

IRANIAN TRADITIONAL AND POPULAR PUPPET SHOWS

OF PAHLEVAN KACHAL AND KHEIMEH SHAB-BAZI

by Poupak Azimpour Tabrizi

INTRODUCTION

In the pre-Islamic era, in the Sasanian civilization contemporary with the reign of Bahram-e Gur (421-438) some 12000 (on the authority of *Moulouk al-Arz* and *Majma al-Tawarikh*) or 11000 (as stated by Firdawsi in *Shah-name*) or about 5000 to 6000 (according to *Farhang-e Anjoman* and Saalebi's *Shahname*) gypsy performers and musicians migrated from India to Iran and founded deep traditions and methods of performance. But since the documents that indicate this unique, widespread, cultural migration start a few centuries later, we only have solid evidence of their presence in Iran from the 10th century onward. Nizami Ganjavi, one of the great Iranian poets, clearly refers to the presence of performers and musicians:

*“Six thousand story-making masters
Musicians, dancers and puppeteer
Were gathered from every town
And every town got a share of them
So wherever they itinerated
They pleased the people and exhilarated¹”*

This short introduction should suffice to give an idea of the historical roots of these traditional shows in Iran, and perhaps helps to explain the unity of the collection of various performances in Iran, especially in the field of satiric and comics. In describing these shows two objectives can be pursued: first, their introduction and elucidation, emphasizing their common denominator. Second, the demonstration of the new use and metamorphosis of these two types of shows that have retained their critical language, and sometimes in a very modern way are more biting than even some of the serious social movements in Iran.

What is meant by a common denominator is the story, the linguistic components, the relation of characters, costumes, scenes and even their aesthetics, and also their common origin in a single general concept. In the process of describing the two different types of show this will be

The author is a Faculty Member of College of Fine Arts, School of Dramatic Arts and Music, University of Tehran
The author wishes to thank Ellen Vuosalo Tavakoli (University of Mazandaran) for editing the English of this paper
and Mohsen Kiani for translation from Persian to English.

¹ *The Seven Beauties*. The original title is *Haft Peykar*. It is a part of Nizami's *Khamasa*.

clarified.

PAHLEVAN KACHAL (THE BALD HERO)

Pahlevan Kachal represents a widespread type of performance in Iran that has assumed different names in different regions. In Isfahan it is called “the puppet behind the curtain”. In Shiraz they call it “Jiji viji”. “Jiji viji” means squeaky and noisy, and the naming is because of a swazzle called *Safir* that is used by the performer to produce the buzzing voice of the characters. In Sabzevar the show is called “Pahlevan Kachal of Iraq”. *Pahlevan Kachal* features five principal puppets and tens of other subsidiary puppets. Pahlevan Kachal, Salimeh Khanum or the Princess, the Dīvs (demons), Molla or the teacher, and Ververe Jadoo (the mother of the Dīvs) are some of the members of the show’s cast.

A performance of *Pahlevan Kachal* begins by singing a *vasoonak* and ends with singing another. *Pahlevan Kachal* is a musical show; the puppeteer performs the show with two musicians sitting behind the curtain or inside the booth. One of the musicians plays *kamancheh*³ and the other plays *tombak*.⁴ Those in front of the booth are called *babas*. Morshed, who also plays *tombak*, is “*baba no. 1*”. He supervises the puppets in the story and interprets the sometimes unintelligible, squawky “language” of the puppets for the audience.

The poems sung in this show draw on *vasoonaks* of Shiraz, folk songs that are sung in various singing modes at weddings and other celebration parties.

Owing to the fact that in former times the oral culture was dominant in Iran, the early descriptions of *Pahlevan Kachal* shows are found in the writings of travelers and orientalists from the west. Leon Moussinac describes Pahlevan Kachal as a gluttonous, clever, sly, intelligent and irreligious hedonist with a short stature, hunched back, and a bald head.⁵

Alexander Chodźko (1804-1891), the Polish poet and Iranologist, says about Pahlevan Kachal:

“The common hero of Pahlevan Kachal has no peculiar costume. Baldness is the distinctive feature of this character just as a hunched back distinguishes Pulshinel. The character of Pahlevan Kachal is very similar to that of Pulcinella of Naples, but his deeply religious upbringing sets him apart from Pulcinella and the other European counterparts such as the Mapatacco of Rome, Arlequin of Bologna, and the Pulchinelle of France. Pahlevan Kachal is also deeply sly. He

² In the old times the performers of *Pahlevan Kachal* would put on shows for various occasions such as circumcision ceremonies, birthday parties, weddings and other celebratory occasions. Upon entering the host’s house, they would nail a curtain at the corner of a room and put on a show for the people in the house. Nowadays, this curtain has turned into a booth that can easily be carried and mounted.

