

Shahname: Bedrock of Iranian Identity

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Bashiri Working Papers on Central Asia and Iran

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Introduction

Around the year one thousand of the common era, two processes of epic formation took shape in Central Asian literature. The Iranians, under the Samanids of Bukhara (819-999), developed an epic rooted in their oral traditions and pre-Islamic historical documents. The epic called the *Shahname* (book of kings) is written by Abu al-Qasim Ferdowsi Tusi (940 -1026). The *Shahname* contains a full account of Iranian cosmology and mythology as well as a brief account of the historical dynasties that preceded the Samanids. The main intent of the epic is to provide a literary and cultural account of the identity of the Iranian peoples rather than an exact account of historical events.

Roughly during the same time period, the Turks developed an epic rooted in the heroic deeds of the Kyrgyz tribal lords detailing how, in AD 840, they successfully fought the Uyghurs and destroyed their capital of Bei-tin. The epic is called *Manas*. It is a compilation of heroic songs created in praise of the hero of the same name. Manas comes through as a champion whose actions and attributes presage those of Genghis Khan.¹ He unites his people, fights the Chinese and the Kalmyks, and triumphs over them.

While the *Shahname* grew out of a civilization struggling to preserve its pre-Islamic identity through oral and written records and artistic accomplishments of the Iranians, *Manas* endeavored to safeguard the Turkic heritage of the Central Asian nomads through oral transmission of the deeds of their heroes. Both attempts have proven successful. The *Shahname*, the bedrock of Iranian cultural and national resilience, has successfully safeguarded Iranian identity against incredible odds. Similarly, *Manas* has accomplished the triumphant emergence of the Kyrgyz tribes from the bondage of the Uyghurs and the Chinese and continues to buttress Turkish identity, Kyrgyz identity in particular.

Both epics have their own separate histories from medieval times through the last century. They have experienced upheavals that could have cost them their very existence. Yet, they have surmounted those impediments by dint of their conviction and flexibility,² and a promise to continue their contribution to their respective societies.

The present study is about Iranian identity embedded in the *Shahname*. It shows how Iranians who emphasize national identity and those who emphasize Islamic identity draw on the epic for their respective identities. It further shows how the dynamics of the epic are understood by the general public, by the presenters of the stories from the epic, and by emulators who, over the centuries, have converted mythic stories from the epic into real life events, through the magic of the *ta'ziyah*. The stories of special interest are “Rustam and Sohrab,” the “Story of Siyavosh,” the “Story of Kaykhosrau,” and the “Story of Imam Zayn al-‘Abedin.”

The Contents of the *Shahname*

The *Shahname*, a major work in world literature and a foundational one in Iranian language and culture, contains 60,000 *bayts* and sixty-two stories that vary in length, attraction, and presentation. The actions in the epic proper span several different ages. The stories that we shall deal with belong to the mythic age leading to the historic. The *Shahname* begins with the story of Kayumars, the first mythic man who received the *farr* (glory) from *Qayomart*, the cosmic man who, in turn, received it from the creator. Kayumars passed the *farr* down to his descendants.

¹ Ratchnevsky. *Genghis Khan*, p. 169.

² For a study of *Manas*, see Bashiri, “*Manas: The Kyrgyz Epic*” in bibliography.

There is no direct translation for the *farr* because the *farr* varies depending on context.³ Generally, it is defined as a quality of spirit enjoyed by individuals, depending on their foresight and truthfulness. The *farr* of the king is the strongest, especially in matters related to legitimacy and governance. It is passed on hereditarily. Historical monarchs of Iran are linked to Iran's cosmic and mythic rulers via their divine *farr*. Those like Darius the Great, who lacked divine *farr*, had to prove themselves worthy of carrying the *farr*.⁴ As we shall see, the *farr* plays an important role in the lives of Siyavosh and Kaykhosrau. They share a virtue that their opponent Afrasiyab lacks and endeavors to own through force. In Islamic times, the *farr* plays a pivotal role vis-à-vis *velayat* (sanctity), a value cherished by the Shi'ite *imams*

One of the earlier stories in the *Shahname* is the story of Jamshid. It depicts how Jamshid's mismanagement of the *farr* cost him his kingdom and his *farr*. Consequently, the country was plunged into chaos, allowing Zahhak to oppress the people for a thousand years.⁵ The major story in the *Shahname*—a meta-story—is “The Story of Fereydun.” It begins at the end of Zahhak's rule and continues to the disappearance of Kaykhosrau, the last progeny of Fereydun. “The story of Fereydun” contains many episodes each of which is a story unto itself. In fact, due to the popularity of the individual stories in “The Story of Fereydun,” the meta-story itself is either ignored as an independent story, or is limited to the life story of Fereydun as a monarch who divides his kingdom among his three sons. The meta-story that is based on the *farr*, is glossed over. The amazing thing about it is this series of stories called *Chihrdad*, which is the very reason why Ferdowsi wrote the *Shahname*: to provide insight into the role of the *farr* as it relates to good government. In this essay, we shall look at “The Story of Fereydun” as a unit.

“The Story of Fereydun” is based on kingly *farr*, the enduring element that permeates the epic and is one of the foundational elements on which Iranian identity hinges. We shall pursue the *farr*, and its power of spiritual and mundane organization of life and society, in two of the celebrated parts of “The Story of Fereydun,” to wit: “The Story of Siyavosh” and “The Story of Kaykhosrau.”

Of the stories that are tangentially related to “The Story of Fereydun” (i.e., “Rostam and Sohrab,” “Bizhan and Mizheh,” “The Seven Ordeals of Rostam,” and others), we shall look at “Rostam and Sohrab” in some detail in order to show how nationally-oriented Iranians and religiously-oriented Iranians relate to the content of the *Shahname*. It will become clear that deep down in their identity, they are directed by powerful, but distinct parallel identities: *farr*-based versus *velayat*-based identities. The amount of their allegiance to each depends on their family background, education, and loyalties. (More on this later.)

The *Shahname* ends with stories related to the appearance of the Prophet Zoroaster and the propagation of Zoroastrianism by King Gushtasp and his successors. Among the latter group of stories, “The Story of Rostam and Esfandiar” stands out. Before discussing “Rostam and Sohrab,” we will cast a brief look at how the *Shahname* was discovered by western scholars, how they appreciated it, and how it was promoted.

³ For the role of *farr* in the *Shahname*, see Bashiri “Role of *Farr*,” in bibliography; for the types of *farr*, see Bashiri, *Ancient Iran*, pp. 10, 16, 89.

⁴ Bashiri, *Ancient Iran*, p. 88.

⁵ For discussion of the lives of the heroes of the *Shahname*, see Bashiri, “Characters,” in bibliography.

The West's Recognition of the *Shahname*

In 1647, the German diplomat Adam Olearius (1603-1671) published an account called *A Detailed Description of the Travel of the Yolsteen Embassy to Moscow and Persia in 1633, 1636, and 1639*. In it, he referred to Hakim Firdowsi and spoke about the manner by which Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna had treated the aged sage.⁶ After that, French Orientalist Beurteulemy D'Herberlot devoted a section of his *Oriental Library* (1697) to the *Shahname*. In 1772, the British Orientalist Sir William Jones (1746-1794) translated "Rostam and Sohrab" into English. His efforts were continued by Joseph Champion who, in 1785, published *The Poems of Ferdosi*.⁷ Half a century later, in 1832, James Atkinson published an abridged version of the epic entitled *The Shah Nameh of the Persian Poet Firdausi*. V. A. Zhukovsky translated "Rustam and Sohrab" into Russian in 1846. The work with the most impact on western scholars, especially the British, was Mathew Arnold's 1853 verse translation of "Sohrab and Rustam." In this way, the Persian epic found its way into the literary circles of Europe.

The works cited above were mostly fragments translated at the whim of individuals. The complete, annotated translation of the epic was prepared by Arthur and George Warner and published between 1905 and 1925 by Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd. Even though its language is archaic, it remains the best translation of the total work.⁸ Needless to say, subsequent to the efforts of the Warner brothers, and the scholars mentioned above, many dissertations, articles, books, and movies have appeared. They are all devoted to the study and appreciation of aspects of the epic and of its larger-than-life characters.⁹

Ferdowsi could have written his account of the activities of Iran's cosmic, mythic, and historical personages—hero-saints and monarchs—in prose. But he did not. Rather, he chose the medium of poetry, because prose is less accessible to an illiterate audience than poetry. Put differently, around AD 1000, the ordinary Iranian's capacity to retain large tracts of poetry in his memory was superior to his ability to retain the same amount of information in prose. Besides, Ferdowsi intended his stories to become a part of the daily life of his compatriots, an example for Arabian and Turkish overlords, and a testament to the richness of the culture they commanded.

Ferdowsi's epic is the most instrumental, influential, and constructive contribution to the revival of the Persian language and the establishment of Iranian identity. More poignantly, the content of the *Shahname* proper pertains to the identity of the people of Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, to name a few. In Tajikistan, for instance, according to Nizam Nurjanov, there is a celebration called "Caravan of Joy" with Rostam, Tahminah, elephants, dragons, and soldiers participating in it. One of the props in the caravan is a tree. The tree motif, Nurjanov believes, harks to the time of Zoroaster.¹⁰

In sum, every year, a large part of Asia commemorates Ferdowsi's epic by organizing *Shahname* conferences, *Shahname* recital sessions, *Shahname* presentations, and the like. Most of those presentations are above and beyond the reach of the common people, especially the illiterate. Yet there are venues that eliminate the barriers and bring the *Shahname* directly to the people. Whether the behind the scene manipulation of the stories affects the individual depends entirely on the individual.

⁶ Geizer, "Biographical Data," pp. 279-285.

⁷ Karimi-Hakkak, *The "Shahname,"* pp. 114-147.

⁸ In this essay, the quotations from the *Shahname* will be taken from the Warner translation. The archaic spelling and forms will be retained. No changes will be made.

⁹ For more information on text and translation of the epic, see Bashiri, *Firdowsi's Shahname*, pp. 10-13.

¹⁰ Nurjanov, "Carnival," pp. 198-207.

