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Embodying Evil and Bad Luck

Stray Notes on the Folklore of Bats in Southwest Asia

Abstract

Like other animals of the magical sphere, the bat is perceived as strange and frightening. Local bat names as well as sayings comparing human and bat behavior reflect the peculiar anatomy and characteristics of this nocturnal flying mammal. Oral traditions in southwest Asia predominantly show the animal as an embodiment of evil and carrier of bad luck. Therefore, body parts and liquids of the bat are used in practices of “black” magic. Nevertheless, due to its hybrid nature as a mammal with bird-like wings, the bat is exempted from being killed.

Keywords: bat—human behavior—evil—omen—magic

BEFORE introducing ethnographic notes on bat folklore in the region between Iran and Rajasthan, it seems appropriate to take a brief look at the zoology of these misunderstood and feared animals (FENTON 1983; FENTON 1992).^{*} A characteristic often reflected in local oral traditions is that bats, like humans, are mammals: They give birth to live young ones, feed their newborns milk, and most of them have hair or fur. But strangely enough, they are the only mammals that can actively fly. Moreover, in a typical posture differing remarkably from that of other mammals, many bats hang upside down when they are not flying.

Bats comprise the mammalian order called Chiroptera, a term derived from the Greek meaning “hand-wing,” which reflects the specific structure of the wings consisting of folds of skin stretching from the sides of the body to the elongated finger and hand bones. There is great diversity in bats with about 900 living species divided in the major suborders of the Megachiroptera (large bats as, for instance, the flying fox with wing-spans of nearly two meters) and the much more numerous Microchiroptera (small bats, with about 750 species alone). Bats are nocturnal animals mainly feeding on insects; others eat fruit, nectar, or pollen. Some also prey on fish, frogs, birds, and so on while the most infamous, the vampires, feed only on blood. The latter are found only in South and Central America, whereas insectivorous species and fruit-eaters occur almost everywhere in the world.

While not wishing to go into details of the bat fauna in southwest Asia, a topic apparently not yet that well researched, I would like to discuss stray notes on bat folklore that I have collected in that region since the mid 1990s. Local perceptions of bats are reflected in names, sayings, and folk belief as well as in practices which subject the animal to symbolic interpretation.

LOCAL BAT NAMES

Names for the animal in various languages between Iran and Rajasthan draw on different aspects of its peculiar anatomy and behavior. Thus, in Persian the bat is called *shab-parak* or *shaprak* (“night-flying”), *shabān* (“in the night”), *shabīne*

(“nocturnal”), *shabān-nūr* (from *nūr*—“light”), *shab-yāze* (from *yāzidan*—“to pull,” “to stretch”), *shab-pūz* (from *pushidan*—“to cover”), *shab-angiz* (from *angikhtan*—“to excite”), *shab-būze* (probably meaning “rapidly moving in the night”), *shab-bāze* (“night-player”), and *shab-pūr* (“son of the night”). Another name for it is *shab-bāre* (from *bāridan*—“to rain,” “to snow”), a term also used abusively in Iran and Afghanistan (although rare nowadays) in the sense of “addicted to the night” for a prostitute. In the vernacular Dari spoken in Kabul, people call the bat *shau-parak-e charmī* (“leather butterfly”) referring to the animal’s fluttering flight and to the consistency of its skin-wings. The latter characteristic is also the reason why this expression is used to mock a person who is wearing leather boots, leather gaiters, or a leather coat. In contrast, the name *yer-qanat* (“earth-wings”) in the language of Iranian Yomut-Turkmen draws on the earth-like color of the wings. Customary names for the bat in the Pashto spoken in the north, around Peshawar and Swat, are *kha-perak* (which is also the name of a female demon) and further to the south *shah-perak* (“flying king”). In Balochi it is called *shab-char* (“moving in the night”) and in easternmost Balochi also *chamra* (“leather”). The Dravidian Brahui language in Balochistan has *chalkhchuk*. Further to the east, in Pakistan and India, bat names again mostly refer to local words for leather or skin by using the specifying member *cham*, such as in Hindko (*cham-cherék*), Punjabi (*cham-chit*, *cham-charik*, *chaméti*), Sindhi (*chamro*, *chamdo*), in Urdu and Hindi (*cham-gādar*, *cham-gīdar*; derived from *gīdar*—“jackal”), and in Marwari (*cham-chér*). Further to the north, in the mountains of the Hindukush and Karakoram, we find *cham-pétr* in Bashgali, the language of the Eastern Kati-Nuristani, and *pust-wrāzun* (“skin-wings”) in Khowar spoken in Chitral. The Kalasha differentiate between large bats, called *dadrók*, and small bats, called *trúmishuwajíyek*. In the Karakoram, the bat is named *shomái taltaápan* (“bat of the night/evening”) in Shina and *kanvát* (“round ear”) in Kohistani. The Burushaski language of Hunza and Nager differentiates between *gon hoólalas* (“moth with ears”), apparently denoting a species of the Microchiroptera, and *galgícange hal* (“fox with wings,” that is to say the gigantic flying fox).¹ Yasin-Burushaski has *haúlal* which also means “butterfly” and “moth.” Finally, in Balti language we have *tsannbiu* (“night-bird”).

