in the form of rituals which were meant to protect their family members. These beliefs have been useful in the education of children too. There have been such folkloric beings which have affected even the lives of the adults in Iran, and have encouraged the latter to overcome their fears. The author has made an attempt to collect data through library sources. As a result, he has found out that the rituals concerning these imaginary beings have been held in dramatic forms, and have been attributed with such elements like plot, actor and stage designing.

INTRODUCTION

Ever since man was created, he has started creating strange beings in his imagination and he has attributed supernatural powers to these spiritual beings¹. Most of these beings belonged to a period when civilization had not yet developed and man was helpless against the anger and wrath of nature, and believed in different gods. In order to protect himself and his family, man used to take refuge in magic. It is believed that this world of wonders has provided shelter for the spiritual and fearful beings that dwelled in the remote and dry deserts.

The Iranian people were occupied with such creatures like *Jinn*, *Peri*, *Al* and the *Ghoul*; ² some of these beings were friendly to man and some were his enemies. Through the stories narrated for us by our ancestors, we realize that the heroes in these stories have always fought with the *Ghouls* and *Jinns*, or, fallen in love with some beautiful *Peries* (Zarinkoob 1976).

Sharden, the European excursionist of Safavid³ period, states: "The Iranian People were strong believers in superstition and spiritual beings, and there are no other people more interested in such things than the Persians" (Sharden 1966). Indeed man's life has been greatly affected by fear, fear of unknown forces, lightening, famine, and storms. Man has also created dance characterized by motions, which, in turn, has resulted in sorrow, happiness, hope, and despair.

On the other hand, religious rituals have been considered as ways through which man has established an association with the sacred;

these rituals have not only served as means of ameliorating man's excitements and fears but also they have been used as means of displaying important happenings in man's life, making it easier for him to accept such phenomena like death and other disasters. From an anthropological point of view, the rite of passage and the rites of reinforcement are of great importance. The rites of passage helps man pass through such crisis like birth, maturity, marriage and death. The rite of reinforcement is a ceremony that determines the crisis in the lives of a group not an individual. Whatever the nature of crisis is, it might function like heavy and light rain, which turns harmful for the products. The purpose of such rites is to unite people and reduce their anxieties.

The psychoanalyst, Melanie Klein (1882-1960), has drawn a parallel between fantasies and folktales. She believes that there is a need to transform an identity based on "primitive fantasies into one based on reality"; she believes that these conflicts can help explain the universal appeal of "archetypal conflict, particularly myths, folk tales and fairy tales" (Parkin – Gounelas 2001). For Klein, many tales begin with the splitting of the mother into the good mother, who is either lost or dead, and the evil stepmother. In order to justify her statement, she points out to such tales like "Cinderella", "Snow White", or "Hansel and Gretel". "How does it come about that the child creates such a fantastic image of its parents?" She replies that the answer can be found through "investigation of the psychic mechanisms of (pre-) Oedipal child (and his fears of imaginary

objects), and in tracing the way aggression is a projection of innate, repressed impulses" (Parkin-Gounelas 2001).

The folk culture and custom of Persians is one of the valuable sources which have been quite influential in their life circle, and it has reinforced the spirit of life among them; it has prompted Persians to make use of symbols, metaphors and signs, which are helpful in transferring the feelings of the creative man into words. It is here that the customs and rituals are not merely considered as mere entertainments but they enact people's beliefs (Anasori 2006).

Theoretical Framework

An important issue in the Anthropological studies in the theory of evolution proposed by Charles Darwin in his *Origin of Species* (1859). He believed that nature offers limited sources of life to different species, therefore these species are compelled to compete with one another. Those who are able to cope with the environment and limitations of nature survive and the rest are prone to destruction. This is in tune with the natural selection. Although he does not refer to human being in this perspective and he has been more concerned with plants and animals, but he proposed that man has been evolved into a perfect being gradually. Based on these assumptions, people in different cultures have portrayed the folkloric creatures and maintained their beliefs in them.