The “Rostam and Sohrab” Story

The story of Rostam and his son Sohrab is the most read, appreciated, translated, and commented upon of the *Shahname* stories. It can be narrated over a short period of time, often in a single session. Although it has a national ambiance, it is also used in Islamic circles to depict tragic misunderstandings within families. It is a father-son tragedy that hinges on the vagaries of destiny. It appeals more to the youth who frequent the nationally-oriented *zurkhanehs* and attend *Shahname* recitals than to those who attend Islamic-oriented *zurkhanehs*, *ta'ziyah* passion plays, and *rowzahs*. Here is a synopsis of the story.

Sohrab is the son of Rostam, Iran's national champion, and Tahmineh, the daughter of the king of Samangan in Turan. While hunting, Rostam loses his way and enters the territory of Samangan. Feeling hungry, he kills a deer, eats a good meal, and takes a nap by a spring of clear water. He leaves his horse, Rakhsh, to graze in the lush meadow. Two Samanganians capture Rakhsh, take it to Samangan, and hand it over to the stables of the king. When Rostam awakens and cannot find Rakhsh, he goes to the city to look for it. The guards in Samangan capture the champion and bring him to the king. The king recognizes the champion, entertains him and invites him to stay the night. That same night, Princess Tahmineh, who has taken a liking to the champion, comes to Rostam's room with a proposal. Give me a child in exchange for your horse. As a result, a child is conceived. When Rostam leaves the next day, he gives Tahmineh two tokens. A string of beads and a bracelet. "If our child is a girl, weave this string into her hair. If it is boy, have him wear this bracelet on his arm." He then says good-bye to the king and leaves.

In time, a son is born to Tahmineh. He is called Sohrab. Sohrab grows up in the palace and, by age twelve, becomes the champion of Samangan. When he asks his mother about his father's identity, she tells him all she knows about Rostam, Iran's national champion. Sohrab decides to find his father. He thinks, he and his father could overthrow Kai Ka'us, the ruler of Iran, and make Rostam the king of Iran. He then asks Tahmineh about how to identify his father. She gives him the bracelet that his father had left with her and instructs him to keep it on his arm at all times. Sohrab continues gaining strength and notoriety until he becomes Turan's national champion.

Afrasiyab, the ruler of Turan, plans to invade Iran. He chooses Sohrab as his commander to face Rostam, the Iranian champion. Then, he orders Sohrab to invade Iran at the head of an army of 12,000. He also assigns two of his trustees, Human and Barman, to accompany the young champion. Before leaving for the battlefield, Afrasiyab instructs Human that under no circumstance should Sohrab discover the identity of Rostam. He also orders Human that, after the son kills the father, he should be brought back to him.

Once the Turanian army is ready, Sohrab marches on Iran. Rostam, listening to other champions talking about their rival champions in the Turanian army, hears about a new young Turanian champion called Sohrab. He thinks about his trip to Samangan and Tahmineh and the possibility that the young warrior might be his own son. But he dismisses the thought. He convinces himself that if he were to have a son from Tahmineh, he would be too young to fit the description of Sohrab. He, therefore, dismisses the thought and, when all is ready, moves the army of Iran east and faces the Turanian army.

Sohrab, too, knows that his father might be one of the champions in the Iranian army. He asks Human to point out Rostam to him. Human procrastinates. Consequently, Sohrab goes to the battlefield without knowing whether his father is among the Iranian champions or not.

Rustem, meanwhile, the thickening tumult hears¹¹
 And in his heart, untouched by human fears,
 Says: ‘What is this, the feeling seems to stun!
 This battle must be led by Ahriman,
 The awful day of doom must have begun.’
 In haste he arms, and mounts his bounding steed,
 The growing rage demands redoubled speed;
 The leopard’s skin he over his shoulders throws,
 The regal girdle round his middle glows,
 High wave his glorious banners; broad revealed,
 The pictured dragons glare along the field.¹²

Eventually, father and son, without knowing each other’s identity, face each other in mortal combat. Rostam suggests that they should fight in a spot away from both camps. Sohrab agrees. Before the battle begins, Sohrab asks Rostam about his identity:

The generous speech Sohrab attentive heard,
 His heart expanding glowed at every word:
 ‘One question answer, and in answering show
 That truth should ever from a warrior flow:
 Art thou not Rustem, whose exploits sublime
 Endear his name thro’ every distant clime?’¹³

Rostam refuses to identify himself. He even denies that he is a warrior of some nobility. Disappointed, the young champion proceeds and engages the old warrior.

‘I boast no station of exalted birth,
 No proud pretensions to distinguished worth;
 To him inferior, no such powers are mine,
 No offspring I of Nairum’s glorious line!’
 The prompt denial damp’t his filial joy,
 All hope at once forsook the Warrior-boy.¹⁴

A lengthy engagement follows. They exchange arrows, spears, maces, and swords. Neither champion wins. They wrestle until sunset with no clear winner. Then, according to the rules of single combat, they stop the fight for the night. The next day, Sohrab is jubilant. He approaches Rostam with a friendly suggestion:

Sohrab now buckles on his war-attire,
 His heart all softness, and his brain all fire;
 Around his lips such smiles benignant played,
 He seemed to greet a friend, as thus he said:
 ‘Here let us sit together on the plain,
 Here social sit, and from the fight refrain;
 Ask we from heaven forgiveness of the past,
 And bind our souls in friendship that may last;
 Ours be the feast—let us be warm and free,
 For powerful instinct draws me still to thee;
 Fain would my heart in bland affection join,
 Then let thy generous ardour equal mine;
 And kindly say, with whom I now contend—

¹¹ Rostem is Warner’s rendition of Rostam.

¹² Atkinson, “Rustem Slays Sohrab,” p. 202.

¹³ Atkinson, “Rustem Slays Sohrab,” p. 203.

¹⁴ Atkinson, “Rustem Slays Sohrab,” p. 203.

What name distinguished boasts my warrior-friend!
 Thy name unfit for champion brave to hide
 Thy name so long, long-sought, and still denied;
 Say, art thou Rustem, whom I burn to know?
 Ingenuous say, and cease to be my foe!¹⁵

Rostam refuses Sohrab's suggestion of friendship. Instead, he rebukes the young warrior for delaying the fight. The two champions pick up where they had left off the previous day. They wrestle for a while when, Sohrab, younger and stronger of the two, finds an opportunity. He lifts Rostam, throws him to the ground, sits on his chest, draws his dagger, and proceeds to cut his throat. Rostam quickly thinks of a ruse. In our culture, he says, winning has always been two falls out of three! Inexperienced Sohrab halts. Convinced that he can repeat the same feat, accepts the ruling and releases Rustam.

Sohrab now clasps his hands, and forward springs
 Impatiently, and round the Champion clings;
 Seizes his girdle-belt, with power to tear
 The very earth asunder; in despair
 Rustem, defeated, feels his nerves give way,
 And thundering falls. Sohrab bestrides his prey:
 Grim as the lion, prowling through the wood,
 Upon a wild ass springs, and pants for blood.
 His lifted sword had lopt the gory head,
 But Rustem, quick, with crafty ardour said:
 'One moment, hold! What, are our laws unknown?
 A Chief may fight till he is twice o'erthrown;
 The second fall, his recreant blood is spilt.'

Proud of his strength, and easily deceived
 The wondering youth the artful tale believed;
 Released his prey, and, wild as wind over wave,
 Neglecting all the prudence of the brave.¹⁶

The next day, the warriors return to the battle field on horseback. They dismount and resume the fight as if nothing had happened. Before long, Rostam throws Sohrab to the ground and, without the slightest hesitation, plunges his poisoned dagger into the young man's side. While dying, Sohrab assures his murderer that his father, Rostam, will avenge his death.

Again, dismounting, each the other viewed
 With sullen glance, and swift the fight renewed;
 Clenched front to front, again they tug and bend,
 Twist their broad limbs as every nerve would rend;
 With rage convulsive Rustem grasps him round;
 Bends his strong back, and hurls him down,
 Like lightening quick he gives the deadly thrust,
 And spurns the Stripling weltering in the dust—
 Thus as his blood that shining steel imbrues,
 Thine too shall flow, when Destiny pursues;
 For when she marks the victim of her power,
 A thousand daggers speed the dying hour.
 Writhing in pain Sohrab in murmurs sighed—
 And thus to Rustem: 'Vaunt not, in thy pride;
 Upon myself this sorrow have I brought,

¹⁵ Atkinson, "Rustem Slays Sohrab," pp. 208-209.

¹⁶ Atkinson, "Rustem Slays Sohrab," p. 203.

Thou but the instrument of fate—which wrought
 My downfall; thou art guiltless—guiltless quite;
 Oh! Had I seen my father in the fight.
 My glorious father! Life will soon be o'er,
 And his great deeds enchant my soul no more!
 Of him my mother gave the mark and sign,
 For him I sought, and what an end is mine!
 My only wish on earth, my constant sigh,
 In vain for thee the deepest glooms of night;
 Couldst thou through Ocean's depths for refuge fly,
 Or midst the star-beams track the upper sky!
 Rustem, with vengeance armed, will reach thee there,
 His soul the prey of anguish and despair.¹⁷

Sohrab's foreboding words confuse Rostam. Then, upon realizing what he might have done, he asks for proof that Sohrab is indeed his son:

An icy horror chills the Champion's heart,
 His brain whirls round with agonizing smart;
 O'er his wan cheek no gushing sorrows flow,
 Senseless he sinks beneath the weight of woe;
 Relieved at length, with frenzied look he cries;
 'Prove thou art mine, confirm my doubting eyes!
 For I am Rustem!¹⁸

Similarly, horrified at the turn of events, especially Rostam's reaction, Sohrab wonders about Rostam's persona, let alone his fatherhood. He directs Rostam to undo his armor and see the bracelet:

'If thou art Rustem, cruel is thy part,
 No warmth paternal seems to fill thy heart;
 Else hast thou known me when, with strong desire,
 I fondly claimed thee for my valiant sire;
 Now from my body strip the shining mail,
 Untie these bands, ere life and feeling fail;
 And on my arm the direful proof behold!
 Thy sacred bracelet of refulgent gold!¹⁹

The sight of the bracelet enrages Rostam. He sends Gudarz to Kai Ka'us to ask for the king's special antidote. Kai Ka'us, fearful of the possible alliance of the father and son against himself, procrastinates, allowing time to weaken and kill the youth. When Gudarz does not return, Rostam himself goes and gets the antidote. But, when he returns with the antidote, it is too late.

