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CUPID AND PSYCHE
IN
AFGHANISTAN

An International Tale
in
Cultural Context

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

In contemplating how best to present the institution of Afghan folktale telling to non-folklorists of varied backgrounds and interests, one confronts a dilemma which plagues folklorists in their own approach to their material. The dilemma can best be summarized in the juxtaposition of observations by two scholars, one a historian and folklorist, the other an anthropologist. Richard Dorson, the folklorist, stresses the comparatist dimension of folklore studies, in which materials from around the world are perceived to share both structure and content. In a 1975 article,[1] he counters the assertion of another folklorist of the anthropological persuasion, Phil Peek, who asked the question, "How could correlation of a culture's folklore and its value system possibly be considered a fallacy?" Dorson's answer to this was that such an assumption can very easily be fallacious or at least misleading, because "This is a standard technique of anthropologists who read into widely distributed folklore items a symbolism and set of meanings peculiar to the culture they study. The mirror approach will only work if weighted with the comparative aspect." In other words, one must not claim cultural exclusiveness for verbal forms or sets of symbols and meanings which occur widely across cultures, and one must take into acount the wider occurrence of any given folklore item, before attributing its content or structure to a particular culture.

The second half of the dilemma has been articulated by William Bascom, whose extensive studies of African art and verbal lore have centered on the anthropological interpretation of symbols and art forms. In a 1954 article,[2] he remarked that the 'basic paradox of folklore', when viewed intraculturally as a mirror for cultural norms and values, is that social values are prominently displayed in folklore at the same time that the audience takes obvious pleasure in their violation. Many others have noted the antisocial fantasy element in folklore, in which accepted social norms are violated to the obvious approval of the audience which cheers the (anti)hero on to further exploits.[3]

To illustrate both the universality and the cultural particularity of Afghan oral tales, I have chosen to present a very widely known international folktale, which is represented by no fewer than eleven different storytellers' performances in my collection.[4] The tale of Xasteh Xomār is closely related to the tales of Beauty and the Beast and Cupid and Psyche, which are widely known in the west. Thus this tale is both Afghan and international and, as will be shown, elements in it both uphold and violate Afghan social values and behavioral norms.

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1) R.M. Dorson, "African and Afro-American Folklore," Journal of American Folklore 88 (1975), p. 163.

2) W. Bascom, "The Four Functions of Folklore", Journal of American Folklore 67 (1954), pp. 333-349.

3) Trickster tale cycles, of which the 'Mulla Nasr ud-Din' stories are a well-known Middle Eastern example, can be encyclopedic in their presentation of anti-social behavior.

4) These tales were collected in the course of a two-year recording project (1974 - 1976) which yielded more than 800 stories, songs and interviews. I am grateful for the financial support of the Fulbright-Hays doctoral dissertation research program, the American Association of University Women, Harvard University's Sheldon Fund, and the National Science Foundation, which made this project possible.

THE STYLE OF AFGHAN ORAL NARRATIVE

The text of Xasteh Xomār which accompanies this discussion is very nearly a verbatim translation of the Dari-language original. A few expressions have been paraphrased to render idiomatic meanings. In a departure from the usual procedure in writing down oral narrative, the highly repetitive style of oral storytelling has been preserved in the translation. This translation is intended to present the story as nearly as possible in the form in which it would be presented to an Afghan audience. Oral presentation is of necessity highly repetitive. Major and minor series of events are presented more than once, so that the audience can comprehend and remember the overall flow of events. These repetition patterns in Afghan storytelling (as in other traditions) are of approximately three types:

a) Verbal repetitions. These include repetitive phrasings, such as "he told her, anyway. He told her, and morning came" (p.11), "they came and came and came " (p. 9). The former example is a 'stall', a repeated phrase which allows the storyteller a moment to organize the next sequence of events. The latter type of repetition, though it may also serve as a stall, has a more immediate effect on the audience in emphasizing distance, elapsed time, or intense activity.

Another aspect of Dari style, which accounts for some repetitive patterns, is difficult to render in English translation because it is caused by the inherent ambiguity of the single pronoun, /ū/ (او), which is replaced by he, she or it in English. In addition, ū replaces /ān) (آن), 'that', in colloquial Dari. Pronominal references can be quite ambiguous. In speech, this ambiguity is partly resolved by stress ('she/he went this way, and she/he went that way") and partly by context. Many are left unclear, and there are a number of verbal repetitions in Xasteh Xomār which are attempts by the narrator to resolve ambiguous references, such as "his heart burned. Xasteh Xomār's heart burned" (p. 10).

b) Planning/execution/recapitulation sequences. Very often a character announces a plan or gives directions for a series of actions which are then carried out (e.g. the magic wedding, p. 7). After the completion of a series of actions, there is often an opportunity for one or another of the characters to recapitulate, briefly or at length, events which have gone before. Recapitulations frequently occur as components of recognition scenes, in which a character establishes his or her identity or legitimacy by demonstrating a knowledge of how certain events happened. Recapitulations often occur at a structural point immediately before the final, climactic series of events in a story. They may also occur at the conclusion of one section of a story, preliminary to the next section. The human bride's speech to Xasteh Xomār immediately after their wedding (pp.7-8) is an example of the latter. The heroine recapitulates at length to her husband the circumstances of her being chosen as his bride. Implied in his approval of her actions ("Xasteh Xomār got very happy with this girl. . .") is a negative judgement on her elder sisters, who take the role of spoilers in the next section of the story

(pp. 8-12).

c) Series of analogous events, such as the three sisters' responses to their father (pp. 5-6), or the five tasks which Xasteh Xomār's mother sets for the heroine. Although these events are very similar, even redundant in their contribution to the plot, they contain minimal differences which serve to distinguish them in the minds of storyteller and audience. Their arrangement is often hierarchical (in difficulty of accomplishment or, as in the heroine's tasks in Xasteh Xomār, in the degree of magical content) so that repetition of similar events effects an intensification of drama, as well as the reiteration of important ideas through the articulation of a set of related symbols. (These 'ideas' and symbols' will be discussed below.)

Because repetitiveness is considered an aesthetic flaw in literary prose, the repetitive patterns of oral narrative are usually edited out when traditional tales are written down, even for scholarly purposes. In oral presentations, these repetitions are a vital mnemonic device. They give the audience opportunities to review and assimilate the contents of the narrative. Their mnemonic value is complemented by their aesthetic effect, for in oral narrative as in music, a limited number of themes are repeated in different order and relation to each other, and the aesthetic effect depends on the audience's comprehension of their forms, variations and relationships. On first listening to foreign music or foreign tales, a person unfamiliar with the tradition often misses the overall structures and relations, which are embedded in a welter of unfamiliar detail.

To an Afghan audience, accustomed to hearing tales in their own tradition, both the major forms and descriptive details of Xasteh Xomār, its regularities and symmetries, are readily comprehensible by virtue of their familiarity from performances of this and other tales. The narrator of the tale translated here once remarked, when complimented on the speed and ease with which she had learned a new story, "When you know the words, learning is easy."

Oral performance, with all its expressive liveliness of tone and gesture, is not well portrayed even by verbatim transcription. A tape of the single oral performance translated here is available,* in the hope that the sound of the Dari original will help both those who are fluent in Persian and those who are not, to experience the liveliness and spontaneity of the storyteller's art.

*The cassette tape is available free of charge to subscribers on written request to The Afghanistan Council, The Asia Society, 112 East 64th Street, New York, NY 10021. For non-subscribers and for additional copies the price of the cassette is $3.50.

XASTEH XOMĀR*

Some things that bear fruit,
(Some that) bear none,
Cypress and poplar
Pomegranate and quince,
Pistachio and pomegranate
The mouse did the carding,
The 'mother of mice' the spinning
The louse did the tailoring,
The tick the dyeing.
We went to the house of Mulla Abbās,
There we ate bread and <u>mās</u>.[1]
He put us over there,
With the felt rug on top of the cotton rug.
We suffered with the cold.
We fell asleep in the evening,
Morning came, we mounted our donkey in the morning,
With our water jar behind.
The wall fell down and our water jar broke.
The cow gave birth, a female calf.
Her bowl broke and her <u>mās</u> spilled.
Lord, Lord ( )[2]

Spring comes and much rain falls, and the trees turn green, and put out blossoms, and they bloom, pomegranate and quince and pistachio and almond, and - - mulberry and apple and apricot, everything blooms! And we slaves,[3] we people of Afghanistan, when they're ripe we eat them and enjoy them.

There was, and there was - there was no one better than God - there was a clan of nomads, herdsmen. Did you hear? Or not? (MM: We heard!) This nomad herdsman - is this the story of Hussein-e Xāldār? Or Xasteh Xomār? (<u>M</u>[4]: Xasteh Xomār! <u>MM</u>: Xasteh Xomār. Or it's up to you). But you've written it down. (<u>MM</u>: It doesn't matter - I'll write it over.) No -- I'll tell it. I'll tell <u>Xasteh Xomār</u>.

