

# Orality and Textuality in the Iranian World

*Patterns of Interaction across the Centuries*

*Edited by*

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# Introduction: New Perspectives on Orality in Iranian Studies

*Julia Rubanovich*

With the development of a variety of theoretical approaches towards the study of orality and folklore during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, exploring the oral in a certain culture has opened up new directions for discussing the oral-literate nexus. The judicious revisiting of the premises postulated by the pioneering Oral Formulaic Theory of Milman Parry and Albert Lord and their followers expanded our understanding of what is oral beyond the rigid boundaries of traditional formulae and harnessed the polarization of the oral and the written/literate as oppositional or competing cultural forces.<sup>1</sup> The current tendency of contemporary scholarship to avoid couching the oral and the written/literate in evolutionary terms has given rise to new paths of research revealing the complexities of the interaction between orality and literacy, orality and textuality/textualization, orality and memory/memorization, and so on.<sup>2</sup> The interrelationship and cross-fertilization between orality and textuality emerged as a cornerstone in the study of literary traditions – ancient, medieval and contemporary – embracing such fundamental aspects of the oral-literate nexus as a work's composition; its transmission (performance often being the main channel of delivery); aural reception; oral poetics etc. The current exploration of orality in its diverse manifestations pays attention to the idiosyncrasies of specific cultures, historical periods and literary genres, encompassing most noticeably Jewish, Greek and Roman worlds,<sup>3</sup> medieval

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- 1 For the most up to date analytical review of the evolution of the Oral Formulaic Theory in the context of the study of medieval literature, see Foley and Ramey 2012.
  - 2 An incisive introduction into various aspects of the interplay of orality/literacy, textualization, oral literature and genre, accompanied by an extensive bibliography is given by Reichl 2012a; of related interest are Harris and Reichl 2012 on medieval performance and performers, and DuBois 2012 on the linguistics and stylistics of orality.
  - 3 For the recent scholarly engagement with orality in the ancient and medieval Jewish tradition, see, e.g., Elman and Gershoni 2000; Yassif 2012; for the ancient Greek and Roman domain, see, e.g., Watson 2001; Mackie 2004; Amodio 2005: 15–148; Rimell 2007; Mackay 2008; Minchin 2012.

European vernacular cultural realms,<sup>4</sup> Slavic, mostly epic, literary tradition,<sup>5</sup> as well as Arabic literature.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, in sharp contrast to recent research into the orality of the above-mentioned traditions, the Iranian domain has remained a backwater. While not altogether neglected, discussions of oral tradition and orality in the Iranian world have been limited in scope, focusing on two distinct kinds of material: (a) the pre-Islamic religious and literary Zoroastrian tradition, specifically aspects of the oral composition and transmission-in-performance of the Avestan texts, and their writing down, notably in connection with manuscript studies;<sup>7</sup> (b) folklore and contemporary popular literature in Persian, Tajik and Dari as well as in those Iranian languages which, compared with Persian, developed into a vehicle of literary written expression only relatively recently, such as Kurdish, Pashto, Balochi and Ossetic.<sup>8</sup> As far as medieval Persian literature is concerned, besides a controversial attempt to apply the Oral Formulaic

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4 For Older Germanic poetry and medieval German literature, see recently, e.g., Harris 2012 and Müller 2012 respectively; for Old English and Middle English literature, see, e.g., Amodio 2004; O'Brien O'Keeffe 2012; Amodio 2005: 149–305; Putter 2012.