This story lends itself to many possibilities for elaboration, a feature that *naqqals* (storyteller) exploit. It also raises philosophical speculation. For instance, Sohrab's mother, upon hearing about the death of her son, blames herself profusely.

'Why did I not conduct thee on the way,
 And point where Rustem's bright pavilion lay?
 Thou hadst the tokens—why didst thou withhold
 Those dear remembrances—that pledge of gold?
 Hast thou the bracelet to his view restored,
 Thy precious blood had never stained his sword.'

¹⁷ Atkinson, "Rustem Slays Sohrab," pp. 210-211.

¹⁸ Atkinson, "Rustem Slays Sohrab," p. 211.

¹⁹ Atkinson, "Rustem Slays Sohrab," p. 211.

The bard himself, too, in several places, attributes the tragic fate of the father and son to fortune, fate, and destiny:

His tender youth in distant bowers had past,
Sheltered at home he felt no withering blast;
In the soft prison of his mother's arms
Secure from danger and the world's alarms.
Of ruthless Fortune! Flushed with generous pride,
He sought his sire, and thus unhappy died.²⁰

What is the role of paternal feeling, or lack thereof, in Rostam? One wonders. Sohrab complained about it profusely and Ferdowsi recognized it as one of man's instinctive handicaps. A shortcoming on which clever opponents capitalize and, through treachery, turn what can be auspicious and great into an unfathomable doom.

Son and Father driven
To mortal strife! Are these the ways of Heaven?
The various swarms which boundless ocean breeds,
The countless tribes which crop the flowery meads,
All know their kind, but hapless man alone
Has no instinctive feeling for his own!²¹

Although all Iranians enjoy reading "Rostam and Sohrab," and like to talk about it, the prisms through which they see the father and son as champions differ. When thinking about the father and son, some regard them not so much as mortals, but as mythic heroes larger than life. They count them alongside such figures as Kaveh and hero-saints like Siyavosh and Kaykhosrau. Others relate the prowess of the father and son to the prowess of the Shi'ite *imams*, especially Imam Ali. What is the root cause of this dichotomy? It is the same difference that is visible in the portraits that Iranian artists present of the two as well as the same difference that moves the customer to purchase one or the other of those portraits. This difference, it should be mentioned, is pivotal to a better understanding of Iranian society as a whole. We shall return to it after we become familiar with the activities of another father and son, to wit: Siyavosh and Kaykhosrau.

The Story of Siyavosh

Siyavosh is a handsome, talented prince and a hands-on warrior and leader. Ferdowsi depicts him as a symbol of innocence and honesty. When unfairly persecuted, with the help of his *farr*, and regardless of worldly consequences, he follows the dictates of the creator.

Siyavosh was born to the king of Iran by the daughter of a noble Turanian whose lineage included both Fereydun and Garsivaz. She was found in the forest by Tus²² and Giv²³ while the champions were hunting.²⁴ Their quarrel over her ownership brought the girl to the court of Kai Ka'us where the king asked the girl about her lineage:

²⁰ Atkinson, "Rustem Slays Sohrab," p. 217.

²¹ Atkinson, "Rustem Slays Sohrab," p. 203.

²² Tus and Gustaham are the sons of King Nawzar. Tus, a wayward champion, is not endowed with the kingly *farr*. We find him frequently at odds with the royal house and with the house of Gudarz. The latter is a staunch supporter of Kaykhosrau who wins the kingly glory in a contest against Tus.

²³ Giv, the son of Gudarz, is one of the most beloved heroes of the epic. He is credited with finding and bringing Kaykhosrau from Turan to grace the Iranian throne. For a detailed study of the house of Gudarz and its relation to the Parthian dynasty, see Yarshater, 1983, pp. 457-461.

²⁴ See, A. Ahrarov. "Epic on the Screen," pp. 208-217.

He questioned her: "What is thy lineage,
 For thou art fairy-like in countenance?"
 "I am of high birth on my mother's side,"
 She said, "my father sprang from Faridun."²⁵
 My father's father is prince Garsiwaz,²⁶
 Whose tents now occupy yon border land."²⁷

The champions' quarrel was settled by the king who placed her in his own harem where she gave birth to Siyavosh. At the age of about seven, Siyavosh was entrusted to Rostam to teach him chivalry and the ethics of kings, including the significance of the *farr*. Rostam took the child to Zabulistan and treated him as if he were his own son.²⁸ In Zabulistan, Siyavosh learned riding, archery, and wrestling. He was also instructed in the fine arts of conversation, drinking, and merry-making.

When Siyavosh was about twenty years old, he returned to the court and was assigned his own quarters. For the next seven years, Kai Ka'us honored the youth, tested him, and, in time, bestowed the governorship of Quhistan upon him. Siyavosh remained in Quhistan until his mother died. He then returned to the court to mourn her death.

Learning about the return of Siyavosh, the ladies of the harem—sisters of the prince and wives of the king—asked their sire to send Siyavosh to them. The king obliged.²⁹

Thy sisters and Sudabah, in affection
 A mother to thee, are within the bower.³⁰

Siyavosh asked Kai Ka'us to exempt him from the visit, but his request was denied. When Siyavosh entered the harem, he met Sudabeh, his step-mother, who held him tightly in her arms for an unusually long while. Her close embrace disturbed the prince:

When Siyawush appeared within the veil³¹
 Sudabah hastened to descend the throne,
 Advanced with graceful gait, saluted him,
 Embraced him long, long kissed his eyes and face,
 And wearied not to look at him.³²

Joseph-like in mien, Siyavosh was endowed with outward as well as inner beauty. Recognizing Siyavosh's prospect as a future king, Sudabeh, who had married Kai Ka'us for his power rather than for himself, tried to attract the prince to herself and marry him to her daughter. The prince refused:

²⁵ Faridun is Warner's rendition of Fereydun.

²⁶ Garsiwaz is Warner's rendition of Garsivaz.

²⁷ ME, vol. III, p. 9; Warner, vol. II, p. 195.

²⁸ The name Rostam is listed neither among the *Kavis* of the *Avesta*, nor among lesser personages like Tusa and the sons of Vaeska. He might be a figment of Ferdowsi's imagination, a replacement for a *Kavi* otherwise not mentioned, or a hero of the Sakian tribes immortalized in the Sistan chronicles. For more information, see Yarshater, 1983, pp. 453-457. See also Eslami-Nodushan, 1985, pp. 291-389.

²⁹ The story of Siyavosh also appears in Nizam al-Mulk's *Siyasatname* (book of government), where the Wazir discusses the shortcomings of allowing women of the court to participate in the affairs of State. See Darke, 1962, pp. 242-245. For the role of women in the epic, see Eslami-Nodushan, 1985, pp. 119-128.

³⁰ Warner, vol. II, p. 201. Sudabah is Warner's rendition of Sudabeh.

³¹ Warner, vol. II, p. 321; Siyawush is Warner's rendition of Siyavosh.

³² Warner, vol. II, p. 203.

Far better hold my pure heart's funeral rites
 Than take a consort from among my foes.
 I have been told by famous warriors
 Of all the doings of Hamavaran [...] ³³

Failing, the frustrated Sudabeh impudently offered herself to him. She thought by engaging the youth in an act for which he could be blackmailed, she would reach her goal:

I stand before thee and I give to thee
 Myself and my sweet life. I will fulfil
 Whate'er thou asketh me—thy whole desire—
 And let my head be taken in thy toils." ³⁴

The prince refused to soil his covenant with his father and his creator (who had given him the *farr*). He resisted Sudabeh's temptations. Infuriated, Sudabeh accused him of having made lustful advances. She informed her husband that the prince had assaulted her with the intention of raping her:

Then he tried to force me,
 And handled me with hands as hard as stones.
 I would not grant his wishes. All my hair
 He tore and caused these scratches on my face [...] ³⁵

The prince's denial of the allegations placed Kai Ka'us in a quandary. Sudabeh, who continued to accuse the prince of rape, finally produced a stillborn child as proof of her accusation. Kai Ka'us took the matter to the assembly of the *mu'bad*s for advice. The assembly advised the king to ask both Siyavosh and Sudabeh to undergo trial by fire. Sudabeh refused; but Siyavosh, prompted by his *farr*, accepted. He rode his horse through a mountain of burning wood and emerged unblemished:

The noble hero nathless reappeared,
 With rosy cheeks and smiles upon his lips.
 A roar went up as men caught sight of him:
 They cried: "The young Shah cometh from the fire!" ³⁶

Wounded, Sudabeh recoiled and worked other magic to make life at the court difficult for the prince. The unwise Kai Ka'us, too, unwittingly stoked the feud, first by taking the case to the *mu'bad*s for a decision and then by forcing Siyavosh to undergo trial by fire.

An opportunity for escape appeared for Siyavosh when Afrasiyab, Iran's enemy to the east, threatened to cross the Oxus with a hundred thousand warriors. As Kai Ka'us prepared to retaliate, the prince saw his chance to distance himself from the court. He volunteered to lead Kai Ka'us' army against Turan:

Perchance All-righteous God will set me free
 Both from Sudaba and my sire's distrust [...] ³⁷

Kai Ka'us accepted Siyavosh's proposal. Siyavosh, Rostam, and an army of 12,000 men defeated the army of Afrasiyab. From Gang Dezh, in Sughd, where his headquarters were located, Afrasiyab sent a delegation with appropriate gifts to the Iranian prince. The delegation,

³³ Warner, vol. II, p. 207.

³⁴ Warner, vol. II, p. 208.

³⁵ Warner, vol. II, p. 212.

³⁶ Warner, vol. II, p. 220.

³⁷ Warner, vol. II, p. 225.

headed by Garsivaz, Afrasiyab's brother, offered to sign a peace treaty. Siyavosh presented the treaty to the war council which, after weighing the pros and cons of Afrasiyab's offer, accepted the terms. Siyavosh's terms for accepting Afrasiyab's offer were stringent. They specified that the Turanian army should withdraw from previously held Iranian territory in the Oxus region and that a hundred of Afrasiyab's relatives, named by Rostam, should be sent as hostages to Iran.