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* Recorded 14 April, 1975 from MZ, a 28-year-old mother of five, native of G_____ village, Anjīl district, Herat province. Presently living in Herat City. Details of this informant's identity are withheld at her own request.

1) /Māst/ 'yoghurt'. 2) This is an example of a 'Būd, <u>nabúd</u>', a nonsense verse used to invoke the fantasy world of afsāneh at the story's outset. The last phrase is inaudible. 3) /Bandeh/: 'slaves of God' not a political statement! 4) Comments from the audience are in parentheses. <u>MM</u> indicates the author, <u>M</u> the nine-year-old daughter of the storyteller.

There was and there was, there was an old man. OK? He was an old thorn-gatherer. This old thorn-gatherer would go and cut thorns and would take his thorns and sell them, and would bring things for himself and his little daughters to eat.

One day came, some days and a while passed, and he was cutting his load of thorns and tying it to pick it up, when he saw a flat stone, there. When he lifted up the flat stone, he saw a store room full of wheat there. He said - then he picked up his load of thorns - he didn't throw it away! He put it on his back and took it and put it down in his own house. He said, "Wife!"

"What?"

"Come, God has given!"

"What has God given?"

"God has given a store room full of wheat."

"Good."

Then he went and got donkeys and sacks from these Muslims, and found some people, two or three workers, and he came and loaded up that little room full of wheat, and carried it off. From about morning when he started, it was close to supper time prayer when he finished and he went after a broom to sweep out the last of it. - OK, it was enough like that, if you'd just taken it all, and hadn't swept the floor, too. So you wouldn't have seen all those troubles! - He was greedy, though, he came and took the broom, to go sweep it out, and when he came back, he saw a snake lying on top of the storehouse, curled up.

Then he said, "For whom have you carried off this store house full of wheat? It was mine."

He said, "This store house of wheat - I have an old wife, and three daughters, and I've been cutting thorns. Today I came and cut a little load of thorns, and I saw a flat stone, and I said, 'I'll take that flat stone home, it'll be useful.' We don't have anything else - 'When my kids wash their feet, they can put them on the stone,' Then I saw there was a store room full of wheat. I went and got sacks and donkeys, and loaded it up, and I brought this little broom to sweep it out."

He said, "All right, now, if you give me one of your daughters, fine, but if you don't, I'll eat you." This snake told him that. And the snake's name was Xasteh Xomār.[1] (MM: Xasteh Xomār.) Xasteh Xomār - "I'll eat you."

He said, "That's all right, I'll give one."

He came back to the house and sat down sadly. (M: No, he said to him -) Shut up! He came to the house and sat down sadly, and said - his eldest daughter came and said, "Papa! Papa!"

"Soul of your Papa!"

"Why are you so sad, now that God has given to us?"

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1) Complex pun on /mār/, 'snake', /xasteh xormā/, 'date seed', and/or /xasteh/, 'weary', and /xomār/, 'languid (glance)', the latter two terms used frequently in classical Persian poetry to describe the gaze of the idealized lover. I am indebted to Shahla Haeri and Aminollah Azhar for these suggestions.

"Oh, darling, don't ask!"

"No, by God, you must tell!"

"Well, I went and there was a snake lying on top of the store house He said, 'You must give me one of your daughters and if you don't, I'll eat you!"

"Oh, to death if he eats you! To dust (with it) if he eats you![1] What's one old wom- one old man, an old fart, if that's all he'll eat? I'm young - am I supposed to go and marry that snake, so he won't eat you, my father? What if he does? To dust, if he eats you! I should wreck my life?"

Put it that the middle daughter came along. The middle daughter came along and said, "Papa! Papa!"

"Soul of your Papa!"

"Why are you sad?"

"Don't ask, darling."

"Oh, Papa! By God, you must tell - now that God has given to us, why are you sad?"

He said, "Well, then, when I went back to sweep out the store room, there was a snake in it. He said, 'To whom did you take the wheat?' I said, 'I have three daughters,' and he said, 'All right, out of these three daugthers, if you give me one, good, if you don't, I'll eat you.'"

She said, "Eh, to death if he eats you! Dust, if he eats you! Should my heart be sad if he eats you? Should I be grieved if he eats you? Should I go marry a snake? He'll eat me! You've seen your life, it's gone by, you've gotten old, let him eat you, to dust with it, forget it![2]

So then the poor old man sat there sadly. His little daughter came along. His little daughter came and said, "Papa! Papa"

"Soul of your Papa!"

"Why are you so sad, now that God has given us this store house of wheat? If we eat for the rest of our lives, it's enough for us!"

"Oh, darling, don't ask!"

"No, by God, you must tell!"

"Go away you crop-haired heathen![3] And you worse than the rest!"

"Papa, if you tell me, 'Die!', I'll die, if you tell me, 'Come to life', I'll come to life, but you must tell me. Tell me."

"All right, there was this snake in the store house, when I took the broom there to sweep it, and he said, 'If you give me one of your daugthers, I won't eat you. If you don't, I'll eat you.'"

She said, "Eh, Papa, to death if he eats me! To dust if he eats me! I'll accept that snake." This little sister spoke. She said, "It must be that God has given me this snake as my lot. I'll marry this snake."

He said "Good." This old man, overjoyed, he came, and that Xasteh Xomār who was a snake - he wasn't a snake! He'd put a snake skin over himself, but he was a parīzād.[4] He'd said, "You bring me word, if your daughter accepts me, you bring me word, and if not, if she says 'No', you come so I can eat you, then. Even if you sit at home, I'll come and eat you.

The old man came, overjoyed, and said, "My little daughter accepts you."

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1) Mild oaths: 'So what?' 'to Hell with it!' 2) /ġom konīm/, lit. 'lose it.' 3) Women's hair is cut off as a sign of disgrace 4) /Parīzād or /parī/, a good supernatural, cognate to English 'fairy.'

"All right, when tomorrow comes, there'll come a wind, and your house and courtyard will all be swept out at once. After that some little drops of rain will fall, and settle the dust. After the dust settles, a suit of clothes will fall down. Wash your little girl's hair well, and put the clothes on her, and after that a camel will come and bellow at the gate. Put the girl on it, and go slap it, (let it go) off toward the west.[1] So it will go that way."

"He said, "All right."

The next morning came, and those clouds came and the wind came up, and didn't leave a thorn or a straw in his house. It was swept, then the raindrops came and the dust was settled, and a suit of clothes fell out of the air. When it fell, they took it - they'd washed her hair clean, and they put the clothes on her, and all at once they heard the bellow of a camel --- No, God of repentence,[2] -- Oh, yes - (first) they saw that snakes came, and snakes came, and snakes came and snakes came and snakes came,[3] and out of fear this poor guy doesn't say anything. All the rooms got full of snakes. Then after that they saw a camel come to the gate, and it bellowed and bellowed, and when the old man went out, he saw a camel, white as milk. So he put a little shawl over his daughter's face and mounted her on the camel, and smacked it a good one and said, "Go! Off toward the west!" The camel went.

The camel went off as far as, say, from here to the Mālān bridge,[4] where there was nobody, just desert and empty land, and he set the girl down. He rolled over, and he was a young man so beautiful his own sister would fall in love with him, seeing him from behind! That's what a fine young man he was! And he put her on his shoulders and came to that same place where the stone and store house were. He lifted the stone and went and she saw, wow! There's a whole house here, with carpets of silk spread all over and piles and piles of meat, and so much ghee that it couldn't be gathered together, and rice like that, and sweets, and tea, and there were dresses like that, and pearls and jewels and gold, and good things like that.

This - then this Xasteh Xomār was a parī, not a dīv or a bārzangī[5] or a snake, but he'd pulled on a snake skin over his body, so no human would know what he was. (They'd) think he was a snake.

So he said, "Do you know what this is all about?"

"No."

"I'm no snake, I'm a person. Though I'm of humankind,[6] I have this snake skin on my body. All this house and wealth, all this is yo(urs) - I'm a person and of humankind, but I wear this snake skin during the day."

She said - this girl said, "These two sisters of mine, the older and the younger, when my father brought the wheat, they were very happy about the wheat and the store house.

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1) /Qiblah zamīn/ 'the land of the qiblah (Mecca),' to the west relative to Afghanistan 2) An expression of regret for forgetfulness. 3) The snake's wedding party: invitees to weddings serve as witnesses on behalf of both families 4) Perhaps three miles. 5) /Dīv/ a malevolent supernatural, often monstrous and associated with bride-stealing in folktale; /bārzangī/: "like dīv only bigger, worse" according to MZ. 6) MZ sees parī as sexually compatible with humans, but not with dīv, as she explains in another story in my collection. Here she considers parī to be human - not a generally shared idea.