³ An Iranian string instrument similar to the violin.

⁴ An Iranian percussion instrument like the goblet drum.

⁵ *A Study of Iranian Theater*, p. 100.

*is pious, learned, and even, like all Iranians, a poet. His real business is outwitting the Mollas, and teasing beautiful women and girls.*⁶

Like common local Iranian heroes, called *Looties*⁷, Pahlevan Kachal displays witticism and humor alongside nobility and self-sacrifice (which is of course exhibited later on). In many of the stories, this sly and sneaky character turns into a person striving against tyranny and injustice, someone who stands up for the oppressed. Now and then he saves a girl imprisoned in the Dīvs' castle. In some shows Pahlevan Kachal is a man who makes use of expedient policies to reach his goal. He is both perseverant and artful. His wisdom resembles cunning and his duplicity is second to none. Physically he is bald, robust and tall. He has muscular arms and dresses in the fashion of ancient heroes. He is sometimes wearing a helmet, with a shield, a sword and a cudgel, and on occasion appears in a piece of pelt. If needs be, he puts on a shirt, a pair of pants, with a wide belt.

One of the most important stories of *Pahlevan Kachal* performed in Shiraz is the one about saving the princess from the family of Dīvs – the Dīvs' mother (Ververe Jadoo), and her two sons (the two-horned Dīv and the three-horned Dīv). After numerous battles and killing the Dīvs, he releases Princess Salimeh Khanum, and takes her to Salim Khan, the king, and then quite selflessly gives his blessing when the girl marries the black servant. The black servant is no one but Mobarak, the famous puppet of the shows of *Kheimeh Shab-Bazi*.

The stories of *Pahlevan Kachal* are performed all over Iran with little variation, which always includes fighting ills and evils (the Dīvs) and reaching virtue and beauty (Salimeh Khanum).

Considering the contradictory qualities of Pahlevan Kachal and his involvement in various issues with a justice-demanding themes, Alexander Chodźko aptly presents this anthropological conclusion in his book, *The Iranian Theater* :

“Pahlevan Kachal is the epitome of the Iranian tribe, which despite being superior to its neighbor in civilization and culture, has been under the occupation of despotic foreign rulers for the past thirteen centuries. In the meantime, the Iranian tribe has been imprisoned and enslaved, but by keeping the feeling of superiority has fought its masters with the weapon of an internal resistance. Reduced to the level of smooth-talking, hypocrisy and duplicity, and with infinite patience, like Pahlevan Kachal, it has vanquished the powerful rulers by making use of deceit, the magic of language and the charm of poetry. See what it did to the Macedonian commanders, the converting Arabs, and the Tartar khans. It led them all to corruption and destruction, and imposed its customs, language and literature on them. And finally the victorious tribes mingled with the subdued

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ A word with a wide range of meanings, it is mainly used to refer to an altruistic man of honor, but also sometimes to actors, musicians or itinerate puppeteers.

Iranian tribe and now they worship together, eat together, drink together, sing together, and live in the manner of Pahlevan Kachal.⁸

About the creation and origin of *Pahlevan Kachal* there are two opinions among the puppeteers of Shiraz:

“Some believe that this hero is a mythical character whose stories of great feats, including his attack on the charmed castle and fight with Ververe Jadoo has entered Kheimeh Shab-Bazi; some others say that such a person had existed, he had been a respected Looti and puppeteer after whose death his name was given to one of the heroes, and later was used to refer to the whole show.⁹”

From the aesthetic point of view *Pahlevan Kachal* is not blessed with good looks, just like his counterparts in Asia and Europe, e.g. *Kara göz* in Turkey, *Pulcinella* in Italy and *Kasper* in Germany. As we know, the majority of these characters have a hunch back, a broken nose, a long jaw or tiny eyes that emphasize the absurdity of their face and their apparent craftiness, and mischief.

On the word level the two words *pahlevan* and *kachal* convey two contrasting meanings. On the one hand *pahlevan* is a hero who is strong and athletic, with a bulky figure and at the same time with his sportsmanship gives the impression of a brave person, on the other hand, baldness (*kachal* meaning bald) is regarded as a defect in appearance and represents a physical blemish, diminishing physical beauty. But in the course of the show his essentially good nature is revealed, although he seems to be doing deceitful things on the side.