Afrasiyab frowned at the idea of sending his close relatives as hostages but, upon having a vision, accepted the terms. Elated with this easy victory, Siyavosh reciprocated Afrasiyab's kind gesture by signing the peace treaty and by sending the Turanian king many precious gifts. He also dispatched Rostam with a letter to Kai Ka'us. Kai Ka'us rejected the peace treaty and informed Rostam that he wanted Afrasiyab dead. He further rebuked the national champion for having been duped by the guileful Afrasiyab. To the prince he wrote: "Prepare a huge bonfire and burn all the gifts sent by Afrasiyab. Send the hostages to Iran to be beheaded, ignore the treaty, cross the Oxus immediately, and finish Afrasiyab."

Rostam pleaded with Kai Ka'us to reconsider his order. He hoped that the king would not force the young prince to break his promise to the enemy. He reminded Kai Ka'us that Siyavosh had followed the king's orders and remained on the south shore of the Oxus. Besides, Rostam argued, breaking one's covenant was an unmanly act, an act against all the rules of chivalry that he had taught the prince. Kai Ka'us did not heed Rostam's advice. Rather, he ordered Siyavosh to relinquish his command to Tus and return from Balkh. Siyavosh refused and by defying his father and king openly, placed himself in a precarious situation.

The future, dark as the face of Ahriman, was before him. It refused to divulge what the next day would bring. But could it conceal affairs from a man who carried the *farr*? Using his divine foresight, Siyavosh looked into his future and reviewed the final outcome, an outcome that spoke well for his decision to defect.

He, therefore, summoned his commanders and discussed the matter of relinquishing his command with them. "I am not happy at court," he said. "This was the reason I accepted this command in the first place. And I am not happy with my father's grandiose schemes to elevate himself at my expense. I have a covenant with the Creator, a covenant compared to which my father's wishes pale.³⁸ All my experiences in this world have been painful. What the future brings cannot be any different":

Would I had died, or never had been born,
Since I am fated to endure such bale
And taste of every poison in the world;
And yet the tree hath not attained full growth
Whose fruit is venom and the leafage loss!³⁹

"I have come to the conclusion that I have no alternative but to defect to the enemy. I am, therefore, relinquishing the command of this host to Bahram until the arrival of Tus. Bahram is to put everything in order and hand the command down to Tus when the champion arrives." The warriors were overwhelmed:

Bahram was sorely troubled when he heard,
While Zanga son of Shawaran wept blood,
And cursed the country of Hamavaran.⁴⁰

³⁸ For the significance of covenant as explained in the *Mihr Yasht*, see Gershevitch, 1967, pp. 42.

³⁹ Warner, vol. II, p. 250.

⁴⁰ Warner, vol. II, p. 250.

Siyavosh then sent an embassy to Afrasiyab and asked permission for safe passage through Turan to a place where he could stay hidden from his father. Hoping to use Siyavosh to dominate Iran, after consulting with his commander in chief, Piran, Afrasiyab invited the prince to Turan and assured him of his own support as well as the support of his people:

For all Turan will do thee reverence,
And I for my part long to have thy love.
Then thou and I will be as son and sire—
A sire who is a slave before his son.⁴¹

Encouraged by Afrasiyab's kind words, Siyavosh addressed his army, asking the commanders to heed Bahram. He then set forth to meet the envoys who had crossed the Oxus to conduct him and his private army into exile.

As time passed, Siyavosh married Piran's daughter, Jarireh, and had a son, Farud. Then he married Afrasiyab's daughter, Farangis. He built a small kingdom near Khotan called Siyavoshgird. Most importantly he tried to follow the dictates of his *farr* and keep on the good side of Afrasiyab.

Garsivaz was jealous of Siyavosh and Farangis. Hoping that one day he would rule the beautiful Gang Dezh himself, when talking to Afrasiyab about Siyavosh, he gave damaging reports regarding the prince and his activities:

Siyawush, O king!
Hath wholly changed, the envoys of Ka'us
Come often secretly, he correspondeth
With Rum and Chin, and drinketh to his father[.]⁴²

Court intrigue reached new heights when Garsivaz became the liaison between the palaces. He concocted events on either side and sowed discord far and wide. He frightened Siyavosh of Afrasiyab's might, and disheartened Afrasiyab, who was already in awe of Siyavosh and his *farr*. Regarding his visits to the court of Siyavosh, he reported on the relationship of the prince with China and Rome, and emphasized Siyavosh's strong ties to Iran:

Now Siyawush showed no regard for me,
Nor even came to meet me on the way,
Would hear no words, would not peruse thy letter,
But set me on my knees below his throne.
He had much correspondence with Iran,
And kept his city's portals shut on us.
What with a host from Rum and one from Chin
There is a constant bruit within the land.
Unless thou actest promptly thou wilt have
Naught left but wind.⁴³

Infuriated, Afrasiyab mobilized his army and headed for Khotan. Upon hearing of this move, Siyavosh, prompted by his *farr*, informed Piran of Afrasiyab's intention. Piran did not believe him. He then prepared his pregnant wife, Farangis, to face the future without him:

⁴¹ Warner, vol. II, p. 255.

⁴² Warner, vol. II, pp. 296-297.

⁴³ Warner, vol. II, p. 307.

This is the fifth month of thy pregnancy
 With our illustrious and growing babe:
 This precious Tree of thine will bring forth Fruit,
 A glorious monarch; name him Kai Khusrau,
 And in thy sorrowing find peace in him[.]⁴⁴

At the end, he instructed his steed, Bihzad, to allow no one but the avenging Kaykhosrau to ride him:

Long while he whispered in his charger's ear,
 And said: "Be prudent, have to do with none.
 When to avenge me Kai Khusrau shall come
 It is on thee that he must put the bridle,
 So now renounce the stable once for all,
 For thou shalt carry him to his revenge.
 Be thou his charger, trample on the world,
 And with thy hoofs sweep foemen from the earth."⁴⁵

Having completed his will and testament, Siyavosh killed all his other horses, burned his palaces with their untold riches, and rode Bihzad to meet Afrasiyab. In the field, as his thousand Iranian warriors faced the army of Afrasiyab, Siyavosh ordered his commanders to refrain from fighting:

Take him
 Beside the road and let him be beheaded
 On some bare spot where grasses never grow,
 And pour his blood upon the burning earth.
 Let there be no delay and have no fears.⁴⁶

Afrasiyab refused to comment on the sin for which Siyavosh was being accused. All he recalled were the words of Garsivaz:

The plain is full
 Of vultures feeding on Iranian dead,
 And if thou fearest vengeance there is cause.
 Should Siyawush cry out earth would appear
 All mace and scimitar from Rum to Chin.
 Hath he not done thee wrong enough that thou
 Shouldst listen weakly to what others say?
 The snake's tail thou hast crushed and bruised its head;
 Now wilt thou deck its body with brocade?
 If thou shalt spare his life I will depart
 To some retreat and perish.⁴⁷

Gorvy and Damur supported Garsivaz. They, too, urged Afrasiyab to carry out his decision and prevent his realm from falling victim to future threats. Afrasiyab remained hesitant. He could not justify Siyavosh's death to himself:

⁴⁴ Warner, vol. II, p. 310.

⁴⁵ Warner, vol. II, p. 312.

⁴⁶ Warner, vol. II, p. 315.

⁴⁷ Warner, vol. II, pp. 316-317.

I have myself beheld no fault in him;
 Albeit astrologers declare that ill
 will come to me through him, and if I shed
 His blood revenge will raise dust in Turan
 And dim the sun[.]⁴⁸

Neither did he listen to the earnest pleas of Farangis for mercy:

Why hast thou wrapped thy heart up in deceit?
 Dost thou not from thy height perceive the abyss?
 Take not a monarch's and a guiltless head;
 The Judge of sun and moon will disapprove.
 When Siyawush departed from Iran
 He did thee homage—thee of all the world—
 Gave umbrage to the Shah, left treasures, crown,
 And throne to make thee his support and shelter.
 What hast thou seen in him to make thee quit
 The path of right? No man beheadeth kings
 And long retaineth his own sovereignty.
 Wrong not my blameless self too, for the world
 Is fleeting and is full of sobs and sighs.⁴⁹

Despite her efforts, Farangis could not convince her father of her husband's innocence. Afrasiyab ordered Gorvy to take Siyavosh to a fort high in the mountains and, away from Farangis, behead him.⁵⁰ Gorvy followed his master's orders:

When he was past the city and the host
 They bore and dragged him bound upon the plain,
 And then Gurwi received from Garsiwaz⁵¹
 A blue-steel dagger for the bloody deed.
 He dragged the prince on by the hair afoot
 And when he came to where the mark had stood.

Flung to the ground the mighty Elephant,
 And showed no shame or reverence for rank,
 But set a golden basin on the ground,
 Turned up the prince's face as 'twere a sheep's
 Cut off the silver Cypress' head and filled
 The bowl with blood. Gurwi took up the bowl
 And emptied it where he had been commanded.
 From that blood presently there sprang a plant,
 Which I will teach thee how to recognise,
 For it is called "The Blood of Siyawush."

As mentioned, before he was murdered, Siyavosh informed his wife that his death was imminent. He also foretold that an Iranian champion would come to Turan and secretly take her and their child to Iran. Through his *farr*, he even foresaw that their son would become king, raise an army, and take revenge:

⁴⁸ Warner, vol. II, p. 317.

⁴⁹ Warner, vol. II, p. 318.

⁵⁰ For further study of the life of Siyavosh, see Eslami-Nodushan, 1985, pp. 173-224.

⁵¹ Gurwi is Warner's rendition of Gorvy.

And there will come a saviour from Iran,
 One with his loins girt up by God's command,
 Who will convey thee and thy son in haste
 Toward the Jihun. Thy son will have the throne,
 And rule o'er fowl and fish. A host will come
 For vengeance from Iran and shake the world.

To vindicate mine honour! Battle-shouts
 Will rise, and Kai Khusrau will vex the age;
 Then Rostam's Rakhsh will trample earth, despising
 Turanian folk, and thou wilt see no vengeance
 Ta'en for me till the Resurrection-day
 Save by the mace and trenchant scimitar.⁵²

The Story of Kaykhosrau

The story of Kaykhosrau is long and need not be retold in the same manner as “Rostam and Sohrab” and “The Story of Siyavosh.”⁵³ What follows, therefore, is a synopsis of the highlights of the germane part of the story for this essay: the end of Kaykhosrau’s kingship and his disappearance into the White Light.