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939)⁴ has explained folk tales and folkloric creatures in terms of psychoanalysis. The revolutions, which occurred in the explorations of the subconscious mind of man in the field of psychoanalysis by the writings, experiments, and discoveries of Sigmund Freud, besides changing the direction in other areas of human inquiry, influenced heavily the theoretical and methodological prospects of folkloristic. Freud himself leaned heavily on myths, tales, particularly dreams in folklore for his psychoanalytical explorations of human mind. In *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Freud declared that dreams express the latent repressed wishes and fears of infantile sexuality in symbolic disguise. Since myths, folktales, and other forms of folklore looked like dreams, naturally attempts were made to equate them. Some even declared that myth is the dream of a culture; and therefore the same psychological mechanisms operated in

dreams and myths and were subject to the same interpretations.

James Frazer (1854 – 1941)⁵ in *The Golden Bough* (1925) explains that man has crossed an evolutionary course. First, he has taken refuge in magic, then in religion and finally in knowledge. As a result, there have been many evolutionary theories in the world, some deal with family relationship, some with neo evolutionism and some with technology.

All the quaint superstitions, the old world maxims, the venerable saws which the ingenuity of savage philosophers elaborated long ago, and which old women at chimney corners still impart as treasures of great price to their descendants gathered round the cottage fire on winter evenings—all these antique fancies clustered, all these cobwebs of the brain were spun about the path of the old king, the human god, who, immersed in them like a fly in the toils of a spider, could hardly stir a Hub for the threads of custom, "light as air but strong as links of iron," that crossing and recrossing each other in an endless maze bound him fast within a network of observances from which death or deposition alone could release him (Frazer 1925).

Referring to the external souls in folk tales, Frazer points out that soul may be absent from man's body and still continue to animate him by virtue of a sort of sympathy or action at a distance in secret. Emphasizing the importance of folktale and people's beliefs, he believes:

folk-tales are a faithful reflection of the world as it appeared to the primitive mind; and we may be sure that any idea which commonly occurs in them, however absurd it may seem to us, must once have been an ordinary paper of belief. This assurance, so far as it concerns the supposed power of disengaging the soul from the body for a longer or shorter time, is amply corroborated by a comparison of the folktales in question with the actual beliefs and practices of savages (Frazer 1925).

In another instant, he refers to the presence of giants in folktales by saying that: *"The end of the ogre is like that of the magician... As the bird's wings and legs are torn off, the ogre's arms and legs drop off; and when its neck is wrung, he falls down dead. In a Bengalee story it is said that all the ogres dwell in Ceylon, and that all their lives are in a single"* (Frazer 1925).

As far as the expulsion of evil spirits is concerned, Frazer has proposed his ideas. He refers to customs of different nations all over the world and the vehicle they used in order to expel the

evil spirits; sometimes these evils are human beings and sometimes animals.

He maintains that the evil influences are embodied in a visible form, or are at least supposed to be loaded upon a material medium, which acts as a vehicle to draw them off from the people, village, or town. Often the vehicle, which carries away the collected demons or ills of a whole community, is an animal or scapegoat.

An important issue which has encouraged the people of Asia, Iranians in particular, to focus on divination is these people's curiosity to know about future; as Tavenier believes:

The Iranians are interested in knowing future and they respect astronomers and counsel with them. The king has four astronomers and they say fortunate and unfortunate days. Many calendars are sold every year in Iran. These calendars contain length and width and conjunction and dispersion of the stars. Wars, diseases, drought, times for wearing new clothes, phlebotomy, traveling and other affairs are predicted according to these calendars (Iqbali 2012).

Objectives

1. Investigating the Iranian people's beliefs in imaginary and spiritual animals
2. Investigating the effect of people's beliefs in imaginary beings on their lives

The objective of this paper is to study the effect of Imaginary beings in the lives of Iranian people and their beliefs.