My poor father came, and sat down sadly. When he sat down, my older sister said, 'Papa! Papa!' and he said, 'Soul of your Papa!' She said, 'Why are you so sad, now that God has given to us?' He said, 'Darling, don't ask!' She said, 'Why?' He said, 'When I went back to sweep out the store house, there was a snake curled up in the room. He said, "To whom did you take this wheat?" I said "I have three daughters, and I'm just a thorn-cutter, I don't have a thing. I took it to eat with them." Then he said, "If you give me one of your daughters, good. If not, I'll eat you."' She said, 'Eh, to death if he eats you! To dust if he eats you, one old thing, an old man! Should I go and marry a snake? Wreck my life?' So then, when she said that, like that, she left. It was left to my middle sister. When my middle sister came, she said, 'Papa! Papa!' He said, 'Soul of your father!' 'Why are you so sad like this?' He said this - 'Don't ask, darling! You're worse than she is!' She said, 'No by God, you must tell!' He said, 'All right, this wheat, that God gave and I brought, when I took the broom and a sack back to sweep it out, all at once I saw a snake in the store room. The snake said, "To whom did you take this wheat?" I said, "I have an old wife and three little daughters, I took it for them." He said "If you give me one of those daughters of yours, fine and good, but if you don't, I'll eat you."' My sister said, 'To death if he eats you, to dust if he eats you. Should it wound my soul if he eats you? You're old, you've consumed your life, anyway, so if you die, to dust with it, if a snake eats you! Should I go and marry a snake, so he can eat me?' My sister spoke like that to him. It was left to me. It was left to me, and I went, and my father said, 'Go! You crop-haired heathen! You're worse than they are! Look what they did, and they're older and wiser, and look what they said to me. How should you give me an answer?' I said, 'No, you have to tell me.' When he told me that, I said, 'Eh, Papa dear! It's better that he should eat me, than eat you. God made this snake my fate. I'll marry this snake!"

Xasteh Xomār got very happy with this girl, and she found love in his heart. And this girl - just think, this Xasteh Xomār has a face that shines, and eyes like cups, and great beauty, a fine countenance.

Put it then that they were living here, and after some days and a while, these sisters of hers - he said, "Oh wife, this house, this gold, this wealth, all this, everything is yours. If you want to, eat. If you want to use it, anything you want to, do." When he would go out in the morning to hunt, Xasteh Xomār, he would give her a ring. He said, "When you get hungry, or you want something, give this ring a twist and say, 'By the truth of the excellent Prophet Solomon, I ask that such-and-such will come to me.'" And it would come and appear in front of her and she'd eat.

So he was here, and these two crop-haired heathen sisters of hers, one day they said, "Papa, Papa!"

"Soul of your Papa!"

"You gave that sister of ours to a snake. We'll go and get news

of her."[1]

He said, "Oh, darling! That snake ate her, he killed her, or whatever, Where will you go?"

"No, we're going."

Their mother said "No," too.

They said, "No, we're going."

These two got up and went to the city, and bought two cooked sheeps' heads. And each sister wrapped one up in her carrying cloth, saying, "We'll take our sister a present, a nice, wholesome cooked head." (MZ laughs.)[2]

They came. Their father had showed them the way, already. They came and came and came and came, and they found that plain. They came, came, came, came, came, came, came, and it got to be past afternoon prayer time, anyway, stage by stage, and all at once they found that flat stone. They knocked on the stone, and then their sister came. She said, "Who is it?"

"It's I."

"Who is it, here?"

"We've come as guests."[3]

When she raised the stone, she saw it was her two sisters, and she said, "Lord! What's that on your heads?"

They said, "We brought you cooked heads, dear Sister."

She said, "Take them and throw them away."

They took these heads off, waay away, and dug a hole and threw them in it, and covered it up again, and came back.

She took them to the hamām[4] right away, and washed her sisters' heads and bodies clean, and she took fine clothes that she had in the house and put one suit on each, and golden bracelets on her wrists and necklaces at her throat and golden rings and hair ornaments on her head, and the other just the same, so that "When Xasteh Xomār comes, he won't laugh in his beard at us."

The rooms and everything were in her keeping, anyway. Supper prayer time came and Xasteh Xomar returned, and he said, "You're talking - who is it?"

"I have guests."

"Who are your guests?"

"My sisters."

"That's fine, then, that your sisters have come."

That evening, they sat down to talk and they were talking and telling their news, and their hearts' secrets, and later, they went to sleep. It got to be morning and they got up. This - eldest sister of hers was a rascal, and in the morning she said, "Sister, Sister!"

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1) A few days or weeks after her wedding, a new bride will normally receive a visit from her relatives, who may then take her home to visit her own family 2) Cooked heads, sold by vendors on the street in many cities, are regarded as low-status food, although people will admit, laughingly, that they like them. 3) When knocking on a private door, people do not ordinarily give their names, but state their business and/or are recognized by voice. 4) Here, a private bath in the house.

"Soul of your sister!"

"You're with this snake, now - how can you sleep with him? What do you do? Aren't you afraid? He's a snake!"

"Eh, Sister! He's no snake."

"How do you mean, he's no snake? Of course he's a snake!"

"All right, tonight when we're going to sleep, you come and peek around the door, and see what kind of thing he is! Then after that, say 'He's a snake.'"

That evening when the husband and wife were going to sleep, these two sisters went and looked through a hole in the door, and they saw the room was on fire from his beauty!

She said, "Ehhh!? That sister of mine, so at ease and well cared for! Come let's burn his snake skin! Why should he cover himself with a snake skin? This - this boy mustn't cover himself with a snake skin!"

After that, this eldest sister - she was a rascal, the elder one - morning came and she said, "Sister, Sister!"

"Soul of your sister!"

"By God, we looked, last night, and he's quite a thing! But Sister, why does he cover himself with that skin? Come, let's burn his skin, so that he won't put it on."

She said, "This - what would it burn in, that a person could burn it? OK, let him put it on - let him wear it. As soon as he comes, he takes it off, anyway, he doesn't wear the skin when he's with me. When he goes out to hunt, (he puts it on)."

"She said, "No, he shouldn't put it on at all." This older sister of hers said that.

Put it, dear, kind friends, that she said, "What shall I do?"

"Nothing, only, tonight, when you're going to sleep, laughing and talking and joking, all at once say, 'How can your (snake) skin be burned?" He'll tell, then. Then after that, we'll burn it."

She said, "All right." She was her sister, anyway, if she hit one side of her face, it would hurt, and if she hit the other side, it would hurt, too. On this side there was her husband. He was her husband and he had a fine countenance, he was beautiful, and she had everything she wanted - and on this side, there was her sister, and she was fond of her sister, too. When the evening came, and they were laughing and talking and telling their secrets, and joking, all at once she brought it up and said, "How does your snake skin burn?"

He said, "Oh, foolish human! Whoever said this to you, said it out of enmity. Without this skin, I can't be with you. My snake skin -" first, oh, God of repentence, I forgot! First, he hit her with his hand, when she said, "How does your snake skin burn?" He took and hit her on the cheek, like that, so that her head spun around backward. Yeah, well, he got mad then! He said, 'Now, if she burns my skin, now, I won't be with her, then, - these sisters - she'll be in trouble, then!' Of course, he was a parī and it was clear to him. He swung his hand and hit her, and her head spun around backwards. After that, his heart burned. Xasteh Xemār's heart burned. So he gently slapped her face back the other way, and it went back where

it belonged,[1] and his heart burned, and his tears poured down. He was very fond of her. He said, "Oh, foolish human! Whoever said that to you, said it out of enmity. If someone burns my snake skin, I won't be here any more. My skin burns in onion and garlic skins." He told her, anyway.

He told her and morning came. When morning came, these two sisters said - they saw their sister's face looking like it had been hit, and her cheek swollen like that. She said, "Sister, sister!"

"Soul of your sister!"

"Did you ask?"

"Yes, I asked."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing, only - first he hit my face, so my head spun around. After that he shed tears, then I understood, he gently hit me so my face went right again, then he said, 'Oh, foolish human, whoever said this to you, said it out of enmity for you. My skin burns in onion skins and garlic skins. You have your choice. If you burn it, it won't be with you any more.'"

"Ehh, Sister, let's burn it - where will he go? He was lying - if we burn the skin, where will he go?" She didn't realize that if they burned the skin he would take flight, like a dove, and go. Ye-es. He was a pari. She didn't understand, she was a human, foolish and simple.

