



Erika Friedl, *Folktales and Storytellers of Iran: Culture, Ethos and Identity*

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In 1969, folklorist Robert A. GEORGES cautioned fellow folklorists that the time had come to abandon the method of gathering and writing about folk tales common to the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, and develop a new methodology and lens to study them: “Nineteenth-century scholars came to regard stories as cultural artifacts and to conceive of them as surviving or traditional linguistic entities pervaded by meaningful symbols” (1969, 313–28). Instead of collecting and publishing the text, often with several variants, as was the general practice up until the 1970s, Georges suggested a more holistic approach, which he labeled “the storytelling event,” in which he urged the folklore scholar to focus on all aspects of the event. In addition to furnishing the text and its meaning, he also urged the folklorist to report on the storyteller, the manner of telling, and the range of audience responses to the story. He concluded: “Data for studying storytelling events must be sought in natural field situations, and every attempt must be made to capture their wholeness.... Only by attempting to study storytelling events holistically can we begin to appreciate their true significance as communicative events, as social experiences, and as unique expressions of human behavior” (327–28).

Georges’s article has been influential beyond folklore, influencing dance studies, ethnomusicology, and anthropology, among other fields. To this day, folklorists and other gatherers of folk tales do not always follow Georges’s sage advice, and both folklorists and amateur authors continue to publish uncontextualized collections of stories.

Anthropologist Erika Friedl, without mentioning Georges’s article specifically, meticulously follows his advice in *Folktales and Storytellers of Iran* and provides us several texts, descriptions of storytellers and their lives, and how the tales relate to different worldviews and the lives of the people who listen to them in this rich study of the folk tales and storytellers in Boir Ahmad, a region of Luristan in southwestern Iran. Pro-

fessor Friedl is well positioned to give us this illuminating view of the multiple ways in which the people of Boir Ahmad listen and respond to the tales, for she has spent over seven years doing field work in the region across the span of several decades, especially prior to the 1990s, during which time the lives of the people of the area materially improved. She has documented their lives in a series of books about the region (*The Women of Deh Kuh* (1991); *Children of Deh Kuh* (1997); as well as several articles). She confines the tales that she analyzes to this specific region and frequently comments when specific folk tales, motifs, or characters have wider Iranian meaning. She has translated the tales from Lori, the local language, related to Persian (Farsi), but significantly different from it.

Boir Ahmad is a mountainous region in which traditionally much of the population practiced transhumance, moving large flocks of sheep and goats from the winter quarters on the flatland areas to the summer quarters in the highlands and mountains, following the grass. It is a hard life, and poverty and hunger, which the older generations remember well, is a constant theme throughout the book and the tales. A recent YouTube recording shows the tribe on the move (<https://youtu.be/JM8QHRC-MaYY>; accessed 26 October 2017). The hunger and want that characterize the often harsh lives of the people of Luristan drive many of the plots and actors of the tales. For example, trying to obtain or steal food feature in many of the tales.

Friedl compares the folktales that she has gathered with collections by other authors, whom she consulted as she prepared the study. She has specifically avoided using trendy scholarly concepts and theories, and instead of providing us with a “scholarly interpretation” she focuses on the meaning these tales have for their local listeners and has organized her text to reflect this: “But even scholars who record tales in the field, close to ethnographic reality, tend to use folktales as texts to be analyzed in the framework of a theory such as, for example, psychoanalysis, structuralism, functionalism or feminism, ignoring the ethnographic context. The ‘meaning’ they are after transcends the meanings local people give the tales. This local meaning is my main interest. I aim to unite folktale texts with life as lived by the storytellers and their listeners” (2014, 1).

In this, she succeeds admirably. For example, several times she points out that readers should not read Freudian meanings into stories that might invite such an analysis, because the local people do not invest such meaning in the tales. As Friedl observes, and as I experienced when I lived in Iran, folklore and storytelling is still a living activity and a source of local identity construction and pride. Folklore is fairly recent form of scholarly study in Iran, which makes this collection and the information it brings to Iranian studies a valuable addition to the field of folklore and anthropology.

Above all, she notes that the tales do not take on an other-worldliness, even when peopled with fairies (*pari*), or demons (*div*), or animals that talk. The animals behave like they do in the real world: wolves kill, foxes are clever, dogs guard flocks and endure the beatings of their masters, snakes poison. It is the world of here, as Friedl stresses. The listeners recognize their world, the creatures in it, and their belief systems embedded in the tales. In part, the tales provide the cautionary message to always be aware of your surroundings.

In the organization of the book, Friedl provides several full-length tales, but due to concerns with space, and because of the repetitive quality of many of the tales, she more often gives us a condensed version, especially with the popular “string tales” type (also popular in folk songs), such as the mouse eats the cheese, the cat eats the mouse, the

dog eats the cat, etc. In addition, she describes the tale collections that she uses, their strengths, and their weaknesses. Chapter 1 relates the biographies of a male and female storyteller, and how their sex and class affect the tales they favor and their actors' behavior.

In subsequent chapters she analyzes the content, motifs, and characters. In Chapter 2, Friedl notes that most tales "start within the family" (45). She specifically analyzes the positive or negative relations between brothers and sisters that often propel the plots. In Chapter 3, she analyzes specific female characters, many of which remain nameless. The most common female characters are Old Woman, Girl/Bride, Wife, and Mother. Chapter 4 focuses on the role of plants, both medicinal and as food, and animals. The people in the region are Shi'i Muslims, but as Friedl notes, "[c]onsidering this religious background the scarcity of religious themes and references to God and theology in the people's tales is noteworthy" (128).

Chapter 6 discusses "extra-human beings" such as fairies, jinn, and ghouls. She notes that, "[p]eople do not worship these beings. Rather, they try to keep a prudent distance from those that are potentially harmful, and try to ingratiate themselves with those who they think can help them" (155). Even in Tehran some people believed in *jenn* and *moshkel gosha* ("difficulty opener," meaning the power to help one in times of need, such as in passing an examination), for which they had to enact ritual-like behavior to succeed. Fate (*pishani neveshteh*, "written on the forehead") occurs in several tales, but the evil eye, widely believed in, is curiously absent. In her last chapter, Friedl states about the philosophy of everyday life, "[i]n Iran many historical processes and cultural influences left behind thought systems from which people now choose. Even Islam, the most strictly formulated philosophical system offers choices and validations for just about any kind of behavior. The tales reflect this wealth of options" (181).

I found her discussion of *zarangi*, which she describes as "implying cunning and the wisdom to choose the most successful strategy in any situation," as "perhaps the most controversial of ethical principles" (197–99). Yet, *zarangi* features in many of the tales because in a society of hunger and want, *zarangi* provides the actors with a recognizable trait from the local viewpoint, an admirable form of agency that permits the characters to capitalize on *bakht* (luck) when it appears. Clearly, the tribal people and peasants of the region admire and recognize this character trait.

For an understanding of the worldviews of a non-Western ethnic group and how they see their world through the telling of tales, I highly recommend this valuable study. I would recommend, also, that it be used in conjunction with Friedl's folk tale collection, with Lori and English texts (2007).

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