METHODOLOGY

In accomplishing this paper, the author, being an Iranian himself, has made use of such instruments including observation, and interviews with other Iranian people who are familiar with the role imaginary and spiritual beings have played in their lives. The researcher has made use of library data and many documented sources and different works written by different scholars. He has also made use of such great thinkers like Frazer, Darwin, and Freud.

RESULTS

The Belief in Spiritual Beings

The use of fear in educating children has been quite prevalent amongst the ancient Iranian people, and for this reason, they have made use of

spiritual beings. In the past, these beings were believed to be helpful in promoting life. The most important and common beings include *Jinn*, *Ajeneh*, *Mard Azema*, *Az Ma Behtaroon*, *Bacheh Barak*, *Vagheh*, *Al*, *Jinn Din* and *Noh Saro Si Dandoon*. The elders of families used to frighten children by narrating the stories of these beings in order to prevent the latter from going to certain places. For example, children were warned not to go to certain ruined areas because *Jinns* (ghost) used to live there; these children were asked not to cry or lest the *jinn* named *Noh Saro Si Dandoon*⁶ would come and eat them.

It was believed amongst among people, *Bakhtiaries*⁷ in particular, that at night, before they went to sleep, they were expected to pour hot water around themselves and utter the name of God in order to keep demon spirits away. The most important folkloric beings in the Iranian culture are as given below.

1. The Mard Azema

It is a kind of (*Jinn*) spirit who does not harm anyone but examines men's courage and lack of fear by appearing to them in remote places. It is believed that the *Mard Azemas* appear in the form of ghouls. However, it is also believed that these beings do not appear to the timid persons or else the latter might be harmed. This way the timid persons would be encouraged more to get rid of their fears.

2. Th Al

It is in the form of a bony, thin old woman, with a clay nose, red face, and a straw or reedy basket hanging from its shoulder, in which the liver or lung of the young mother is placed. In Central Asia, the *Al* is customarily a fat, ugly and hairy crone with sagging breasts, the one hanging over one shoulder, while hanging over her other shoulder is a woolen bag in which she has placed the heart and liver of her victim. People have found ways to fight this dangerous creature; these ways include spitting few onions, placing gun and sword in the room of the pregnant woman and drawing a line around its bed (Hedayat 1963).

In Iran, the *Al* is used as a kind of being manifesting a curse; whenever the Persians intended to frighten girls they used to inform the latter that *Al* would come and take them away. The

Iranian people considered the *Al* as a demon spirit. Based on the beliefs of the Persians, and as it has come in the Iranian folklore, there are some rituals concerning the *Al* in Iran and Armenia. It was believed that a pregnant woman used to go to her father's house at the time of childbirth, so that her fears of the first childbirth could be reduced. At the night of the childbirth, the elders used to attend the feast prepared to keep the *Al* away from the pregnant woman. At the time of childbirth, one of those attending the feast used to utter some words loudly so that the demon spirits, the *Jinns* and animals could hear his voice; in this way he could warn them that the newly born child was strong and brave. The man used to repeat these words five times. These people were expected to take care of the newly born child for a period of forty nights so that the *Al* would not replace the child for another one. They used to place a bowl filled with a mixture of salt and ash under the baby's cradle and rub some of the mixture around the door; they also placed *Quran* and a piece of scissor or knife near both the mother and the child, in order to keep the *Al* or other deceases away for them. This process lasted forty days.

It was also believed, among Bakhtiaries, that the pregnant woman should be taken to the elders so that the latter would use a piece of string to make forty knots to be tied around the woman's wrist; this way they would keep the *Al* away from the baby and his or her mother for a period of forty days (Anasori 2006).

3. *As Ma Behtaroon*

As Ma Behtaroon (Better than us) were those beings, which were not terrestrial and would not harm anyone; they were believed to be present amongst the people invisibly, and would make use of things available in the houses. If it happened that people lost things to be found later in the same place, they would believe that *Az Ma Behtaroon* might have taken them away and used them, placing them where it was first found.