After that, they gathered up onion and garlic skins, and they threw them in the bread oven, and the bread oven got hot, as red as a copper coin. When it got red, all at once - they went and got the skin from the room. When she'd gone and brought the skin and given it to her sister, and she was about to throw it in the oven, he came down out of the air, in the middle of everything. This Xasteh Xomar suddenly stood there, like something that goes up and comes right back down. When he came down, he said, "Oh, human! Hold back your hand! Oh, human, hold back your hand?" She threw it in the oven! (Interrupted by MZ's husband speaking.)

She threw it - threw it in the oven, threw the skin. It burnt. It burnt, the skin, and he went on his way. He went on his way, and the girl was left there, then. He told her that these things and property - Xasteh Xomār went, then, he disappeared - after he went, then, these carpets and jewels and gold and this food and clothing - not a bit was left in the house! Nothing - he left - like an ant going into its hole, and nothing remained. He left, and it was finished. The three sisters were left there.

These three sisters were left, and the one suit of clothes that the girl was wearing, Xasteh Xomār's wife, that was valuable - only it remained. She took off those clothes, and sold them. Said - as he was flying up, to go, he said, "Human, hold back your hand," and she held back, and he said, "Oh, foolish human, you'll remember these days! If you come, head toward the west. Take seven iron walking sticks and seven pairs of steel shoes, and maybe, stage by

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1) This incident is a commonplace, and occurs most often when the female captives of dīv question their captor/lovers, in order to learn a means of escape.

stage, you'll come to me, but there, my mother's a div, my father's a div, my aunt's a div, her daughter's a div, and they'll eat you. It would be better if you didn't come. But if you come, head toward the west." He told her that, and he went. And when he went, all the valuable goods disappeared.

She sold those clothes, and had seven iron walking sticks made and seven pairs of iron shoes. Then she took a packsack, and put seven plain homespun suits of clothes in it, and put it on her back. And this ring is on her finger. And she went then, heading west. She went by night, she went by day, she went by night, she went by day, she went by night, she went by day, and one pair of shoes fell off, and one stick broke. And she'd brought seven sticks! So she put on another pair of shoes, and took another stick, and stage by stage, she went on, night and day, night and day, and nights she would sleep in mosques, or out in the dry desert. Another pair of shoes got worn out and full of holes, and she threw them away, and she hit them with the stick and it broke, and she threw it away. Why should I give you a headache? Six pairs of shoes and six walking sticks were finished, and the seventh was in her hand, and she's still heading west. After that, from far away, she saw a herd of camels appearing. They were herding camels there. She went and when they got close, she asked, "Whose is this herd of camels?"

He said, "This herd of camels
Belongs to Xasteh Xomār,
To the brideprice of Bibī Negār."[1]

This man who was herding the camels said,
"This herd of camels
Belongs to Xasteh Xomār,
To the brideprice of Bibī Negār."

That is, "Xasteh Xomār has given this herd of camels as brideprice to Bibī Negār."

After she left the camels, she came, came, came, came, and she saw a herd of cows. She came up to the cowherd. She said, "Whose is this herd of cows?"

"It belongs to Xasteh Xomār,
To the brideprice of Bibī Negār."

So she came, She came, came, came, came, and she saw a herd of sheep, ewes and lambs. She said, "Whose is this herd of sheep?"

He said, "It belongs to Xasteh Xomār,
To the brideprice of Bibī Negār."

She said "What sort is this Xasteh Xomār?
And what is the 'brideprice of Bibī Negār'?
Where is their place and their house?

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1) The name /Bibī Negār/ means 'Lady Beauty' or 'Lady Idol'. MZ sometimes uses the phrase, /mar-e Bibī Negar/, 'brideprice of Bibī Negar' as though it were the character's name. See below, pp. 13, 18.

He said, "Wayyy - if you go - can you see that herd of goats? If you go past those goats, you see those trees that look black? Those trees are in front of the house of Xasteh Xomār."

She came and came and came, and arrived at the herd of goats, and said, "Whose is this herd of goats?"

He said, "It belongs to Xasteh Xomār,
To the brideprice of Bibī Negār."

She said, "Where is the place of Xasteh Xomār, and the 'brideprice of Bibī Negār'?"

He said, "Wa-ayy, off, by those trees that look black - it's there, beside a stream of water. The door - the gate is there."

She came and came and came and came, and she came to the trees and the stream. Right there by the door, she leaned her back against the wall and sat down. After she sat down, Xasteh Xomār's servant girl came out to fill a pitcher in the stream, for him to wash for prayers. So he could wash for prayers.

Then she said, "My little Mother, my little sister, give me one little drop of that water to drink, for I'm so tired and weary, that if I bend down to the stream, my back will break!"

She said, "Drink death! Drink dust! I'm taking this water for my master to wash for prayers," - this servant girl said that.

She said, "Oh, Lord, just as you carry it" - and that ring of Xasteh Xomār's was on her finger - "by the truth of the excellent Prophet Solomon, I ask that this water may turn to blood!"

When she took it and poured it over his hands, he saw that it was blood. He didn't say anything, Xasteh Xomār - he knew it was a sign of her.

So this girl came back. He didn't say, "What is this blood?"

This girl emptied it out, and came back to the stream and put it in the water and filled it.

When she filled it, she said, "Oh, dear mother! Dear lamb! Give me a little drop to drink, for if I bend over to drink my back will break. I'm so tired!"

She said, "Drink death! Drink dust! Drink lumps! My master is washing for prayer; should I give you to drink, so he can wash in your leftovers?"

She said, "Oh, Lord, just as you carry that water, by the truth of the excellent Prophet Solomon, I ask that this water be pus!"

When she brought it and poured it, it was pus. He said, "Why was it blood when you brought it the first time, and now again, it's pus that you brought?" By now he understood it all, and he said, "Oh, Lord God! What faith this human had, to come! Now what do I do?"

She said, "There, now, master, there's a traveler sitting at the gate, who says, 'Give me a drop to drink.' I don't give it, and that time it turned to blood, and now it's turned to pus."

He said, "You go and draw water in the pitcher from the stream for the traveler to drink, then bring me the remains for me to wash. It's all right." Xasteh Xomār said it.

This girl came and filled the pitcher and she said, "Give me a drop to drink."

She said, "Drink death! Drink dust! Take it and drink, then, and be satisfied."

And she - who didn't want water, anyway - it was an excuse - when she took the pitcher, the other one looked away, and she dropped her ring into the pitcher. She gave it back to the girl, and out of fear she didn't pour it out, she took it in.

When she took it in, Xasteh Xomār took the pitcher from her and said, "Leave, then, you're dismissed." He dismissed her, and when he'd dismissed her, he poured out the water and washed, and at the very last, the ring fell out with a clatter, his own ring. He said,"Lord God, a faithful human, she's kept faith, and come!"

He came out, then. He came out fast! He came and saw her sitting by the door, and said, "Didn't I say that you'd be sorry? Now what will I do with you? My mother's a dīv, my father's a dīv, my aunt's a div, her daughter's a dīv, and if my mother doesn't eat you, her sister will, and if she doesn't, her daughter will."

She said, "Whatever you do, I've come, now."

He put her on the ground and he sang over her, and sang, and sang, and sang, and sang, and sang, and sang, and sang, and by dear God's will she became a needle. He picked up the needle and stuck it in his coat and went back in the house, Xasteh Xomār's mother said,

"Pah! Pah! A human smell!
If a horse comes, it casts its shoe.
If a bird comes, it casts its plume,
What is a human being doing here?"

He said, "Eh, Mother! You think it's a human. I - with the humans - I am always going among the humans, and their smell is on me."

She said, "No, darling! You were always with humans, didn't I know? There's a human on you, somewhere!"

"No, there isn't!"

"Yes, there is a human. Xasteh Xomār, you've a human on you!"

"Mother, there is no human! I go around among humans, I'm always among them, and their smell is on me."

She said, "Darling, I'm a dīv! I can tell by the human smell, that there's a human on you somewhere!"

He said, "Well, Mother, it's nothing, only tomorrow is my wedding night, and I've brought a servant girl for your sister's daughter."[1]

"She said, "Good, bring her out."

He said, "No! You swear, now, and then I'll bring her out."

She said, "By the idol on the left hand, Xasteh Xomār, I swear I won't eat her -"

He said, "No."

She said, "By the idol on the right hand, I swear I won't eat her."

"No, I won't bring her out. You'll eat her."

I swear by my mother's milk,[2] darling, Xasteh Xomār, my dear, bring her out! I won't eat her."

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1) Xasteh Xomār is engaged to marry his cousin. 2) Hafizullah Baghban in his translation of this story (Dorson, 1975, p.237, note 16) explains that /haykal/. lit. 'statue, image' is the worship object of evil supernaturals, and that 'Left-hand haykal is the orgres' real worship object, so promise is kept when sworn by it; an ogre's swearing by the right-hand haykal is not reliable.' Several of my informants treat only swearing by the mother's milk as binding to supernaturals.