5 See, e.g., Foley 1991; idem 1995, ch. 4; Reichl 2012a: 33–38; Azbelev 2012.

6 The study of orality in Arabic literature has taken a number of different directions. The pioneering research of Gregor Schoeler (2006; 2009) forcefully brings out the complexity of the relationship between the oral and the written in early Arabic literature, exploring the evolution of its transmission from the oral to the written and from the aural to the read and focusing on the interplay of various modes of dissemination of knowledge by Muslim scholars from the late first/seventh to the fourth/tenth centuries (in this vein see also Cook 1997 and to a certain extent Toorawa 2005). Considerable attention has been given to the genre of the folk heroic epic (*al-sīra al-sha'biyya*), both in medieval and living tradition, with a special emphasis on its formal and thematic characteristics rooted in oral delivery through performance (for the most recent overview including relevant bibliography, see Herzog 2012). Classical Arabic poetry has been studied from the viewpoint of the theory of Oral Formulaic composition (see Monroe 1972; Zwettler 1978), an attempt met with intense critical rebuttal (see, e.g., Scholer 2006: 87–110).

7 See recently Cantera 2012, especially the contributions by P.O. Skjærvø, A. Panaino and the editor's preface surveying the state of the arts in the field.

8 For succinct surveys of Kurdish, Pashto, Balochi and Ossetic oral traditions and their interrelation with the written ones, see, e.g., Allison 2010; Heston 2010; Elfenbein 2010; Thordarson 2010 respectively. For the most recent surveys of Persian, Dari and Tajik popular literature and folklore, including up to date bibliographies, see Marzolph 2010; Rahmoni 2010; Mills 2010 respectively. Among the study of specific folk genres, folktales have won the most scholarly attention, being widely collected and systematized according to the international Aarne/Thompson system of tale-types (for Iranian folktales, see bibliography in Marzolph 2010: 352–64).

Theory to Firdausī's *Shāh-nāma*,<sup>9</sup> the so-called *dāstāns* of Persian folk prose literature have been assessed from the orality viewpoint, notably aspects of their production, delivery through performance and their oral traditional aesthetics rooted in the storytelling tradition of *qiṣṣa-kh'ānī* and *naqqālī*.<sup>10</sup>

Two important reasons for the lack of scholarly interest in the role of orality in Iranian cultural history, especially during the medieval and early modern periods, can be mentioned here: (a) the evaluative conceptualization of cultural phenomena and processes as a hierarchical construct of binary oppositions, such as 'written–oral,' 'elite–popular,' 'high–low,' 'literary–folk,' with a noticeable bias towards the first constituent of each pair and as a result, the marginalization of hierarchically 'inferior' phenomena; (b) a strong disinclination to apply to Iranian material methodological and theoretical approaches in the field of orality that derived from studying Western cultures.<sup>11</sup>

Conceived as a response to the marginalization of orality and oral traditions, the present volume circumvents rigid traditional scholarly discourse and attempts to demonstrate the cultural centrality of the oral tradition for Iranian studies. It contains contributions from scholars from various areas of Iranian and comparative studies, among which are the pre-Islamic Zoroastrian tradition with its wide network of influences in late antique Mesopotamia, notably among the Jewish milieu; classical Persian literature in its manifold genres; medieval Persian history; oral history; folklore and more. The essays in this collection embrace both pre-Islamic and Islamic periods, both verbal and visual media, as well as various language communities (Middle Persian, Persian, Tajik, Dari) and geographical spaces (Greater Iran in pre-Islamic and Islamic medieval periods; Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan of modern times). Taken as a whole, the essays are rooted in the understanding that orality and

9 See Davidson 1988; 1994; 1998; 2000; for the most recent critical survey of this attempt and the controversy surrounding it, see Rubanovich 2013.

10 Muḥammad Ja'far Maḥjūb was the first to associate the *dāstān* genre with the oral strain within Persian literature and to study it from the oral tradition perspective; see now the collection of his articles on the subject in Maḥjūb 1382/2003: 267–950. On various aspects of the *dāstān* production, transmission and traditional aesthetics, see Hanaway 1970; idem 1971; Salimov 1971; Rubanovich 2012: 660–75; for discussion of specific *dāstāns* in connection with orality and oral tradition, see Gaillard 1987; Ismā'īlī 2001: 1, 25–154; idem 1386/2007: 1, 18–47; Marzolph 1999. For the evolution and characteristics of the storytelling tradition of *qiṣṣa-kh'ānī* and *naqqālī*, as well as that of the *shāh-nāma-kh'ānī* related to them, see Maḥjūb 1382/2003: 1079–1113; Page 1979; Omidsalar 1984; Omidsalar and Omidsalar 1999; Yamamoto 2003; eadem 2010. See also U. Marzolph's article in this volume.