4. *The Ghoul*

A *ghoul* is a desert-dwelling demon that can assume the guise of an animal especially a hyena. It lures unwary people into the desert wastes or abandoned places to slay and devour them. It was believed that the creature would also prey

on young children, drink blood, steal coins, and eat the dead, taking the form of the person most recently eaten. It was also believed that these beings had punter-like hands, which could kill people easily. It was believed that if a man happened to pierce a pin in the head of a ghoul suddenly, the creature would be the man's permanent slave and would fulfill the latter's wishes (Zandi 2006).

The *Goul* is a (folkloric) monster associated with graveyards, consuming human flesh, and is often classified as undead. In fiction, these creatures dwell in cemeteries and other uninhabited places. The oldest surviving book that mentions ghouls is likely Arabian *One Thousand and One Nights*. The term "Goul" was first used in English literature in 1786, in William Beckford's Orientalist novel *Vathek*, which describes the *ghûl* of Arabian folklore; the word "*ghoul*" is also used in a derogatory sense to refer to a person who delights in the macabre, or whose profession is linked directly to death, such as a gravedigger.

5. *The Div (Goblin)*

The term "*Div*" (Goblin) was named after a group of Aryan gods. When Zoroaster⁸ appeared in ancient Iran, goblins were believed to symbolize devil (Zandi 2006). Thus in ancient epics and legends and in people's beliefs, *Divs* were described as ugly and deceptive; they were considered cruel and used to appear in different forms (Tabatabaai 2006).

White Goblin is, according to *Shahnameh*⁹, is a kind of goblin named after the king of goblins in Mazandaran¹⁰. It was believed that he imprisoned the Persian king, *Keikavoos*, and his soldiers, and the latter were later freed by *Rustam*.¹¹ The creature was believed to be tall with red eyes, light hairs and physically strong body. The ancient Iranian people believed that he had been away from the cities for hundreds of years and dwelled in deserts. This spiritual creature was believed to have appeared now and then in the cities in order to find food.

6. *The Hamzad (Twin)*

In ancient Persia, it was believed that every man at the time of birth had a twin, a kind of *jinn* who had a common fate with the former and used to play with him during childhood. The *Hamzad* was prevalent amongst Bakhtiaries. The twin and

the child used to play in the cold ashes at the fireplace where they were not supposed to be distracted, or else, the twin might have harmed the child. The belief in the *Hamzad* has been prevalent amongst many nations (Moen 1996).

7. The Jinn (Jinni)

The term “*Jinn*” used to stand for a creature hidden from sight; it is derived from the Arabic word, “hide” or “be hidden”. *Jinns* were believed to appear at nights; they were believed to dwell in bathhouses, ruins and deserts and appear in the form of human. It differed from man in that the former had hoofs. Its eyelash differed from those of men and he had blond hairs. It was believed that along with the birth of each human child, a new *Jinn* would be born, looking like the human child but with a dark complexion and ugly face.

The word “*genie*” in English is derived from Latin “*genius*”, meaning a sort of tutelary or guardian spirit thought to be assigned to each person at his or her birth. English borrowed the French descendant of this word, *génie*; its earliest written attestation in English, in 1655, is a plural spelled “*genyes*.” The French translators of *The Book of One Thousand and One Nights* used *génie* as a translation of *Jinnî* because it was similar to the Arabic word in sound and in meaning. This use was also adopted in English and has since become dominant.

Similar to humans, *Jinns* have free will allowing them to do as they choose. They are usually invisible to humans, and humans do not appear clearly to them. *Jinns* have the power to travel large distances at extreme speeds and are thought to live in remote areas, mountains, seas, trees, and the air, in their own communities. Like humans, *Jinns* will also be expected to be judged on the Day of Judgment and will be sent to Paradise or Hell according to their deeds.