After that, he took the needle out of his collar and put it down there, and sang over it, and the same girl as before, it turned into that girl.

So then, after that, his mother didn't say any more. She got an idea, though, saying. "All right, now that I've sworn this to my son, I'll send her to my sister's house. My sister hasn't sworn, and she'll eat her."

Morning came, and that evening was to be Xasteh Xomār's wedding with Bibī Negār. She said, to the girl, "Go and sweep the whole castle and sprinkle water to settle the dust. Go first and sweep."

The girl went and got a broom and started sweeping, but by noon she hadn't even finished one of the roof platforms. Xasteh Xomār came and said, "What are you doing?"

"Nothing; she told me 'Go and sweep the castle, for tonight is Xasteh Xomār's wedding. And after that, sprinkle it with water.'"

He said, "Very well, even if you swept from now till tomorrow, could you finish even one roof platform? Didn't I tell you you'd be sorry?" He said, "Throw away the broom." She threw it away and he said, "By the truth of the excellent Prophet Solomon, I ask for a little gust of wind, so that not a straw or a twig or a bit of dust will be left on the roof or in the castle."

By the will of God such a wind came up that not a twig or a straw remained. The wind took them. She went and said, "Peace be with you."

(His mother) said, "And peace be with you.
Were it not for your wish of 'peace',
You would be a raw mouthful for me."
"Did you sweep?"

"Yes, I swept."

"This was your master's deed, not yours. Go and sprinkle with the water."

So she went and got water from the stream, and she was sprinkling it to settle the dust. She was sprinkling it, and Xasteh Xomār came along - he's always in hiding, to see what she does - he says, "What are you doing?"

She said, "Nothing; she told me to sprinkle water."

Xasteh Xomār said, "All right, didn't I tell you you'd be sorry? If you sprinkle water for the next two or three days from now, will you finish it? Go, put away your bucket." She went and put it away, and he said, "By the truth of the excellent Prophet Solomon, I ask for a cloud to come and rain a few drops on this land, to settle all the dust at once."

The cloud came and rained its few drops, and the land was all sprinkled, and then the girl went and said, "Peace be with you, I've settled the dust."

"This was your master's deed, not yours." His mother, she knows. She said, "Take this black mat,[1] and wash it white in the stream, and bring it, for tonight is Xasteh Xomār's wedding."

She took the mat down to the stream, but no matter how she rubbed it and wrung it and scrubbed it, it wouldn't turn white. Xasteh Xomār came out and said, "What are you doing?"

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1) /Palās/, properly any sort of coarsely woven cloth. Often used in Herātī to describe a heavy woven cotton which is used as an inexpensive floor covering.

She said, "Nothing. She told me to take this black mat and wash it white."

He said, "Does a black cloth turn white? How can it turn white? If you wash it in this stream for ten years, till it all wears to pieces, would the threads of it turn white?"

She said, "What should I do, then?"

"Get up out of that stream, and bring the mat."

She brought it and he said, "By the truth of the excellent Prophet Solomon, I ask that this mat may turn as white as milk-white!" By the will of God, when he recited the Great Name,[1] the mat turned as white as milk. She took it back.

"Did you make it white?"

"Yes."

"This was your master's deed, not yours. Take it back, and make it black again."

Xasteh Xomār hadn't even gone back up to the castle, and at the bottom of the stairs, by the door, he saw her bringing the mat back. He said, "What did she say?"

"She said, 'Take it back and turn it black again.'"

He came out, and sat on the doorstep and said, "By the truth of the excellent Prophet Solomon I ask that this mat be blacker than before!" It turned black.

After it turned black, she took it back to that bārzangī. She said, "Did you turn it black?"

"Yes."

"This was your master's deed, not yours. Now go, and bring the comb and scissors and the mirror from my sister's house. Tonight is Xasteh Xomār's wedding." She's sending her there, because she's sworn, already, and she'd said to her, "If you don't make this black mat white, I'll eat you."

She made it white, so she said, "Go, make it black again. If you don't make it black, I'll eat you." And she made it black again.

She said, "Go get the comb and mirror and scissors from my sister's house, because tonight is young Xasteh Xomār's wedding."

She said, "All right. By what road do I go?"

"Just go, and bring them, by any road you choose."

She went out, and Xasteh Xomār was by the door and said. "Where are you going?"

She said, "It's nothing, only she told me 'Go to my sister's house and bring the comb and mirror and scissors, for tonight is Xasteh Xomār's wedding.'"

He said, "All right, now, as you go" - eh, oh - "As you go, there's a spring of blood. You say,'My, my, my! What a fine spring of red syrup! If only you had time, you could sit and drink half a bowl of it!' When you get a little farther on, there's a spring of pus. You say, 'My, my, my! What a fine spring of yellow ghee! If only you had time to sit and eat a little of it, and dress your hair with it!' After that you'll come to a bent tree.

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1) In Muslim tradition Solomon controlled the dīv and understood the language of birds, and was a white magician who knew the greatest Name of God. Xasteh Xomār's magic is all of the white variety, and he prays, Muslim style, whereas his mother, a dīv, is also an idol-worshipper. Parī and dīv divide the supernatural into good and bad halves.

You say, 'My, my, my! What a lovely, straight mulberry tree! If only you were free to sit in its shade and let the cool breeze touch your body!' Then as you go, there's this - a camel, and a dog. There are bones in front of the camel, and straw in front of the dog. Take the straw and put it in front of the camel, and the bones in front of the dog. After that you'll come to a ruined cook shed.[1] You say, 'My, my, my! What a nice, well-built cook shed. Here I am sweating. If only I had time, I'd sit in its shade.' You go by, then, and you'll arrive at the house. You say 'Salām.' When you say 'Salām', she'll say

'Were it not for your wish of "peace,"
You would be a raw mouthful for me.'

You say, 'Your sister has sent me for the scissors and mirror and comb.' She'll go into the next room to sharpen her teeth. There's a niche above the door, and the mirror and scissors and comb are on it. Take them and run, then."

"All right."

She went, and as she went she arrived at the spring of blood. She said, "My, my! What a fine spring of"- what was it? (MM: -Syrup-?) -"What a fine red syrup!" - this - that we people of Afghanistan make, this syrup of mulberries - well, now it's not made very much, but in the old times they made a lot of it, now they make it less. She said, "My, my, my! What a fine spring of red syrup! If only you had time, you could drink half a bowl of it." And she went past.

She went past, and she went and went and went and went, and arrived at the spring of pus. When she arrived at the spring of pus, she said, "My, my, my! What a fine spring of yellow ghee! If only you had time, you could scoop some up in your hand to eat, and dress your hair and oil you feet!" She went past.

After she went past, she saw a bent tree. She said, "My, my my! What a fine, straight, shady tree! If only I had time, I'd sit in its shade and enjoy the cool breeze." She went past.

After she passed, she came and saw a camel and a dog tied up. There were bones in front of the camel, and straw in front of the dog. A dog can't eat straw - he eats bones, not straw, and the camel eats straw, not bones - he's an animal (sic). So she took the bones and put them in front of the dog, and put the straw in front of the camel, and she went, and she saw the broken-down cook shed, and she said, "My, my! What a fine, well-built cook shed. If only I had time, I could go and sit in its shade!" Then she went, and said, "Peace be with you!"

She said, "Were it not for your wish of 'peace,'
You'd be a raw mouthful for me!"

She said, "Tonight is the wedding of Xasteh Xomār and Bibī Negār. I came after the scissors and mirror and comb."

"Good, you sit right here while I go in the next room and find them."

"Fine, you go, then."

After she went into the other room, she heard xarrīt-tā, xarrīt-tā, xarrīt-tā, xarrīt-tā, she's whetting her teeth, and she's going to come out and eat her.

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1) /mādbāx/, a cooking enclosure with a hearth, partly or wholly detached from the building to which it belongs.

So she carefully reached up above the door and got the mirror and comb and scissors, all three. She had two feet, and she borrowed two more, and she ran!

She said, "Ruined cook shed, get her!"

"Why should I get her? Why should I get her? You say 'ruined,' she said, 'well-made.'"

"Dog, get her!"

"Why should I get her? You gave me straw, she gave me bones."

"Camel, get her!

"Why should I get her? You gave me hunger, gave me bones. She gave me straw."

"Crooked tree, get her!"

"Why should I get her? You said 'crooked', she said 'straight' and 'fine' and 'shady.'"

"Spring of pus, get her!"

"Why should I get her? You said 'pus,' she said 'yellow ghee.'"

"Spring of blood, get her!"

"Why should I get her? You said, 'blood,' she said 'red syrup.' I won't get her."

So she ran, and got away. She went and said, "Peace be with you!"

"Did you bring them?"

"Yes."