The upshot is that it is the interior, the character and sportsmanship that lasts. From this viewpoint, perhaps none of the traditional puppet characters can be aesthetically classified as “beautiful”; in fact they can be very easily described as “ugly”. Despite this, their popularity has not waned; instead, they have been variously characterized as shrewd critics, joyful friends of children, and outright saints among the weak and the oppressed. The reason is that the puppeteer himself was a commoner, and the puppets, with their exaggerated gestures and loud voices, were the only means of releasing pent-up anger and frustration against the powerful rulers.

For the same reason, many types of puppet show all over the world have been named after their heroes. For example, Punch in England, Pulcinel in France, Pulcinella in Italy, and *Pahlevan Kachal* in Iran. This legendary hero with his complicated aspects of character, in different periods has made a name for himself in the traditional Iranian hand puppet shows.

So *Pahlevan Kachal* is a wise and determined hero, whom we follow in his daily life and interaction with people. He never reveals his true intentions to us, nor does he let us be sure of his morals, thoughts and actions. We will only be allowed to sympathize and identify with parts

⁸ *The Curtains of Plays and Collected Articles on Theater and Ta'zieh*, p.143.

⁹ *A Study of Iranian Theater*, p. 110.

of his actions. Identifying with him consoles us and makes us believe that nothing is eternal and holy, and it is only in the face of daily social routines of life that people's actions can be judged.

SHAB-BAZI¹⁰ OR KHEIMEH SHAB-BAZI

Shab-Bazi or *Parde-Bazi* is the string puppet form. In *Fotowat Nameh Soltani*, Vaez Kashefi mentions that this show was put on during the night and was alternatively called *Bazi-ye Pishband*. *Pishband* was a chest in front of which the puppets were played. It is also the location for storing the puppets.

The puppeteers put this chest between themselves and the audience and played the puppets in the front. Later it was mainly called *Kheimehh Shab-Bazi*, which is still the operative name. Attar of Nishapur, the famous poet of the 13th century, called it *Parde-Bazi*. In the book *Oshtor-nameh*, a "master Parde-Baz" and one "master painter" are mentioned. The former lays the colored masks on the cloth in front of the booth (kheimeh), and the latter moves the strings of the puppets.

Kheimeh Shab-Bazi is also mentioned in the 13th century *Jahangushay History* Iranian ¹¹. *Kheimeh Shab-Bazi* has received remarkable influence in the Safavid (1501-1736) and Qajar (1794-1925) eras due to cultural exchanges with the Ottoman, Mongol and Indo-Chinese puppet shows.

Sadegh Hedayat, the famous contemporary Iranian researcher and writer says:

"Kheimeh Shab-Bazi takes place on the ground, in a booth made by using ropes with iron nails attached to their ends. The walls are 170 cm tall and 190 cm wide. The booth's back and side wall and its roof are flat and without backing. The front wall, facing the audience starts from the floor and is as wide as the booth. It is a rectangular opening, cut as high as 50 cm. Inside the booth, about 60 cm deep, there is a black cloth with tiny Malileh filigree. The puppets appear in front of this black inner curtain that hides the movements of the puppets' strings. The furthest part of the booth, where the operator and the puppet chest are located, is hidden from the viewers by means of the same black cloth. The floor of the booth, from the front wall to the inner curtain in the middle of the booth, is covered with a white cloth on which the puppet's show is performed. The puppets are moved from the back of the cloth, in the middle of the booth, towards the front, in the middle. The length of the attached strings depends on the extent of each puppet's movement, with the main strings attached to the head and shoulders of the puppets. During the show the puppets' strings will be attached to

¹⁰ Night play.

¹¹ *The History of the World Conqueror*, by Ata-Malik Juvayni.

wooden pieces that the operators handle. There are 70 to 80 puppets for each show. The puppets vary in height, ranging from 20 to 35 cm.¹²

The head of each puppet is made of porcelain (later plaster and wood were also used), and their body is made out of cloth and wood. The puppets' costumes is tailored for them according to their character, by the puppeteers or their wives. *Kheimeh Shab-Bazi* is a musical show. The team of presenters is made up of the three-person triangle of master puppeteer, two musicians and the Morshed, who is a wise narrator.