Molla Sadra, the great Persian poet, describes *Jinn* as “creatures with soft bodies, who look like fragments of air, sticking together in a way that they can be visible” (Shabgard 2013).

There is a way to avoid trouble from the *jinn* by leaving them food and charcoal to keep them happy, asking permission before turning on water (as some people believe that the *Jinns* live in water pipes), and sprinkling salt on the floor around one's bed to avoid nocturnal attacks by *Jinn*.

8. The Simurgh (Phoenicis)

Ancient Greek mythology describes Phoenicis as a bird “singing so beautifully that the sun stops in its path across the sky to listen to her song” (Larius 2008).

In Persia, Phoenicis is named after one of the legendary beings believed to be of great importance amongst Iranians. It has been used repeatedly in *Shahnameh*. Its dwelling place is *Ghaf* mountains. It is believed to be wise and it knows many secrets. In *Shahnameh*, it provides *Zal*¹² with a shelter and also teaches *Rustam* how to fight with invulnerable *Esfandyar*¹³. It is believed to be a bird that has made its nest on a healing tree named *Vispobish*, which possesses seeds of different kinds of trees. According to Avesta¹⁴, this tree is placed in the *Voroshka* or *Frakht* Sea. The word *Simorgh* is also used in Avesta as *Morghosein*, the first part of which denotes *Morgh* (bird) and the second part means *Sim* meaning in Persian *Si* (falcon). *Simorgh* has also appeared in many post-Islamic epics and works. It has two characters: divine (in *Zal's* story), and Devil (in *Esfandyar's Haft Khan* story). The devilish *Simorgh* is believed to have been like a dragon that has not been as sacred as the divine *Simorgh*; the former has been killed by *Esfandyar*. The divine *Simorgh* has first appeared in *Shahnameh* when *Zal* was born. It is believed that *Simorgh* has healed *Rustam's* wound caused by the latter's fight with *Esfandyar*. It is also believed that whoever owned a single feather of *Simorgh*, he could burn the feather when in danger and the *Simorgh* would appear and help him.

9. The Ajdeha (Dragon)

It is believed that *Ajdeha* was a gigantic and fearsome animal with a pair of shining eyes and a mouth ample enough to swallow a cow. The small one is believed to be of five ells and the big one thirty ells. This gigantic animal is manifested as the symbol of instigation, having the ability to project fire from its mouth. It is also believed that this strange animal is almost always defeated by the heroes. In fact the fight between dragon and hero in the stories is a manifestation of “man's conflict and search for consciousness. In people's beliefs every dangerous and powerful thing is associated with the Dragon.

10. The Peri

It was named after one of the Persian goddesses before the appearance of Zoroastrianism

in Iran. She has been worshipped by the Persians. Since Zoroastrian religion emphasized moral aspects of man and the Iranians believed that the *Peries* represented love and magic, therefore the *peries* were presented as evil creatures that used to deceive man (Zandi 2006). The mythological position of the *Peries* in the folklore is clear. In Iranian folklore the *Peri* was seen as:

The goddess of water, a female living in the seas, with magical features; it is the stereotype of magicians present throughout the world.... Most of the Iranian folklore stories belonging to pre-Zoroastrian Persia were somehow connected with the Peries. The Peries were associated with the flowing of water and agricultural cultivation. The goddess was considered as a kind of Peri who was connected with water (Ebrahimi 2013).

In the Iranian folklore, the *peri* was believed to have maintained its mythical characteristics, and it was considered as beautiful and sacred being whose origin lied in fire, and unlike the Goul, it was liked and favored by people. The *Peri* was attracted by most of the heroes who happened to cross different obstacles and reach the former.

11. The Homa

It is a legendary bird which is believed to be the carrier of luck and happiness. The ancient Iranians believed that this bird used to eat bones and it has been harmless. It was also believed that whoever came under its shadow, he or she would become rich and lucky. It was also believed that whoever carried the *Homa's* bone or feather, the latter would become strong enough to face the strongest enemies (Zandi 2006). The respected and sacred quality of this bird in the past has brought a fame for it as the cause of the emergence of wine.