"This was your master's deed, not yours." Xasteh Xomār's mother said that. She said "All right." So she brought them, then. She brought them, and it got to be supper time, and her sister came, and it's Xasteh Xomār's wedding, this evening. This girl's fingers - this girl who was Xasteh Xomār's wife from before - they took her fingers and tied cotton around all ten of them, and greased them with ghee. Then they lit the ends of them with matches. Yes. They lit them, amd when they'd lit them, they said, "You go in front of Xasteh Xomār and Bibī Negār, with their water jar on your head, and light their way."

So she went in front of them, and she sang,

"Xasteh Xomār, my little thumbs are burning!
Bibī Negār's brideprice,[1] my heart and soul are burning!

"Xasteh Xomār, my little thumbs are burning!
Bibī Negār's brideprice, my little heart and soul are burning!

"Xasteh Xomār, my little thumbs are burning!
Bibī Negār's brideprice, my heart and soul are burning!"

He said - Xasteh Xomār said, "Mama! That's enough now! Let's put out the flames. There's light enough."

She said, "Eh, darling! Tonight is the wedding of Xasteh Xomār and dear Bibī Negār. Let them burn, let there be light for you to see in front of your feet."

She sang,

"Xasteh Xomār, my little thumbs are burning!
Bibī Negār's brideprice, my heart and soul are burning!

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1) See note 1, page 12.

"Ay, Xasteh Xomār, my little thumbs are burning!
Bibī Negār's brideprice, my heart and soul are burning!

"Xasteh Xomār, my little thumbs are burning!
Bibī Negār's brideprice, my heart and soul are burning!"

So she sang these two little verses, and her hands burnt, her fingers, and they were half burnt down, then.

Xasteh Xomār said, "By God, I swear to God, this human was faithful, and my mother, who was a dīv, and my aunt, they burnt her hands like that. By God, if I don't roast her daughter in oil before this night turns to morning!" He said that in his heart, then.

So then when this was finished, he said - it was time to lay out their beds. When it got to be time to lay out the beds, Xasteh Xomār said, "Mama!"

"What?"

"Put this servant girl's bed right inside the door, for tonight is our wedding and we may want water, or my cousin may want to go outside, and she mustn't be afraid."

She said, "Eh, darling! I'll come and give you water! Your aunt will come and give you water! She shouldn't sleep by the door - it's not necessary."

"Mama" -

"Yes?"

"Am I your child?"

"Yes."

"Did you swear to me?"

"Yes."

"All right. Do as I say and put the bed right by the door."

"Tonight is your wedding, and tonight in this room you'll be kissing, playing and fooling around and she should be by the door? A human?"

He said, "That doesn't matter."

He kept saying this, so she said, "To dust with it! I'll put it there, and once we've put it by the door, and Xasteh Xomār has fallen asleep, I'll tell my sister to go and eat her."

(X, MZ's husband: How much is left?) There's just a little left, just a couple of words.

"She'll eat her, my sister."

So then - these were dīv and bārzangī, and they sleep the sleep of forty.[1] When they'd put their heads down to sleep, Xasteh Xomār, - and his cousin fell asleep, too - he's awake, and he got up. He got up and got a great, bi-ig cooking pot with ring handles, that would hold twenty or thirty man[2] of water or oil. A big pot like that. He dumped out all the cans and got it ready, brought the pot and all the cooking fat therewas in his mother's house, he brought it all and threw it in the pot. And he split the wood and poured a little petrol over it and struck a match and lit it. The wood burned and the fat melted and got so hot that dough would burn in it right away, if you threw it in. After that - that cousin of his was sleeping the sleep of forty, and he just picked her up in a lump and carried her and threw her in the pot of fat. She got cooked. When she was cooked, he took her and set her in the corner of the room and put a shawl over her head.

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1) Forty times as deep and long as human sleep. 2) A /man/ in Herāt equals about 14 pounds.

Then he fastened the door from behind, from inside the room, and he - God knows how, he was a parī - he got out of the room, and he took the girl, and a glass of water - a pottery water bottle, and a handful of needles, and a lump of salt. Then they left. They left, and went and went and went and went and went and went and went and went.

Let that be and listen to this, that morning came. Morning came, and his mother and aunt woke up. The mother said, "I don't know why Xasteh Xomār - they haven't gotten up for prayers yet."

Her sister said, "Eh, sister! Last night was their wedding night. OK, what do you want with them?"

The sun got higher, and Xasteh Xomār didn't get up, and she said, "Sister, sister!"

"Soul of your sister!"

"He's not up."

"Eh, sister, don't bother them! Let them sleep!"

Noon came, and afternoon, and she said, "Sister!"

"What?"

"By God, this seems strange to me. By now Xasteh Xomār would have performed the two mealtime prayers!"

"Sister, it was his wedding! They didn't go to sleep last night."

She said, "No." So Xasteh Xomār's mother came and banged on the door with both her feet, and the door br - oh - she came to the door - God of repentence - and said, "Xasteh Xomār, dear, Xasteh Xomār, dear, get up, now!" She saw there was no talking, no sound, nothing. She saw someone sitting in the corner of the room, with a shawl on her head. She said, "Bibī Negār, Bibī Negār, come and open the door!"

She didn't come.

She thought, "Whaa? She's sitting, and I'm saying, 'Open the door'? Again she spoke, "Bibī Negār, Bibī Negār, auntie's darling, don't tease, come, open the door!"

She didn't come.

After that she hit the door a good one; she was a bārzangī, a dīv, and the door broke in two, and she went into the room. When she lifted the shawl, she saw she was a hunk of roasted, burnt charcoal, like of loaf of bread that burns, in the corner of the room. She said to her sister, "Sister, sister!"

"Soul of your sister!"

"Did you see how this human has gotten her way?"

"What has she done?"

"There, look at what she's done!"

"All right, sister, when you catch up with them, you eat Xasteh Xomār, When I catch up, I'll eat this human, because I[1] swore an oath."

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1) MZ confuses first and second person verbs in this sentence. See next line.

"No, I swore an oath, When I catch up, I'll eat my own son. When you catch up, you eat the girl."

"All right."

They went. They went, and they came like a cloud or a dark wind, or a jet plane, they're coming - they're dīv. All at once Xasteh Xomār looked back and he saw them coming like two bullets. He said, "Human, didn't I tell you not to burn my snake skin? See what times you've brought on my head!"

They were almost catching up with them, and he said, "Oh, God, now what shall I do?" He threw the needles behind him and said, "By the truth of the excellent Prophet Solomon, I ask for a plain without head or foot, covered with needles, so that the needles will go in the bottoms of their feet and come out the tops, and they won't be able to come."

These two came to the needles and when they put their feet down on them, they went in the bottoms of their feet and out the tops, and they came. They came, and they got close, they took out the needles, got rid of them, and came.

"Didn't I tell you not to burn my skin? Now do you see what times you've brought on my head?" He threw the lump of salt, and said, "By the truth of the excellent Prophet Solomon, I ask that as the needles cut them, this shall cripple them and tear them to pieces!"

Their feet were crippled and torn to pieces, and they're coming. They caught up again, they were just a little distance apart. He said, "Now what do I do?" He took the little pottery jar he'd brought with him and threw it on the ground. He said, "By the truth of the excellent Prophet Solomon I ask that this become a sea[1] without head or foot or sides, and they on that side and we on this, so that they can't come."

It became a sea without head or foot or sides, and these two sisters stayed on that side, and Xasteh Xomār and his wife on this side. Then she spoke up and said, "Xasteh Xomār, dear, Mama's dear, how did you get across this sea, so we can cross, too?"

He said, "It's nothing, Mama! I took under my arms - I put this mountain on this shoulder and that mountain on that shoulder, and I put a millstone around my neck, and I crossed, I came, I crossed the sea, that way."

Then those sisters went and took up this mountain and put it on this shoulder, and took up that mountain and put it on that shoulder, and they went to a mill and each put on a stone, over her head, and they came and jumped into the sea, to cross it. Xasteh Xomār sat down by the sea and he said, "If these two - if blood and foam rise out of the water, then my mother and my aunt are dying. But if water and foam rise, then they'll come up and eat me and this human girl."

After they'd sat there for a long time, they saw foam rose and blood rose and foam

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1) /Derīyā/ often used in Herātī for gulfs and wide rivers, as well as seas proper.

and blood rose and foam rose and blood rose, but they themselves didn't rise.

Then he turned to the girl and said, "See? You saw this kind of treatment from your sister's head - hand, all these bad times! See, I was more of a friend to you! I killed my mother and my aunt and my cousin on your account."

After that, then, they set off and left there, and went back to that cave that was from before, and all that valuable property came back, all at once and here,

They were on that side of the stream,
And we lived on this side,

and that's the end of the tale of Xasteh Xomār.