Most of the above-mentioned meanings of bat names in southwest Asia and adjacent Central Asia refer to the animal’s leathery skin-wings, its butterfly-like flight, and its general association with the night. However, there is a different connotation in Seraiki language (spoken in southern Punjab) where *kān-salvār* (“dangerous for the ear”) draws on the human fear that the bat could attack a man and bite into his ear. This belief is apparently in the same vein as the common myth about the alleged hair-seeking of bats (compare FENTON 1992, 186).

STRANGENESS AND HYBRIDITY OF BATS

A four-footed nocturnal creature which flies and lives in caves, wells, ruins, and at tombs is most often perceived as frightening and, as a craftsman from Peshawar spontaneously uttered, *‘ajīb-o-gharīb*—“strange.” There are well-known folk legends, widespread in southwest Asia, pointing to the hybrid nature of the bat which neither seems to fit into the class of mammals nor in that of birds. A variant was narrated to me by Nandilal Upadhyaya from Jodhpur (Rajasthan): First the bat seeks to attend the assembly of mammals, but although it has teeth and breasts producing milk, the other animals decide that it is a bird and “that is why you don’t belong to us.” When approaching the assembly of birds, the bat argues that it can fly, but it is again not accepted and turned away by the decision “you have teeth and you sleep upside down, you are not a bird.” In some variants the bat is reproached by the other animals because of deceitfully trying to approach their assembly. This embodied strangeness and hybridity of the bat, not fitting into any common para-zoological classifications, is also the background for riddles, such as the following from the Brahui in Baluchistan: “Which animal has wings and gives milk?” The peculiar body and behavior of the bat is likewise the object of curiosity in the area of Ghizar in the Karakoram where villagers emphasize that only two animals do not fly in the daytime—the owl (perceived as highly inauspicious) and the bat (perceived as ambivalent).

In a widely known aetiological folk tale, which is part of the famous *Qisas al-anbiyā’* (“Stories of the Prophets”), the strange appearance and nocturnal life of the bat is explained in a positive, devotional context:

One day King Solomon asked all the birds in his kingdom to give him one feather each, explaining: “I am old and the nights are cold. My bony body needs a soft couch. One feather from each of you is not asking too much, surely?” All the birds came and offered him a feather: the eagle, the vulture, the sparrow, the partridge. But the bat said: “One feather is not enough for the king of kings.” And it tore out all its colorful plumage offering it to King Solomon. The latter gratefully accepted, but seeing the generous bat naked except for the soft hairs that all chicks have on their bodies before they get feathers as well, the king in his wisdom decreed: “Your kindness will make you the victim of mockery from the other birds, since the majority of creatures on this earth are mean and do not understand magnanimity. So from now on you will fly only at night so that no one will see your naked wings and mock you unfeelingly. The Creator, however, will never forget a sacrifice” (KNAPPERT 1985, 156).

COMPARING HUMAN AND BAT BEHAVIOR

In southwest Asian folklore there are a number of maledictive sayings highlighting certain peculiarities of human behavior in parabolic comparison to bats. Thus, if somebody (for instance a beggar) in the Punjab literally flutters around another person and plagues him, he can be rudely insulted “for behaving like a bat.” Similarly, but in a figurative sense, to cling to another person is expressed in Punjabi by the curse *cham-chit wakra, pīchchhe paegaēñ māgron nī lehndī*—“like a bat you sit on my neck and dig your claws into me.” The observance of the fluttering movements and rapid manoeuvring of bats during flight has led to the reprimand of people, who are unsteady on their feet, stagger around losing self control, move here and there or pick at their food, asking them “are you a bat?” (Punjabi, Burushaski, Shina). Thus, in Burushaski there is the saying “How do you walk? You are tumbling around like a bat!” Likewise, if somebody cannot decide on which side to be or behaves ambivalently, he or she is compared to a bat (North-West Frontier Province/NWFP, Afghanistan). Finally, in Punjab, Rajasthan, and other parts of South Asia, a reputedly intolerable woman, who is frequently quarreling with her husband, is abused as behaving like a bat, possibly owing to the screeching sound uttered by both.