Sometimes the Morshed is also responsible for playing tombak, in which case three people perform the show, and this is an older tradition. These three collaborate closely, and the Morshed is the mediator. He translates the words of the puppets, since their voice is distorted by the *safir* (swazzle), and also gives the cue for beginning and ending the show. All three can sing. In the past there was also a *ghashogh-zan*¹³ in the group.

Unlike Pahlevan Kachal, which has a specific plotline, in *Kheimeh Shab-Bazi* there is a lot of incidental daily movement of the puppets inside the booth and a lot of spontaneous dialog, which can be about the contemporary issues and events that interest people. Some of their daily routines are: sweeping the booth, *Sagha* giving out drinking water to people, dancing, acrobatics, and the traditional Iranian strongman shows. All these are preparations for the wedding of the son of Salim Khan, the town's ruler. In some scripts something amazing happens _ with the sound of thunderbolt and wind a monster descends and ends the show by gathering all the puppets. This performance reflects many of the ethnological elements and traditional beliefs and rituals peculiar to different periods.

Golunov, a Russian Iranologist notes:

"Anthropological elements can be found in this type of shows. Dances, moving house, marriage and birthday traditions are often chosen as their subject matter. Kheimeh Shab-Bazi theater has been able to attract a lot of public interest, since it has to do with everyday lives of people and is related to their actual behavior."¹⁴

Some of the other stories in *Kheimeh Shab-Bazi* are, Phlevan Panbeh, who has the look and boast of a hero but is in fact a coward, or *Hasan Kachal* which tells the story of a lazy boy who, through a chain of events, is led to the Dīvs' castle where he has to release the captive girl, and *Bijan and Manije* which is a romantic epic story from Firdawsi's *Shah-nameh*.

In the past a *Kheimeh Shab-Bazi* performance would start at night time and would continue until daybreak. Contemporary topics and themes could enter the show through improvisation, and this would interest the crowd since a lot of pent-up political and class frustration could be vented. This show has borne many ethnological elements through the ages and has

¹² *Studies on the Folklore of Iran*, pp. 416-417.

¹³ Someone who banged on a metal bowl with a spoon.

¹⁴ *Iran's Folklore Literature*, pp. 117-118.

strengthened those qualities that are constant in all periods, e.g. sportsmanship, generosity, resistance against the tyranny of the upper classes. The hero of *Kheimeh Shab-Bazi* is called Mobarak. He is a dark-complexioned puppet, always dressed in red with a red hat; like other puppets of *Kheimeh Shab-Bazi*, he is directed by means of only two strings attached to his head and waist. This simplicity of structure makes him capable of strange movements, which shortens the distance between his words and his actions. Mobarak is quick-witted, talks back, is comical and good natured. He is characterized by his romantic infatuation, and his verbosity, especially when he is being spoken to!

The main difference between Mobarak and Pahlevan Kachal is the supernatural elements in some of the stories of *Pahlevan Kachal*. Despite his popularity, Mobarak cannot be called a *pahlevan* or hero. And he does not immediately give the impression of a hero to the audience either. He is a more ordinary character with public aspects, behind which there is also sly rationalism. Outwardly foolish but clever inside, Mobarak is a character akin to Pahlevan Kachal, only he is not supposed to do anything extraordinary. The word “mobarak” (auspicious) as this black marionette’s name, is a pre-judgmental emphasis on his beneficial and hope-giving essence. He is searching for a new land in the laughter of his audience. The land of smiling people, where no problem remains unresolved, and through all unfortunate or unpleasant events, with the aid of laughter and derision, a way can be made. The combination of the power of laughter in *Kheimeh Shab-Bazi* with literary, artistic, sociological and even philosophical concepts, indicates an exceptional Iranian talent in artistic creations.

POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CRITICISM IN THE LANGUAGE OF PAHLEVAN KACHAL AND MOBARAK

The presenters of the *Pahlevan Kachal* and *Kheimeh Shab-Bazi* shows, through the satiric language of the main characters, especially Pahlevan Kachal, and by using a technique of the old Iranian performances called *Goriz* or “digression”, bring the old tales to the present time, and deal with some of the most important issues such as political deviations, social and even economic problems. The audience knows that there is no chance the puppets would approve the status quo. When the topic becomes contemporary, all eyes and ears in the audience expect the biting tongue and the satiric behavior of the puppets. The combination of the old language and the new terms adds to the parody since neither Pahlevan Kachal nor Mobarak is expected to use the modern political, economic, or social terminologies that have become fashionable in the modern times. When the puppets go too far in their criticism, from outside the booth, the Morshed apologizes to those criticized, or justifies what the puppets say, which itself causes increased satire, because the puppets will contradict the Morshed yet again and may even intensify their criticism. All these are based on improvisation; therefore, the presenters of these types of shows must have an active and agile mind.