11 Cf. Rubanovich 2012: 653; also Kreyenbroek 2010 for reasons for the lack of interest in studying oral and popular literature in the field of Iranian studies.

its patterns of intersection and interaction with the written word do not have a single form and do not act according to a single set of rules, either from epoch to epoch, from one culture to another or from one genre to another. The essays seek to reveal the unique blending of oral and literate poetics in the texts or visual artefacts each author focuses upon, conceptualizing their interrelationship and function.

Methodologically, the volume is informed by a wide range of theoretical approaches: alongside a more traditional source-centred comparative historical-philological approach, judicious use is made of theoretical findings derived from structuralism, narratology, hermeneutics, intertextuality, the theory of illocutionary acts etc.



The seventeen articles in the present volume are grouped into five sections, entitled 'Approaching Orality,' 'Sacred Traditions and Oral History,' 'Iranian Epic Tradition,' 'Oral and Literary Traditions as Channels of Cultural Transformation,' 'Performative Aspects of Orality in Artefacts'.

The collection opens with two essays which address the functions of orality in the oral-literate continuum. In 'Memory and Textuality in the Orality-Literacy Continuum,' Karl Reichl considers several assumptions anchored in the perception of orality and literacy as dichotomic entities, as a Great Divide rather than a continuum. Drawing mainly on comparative material from the Serbo-Croatian heroic epic tradition and Kirghiz and Karakalpak oral epic poetry, but also from the ancient Greek and the Anglo-Saxon traditions, Reichl emphasizes the perfect compatibility between the processes of memorizing and remembering and the oral teaching or oral transmission, from which the written text is excluded. In oral traditions the degree of fluidity or stability of the oral 'text' can modulate considerably, depending on the transmitter's memory including his/her command of mnemonic techniques and devices, but also according to the genre, length of a text and the audience. While the popular quatrains on account of their concise form display a greater textual stability, longer epic poetry is more fluid and variable. As far as audience control over the degree of variation is concerned, some audiences would insist on conformity of the transmitted text to a tradition, while others would encourage change and elaboration. Some oral traditions, such as Russian, Kazakh, Turkmen and Uzbek, for example, introduce an emic distinction between the two types of transmitter, i.e. between those who present a memorial oral transmission and those who opt for the 'composition-in-performance' type of transmission assisted by the use of formulas, metrical lines, themes, story-patterns

as these are set forth in the Oral Formulaic Theory. Examining samples from the Kirghiz epic of *Semetey* and from the Karakalpak versions of the epic of *Edige*, Reichl demonstrates that morphological patterns and lexically archaic items may function as ‘memorable words,’ which fact calls for refining the concept of the formula as it is traditionally perceived in the Lord-Parry paradigm. Reichl compellingly advocates the necessity of arcing across the notions of orality and literacy in terms of continuum, notwithstanding their theoretically different approaches to conceptualization and expression in language. As the essays in this volume amply demonstrate, many combinations of the oral and the written modes are manifest in composition and transmission.