12. Bacheh Barak

In the past, in the northern part of *Khoostan*¹⁵¹⁵ A province located in the southern part of Iran there was no electricity and the villagers used to sleep on the rooftops of their houses during the hot seasons, and when there was no sign of moonlight, darkness dominated the area. It happened that sometimes in the middle of night some people shouted and asked for help because their newly born babies had been taken away by

Bache Barak. It was believed that the *Bache Barak* was invisible and no one could see them. However, the babies were left behind by these creatures somewhere near the house. It was believed among *Bakhtiaries* that the *Bacheh Barak* could have a form like that of a panther, although no one had ever seen it. Since it used to take the children away, it was named *Bacheh Barak* (Thief of children).

DISCUSSION

People of the world are united through the manifestation of their beliefs. It is through these beliefs that past and present of a nation is somehow connected. In Iran, among the old Persians, the beliefs inherited from the past have been materialized into symbols; some of these symbols have in turn manifested themselves in the form of imaginary and spiritual beings, and have contributed to the promotion of the Iranian folklore tradition. It has been through these folkloric beings that past and present of the Iranian people have been connected, and life has become meaningful. These being are endowed with such wonderful characteristics that they have been considered as sacred by the old and new Iranian generations.

On the other hand, an important way to justify the existence of imaginary creature such as Jinns is that "the imaginary creatures like the *Jinns* are mentioned in holy books directly; their presence in these books could be a reason for us to accept the authenticity of these holy books (Sharden 2013).

CONCLUSION

Most of the people's beliefs are materialized in rituals and they are endowed with such powerful dramatic aspects the study of which can display the feelings of a group of people under different circumstances. It is not a decrease or misery which is the focus of attention in these rituals, but people's gathering, socializing, and observation of the traditional laws, songs, and rites; such rites and rituals strengthen people's cultural relationship. These rites help stabilizing traditional laws and customs; they include singing native songs and dancing, which in turn, would keep the wicked spirits away.

The complexities of men in the modern ages and the complicated relationships between them

have changed the sacred rituals, and such changes might lead to the disappearance of native ritual and bring dramatic changes in the folk lore of the nations. Thus these rituals must be kept alive and be presented to the new generation so that the latter can realize the importance of these rituals. This is only possible when priorities are given to the importance of nations' folklore and their beliefs manifested through rituals and dominant spiritual beings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There are different nations with different cultures in the world. Each nation is endowed with a particular set of beliefs which manifest themselves in different ways, that is, either through symbols or other spiritual entities. Thus the research on these nations, their beliefs and the way they are projected for the future generations can be helpful. On the other hand folklores of different nations in the world are so extensive that it cannot be underestimated. It is through such researches that a common trait can be traced among all these nations in the world.

NOTES

1. The spiritual beings are some creatures who are supposed to have influenced some people's lives.
2. Jinns and Peries are the Persian names for the evil spirits who are believed to haunt people. The Al and the Ghoul are also Persian names for demon spirits.
3. An Iranian dynasty
4. The founder of psychoanalysis
5. Frazer, an English anthropologist whose master piece *The Golden Bough* has been of great importance to anthropology.
6. A creature with nine heads and thirty teeth.

7. Bakhtiari tribe is of the largest Iranian tribes who live on the edge of the Zagros Mountains of Iran.
8. The Ancient Persian prophet who was the founder of Zoroastrianism.
9. *Shahnameh* is a Persian epic written by the Iranian poet Ferdowsi.
10. A Province in the Northern part of Iran.
11. Rustam was the legendary hero created by Ferdowsi in *Shahnameh*.
12. A central character in *Shahnameh*.
13. A character in *Shahnameh*.
14. The Zoroastrian holy book.
15. A province located in the southern part of Iran.

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