After the death of Siyavosh, Kaykhosrau, third king of the Kayanian dynasty, is born in Piran's house and raised at the house of a shepherd until he is ten years old. He is brought to Iran by Giv, an Iranian champion. Kai Ka’us, recognizing Kaykhosrau’s potential, bestows his throne upon him. After the death of Kai Ka’us, Kaykhosrau becomes the ruler of Iran. As king, he rebuilds the war torn country and, having sworn to avenge his father, when Afrasiyab becomes aggressive, he dispatches a mighty army under Tus to confront him. Tus, against Kaykhosrau’s orders, attacks and kills Siyavosh’s first son, Farud, and fights Piran. He loses. Kaykhosrau removes Tus from command in disgrace.

As the Iranian army struggles, Rostam, Siyavosh’s mentor, enters the war as a mystery paladin and defeats Afrasiyab’s champions one by one. The war is settled with ten duels in the course of which Piran, his only son Ru’in, and his brothers are all killed. At the end, Kaykhosrau himself enters the war, kills both Afrasiyab and Garsivaz and, by doing so, puts an end to the division that Fereyduin had created in the beginning. Iran and Turan become united under the *farr*:

And there will come a saviour from Iran,
 One with his loins girt up by God's command,
 Who will convey thee and thy son in haste
 Toward the Jihun. Thy son will have the throne,
 And rule o'er fowl and fish. A host will come
 For vengeance from Iran and shake the world.

To vindicate mine honour! Battle-shouts
 Will rise, and Kai Khusrau will vex the age;
 Then Rostam's Rakhsh will trample earth, despising

⁵² Warner, vol. II, p. 311.

⁵³ For the full story of Kaykhosrau, see Bashiri, Firdowsi’s Shahname, pp. 57-159.

Turanian folk, and thou wilt see no vengeance
 Ta'en for me till the Resurrection-day
 Save by the mace and trenchant scimitar.⁵⁴

After sixty years of rulership, Kaykhosrau loses interest in worldly matters. He goes into seclusion to reflect on his rulership and his *farr*. He stays in seclusion until his body can no longer tolerate lack of sleep. His mental abilities, however, keep the vigil until he meets the angel Surush:

The Shah's great soul became solicitous
 About God's dealings and his own high state:
 He said: "From Hind and Chin to Rum each place
 Is prosperous; withal, from west to east,
 Mount, desert, land, and sea have I made void
 Of foes; the rule and throne of might are mine;
 The world no longer dreadeth enemies.
 Full many a day hath passed above my head,
 And I have gained from God my full desire,
 Besides the vengeance that I had at heart,
 Yet let me not grow arrogant of soul,
 Corrupt in thought, an Ahriman in faith,
 And be an evil-doer like Zahhak,

.....
 No place remaineth—settlement or desert—
 That hath not read the legend on my sword;
 While all the mighty of the world obey me
 Albeit they be monarches throned and crowned.
 Thanks be to God who gave to me the Grace,
 With feet and wings amid the change of fortune.
 And now I deem it better to depart
 To God in all my glory, and perchance
 The Almighty's messenger may, though unseen,
 And while I still am flourishing, convey
 My spirit to the dwelling of the just,
 Because this Kaian crown and throne will pass.
 None will excel me in success and fame,
 In greatness, welfare, peace, and revelry,
 For I have heard and witnessed this world's secrets,
 Its good and ill both privy and apert;
 But still for husbandman and king alike
 There is a common end—the way to death."⁵⁵

Surush's message is simple. If you wish to reach heaven, you must abandon all involvement with terrestrial existence. Appoint a just overseer for your kingdom and depart. Kaykhosrau conveys Surush's words alongside his own decision to step down as king to his commanders:

I have attained my wish,
 And must dispatch because glad news hath come.
 Whenas mine eyes were sleeping yester-morn
 Surush, the blessed, came to me from God,

⁵⁴ Warner, vol. II, p. 311.

⁵⁵ Warner, vol. IV, pp. 272-274.

And said: "Prepare, for 'tis thy time to go,
 Thy watching and distress are overpassed."
 So now mine audiences, care for the host,
 For crown and throne and belt, are at an end.⁵⁶

The king's decision stunned the commanders. In particular, they questioned Kaykhosrau's choice of Luhrasp as his replacement. Luhrasp, the king assured them, had the *farr*. He would not only fight evil, but would also inaugurate a just rule. Kaykhosrau announced further that Luhrasp's son, Gushtasp, will bring a new day and a new age to the world. Heed my advice, he said, and follow his decrees:

Since God approveth not of ill from us,
 And bad men writhe 'neath time's vicissitudes,
 While he whom God createth for high fortune,
 Fit to be monarch and adorn the throne,
 Endowed with modesty, Faith, birth, and Grace
 Will flourish, conquer, and rejoice in justice.
 The Maker is my witness when I say
 That all these qualities are in Luhrasp.
 He is descended from Hushang the worldlord,
 A noble of discernment and clean hands,
 A scion of Pashin and Kai Kubad,
 Well stocked with knowledge, righteous in his thoughts.
 He will cut off the sorcerers from the earth,
 And manifest the way of holy God,
 His counsels will renew the age's youth,
 And as he is his stainless son will be.
 God said to me: "Look thou upon Luhrasp,"
 And I have acted only as He bade.
 Now do ye homage to him as your Shah,
 And as ye love me slight not mine advice,
 For if a man transgress mine parting counsel
 I shall esteem his past exertions as wind [.]⁵⁷

During his last evening on earth, Kaykhosrau washed in a fountain of clear water, prayed, said goodbye to his champions and, at sunrise, disappeared into the thin air.

Presentation and Emulation of the *Shahname*

The *Shahname* as a reflection of Iranian identity has many facets. These include a public or consumer aspect that consists of management and presentation, and an emulation aspect that includes researching the epic for stories that could either support, or suggest solutions for resolving outstanding socio-political conundrums. The first familiarizes the public with the stories—the characters therein and their relationship to each other—for entertainment purposes and irrespective of background or socio-political value. The latter organizes the stories with a

⁵⁶ Warner, vol. IV, p. 285.

⁵⁷ Warner, vol. IV, p. 302.

definite purpose and hands them down to those who present them in order to propagate that objective. In what follows, in order to present an “in” into the many aspects of Iranian identity, we shall cast a brief look at those two facets. Nevertheless, the study of the other facets, although outside the purview of this study, is essential.

The stories discussed above (i.e., “Rostam and Sohrab” and “The Story of Fereydun”) are both father and son stories that happened in mythic times. Ancient Iranians viewed them as behavioral guidelines at the family and state levels, respectively. Put differently, they regarded the first story as one dealing with human affairs at a personal level. A son who seeks his father earnestly, is unwittingly killed by the father. A tragedy. The second deals with the defense of divine glory handed down to the family as a model for good government. The members of the family must defend that right against expressed attempts by evil that intends to replace glory with chaos (cf., Jamshid’s loss of the *farr*, the rise of Zahhak, and the thousand years of repression). It is also a story of restoration (i.e., replacement of one epoch-making decision—division of the kingdom, allowing evil a share in governance—with another epoch-making decision—destruction of evil, unification of the kingdom, and bringing evil within the domain of the *farr*). In the context of the facets discussed above “Rostam and Sohrab” corresponds to the first, “The Story of Fereydun” to the second.

Iranians love the story of Rostam and his son Sohrab. One place where the general public, especially the lower classes and those from surrounding villages visiting the urban centers, can hear recitations of the *Shahname* is in the corner of the public bazaar. There, an individual, usually referred to as *dervish* or *naqqal*, presents a whole story or an episode of the *Shahname*. To do so, he uses a canvas that unrolls into a screen that he places on a wall. Pictures depicting the heroes of the story to be presented are painted on the screen. They mesmerize the onlookers. The recitation adds life and vibrancy to the scene that, in turn, provides the audience with a sweet memory of their visit to the bazaar or, in the case of the villagers, to town. In fact, master couplets (*shah bayt*) from the epic leave an indelible mark on each participant’s memory prompting him to return, learn more about the heroic deeds of the heroes of the *Shahname*, and impress and enlighten family and friends.

Another place where one can enjoy listening to narration of the *Shahname* is in the *qahvekhane* (teahouse; lit., coffee house). The audience at the *qahvekhane* is somewhat different from the bazaar crowd. Here, the reciter has a particular schedule and the episodes are presented sequentially and, as much as possible, systematically. In other words, regular patrons—neighborhood shopkeepers, drivers, office workers, office managers, policemen—enjoy hearing the exploits of the heroes collectively and, at times, discuss them among themselves as they sip their tea. The *Shahname* takes their imagination to realms that are most likely beyond their reach.

Not to mention that the teahouse keeper provides the service in order to sell more tea, cigarettes, and tobacco for *hookahs* and long-stem pipes. By listening to the reciters consistently, the audience compensates for its overall deficit in education and world view. All these factors combined make the *qahvekhane* experience richer than the experience of the corner-bazaar audience. Some teahouses advertise future stories with specific presentation dates and times.

The more educated Iranians form *Shahname* recital groups and, over a long period of time, recite the entire epic, story by story, and discuss their import. The gatherings are usually held in private homes and participants rotate the difficult task of recitation, which, at times, is accompanied by music. The main feature of these gatherings is that the guests engage in discussion of the finer points of the epic. For instance, what motivated Rostam to stab Sohrab the

way he did.⁵⁸ Or, why didn't Sohrab finish Rostam when he had a chance? Much of this happens very much as it does in the teahouse, except here, the audience has control of the stories being presented as well as the enjoyment of the hospitality of a host and his family.

We should not, of course, ignore the most meaningful of all presentations, the ones contributed by grandfathers to family members who like to enjoy the warmth of the *korsi*,⁵⁹ on a cold winter night while listening to the *Shahname*. This is particularly enjoyable when the narrator recalls similar scenes played out when he himself had frequented the *zurkhaneh* (lit., house of strength).⁶⁰ *Ta'ziyeh* (see below) is another major contributor to the propagation of stories from the *Shahname*.

There are two types of *zurkhaneh*, the traditional or national *zurkhaneh* and the Islamic *zurkhaneh*. The words "national" and "Islamic" define the organizational and the emulation techniques employed in creating ambiance and value in each type. The traditional, as we shall see, endeavors to retain the pre-Islamic values cherished by ancient Iranians, values sanctioned by the deity (*yazdan*). The clientele in the national *zurkhaneh* is the same as those who would purchase the mythic version of the portraits of Rostam and Sohrab.