In ‘Orality and Esotericism: Reflections on Modes of Transmission in Late Antiquity,’ Shaul Shaked appraises the ramifications of the transmission mode of religious teachings at the oral-written interface in a variety of religious traditions, such as Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Christianity and Islam, paying special attention to the interplay between open teaching and esotericism in relation to the modes of transmission. In the first part of the article, Shaked cautions against a simplistic presentation of the sacred scriptures’ transmission in terms of two distinct paradigms: the one, exemplified by the Avesta and the Rig Veda, allegedly promotes the oral communication of the texts, giving rise to what can be termed an ‘oral book’; the other, embodied by the Jewish-Christian tradition, seems to acknowledge the primacy of the written text. Viewed from a historical perspective, however, the patterns of relationship with regard to the written and the oral in these religious systems reveal a more subtle picture. The predilection for a certain transmission may have originated in the historical availability of an appropriate writing technology or in the lack thereof: a prominent example would be the belated setting down in writing of the Avesta after the invention of a proper script under the Sasanians. The choice of media may also have been determined by the forces of canonicity. In Judaism, Rabbinic literature was predominantly orally transmitted in order to demarcate the written Bible from the humanly composed Mishna and Talmud. The primary case of the authoritative weight of the written scripture would be the sacred book of the Manichaeans, the *Arzhang*, composed and written down by the founder of Manichaeism himself. In the second part of his paper, Shaked reflects on the ‘written orality’ and on the role of what he terms the ‘midrashic’ approach to sacred texts, which are characteristic of some esoteric and mystical trends and movements in the religions of Late Antiquity. One of the chief examples of the ‘written orality’ are Aramaic magic spells, usually performed on bowls. In the present volume the issue of spells and their ‘liminal’ position on the orality-textuality interface is further discussed by Ch. Häberl in his contribution on Aramaic incantation texts, while

the relationship of the textual aspects of incantations to their pictorial representation is taken up in N. Viložny's article 'Between Demons and Kings'. As for the 'midrashic' approach, Shaked elucidates its paradoxical nature, when as a result of a diligent study of the sacred texts, accepted as canonical by their students, new eschatological or messianic interpretations emerge that might have had an influence on mystical movements, including early Islamic mysticism.

The essays in Part Two focus upon the variety of ways in which the oral intersects with the textual in the religious domains of Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Islam. In their joint article, Reuven Kiperwasser and Dan D.Y. Shapira explore the concept of cultural diffusion in transmitting certain themes and motifs from Zoroastrianism to Judaism, a field of study which has developed significantly over the past decade.<sup>12</sup> Focusing on specific parts of the Avesta, the *Bundahišn* and the Babylonian Talmud, all of which witnessed a transition from oral to written mode, the authors employ a comparative approach when examining Avestan, Pahlavi and Jewish textual traditions on giant mythological creatures. The comparison reveals parallels in the structure, order and composition of the Talmudic and Pahlavi texts which originate in various patterns of interconnection – from direct and indirect borrowing, when some mythic creatures in the Babylonian Talmud are based on Iranian models, to a possible mythological substratum common to both traditions and transmitted orally in Mesopotamia.

In 'The Islamic Ascension Narrative in the Context of Conversion in Medieval Iran: An Apocalypse at the Intersection of Orality and Textuality,' Maria E. Subtelny offers an innovative reading of the Islamic ascension tale – Muḥammad's *mi'rāj*, opting for its interpretation as an apocalyptic narrative and punctuating its function as a conversion tool in a specific historical environment of Iran. Arguing against a common view of the ascension narrative as coherent and 'complete' and pointing to the existence of disparate variants of the *mi'rāj* tale, Subtelny articulates its fluid and hence non-canonical form when the multiplicity of versions points to the oral mode of transmission with a possible performative dimension. Each and every variant of the narrative may testify to a variety of performative contexts. Drawing on the paradigm of the literary genre of apocalypse as formulated in the seminal article of John J. Collins (1979), as well as on the narratological approach towards literary composition, the author delves into the three narremes present in the Islamic ascension narrative – those of the four drinks, of the cosmic cock and of the Jews on the edge of the world, with the purpose of demonstrating their goal-directed orientation towards a concrete audience in a missionary context. A

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12 See, e.g., Secunda and Fine 2012; Secunda 2014; Gabbay and Secunda 2014.

