

# Iranian Belief Narratives and Verbal Charms. A Preliminary Survey

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**Abstract:** The role of charms in Iranian belief narratives remains largely unexplored. Hereby, I attempt a preliminary survey. First, I examine the text of the Iranian national epic, the *Shahname* of Ferdowsi (X–XI century A.D.), in which the word *afsun* denotes charm or magic spell. In contemporary folktale texts (I mainly rely on the voluminous *Dictionary of Iranian Folktales*), an Arabic loan-word *verd* (which also means a kind of prayer) is used to mean a charm which facilitates supernatural results such as shape-shifting, transformation or miraculous healing. Ritual prayer (*namaz*) and supplication (*do'a*) also function as charms in folk narratives. I also give a brief overview of the Iranian folklore scholarship.

**Keywords:** Shahname, Iranian belief narratives, afsun, verd, Islamic prayer as charm

## INTRODUCTION

Iranian belief narratives are of great antiquity and can be traced back to at least the first millennium B.C. The sacred texts of Zoroastrians, the Avesta, the Old Persian inscriptions and references from the works of Classical Greek and Roman authors such as Herodotus, Xenophon, Chares of Mytilene, Aelian, Ammianus Marcellinus and the Syriac Acts of the Martyrs from the later Antiquity, contain large amounts of pre-Islamic data.

My own investigation hereby focuses mainly on post-Islamic materials, the so-called national epic of Abu al-Qasem Ferdowsi, the *Book of the Kings* (*Shahname*), as well as belief narratives from the monumental contemporary collection of Iranian tales, *The Dictionary of Iranian Folktales* (*Farhang-e Afsaneha-ye Mardom-e Iran*), which has been edited by Ali Ashraf Darvishian and Reza Khandan in a multi-volume enterprise during the last few decades of our era.

## THE SHAHNAME

The national epic, which was composed by Abu al-Qasem Ferdowsi (A.D. 940–1020), is a poetic work of imposing length and quality, consisting of sixty thousand rhyming verses

composed in Classical New Persian and based on ancient written and oral sources. It is relatively well edited and studied both by Iranian and foreign scholars<sup>1</sup> and has greatly influenced the heroic literature of neighboring people (Central Asian and Ottoman Turks, Armenians, Kurds).

Ferdowsi's world-view is clearly monotheistic: the ancient kings and heroes of Iran usually invoke God's name and attributes (world-creator, etc.) in their desperate fight against demons (*dev*) and witches (*jadu*, *zan-e jadu*, *afsungar*).

Magic (*jadu*, *afsun*) is not without importance in the world-view of the epic. While *afsun* (which is etymologically derived from the Middle Persian verb *afsudān*, "to enchant" or "protect with a spell"), is an ambivalent term, meaning a spell which can be taught by an angel<sup>2</sup> and may save a life, the word *jadu*, on the other hand, clearly denotes "black", i.e., harmful magic. In addition, the very word "magic" carries special connotations, as etymologically it means a certain priestly class in ancient Iran, or more commonly "wise man", "sage".

In Ferdowsi's epic, distinctions between the realms of Good and Evil are not as sharp as in Zoroastrian literature. The great heroes and kings of the *Shahname* are frequently caught between conflicting values of honor and self-preservation, when they fight their continuous fratricidal wars against Turan (the north-eastern neighboring empire), Rum (the Western peoples, Greeks, Macedonians, Romans, Byzantines) and "vassal" countries (Sistan, Mazanderan).

## IRANIAN POPULAR LITERATURE

The huge corpus of Iranian Islamic belief narratives which were preserved in medieval chronicles, popular epics, books of anecdotes and hagiographical literature, has still not been fully utilized by contemporary researchers, though the pioneering studies of M.J. Mahjoub deserve to be mentioned (MAHJOUB 2014).

Iranian oral tradition and folk customs have received more attention from both foreign and Iranian scholars during the last hundred years. The studies of A. Christensen, H. Massé, S. Hedayat, and L. P. Elwell-Sutton, dating from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and more recently those of S. A. Enjavi-Shirazi, U. Marzolph and M. Omidshahar, among others, widen our perspectives on the understanding of the shared heritage of story-telling in the Near and Middle East and South-West Asia (Cf. MARZOLPH 1984:306–311).

## POPULAR PIETY AND SUPERSTITION IN IRANIAN CONTEMPORARY BELIEF NARRATIVES

Relying on some hundred texts selected from the multivolume collection of A. Darvishian & R. Khandan, *The Dictionary of Iranian Folktales* (afterwards DIT) and also a collection by the late S.A. Enjavi-Shirazi, I will hereby attempt to give a brief

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed discussion and bibliography see MARKUS-TAKESHITA 2015.