The *zurkhaneh* itself is a covered structure that, in the past, was lit by a single opening in the ceiling. At the center of the structure, sunken in the floor, is a circular pit (*gowd*) of about three or four feet deep and about 30 or 40 feet in diameter. The hall is decorated with large portraits of past champions. The main event is the champions' calisthenics and takes place in the pit directly below the audience level. In older *zurkhanehs*, the surface of the pit was covered by cement. In more modern *zurkhanehs*, it is covered with wood panels.

The main floor, above and around the pit, is divided into several sections, each separated from the other by means of a low partition. The main section, almost all around the pit, is given to the audience. A small section is used by the champions for changing clothes and keeping their equipment. In more modern *zurkhanehs*, this section is changed to lockers. Another section is used by the musicians who entertain the audience before the exercises begin.

By the entrance, there is a kiosk-like structure where the *murshed*, who recites heroic poetry from the *Shahname*, is located. He has a fairly elevated place over the audience so that he can see the goings-on both in the pit and among the audience.

In front of him, slightly higher than his eye-level, there is a bell and, below at his feet, there is a brazier. The bell serves two functions. It signals changes in exercise or tempo, as well as informs the audience of the arrival of prominent guests to the gathering. The brazier is for heating his drum, as well as for preparing a special cinnamon and cardamom flavored hot drink served to the champions after the completion of their exercises.

The most well-known *zurkhaneh* in Iran is at the Bam citadel (*arg-i Bam*). Due to the Bam earthquake (2003), visits to the citadel are halted. Fortunately, the *zurkhaneh*, including its stucco ornamented walls and lattice windows, is intact.

The *zurkhaneh* has a little known but fascinating history. After the fall of the Sassanid empire to the armies of Islam, Iranians athletes and warriors lost the privilege of performing their traditional sports and military maneuvers in the open. Out of necessity, they gathered in private homes and carried on their normal routine in the guise of calisthenics. Later on they moved into the covered structures that came to be known as the *zurkhaneh*.

⁵⁸ See below for more detail.

⁵⁹ *Korsi* is a low table with a heater underneath and blankets covering its top and sides. On special occasions, the family sits around it for meals and entertainment.

⁶⁰ For more on the *zurkhaneh*, see below.

The Traditional *Zurkhaneh*

The lay champions emphasize Iran's ancient past. This is best observed in the national ambiance of their *zurkhaneh*. The poetry the *murshed* recites is from the *Shahname* of Ferdowsi. The national champion they emulate is Rostam, Iran's deathless hero who rescued countless kings from peril and who confronted and vanquished evil at every turn.

Zurkhaneh affiliation is by rank. The lowest rank is that of the *nowcheh*. This is an individual, who is undergoing training, supervised by a designated champion. The next higher rank belongs to the *nowkhasteh*. This is a *nowcheh* who has made a substantial degree of progress. The third rank belongs to the tested champion (*palavan*). The highest rank belongs to the champion of champions (*pahlavan-i pahlavanan*). He organizes the schedule for the exercises. The *zurkhaneh* also has a coach who is variously referred to as *davar* or *murabbi*. He executes the wishes of *pahlavan-i pahlavanan*. The rhythm for the exercises is set by the poetry recited by the *murshed*, as well as by the beat of the *murshed's* drum.

The uniform of the champions consists of either loin cloth, pantaloons, or tight shorts made from leather or durable fabric. The pants are usually decorated with embroidery. In ancient times, the athlete kissed the pants both when he put them on and when he took them off.

The exercises are varied. They include *charkh*, a whirling exercise that a novice starts with a few imperfect whirls and the champion of champions finishes with a perfect whirl. Next is *takht-i shena* (lit., narrow wooden board for pushups) the athletes perform pushups to the count of the leader. Following that, the athletes individually use the *mil* (Indian club), which is made of relatively heavy wood. Two are used at a time. The athlete throws one up and, while it is twirling in the air, he throws the other one up and catches the first. The *kabbadeh* (heavy iron bow) is held over the head and swung from side to side. *Kabbadeh* harks back to early Islamic times when the use of bow and arrow was forbidden for Iranians. The *sang* (lit., rock) is a heavy panel made of extremely dense wood. Two are used. One in each hand. The athlete lies on his back and lifts the *sang* with his right arm. He then lowers this arm and repeats the same with his left arm.

This routine is not set. In some *zurkhanehs* the exercises might begin with acrobatics and juggling presented by the *pishrav* (novice) and end with a wrestling match between two tested *pahlavans*. There are special sessions during which the current champion defends his title against a challenger. Before the wrestling begins the *murshed* places some fragrant *espan* (rue) on the fire to divert the evil eye. The wrestling is accompanied by prayers invoking the prophet, the *imams*, and the *ulema* (religious scholars). It also includes supplication to *Allah* on behalf of the sick and the infirmed in society. When wrestling, the contestants hold each other tightly by the cummerbund or the belt, each trying to force the other off balance. The objective is to make the opponent's shoulder touch the floor of the pit.

The ethics of the traditional *zurkhaneh* are based on manliness and bravery. The rules forbid any tricks that might belittle an opponent or humiliate him before the audience. At the end, it should be added that the rules governing traditional *zurkhanehs* are, at times, somewhat ambiguous. Put differently, depending on the nature of individual athletes and socio-political demands, the *zurkhaneh* can be as much the abode of chivalry, generosity, forbearance, and fair play, as a haven for the unruly elements of society, manipulating strongmen whose strength is for hire!⁶¹

⁶¹ Cf., Rochard, "identities," see bibliography.

The Code of Ethics of the National Champions

1. Be upright. Be not evil. Life is too short.
2. Do not fret for what is gone by, and do not worry about things yet to come.
3. Do not disrespect your commander; be a steady soldier.
4. Do not advocate for others things that you would not advocate for yourself.
5. Do not become a slave.
6. Avoid those who anger easily and those who seek vengeance.
7. Follow the dictates of the creator *Yazdan*.
8. Do not divulge your secrets to anyone.
9. Do not laugh without having a reason to laugh.
10. Before giving a reply, consider the matter at hand carefully.
11. Do not laugh at others.
12. Do not seek the advice of the lowly.
13. Do not mingle with the very rich and the very drunk.
14. Do not borrow from the lowly or you will become their slave through excessive interest.
15. Do not expect an unjust ruling from a king.
16. Do not listen to the backbiter and the liar.
17. Do not encourage the exercise of vengeance.
18. Do not engage in a struggle on the street.
19. In war, if you are entrusted a major responsibility, fear the consequences of your decisions.
20. Respect the learned and engage them in conversation; do not antagonize them.
21. Whether you are in the right or not, do not take an oath.
22. Gather a fortune before you seek a wife; choose your own wife.
23. Accumulate land and water. While all other property might vanish, land and water remain.
24. Do not injure others with your tongue.
25. Be generous in giving away of your wealth.
26. Do not speak before thinking your answer through; speak openly and plainly.
27. Marry a young, wise, and chaste woman.
28. In assemblies, do not occupy a high place so that you are not moved down in disgrace.
29. He who digs a well with the intention of destroying others falls in it himself.
30. Protect religion because the protection of your soul rests therein.
31. Do not prevent your family from being educated; education is the most blessed gift; properties vanish, animals die, but education can only be increased.

The Islamic *Zurkhaneh*

Rooted in Shi'ite Islam, *Sufi* orders, and Iranian national mores, the religiously-oriented *zurkhaneh* is a modified form of the traditional *zurkhaneh*. Its rituals, however, resemble the rituals of the *Sufi* orders prevalent in different localities and emulate the example of Imam Ali. The ambiance of the Islamic *zurkhaneh* is religious and its activities are supervised by *Allah*. *Sufi* terms like master (*murshed*), leader (*pish kesvat*), crown (*taj*), and poverty (*faqr*) are used more often in these *zurkhanehs* than in the traditional *zurkhanehs*.

Every move in the Islamic *zurkhaneh* begins with praise of the Prophet and his family. The ethics of the Islamic *zurkhaneh*, too, follow the ethics of the *Sufi* orders, to wit: the champion must be pure at heart; upon entering the pit, he must bend and ritually kiss the floor of the pit. During the exercises, eating, drinking, smoking, talking, and laughter are forbidden. Individuals who wish to enter the pit must have *rockshaft* (permission) from the *murshed*. The *murshed* approves by saying *forsat* (permission granted).

Unlike in the national *zurkhaneh* where the *Shahname* is recited, the poetry recited in the Islamic *zurkhaneh* is written specifically in praise of the Prophet and his descendant *imams*, especially Imam Ali and his son, Imam Hussein. The walls of the hall and the equipment used,

e.g., the heavy shields (*sang*), are decorated with pictures of the saints and the "patron saint" of the Islamic champions Pouriya-ye Vali, an exemplary champion from the region of Khwarazm (in present-day Republic of Uzbekistan), who died circa 772 AH (AD 1370). Some champions wear arm bands containing appropriate prayers to keep the evil eye away from the *Zurkhaneh* and its clientele.