(MM: That's very good - it's a long one!)

Yes, it is long.

(MM: From whom did you learn it?)

This story - I learned it a long time ago.

(MM: Oh - from when you were little? -)

Yes, I was little - and then I told it all the time, and I didn't forget it.

What Xasteh Xomār Has to Say

The remarks which follow include some observations, by no means complete, on the symbolic structures and cultural contents of this story. In making this type of observations it is important to avoid the cultural anthropologist's fallacy concerning traditional materials, which is to assume particular cultural connections for features which are, in fact, widely shared and not the exclusive property of the culture under study. What emerges from comparative study is the realization of how much is shared cross-culturally, yet used by members of a given society to discuss issues which they see to be specific to their own ideology and way of life. The folklorist's task, from this perspective, becomes one of recognizing specific cultural issues articulated through more widely shared features. Universals may or may not assume specific cultural significance. For instance, the theme of 'youngest last and best', in which the youngest, smallest, weakest, poorest, stupidest, etc., character turns out to be the most able, occurs in traditions all over the world. It might take on a special significance in societies where it contradicts a social norm (e.g., primogeniture in inheritance), and may serve to articulate specific social tensions in such societies, but its universal appeal in societies of many different kinds cannot be explained in those terms. Thus one must assess what can be said by a theme of this scope in a variety of social systems. One investigates a possible range of meanings, rather than trying to tie down a widely distributed theme to a particular society and its institutions.

The extremely wide international distribution of the tale under discussion (Type 425 in the Aarne-Thompson Index[1]) and its relatives has been documented in the encyclopedic monograph by Jan-Oyvind Swahn, The Tale of Cupid and Psyche.[2] This work of ten years collates and discusses 1100 recorded occurrences of this set of tales. The vast majority of them were recorded since 1800, but older examples include those found in literary sources such as Apuleius' Golden Ass and the Indian Jātaka tales. The whole corpus spans 1700 years. Swahn's examples were drawn mainly from within or near the Indo-European linguistic area. Areas poorly represented in the collection include native America, Africa, Indonesia, Oceania and Australia. These are areas in which, at the time of Swahn's writing, less systematic collecting and cataloguing had been carried out than in the Indo-European cultural sphere; so the relative absence of collected variants from less studied areas cannot prove the tale's absence there. Swahn, in fact, cites only two occurrences from 'Persia', but in my experience the tale is one of those most frequently performed in the Persian language.[3] As for its representation in my own collection, over a period of a year in and around the city of Herāt, I recorded the tale in three major variants from eleven different people. Seven informants were female and four were male. Of the males, two were middle-aged men and two were unmarried adolescents. Of the females, six were adult married women and one was a recently married, childless adolescent. All but two of these informants were wholly or functionally illiterate. The tale translated here was told by a 28-year-old mother of five, a native of a village near Herat who now lives in the city. She is entirely illiterate.

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1) Aarne, Antti Amatus, The Types of the Folktale (Folklore Fellows Communication #184), 2nd revision, translated and enlarged by Stith Thompson, Helsinki, 1961, pp. 140-145.

2) Lund, 1955.

3) Hafizullah Baghban in Richard Dorson's Folktales Told Around the World (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1975, pp. 230-237) has translated a slightly different version of this tale which he collected in the vicinity of Herāt in 1967.

As is the case with the great majority of fictional folktales, the action in Xasteh Xomār centers around the finding and winning of a spouse. The situation of the latter part of the story, in which the human partner has to win the supernatural spouse away from his (or her) relatives by accomplishing a series of supernatural tasks, is a universal feature of the tale. In the Afghan context, the theme of spouse-winning becomes a forum for the discussion of preferential marriage patterns which actually exist. Xasteh Xomār is on the verge of marrying his cousin, an ogre, when his human bride arrives at his mother's castle to win him back. Under Islamic law, brothers inherit equally from their fathers and sisters inherit half of their brothers' share. The extended family's interests are served by cousin marriage which has the potential for reconsolidating wealth, especially land, which has been distributed in the inheritances of the previous generation. In the romantic tradition of popular literature and folktale, however, and in the minds of many young people, exogamy is idealized; the non-relative or stranger is portrayed as more attractive, more wealthy or of higher status than the prospective partner from within the family. Marriage to a higher-status person may be the means to greater power and prestige or it may ratify new power and status which have already been acquired through heroic or clever actions.

In folktale and popular romance, the greater sexual interest generated by exogamous marriage is matched by the fantastic material and social gains to be had from exogamy (one marries a princess and acquires a kingdom, or weds a parī who can magically supply all life's needs). In real life, as in folktale, however, this optimism is balanced by a greater sense of risk. The exogamous partner is an unknown quantity, not controllable by pre-existing social ties, as a spouse from within the family would be. For the potential bride, since residence after marriage is usually virilocal, the threat of physical removal from her family intensifies these anxieties.

All these tensions are expressed in imaginary terms in Xasteh Xomār. The human bride agrees to an exogamous marriage which she fears out of filial loyalty. The marriage proves to be extraordinarily beneficial to her until she must make a choice between the demands of her family and those of her exogamous spouse. This dilemma is graphically described by the narrator:

> ... if she hit one side of her face, it would hurt, and if she hit the other side, it would hurt, too. On this side, there was her husband ... and on this side, there was her sister, and she was fond of her sister, too. (p.10.)

Her husband warns the girl not to listen to her sisters who want to burn his snake skin and, when she fails to follow his advice, she loses him and the material security she has enjoyed in the marriage. In order to win him back she must help him to detach himself from his own family who are making him marry his cousin.

The girl's predicament vis-a-vis her mother-in-law, who is portrayed as a hostile ogre, is an intensification of real fears felt by daughters-in-law who do come under the direct authority of their mothers-in-law if they join their husbands' natal households. Virilocality, which often means residence in the husband's father's household, run by his father or mother, is anxiety-producing for the bride and even more so when the groom's relations are not relatives of hers and their treatment of her is potentially unconstrained by blood loyalty. Many young couples look forward to the day when they can detach themselves from the parental household and set up their own establishment. In the story, too, the net effect of the double spouse-winning is to detach both partners from their over-intrusive blood relatives, a somewhat idealistic resolution.

The magical exogamy of Xasteh Xomār sets filial and marital loyalties against each other; and sexual preference, though never totally separated from the question of duty, is clearly under discussion (see pp.6, 8, 10). The obvious phallic qualities of the

snake husband might suggest Freudian generalizations but it must be remembered that the supernatural husband (or wife) takes many forms cross-culturally: bear, dog, snake, swine, wolf, 'beast' or unspecified monster, bird. The animals chosen must be considered not only as general psychological symbols but also in the specific context of beliefs in each culture which cluster about the different animals chosen. Snakes in both Indo-European and Semitic traditions are associated with longevity, wealth and fertility as well as with the more negative qualities of treachery and rapacity. In Russia and Central Asia in particular, there is a whole body of beliefs concerning the 'house snake' who chooses a household and is the source of the prosperity and longevity of the family unit. These snakes are to be fed and propitiated. MZ, the narrator of Xasteh Xomār, tells another story, not as afsāneh or fictional folktale but as possibly true, about such a house snake and the benefits he conferred on the household of a woman he favored.

In the case of Xasteh Xomār, the threat to the bride's father and the girl's own fear of her bridegroom are voiced in terms of rapacious consumption: the overt threat is that they will be eaten; the threat of excessive sexuality remains latent. By contrast another Afghan tale of this type, which I collected near Herāt, has the sex roles reversed and portrays a supernatural bride who takes the form of a monkey, to the disgust of her husband's relatives. Monkeys seem to be connected with both ritual impurity and sexual excess in this and other stories from my collection. Sexual fears per se are more overtly expressed in a case where the supernatural spouse is the female than they are in the male case under discussion.