BATS AS EMBODIMENTS OF EVIL AND BAD LUCK

In southwest Asia the bat is predominantly perceived as a strange, negative, and frightening animal that should be avoided. Thus, it is usually regarded as a bad omen. Belonging to the realm of darkness, it hates the sun. In Parwak, a village in northern Chitral, people think that the bat is in fact a *shaytān* (devil) who flies only in the night because if he would do so in the daytime he would die. In Hunza (Karakoram) a witch (*bilās, rui*) can appear in the shape of a bat. Between Iran and Rajasthan, there is the widespread folk belief that, if a bat lives somewhere in the house or sits on the roof, this would mean bad luck for the owner. Thus, it is also considered a bad omen to see the animal in a dream. Hearing the cry of a bat, people in the old Hunza-villages of Altit, Baltit, and Ganesh believe that somebody from the Tatúkuč clan is going to die soon. People are widely afraid that bats will blind a person through their droppings (Borujerd/Iran) or will dig their claws into their hair and clothes (NWFP). In Pabbi near Peshawar it is said: “Don’t open your eyes while sleeping outside, otherwise a bat will peck out your eyes.” Furthermore, in the NWFP, villagers fear that bats would suck the milk of their water buffaloes in the night, and in the Hindukush and Karakoram the same is supposed to happen with cows whose udders would be injured. There is a general consensus based on Islamic law to consider the animal as *harām*, that is to say as “forbidden” (as food). In this respect, I heard villagers in the Punjab pointing out that bats would not only use their mouth for eating but

also for defecation. Apparently, this zoologically absurd opinion is based on the simple observation of bats roosting upside down hanging by their toes. In parts of the Karakoram this body posture is interpreted as a sign of extreme pride. Thus, a proverb in Shina language refers to the bat stretching out its feet towards the sky. It is then supposed to say “if the sky is falling down, I could cushion it with my feet” (LEITNER 1873, 17).

These negative connotations showing the bat as an embodiment of evil are qualified by the official Islamic view exempting bats from being killed (EISENSTEIN 1991, 15). This is reflected in southwest Asia by the common belief that it would carry bad luck to kill a bat. As I was told in Mardan (NWFP), this would be sinful as “female bats have breasts and are mothers like human females.” In Hunza the bat is even considered to be auspicious in very special contexts: Thus, to catch a living bat with one’s own hands and to touch a leather bag that is used for making butter with it is a particular good omen for securing prosperity (enough butter!) for the household.² Similarly, there is a saying in Hunza (based on pre-Islamic magical belief) that a family would never be without meat for their whole life if the lady would once offer the cooked meat of a bat to her guests, hiding it behind her back while serving. Despite the Islamic taboo mentioned above, it should be added that bats are also useful because of their droppings. Bat guano is collected in Iran and Baluchistan as well as in Rajasthan and used as a natural fertilizer.

BATS IN MAGIC

It is no wonder that such a strange, mostly negatively perceived animal also plays a role in magical practice. Although I could not gather much information on this topic, I was told that in the NWFP and the Punjab magicians (*jadūgār*) would frequently use bat bones to prepare their concoctions. With the blood of the bat they would write amulets for “black,” malevolent and antisocial magic. In Mardan a villager acquainted with magical knowledge assured me that, by orally taking sweat or grease from the bat’s wingpits, the intelligence of a person would grow considerably (which sounds like a distant echo of Greek thoughts about the association of the bat with learning).

CONCLUSION

These folkloric notes on the meaning of bats in southwest Asia apart from zoology show that this nocturnal flying mammal is regarded as embodying evil. Its peculiar anatomy and behavior has stirred people’s imagination perceiving it as strange, frightening, and hybrid, hardly to be classified within the domain of animals, and related to the world of demonic beings. Therefore, the bat is usually seen as a bad omen. Yet it should not be harmed or killed for fear of bad luck.

In the special local context of Hunza, it can even be endowed with auspicious symbolic connotations.

NOTES

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1. In Burushaski bat droppings are called *badâa naghé* (BERGER 1998, 29), a word denoting natural bitumen which is "sweated out" by rocks in high mountain areas and widely used as a folk medicine (FREMBGEN 1999, 25–26; compare WILLSON 1999, 115).

2. Although these positive connotations of the bat in Hunza (a region bordering Eastern Turkestan/Sinkiang) are remarkable, I am hesitant to follow the idea of a diffusion of Chinese symbolism during the eighteenth/nineteenth century (on the auspicious role of the bat in Chinese culture compare PROKOT 1992). I rather think that this limited auspiciousness of the bat in Hunza is a local belief.

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