Code of Ethics of Islamic Champion

1. An upright man seeks the truth and avoids evil. Those who engage in evil deeds do so out of ignorance; they are blind to the truth in things. Know that *Allah* is all knowing.
2. An upright man avoids worldly materials and interests. He does not allow them to become reasons for his happiness or sadness. He is not a doubter. He has patience and knows that *Allah* bestows all that is blessed and that individuals are likely to transform *Allah's* blessing into evil.
3. An upright man will not look at other peoples' wives; rather, he will consider them to be his own sisters. If an unfamiliar woman comes to him, he would not change his demeanor as he would not in the presence of his own sister or mother. If someone mentions a woman, he would not allow bad thoughts to overwhelm him. If an unfamiliar woman is alone in a desert or in a ghost town, the upright man would not have bad thoughts about her; rather, he recalls that *Allah* is everywhere, and that He is omnipotent.
4. A pious man avoids all sin, especially back-biting, as back-biters are despised by all.
5. An upright man repents his sins and does not take pride in worldly things. He keeps an immaculate heart and a tidy appearance. He knows that those who do good deeds will join the pure light of *Allah* and those who engage in evil deeds will be lost in the darkness of Satan.
6. An upright man is loyal and mindful of *Allah* throughout his life. He walks the way of truth, keeps a pure heart, and remains serene under pressure.
7. An upright man has a pure self; he does not seek what is forbidden to him.
8. An upright man is not greedy. He does not covet other peoples' property or wives.
9. An upright man tells the truth even at the expense of a personal loss to him. He does not swear and does not do unto others what he does not want others to do unto him.
10. An upright man keeps his word and never reneges on his word.
11. An upright man keeps his appointments.
12. An upright man does not sleep with someone else's wife; because, for him, sleeping with someone else's wife is tantamount to sleeping with his own mother.
13. An upright man does not laugh out loud because laughing aloud is an act of the Satan. An upright man laughs, however, when evil is vanquished and when justice is served.
14. An upright man, wherever he is and whatever he does, thinks of *Allah* first and considers the women and wives of others as if they were his own sisters and mother. He avoids committing acts that are not allowed.
15. An upright man fears God; he never denounces *Allah*.
16. An upright man recalls his sins, fears *Allah*, and repents. He seeks knowledge, and walks the *tariqa* (the Sufi way).
17. An upright man befriends others because he loves them, rather than for the material things that he might gain out of his friendship.
18. An upright man puts the interests of others before his own. He creates comfort for others before comfort for himself, and he shares the joys and sorrows of his brothers.
19. An upright man does not become happy upon receiving material things and he does not become sorrowful upon losing the same. He considers pebbles and precious stones to be of the same value.
20. An upright man is like a lion at heart, not a fox. He has true faith and loyalty to his religion.
21. An upright man is patient; he defends the rights of the oppressed.
22. An upright man constantly thinks of *Allah*. He sees death near him and strives to improve his afterlife.
23. An upright man believes that a man's body belongs to God first and to him second.

24. An upright man avoids pride, greed, envy, and other such vices. He follows the words and deeds of the Saint Ali and does not flinch at spending his wealth and life in the way of God.
25. An upright man respects the aged, advises the young, and is kind to children. He is merciful to the weak and generous to the poor. He respects the learned, fights the tyrant, and despises the wicked.

The traditional *zurkhaneh* and the subsequent emergence of the Islamic *zurkhanehs* were symptomatic of changes that were introduced into the foundational belief system of the Iranian segment of the early Islamic population of the country. They were, as we shall see, devised out of tested actions rooted deeply in the belief system of the majority population. And again, as we shall see, they were embedded in the traditions and documents that preceded the writing of the *Shahname* by Ferdowsi. They were handed down to the presenters and they propagated them as directed.

Ta'ziyeh

The last venue to discuss in relation to the public face of the *Shahname* is *ta'ziyeh*, a variety of performing art that perpetuates the memory of an unjust killing. The individual killed is usually well known to the audience. He is one who prefers death with dignity over life in oppression. The martyrdom of Siyavosh (outlined above) and the tragedy of Imam Hussein in Karbala (discussed further below) are examples of the sacrifice of two men who died because they tried to change the destiny of their people. Audiences relate to them because, in the object of their sacrifice, they see a reflection of their own belief, if not their own religion.

The most famous *ta'ziyeh*, the Imam Hossein *ta'ziyeh*, has actual historical roots. After the death of his brother Imam Hassan (626), Imam Hussein assumed the spiritual leadership of the nascent Shi'ite community and, accepting an invitation from the people of Kufah, accompanied by his family, traveled there to assume secular rulership as well. The army of Yazid I, Imam Hussein's opponent, blocked the way. Hussein and the seventy-two members of his family were stranded in the hot Karbala desert surrounded by the four-thousand-man army of Yazid I. Hussein had to choose between allegiance to Yazid I and death. He chose to fight to the death.

As days went by and an unbearable thirst set in, Hussein tried to negotiate with Yazid I's commander, but to no avail. Within a few days, the family's provisions and water ran out and access to fresh provisions and water was denied. Animals collapsed and family members became restless. Doom seemed imminent.

During the final attack, Hussein's escort was massacred and Hussein himself was close to death from thirst. He tried vainly to defend himself with what strength he still had, but he was overpowered. He was thrown to the ground like a lamb by Shemr who cut his head off and placed it on a lance. His family, including his son Zayn al-'Abedin, was enslaved.⁶² The Shi'ite community mourned his death. The Arabs mourned because he was the grandson of the Prophet. The converted Iranians mourned because, like Prince Siyavosh, he was an innocent defender of the right.

The task of those dealing with the emulation facet of the *Shahname* discussed above was to create a situation, within the same group, whereby the feeling for the martyrdom of Hussein in real time increases and the intense feeling and shedding of tears for the mythic Prince Siyavosh decreases. Put differently, to deemphasize the importance of the mythic prince and diminish his

⁶² For a thorough description of the events, as well as the controversy regarding Hussein's decision to go to Kufah in spite of obvious dangers for himself and his family, see Momen, *Shi'i Islam*, pp. 29-33; for a detailed discussion the event described, see Bashiri, *Caliphs and Kings*, pp. 49-54.

status until he joins oblivion while emphasizing the plight of the real, historical *imam* until he dominates the story. To do that, they employed a tested practice: introduction and repetition of the new element until it becomes habitual. Using this method, belief in *Ahura Mazda* had been replaced by belief in *Allah* and the direction of prayer from light and fire had been changed to the direction of Mecca and the *qibla*. All that was needed was a method by which to keep the tragedy in the forefront of peoples' mind. The annual ritual *ta'ziyeh* met that need. As we shall see, the task was not easy, but it was doable.

Siyavosh Story and the Hussein *Ta'ziyeh*

Originally the *ta'ziyeh* was not to be included in this essay. The essay was designed as an article dealing with the presentation of aspects of the *Shahname*. But, taking into consideration the innovative aspect outlined above (i.e., the possible genesis of some *ta'ziyeh* stories, especially the Imam Hussein *Ta'ziyeh* passion play, and the "Story of Zayn al-'Abidin"), it became necessary to add a word about the mythic root of the stories in *ta'ziyeh*. That then leads to a brief study of the relationship between the stories in the *Shahname*, particularly those related to the *farr*, and historical events that resemble those mythic finds. The matter becomes serious when historical events and the stories in the *Shahname* coincide and create epoch-making realities. For instance, as the outlines presented above indicate, the killing of Prince Siyavosh and the martyrdom of Imam Hussein have much in common. On the surface, the similarities appear accidental. But digging deeper, it becomes clear that ulterior motives might have been at work.

The martyrdom of Siyavosh took place in mythic times. Nevertheless, in pre-Islamic times, Iranians mourned his death in real time by holding a wake called *Siyavashun*. During Islamic times, the martyrdom of Imam Hussein revived the mourning for Siyavosh in the minds of the recently converted Iranians, which in time led to *ta'ziyehs* in which Hussein replaces Siyavosh. As we shall see, events that happened after Siyavosh in mythic times find their facsimiles in Islamic times.

Regarding the treatment that Siyavosh received at the hands of Afrasiyab and Gorvy, and the treatment that Imam Hussein received at the hands of Yazid I and Shemr, Ehsan Yarshater comments:

The passion of Siyavush bears too close a resemblance to the *Ta'ziyeh* of the Imam in ritual, imagery, and emotive underpinnings to be ignored...⁶³

What are the similarities between the rituals and images in the two stories and what is the significance of the emotive underpinning that Yarshater refers to? We shall look at the ritual and imagery first and will explain the importance of the emotive underpinning following that. To begin with, their life stories show that both warriors had premonitions about their imminent death and spoke about it. Imam Hussein talked to the *Ahl al-Bayt* (family of the prophet) and directed them to be patient. Siyavosh informed his father-in-law Piran, who did not believe him, and his wife Farangis, who made every effort to prevent his death. Both warriors were at the mercy of the commander of a superior army and both were treated disrespectfully by the minions

⁶³ Yarshater, "Ta'ziyeh," p.93.

of those commanders; Shemr in the case of Hussein, and Gorvy in the case of Siyavosh. Both warriors were thrown to the ground like a lamb and their heads were mercilessly cut off. Both minions were torn to pieces by avengers; Shemr by Mukhtar al-Thaqafi and Gorvy by Kaykhosrau. As Yarshater states:

Many other parallels can be drawn between the passion of Siyavush and that of the imam, but it is hardly necessary to demonstrate basic similarity between the two.⁶⁴

In both stories, the passion that the manner of slaying evokes is intense. Ancient Iranians learning the account of the slaying of Siyavosh were shocked to the core. They called it “the blood of Siyavosh” and mourned the death of the innocent prince. Similarly, their descendants, in real time, felt the same passion reactivated in them by the murder of Hussein and called it “the blood of Hussein” and mourned the death of the innocent *imam*. Yarshater provides a graphic account of the last hours of the life of Prince Siyavosh. Due to its importance, especially in analogy to the last hours of Imam Hussein in his *ta'ziyeh*, we shall reproduce it in full:

It appears that, as would befit a martyred saint, he was killed cruelly and in a way that it could not but arouse deep anguish and overwhelming pity. After he was wounded his hands were tied and he was humiliated and driven to the place where he once had excelled in physical prowess. Then he was thrown down “like a lamb” and his throat slit with a sword. It also appears that he was mutilated and his handsome and radiant face cut up and destroyed.⁶⁵

Passion qua passion, especially if it is channeled in a particular direction, does not recognize race. For example, in spite of the intense feud between the Iranians and Arabs in early Islamic times, the Iranians mourned the innocence of Hussein and respected his *velayat* as if it was the *farr*. The *Ahl al-Bait*, however, intended to make *velayat* prominent enough to outshine the *farr* in the minds of Iranians. More importantly, they intended to bring Iranian government out from the reach of the *farr*, and place it under *vilayat*. In other words, they were determined to cut their relationship with the caliphate altogether, reshape Iran’s identity, and make the land their home.⁶⁶ The logistics of the task was placed in the hands of the myth-makers and *ta'ziyeh* organizers to carry out. Traditional *Zurkhaneh* organizers and national champions who trained the youth in the tradition of the ancients reacted against it, but to no avail.