The danger of psychological generalization concerning folktales is exemplified by the psychologist Bruno Bettelheim's remarks concerning the 'animal groom cycle' which in part forms a sub-category of tale type 425, the 'search for the lost husband':

> ... it seems that while fairy tales suggest that sex without love and devotion is animal-like, at least in the Western tradition its animal aspects are non-threatening or even charming, as far as the female is concerned; only the male aspects of sex are beastly.[1]

The sexuality of females who are unnatural spouses, whether in animal form or not, can be as objectionable and as potentially dangerous as that of male supernaturals. Besides the example of the 'monkey bride' tale just given, one need only think of Anchises' horrified speech to Aphrodite when he discovers that he has made love to her unawares (in the Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite) or Gilgamesh's speech to Ishtar rejecting her offer of marriage (in the Gilgamesh Epic from Mesopotamia). However universal the 'meaning' of folktale may be assumed to be, on the basis of the universal popularity of one or many tales, it is dangerous to make generalizations about significance as Bettelheim does on the basis of a very limited sample. Neither Xasteh Xomār nor Beauty and the Beast can be said to make a comprehensive statement about sexual anxiety for their respective societies. In the hands of an individual narrator these stories say certain things. Different stories or even the same story told by another person may say different, even contradictory, things. The 'beastly' and threatening aspects of sex are represented in Afghan traditional tales by both male and female supernatural spouses. The 'monkey bride' variant of type 425 was first performed for me by an adult male. It would be tempting to call it a 'men's variant' and Xasteh Xomār a 'women's variant' except that, two days later, I recorded the 'monkey bride' variant again - from a woman informant who also knew Xasteh Xomār. The recordings took place in the same village. The two informants knew each other and, in all probability, the second female narrator chose to tell me the story because she heard that I had expressed interest in it. Her own interest

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1) B. Bettelheim, The Uses of Enchantment, Vintage Books, 1976, p. 285.

in the tale, her like or dislike for it, are impossible to assess. My Afghan story-telling friends were eager to please and to perform what they (rightly or wrongly) perceived to be interesting to me. Tales, like proverbs, reveal important aspects of their meanings through the context of normal performance: who chooses to tell them, under what circumstances and to whom. Recording for collection creates an abnormal context and so this aspect of meaning is lost. Although frequency of performance could be an important index of individual or societal interest in a particular tale and its messages, it is often impossible for a foreign collector to get accurate information concerning the relative popularity of individual tales. My very limited sample suggests that the performances of tale type 425 were heavily weighted toward the configuration in which the supernatural spouse was male and the sexual anxieties expressed were thus female.[1]

The fear of sexuality is so general a human phenomenon as to find expression in various ways in every culture. One possible explanation for the low incidence of 'female supernatural spouse' variants for type 425 in Afghanistan (though there are plenty of supernatural brides in other tales) may be that, for Afghans, this tale is 'about' the distribution of power in marital relations. In patrilineal Afghanistan a wife joins her husband's family and becomes subject to its authority. In Xasteh Xomār, once the bride's personal fear of her husband is laid to rest, the problem of the story becomes that of power relations among in-laws: while the bride's relatives have the power to destroy the marriage, the groom's relatives have the power to kill the bride. This imaginative reflection on real power relations in the society may have more to do with the emphasis put on the bride's fears than does any general human psychological configuration. Sexual fear is a universal but its distribution among characters and the forms it takes are shaped by social institutions, especially by power distribution among bride-givers and bride-takers.

If the contents of Xasteh Xomār are considered from the perspective of developmental psychology, they can be seen to elaborate the theme of initiation and domestication of the human bride. The demands made on her in her mother-in-law's household all involve ordinary domestic tasks which she must accomplish under preternaturally difficult circumstances. She must sweep and clean the house, wash and carry water and lights, but in her in-laws' magical world these are supernaturally difficult tests which she cannot pass without her husband's aid and that of 'good' magic ("by the truth of the excellent Prophet Solomon;" "This was your master's deed, not yours"). The bride's tactic is obedience, treating the supernatural tasks as if they were normal and using ordinary tools and techniques to accomplish them. Without her husband's knowledge and magical power she is bound to fail.

Using the same tactics according to her husband's directions, the bride 'domesticates' the wild and dangerous features of the other-worldly landscape, the wells of blood and pus, the bent tree, the ruined cook shed and the animals, by treating them as if they were normal and/or beneficial instead of chaotic, dangerous inversions of normal reality. In her search for her husband and the accomplishment of her tasks the girl undergoes a development, through fantasy, into competent adult womanhood. This development stands in strong contrast to her position at the beginning of her marriage in her husband's magical palace in the wild where, childlike, she was waited on hand and foot and lived in a kind of suspended animation as far as the real world was concerned. Initiation to wifehood through a series of domestic tasks fantastically emphasized is a common feature of the tale in its international distribution, though

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1) An extended discussion of the numerous other Afghan tales which include marriage to supernaturals and/or to individuals of higher status and greater personal power is needed to elucidate this issue, particularly to distinguish male and female sexual anxieties expressed in this extremely wide range of tales. No one tale's meanings can be comprehensive.

not always expressed with this particular set of tasks. The theme of domesticity carries even into collateral details in Xasteh Xomār as when the husband, to smuggle the girl into his mother's house, turns her into a woman's tool, a needle, or, in another Afghan variant, into a broom.

The story of Xasteh Xomār takes the form of an initiation ritual, with phases of separation (the bride from her parents and then from her husband), liminality (the bride in the other world) and reintegration (the bride and groom reunited and enabled to return to their independent household).[1] The bride's dangerous separation from her society reaches its apogee in her 'death trip' in which she is sent to her husband's aunt's house to be killed. (In the classical Greek tale of Cupid and Psyche, retold in Apuleius' Golden Ass, she is quite literally sent to the world of the dead to fetch a sleeping draught from Persephone, Queen of the Dead.) She returns, in the Afghan story, with the basic tools of bridal initiation; the comb, scissors and mirror with which the bride is groomed in preparation for her wedding night.

The heroine in Xasteh Xomār survives her errand of death because she strictly obeys her husband's instructions. Duty and obedience are major social values communicated by this story and they are reiterated in this series of events and elsewhere. The girl is rewarded with a miraculous husband when she obeys her father's wishes; she is punished for disobeying her spouse. She must win him back by a conspicuous display of obedience to all the demands of her in-laws, however unreasonable. Obedience to her mother-in-law is superceded by obedience to her husband, a developmental sequence that mirrors the real experience of human brides as they grow older and replace their mothers-in-law as senior women. At the same time that filial loyalty and obedience to senior in-laws are rewarded in this tale, these norms are also violated by Xasteh Xomār's rejection and ultimate destruction of his own family. The two main characters return at the end of the story to an ideal world of independence and material plenty. As often as real social rules are upheld in the fantasy world of folktale, escape is provided from these rules, often in the same breath.

The symmetry and economy with which human issues are presented in Xasteh Xomār are general features of well-told folktales. Meanings are articulated by the symmetrical presentation of series of similar events. Consider, as a final example, the use of fire imagery, cooking and burning in this performance of Xasteh Xomār. First of all the bride loses her husband because of an attempt to harm him with fire, to burn his magical snake skin. Significantly the skin can only be burnt in the bread oven, a woman's tool, which being essential to cook the staple wheat bread, stands as a central symbol of domesticity and feminine technology. This is feminine technology misapplied, however, and during her resultant trials the bride herself is burnt when her fingers are made into candles. In the final setting-to-rights of the bride's situation her rival, the ogre bride, is totally consumed by fire - cooked to death. Once again the unnatural use of domestic technology causes separation from a family group but this time it is a beneficial separation, unnatural behavior being the appropriate strategy in an unnatural world from which Xasteh Xomār and his bride want to escape.

The effect of this contrastive repetition of a limited number of images with progressive changes, is elegance and economy in the articulation of a story's meanings. As in the case of the obedience theme discussed above, one can even say two different things with the same image in the same story. Not every storyteller exploits this potential for symmetry and economy fully, however. In two of the performances of Xasteh Xomār

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1) On the basic pattern of initiation rituals see Arnold van Gennep, Rites of Passage, trans. M.B. Vizedom & G.L. Caffee, University of Chicago Press, 1960. Many folktales share this general pattern.

which I recorded, the demon bride is simply beheaded, not burned. There is another bit of symbolic economy which was not exploited by any of my Afghan narrators. The three objects which the bride fetches from the house of her mother-in-law's sister are also appropriate for use in the magic escape which later ensues. They are so used in variants of this magical flight motif from other traditions. The comb and scissors are magically transformed into fields of sharp objects to lame the pursuers and the mirror becomes the water barrier which finally suffices to stop them. This opportunity for economy of images was not exploited in the Afghan tales which I was able to collect. Only the mirror turns up in double use in the telling of one of my informants.

Symmetrical repetition with variations, which we may interpret as an aesthetic or symbolic pattern, has a practical utility in oral performance. The organization of events around classes of related objects (domestic tasks or tools, geographical features, fire, etc.,) is a powerful mnemonic device which allows both the story-teller and the audience to organize the flow of events in the plot and to reconstruct it quickly and smoothly. The symmetry and economy which are discernable in oral narrative may not be a matter of conscious manipulation for the average storyteller. He or she may simply use the patterns provided for their mnemonic utility but in so doing produces a narrative which is aesthetically pleasing to both teller and audience because it is so comprehensively organized. The aesthetic value of the tale is rooted in its symmetry and so is its comprehensibility. The story makes sense because it is beautiful and vice versa.

The contents of a folktale are not simply diagnostic of culture but must be 'read' with general knowledge both of the culture in question and of the aesthetics and techniques of oral tale-telling. In the light of these two considerations the universal structures of the tale take on a new and particular vividness.