<sup>2</sup> In the chapters of the primeval kings it means God-given spell, incantation, cf. the chapter of King Tahmuras, verses 27, 37; the chapter of Zahak, 278–291; the chapter of Faridun, 196–202.

description of the use of verbal charms and other means of asking for supernatural help in a few folk narratives, fairytales and legends.

The ancient Persian word for magic spell, i.e., *afsun*, which was often used by Ferdowsi, seems to be absent in folk narratives. The word which usually means “charm” in these texts is the word *verd*, an Arabic loanword. While in the definition of H. Algar, *verd* can be a kind of prayer (ALGAR 1996), in the opinion of M. Bagheri, *verd* in folktales is used as the nonsense word of a conjurer (like *hocus-pocus* in European tales) (Professor Mehri Bagheri, personal communication, 2018). In our above-mentioned texts, *verd* is sometimes used by a magical helper to perform impossible tasks for the heroine (DIT, vol.7. *Green Ali*, 36–37. ATU 425 B.; DIT, vol. 7. *The Three Sisters*, 431). Frequently, *verd* is used in cases of shape shifting or the transformation of men into animals, such as a dog or a donkey (ENJAVI-SHIRAZI 2005:240–241), or a hen, a deer (DIT, vol. 17. *Two Dervishes*, 341; *Enchanted Garden*, 382), a monkey (DIT, vol. 18. *Enchanted Spring*, 217), etc., or transformation into inanimate objects.<sup>3</sup>

*Verd* is used by sorcerers, witches, demons, fairies and wise women (Cf. ENJAVI-SHIRAZI 2005:241; DIT, vol. 17. *Enchanted Spring*, 219; DIT, vol. 18. *Enchanted Garden*, 384), and above all, by dervishes, who in folktales seem to be endowed with great magical, but often sinister powers, as in several versions of the tale *The Magician and His Pupil*, ATU 325 in the collection.

*Verd* also can be taught to human beings under certain conditions, cf. the tale of *The Daughter of Dal*<sup>4</sup> (i.e., *foster-daughter of a legendary bird*), in which an egg and rags can be transformed into a baby by the *verd*-chanting of a childless woman (DIT, vol.18. 460).

In these belief narratives, prayers – both the obligatory ritual prayer (Persian *namaz*, equivalent of the Arabic *salat*) and the supplication (*do 'a*) – are said in certain desperate cases to achieve miraculous results for humans, such as reviving the dead (DIT, vol.7. *Sam and Malek Ebrahim*, 30; DIT, vol.7. *The Stone of Patience*, 242, 261, ff), transforming inanimate objects (doll, dough figure) into living maidens (DIT, vol.3. *Four men and the miracle*, 416; DIT, vol.18. *The Dough Girl*, 495), rejuvenating the old (DIT, vol.7. *Sam and Malek Ebrahim*, 30), healing the blind (DIT, vol.3. *Jamjame*, 225) and opening the enchanted gate (DIT, vol. 3. *The Lazy Boy*, 137).

The use of magic objects is also often accompanied by prayers. In the Kurdish tale of *Toli Hazar* (*The princess whose finger can be seen only at the price of thousand pieces of gold*), the stick and the table cloth provides food, when prayer (*do 'a*) is said over them (DIT, vol. 3, 117).

In the story of *The Lazy Boy under the Apricot Tree*, the seal of Solomon placed under the tongue makes every wish come true, if the protagonist simultaneously performs the obligatory Islamic prayer and a supplication (DIT, vol. 3, 155).

In the tale of the *Cup bearer*, the carpet can fly with its owner in any direction, if he pronounces the Quranic verse 61/13, “In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful, the help is from God, the victory is near”.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> a needle, *Green Ali*, 36; a stone, *Sorcery*, DIT, vol. 18. 122.

<sup>4</sup> Dal is a legendary bird in some southern Iranian folktales. In most traditional narratives and above all in the *Shahname*, Simorg is the magical (and maternal) bird helper.

<sup>5</sup> DIT, vol. 7., 62. For Quranic verses used as charms, see DONALDSON 1938: chapters XVI and XXVI.

## CONCLUSION

It can be said that charms (*afsun*, *verd*, and, in a certain sense, ritual and supplicatory prayer) have an important role in Iranian belief narratives. They are taught by miraculous helpers (saints, prophets, wise old men and women, dervishes) in accordance with Islamic tradition.

Traces of pre-Islamic beliefs also subsist. Ogres and demons (*dev*), witches (*jadu*) and fairies (*pari*, who are a sort of nature spirit, most notably “She of the Forty Tresses” Chehel Gisu, the femme fatale of Iranian fairy tales) are encountered and usually overcome by human heroes and heroines.

With the help of the ATU Index (UTHER 2011) and Stith Thompson’s Motif Index (THOMPSON 1955–1958), more in-depth studies can be done in this promising field.

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