The *Farr* and *Velayat* in Competition

During the lifespan of the dynasty of the *imams* of the Shi’ites (610-940), two decisive historical events took place that have their analogy, if not their roots, in Iranian mythology. As we shall see, both are instrumental in deciding the direction of Iranian identity under Shi’ism. One event happened after the Karbala tragedy with regard to the rulership of the Shi’ite community after the Third Imam, Hussein. The other happened when the Twelfth Imam went into occultation. This latter had the potential of elevating *velayat* to the level of the *farr* and

⁶⁴ Yarshater, “Ta’ziyeh,” p.93.

⁶⁵ For references to Tabari, Bal’ami, Tha’alibi, and Firdowsi, see Yarshater, “Ta’ziyeh,” p. 93.

⁶⁶ For information on events leading to the Shi’ification of Iran, see Bashiri, *Caliphs and Kings*, pp. 115-131.

beyond as a vehicle for national rulership of Iranian lands. In what follows an attempt is made to elucidate the germane points contained in each event in the context of the lives of the Fourth and Twelfth *imams* as compared with the lives of Siyavosh and Kaykhosrau outlined above.

Imam Zayn al-‘Abedin (658–713) is the only son of Imam Hussein and the daughter of the last Sassanid king, Yazdagird III.⁶⁷ Because his mother died in childbirth, he was brought up by a slave.⁶⁸ After the death of his father in the Karbala tragedy, he was enslaved and, alongside the rest of his family, was taken to the court of Yazid I in Damascus. From there, he was sent to Medina, where he lived in seclusion. His imamate had an awkward start.

After the death of Imam Hussein, a rebellion took place within the ranks of the *Ahl al-Bayt*. This was a quarrel among the members of the *Ahl al-Bayt* regarding succession to the mantle of Imam Hussein. The candidates were Hussein’s son, Zayn al-‘Abedin, and Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyah (c. 633–700), a son of Imam Ali and Khawlah bint Ja’far. The quarrel was natural because, according to Arab tradition, there was no strict rule of inheritance for succession. For instance Zayn al-‘Abedin’s father, Imam Hussein, had taken over the leadership of the community from his brother Imam Hassan. In fact, it seemed that Muhammad ibn Hanafiyah, promoted by Mukhtar al-Thaqafi as the Mahdi (686), had a better chance at leadership. (More about the significance of the Mahdi in this context later.)

For a solution, the *Ahl al-Bayt* resorted to a *surah* from the *Qur’an* whereby *Allah* blesses the Prophet and his *immediate* family. By invoking the doctrine of the *Panj Tan-e Al-e ‘Aba* (five of the cloak), the *Ahl al-Bayt* established a ruling (*nass*) whereby only the descendants of Ali through Fatimah, the daughter of the Prophet, were recognized as infallible *imams*.⁶⁹ The *nass* specifies that only the *Panj Tan-e Al-e ‘Aba* (i.e., Muhammad, Ali, Fatimah, Hassan, and Hussein) are protected by *Allah* and, consequently, their progeny are allowed to carry His decrees (read *velayat*). This pantheon, formed directly under *Allah*, not only excluded Muhammad ibn Hanafiyah from the family core, but it also injected divine content into the thus far political allegiance of the people to the Shi’ite community leaders based on loyalty. In other words, it transformed the political activities of Ali, Hassan, and Hussein into divine activities, made their rulership divine, and themselves immaculate *imams*. Most importantly, it abrogated the tradition of the council of elders and placed divine *velayat* in competition with divine *farr* in the future administration of the Iranian and Shi’ite communities. *Farr*, as is clearly seen in “The Story of Fereydu,” remained the distinctive proof of legitimacy for Iranians. Zayn al-‘Abedin’s *velayat* made him the fourth *imam*. All that was needed was to create a parallel between divine *velayat* and divine *farr* for Iranian identity in the future. Amir-Moezzi explains the same concept in the larger context of *Imamism* as follows:

This fact acquires its fullest significance when one takes into consideration the key importance of the light of Divine Alliance (*nur al-walāya*) in Imamism... Thus, from Imam Zayn al-‘Abedin onwards, the Shi’ite Imams will be the bearers of a two-fold light: that of *walāya* from ‘Ali and Fāṭema (thus of Moḥammad) and the glorious light from the ancient kings of Persia, as transmitted by Šahrbānu.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ It should be mentioned that the very existence of Shahrbanu, Hussein’s alleged wife, is controversial, but that does not affect our discussion here. See, Amir-Moezzi, “Shahrbanu,” in bibliography.

⁶⁸ Qomi, *Tarikh-i Qom*, 196.

⁶⁹ See Bashiri, *Iranian Philosophy*, pp. 34-43.

⁷⁰ Amir-Moezzi, “Shahrbanu,” in bibliography.

In this way, the move towards hereditary rulership among the Shi'ites, strengthened *velayat* and made it both an instrument for community guidance and a vehicle for national rulership. Zayn al-'Abedin died, possibly poisoned, in 712 or 713. He was followed by his son Imam al-Baqir, the Fifth Imam of the Twelver Shi'ites. The twelfth and last progeny of Zayn al-'Abedin, Muḥammad al-Muntazir (869-) completes the dynasty of the Shi'ite *imams*. Two Occultations are attributed to him: a Lesser Occultation (873-940), and a Greater Occultation that started in 940 and continues into the future.⁷¹

Like the disappearance of Kaykhosrau, the disappearance of the Twelfth Imam is elaborate and need not detain us here. Suffice it to say that like the disappearance of Kaykhosrau that put an end to the rulership of the mythic hero-saints and placed the *farr* at the disposal of earth-bound monarchs under the supervision of the deity, the disappearance of the Twelfth Imam put an end to the rulership of the *imams* and placed the *velayat* at the disposal of jurists under the supervision of the Twelfth Imam as the deputy of *Allah*. It also created an endless rivalry between a *farr*-base society that harkened to ancient Iran and a rival *velayat*-based community that followed the deputy of the Twelfth Imam.

After Thought

As can be observed, there are a number of thought-provoking similarities between the lives of Siyavosh and Zayn al-'Abedin, on the one hand, and the lives of Kaykhosrau and the Twelfth Imam, on the other hand. In fact, they encompass the "Story of Fereydu" and "The Story of Zayn al-'Abedin" from beginning to end. Whether these similarities are accidental or they have been created to fit certain circumstances is beyond the scope of this essay. As it was shown above, in the case of Zayn al-'Abedin and his *imamate*, there are supporting historical facts, but they must be verified through other sources. In other words, as contributing factors to Iranian identity alongside the *farr* and *velayat*, these similarities, and their practical applications, demand scrutiny.

Consider, for instance, the similarities between the lives of Siyavosh and Zayn al-'Abedin. Their mothers belong to two enemy camps. Siyavosh's mother is a Turanian girl found in the woods near the camp of the Iranians. Zayn al-'Abedin's mother is the daughter of the Iranian monarch captured by the invading Muslims. The girls marry powerful men who are protected by the deity. Kai Ka'us carries the *farr*. Imam Hussein carries *velayat*. Their sons find themselves in war, the Iran-Turan war in the case of Siyavosh. The battle of Karbala in the case of Zayn al-'Abedin. Both princes live in exile in enemy country and are killed by a ruler who is afraid of their divine power and is suspicious of their activities. Afrasiyab in the case of Siyavosh and al-Walid or al-Hisham in the case of Zayn al-'Abedin. The similarities between the lives of the only progenies of the two, to wit: Kaykhosrau and the Twelfth Imam, are even more remarkable. They are aware of their glorious future and, after organizing their affairs, disappear. After their departure, either the individuals who carry the *farr*, or those who carry *velayat* attend to the day-to-day affairs of their kingdom, as the case might be, under divine supervision.

⁷¹ For detail on the occultation, see Bashiri, *Caliphs and Kings*, pp. 318-319.

Conclusion

The *Shahname* is not only the bedrock of Iranian culture as a whole, but also the guarantor for the longevity, resilience and, indeed, the socio-political vigor of Iran. The reason for the continuous viability of Iran, and for the applicability of the dicta of the *Shahname* among Iranians is the *farr*, deservedly celebrated as the fulcrum of Iran's identity. The immensity of the impact of the *farr* is illustrated in "The Story of Fereydun," especially in the vital decisions of Prince Siyavosh and the wise and epoch-making rulership of his son Kaykhosrau. The very fact that Iran's conquerors should adjust their mode of rulership, *velayat*, to conform to the hereditary nature of the *farr*, but more significantly, to seek divinity for the imamate and choose occultation at its culmination speak volumes about the impact of the *farr* on Shi'ite affairs.

Through a discussion of aspects of Iranian society, it was shown how stories in the *Shahname*, like "Rostam and Sohrab" have morphed into heroic exploits presented in corner bazaars and *zurkhaneh* halls. More poignantly, it is shown how "The Story of Zayn al-'Abidin" is aggrandized to embody "The Story of Siyavosh" and "The Story of Kaykhosrau," and how *velayat* is enabled to rival the *farr*, and how the Second Occultation of the Twelfth Imam is created to overshadow the prevalent notion of the Saoshiyant. Nevertheless, thanks to the versatility of the *farr*, the same adjustments, organized by diverse people with good intentions, have imparted vitality to *velayat* to carry on the unique mission of safeguarding Iran's identity.

Beyond the *Shahname*, the wellspring of Iran's renown, especially in medieval and modern times, is the bard's own foresight, steadfastness, and flexibility that must be commended. His characters, a blend of mythic and real, and a fusion of ethnic types, instruct us to safeguard the *farr* that the creator has bestowed upon every one of us as well as respect *velayat*. It teaches us, through the might of the *farr*, and blessing of *velayat*, to spread wisdom throughout the world, undertake acts of beneficence irrespective of creed, race, ethnicity, gender, and color of skin, and endeavor to reach the ultimate reality, peace. Shaykh Muslih al-Din Sa'di Shirazi, whose "*bani adam*" verse graces the entrance to the building of the United Nations, studied in the school of Ferdowsi. In the following, he expresses Ferdowsi's call for flexibility with regard to the "other" among us:

Of One Essence is the Human Race,
 Thusly has Creation put the Base.
 One Limb impacted is sufficient,
 For all Others to feel the Mace.
 The Unconcern'd with Others' Plight,
 Are but Brutes with Human Face.⁷²

⁷² Sa'di, "Bani adam," see bibliography.

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