To sum up, let us briefly consider the behavioral characteristics of the main protagonists of the traditional Iranian puppet shows, Pahlevan Kachal and Mobarak:

- Exaggeration in speech, action, religion, and love
- Contrast in behavior: their behavior is in intense contrast with reality
- Inappropriate teasing: boldness in the use of vulgar and inappropriate words in order to further their aims, mocking the rulers, authorities, and the rich with bold and biting language, which is a distinguishing quality of traditional puppets
- Repetition of funny movements and words: the repetition of simple words and actions makes the situations funny and comic
- Slapstick and rough-and-tumble: in many situations, Pahlevan Kachal and Mobarak do things that are improbable and unexpected, such as putting the Dīv's horn in Ververe Jadoo's pocket while fighting; repeated summersaults and knockabouts are among other features of these puppets
- Lying, deceit and hypocrisy: these characters are often popular and well-known for their honor code among the masses; however, against other characters and especially their enemies they lie unapologetically, and use deceit, hypocrisy, and craft in order to stand up for the truth, for this reason what they do still appears pleasant and likable
- Defending the weak and fighting for the rights of the oppressed: the ultimate purpose of these characters in using these qualities is the revival of the rights of the oppressed and the weak in the face of the injustice of tyrants.

*“Go ridicule and learn to play the music
In order to defend your rights against the world¹⁵”*

Finally, after the analysis of the structure, characterization, and the scripts of *Kheimeh Shab-Bazi* and *Pahlevan Kachal* puppet shows, we can conclude that the causes of their enduring appeal among the people are as follows:

The extensive use of all types of folklore including stories, customs and traditions, proverbs, popular beliefs, folksongs, and so on has been one of the key success factors in both immediate and indirect communication between the performers and the audience of the shows of *Pahlevan Kachal* and *Kheime-Shab-Bazi*. Likewise, the language of the puppets in the booth very much resembles the language of common people, a simple language whose suggestive power is possibly one of the most notable examples of its kind in the world.

The characterization of Mobarak and Pahlevan Kachal as the only bold and daring characters in the show and their critical view and language has led to the creation of striking contrast in relation to the other characters and this is one of the driving forces of the show.

Furthermore, the creation of comical and occasionally satiric linguistic situations holds the interest of the audience and many issues and problems of the time that the people cannot afford

¹⁵ Ubayd Zakani (1300 – 1371 CE), Persian poet and satirist.

to raise often turn up in the puppets' conversation. The puppet character that is not taken seriously, but whose language is immensely influential is another reason for the popularity of the shows. Perhaps Mobarak is the same mask that the performer puts on the face of the brave puppet of the booth in the interests of the people, making Mobarak's sharp tongue the expressive voice of the oppressed people of the time.

Another reason for the sympathetic reception of the audience is the fact that in the land of puppets all events and concepts occur simply and easily, and the daily lives of common people is shown in an episodic way along with the lives of palace-dwellers.

Moreover, the performers maintain the interest of the audience until the end by using their practical knowledge and their strong psychological insight. They weigh up the existing atmosphere and keep the interaction fresh, energetic and cheerful.

In short it is the combination of these elements that comprise the secret of the enduring popularity of the traditional Iranian puppet shows.

Sources:

- Beizaei, Bahram. *A Study of Iranian Theater*. 5th ed. Tehran: Roshangaran and Women's Studies Publishing, 2006
- Rezvani, Majid. *Le Theatre Et La Danse en Iran*. d'Aujourdhui ed., Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1962.
- Sattari, Jalal. *Curtains of Shows and collected essays on Ta'zieh and Theater*. 1st ed. Tehran: Mina Publishing, 2000
- Sipek, Iery. *Iranian Folklore Literature*. trans. Afgari, Mohammad. Tehran: Soroush Publishing, 2005
- Jackson, N.M. *Jackson's Travelogue*, Chapter 8, "Ecbatana, the Capital of the Medes."
- Vaez Kashefi, M. H. *Fotovatname Soltani*. compiled by Mahjoob, M. J. Tehran: Bonyad-e Farhang-e Iran Publishing,
- Hedayat, Sadegh. *Studies on the Folklore of Iran*. 3rd ed. compiled by Jahangir Hedayat, Tehran: Cheshmeh Publishing, 2000