richly referenced comparative examination of certain Zoroastrian and Jewish traditions and motifs at the crossroads with early Islam posits the three narremes as instrumental in creating variants on the ascension narrative which can be perceived as conversion strategies in proselytizing initiatives in the Iranian world after the Islamic conquests. Thus, for example, the narreme of Muḥammad drinking milk at his ascension seems to echo the motif of the initiatic drink consumed by the apocalyptic hero in the Zoroastrian tradition, while the Prophet's encounter with the cosmic cock, or rooster angel, retains vestiges of the symbolic representation of the Zoroastrian deity Srōš, whose appearance in the ascension narrative would reverberate for the Zoroastrian audience with a cluster of symbolic meanings, first and foremost relating the five *gāhs* of the Zoroastrian ritual with the five prayers in Islam. As for the narreme which describes the Prophet's visit to a 'righteous people' at the edge of the world, Subtelny masterfully shows how, through the permutations of similar motifs from a Judaeo-Hellenistic version of the Alexander Romance and from the Jewish tale of Bulūqiyā, the narreme could have functioned as a conversion catalyst for a Jewish audience which would identify with the righteous Children of Israel, awaiting the true Prophet promised in their Scripture. Subtelny's article grasps the flexibility of the Islamic ascension narrative, whose anchoring in oral transmission with its praxis of performance permitted Muslim missionaries to graft onto it religio-cultural motifs that spoke to the target audience of Zoroastrian or Jewish prospective converts, stressing shared truths and embedding their particular religious beliefs within an Islamic context.

In 'The Motif of the Cave and the Funerary Narratives of Nāṣir-i Khusrau' Jo-Ann Gross pursues the transformation of a particular motif in a specific genre of funeral narrative in the context of the historical reception of the figure of a fifth/eleventh-century writer and an Ismā'īlī *dā'ī* Nāṣir-i Khusrau. Addressing the issue of the scarcity of research into Pamiri indigenous narratives about Nāṣir-i Khusrau, Jo-Ann Gross points to modern scholarship's preference for standard literary and historical written texts over oral, hagiographic traditions, despite Badakhshān Ismā'īlī community's primarily oral transmission of religious, social, and cultural knowledge. Her contribution offers an important corrective to the present state of affairs. The author examines two sources located at seemingly different junctures along the oral-literate continuum: on the one hand, an extended funerary narrative originating in the textual source dating probably to the tenth/sixteenth century, while on the other hand, oral traditions collected during the author's field research in Tajik Badakhshān, as well as those recorded by other scholars. Her examination testifies to a marriage between the oral traditions of Tajik and Afghan Badakhshān

and the Persian textual accounts concerning Nāṣir-i Khusrau's exile, death and burial. Both are imbued with Ismā'īlī and Islamic elements that resonate with Mithraic, Zoroastrian and Ṣūfī parallels and forge the popular perception of this figure. Methodologically Jo-Ann Gross' contribution lies in the theoretical framework of oral history which, although widely used in the research of modern, mainly post-revolutionary Iranian history, has scarcely been applied to the study of living sacred traditions.

Part Three of the collection is devoted to the Iranian epic tradition, highlighting different aspects of its development at the interface of the oral and the written in pre-Islamic and Islamic periods with special emphasis on the cultural agents involved. It opens with Yuhan Vevaina's article on orality and textuality in *The Book of Kings* in relation to the Zoroastrian mythoepic tradition. The author views Zoroastrian Middle Persian texts as dynamic and social projects produced in the Islamic period as bulwarks against a loss of cultural capital and increasing apostasy to Islam. Vevaina underscores the main difficulties in studying the relationship of late antique Zoroastrian texts with their early Islamic Persian counterparts, which is rooted in the extreme scarcity of extant comparative material and in the late provenance of the Zoroastrian Middle Persian interpretative corpus as a body of written sources. The examination of a range of eschatological tropes associated with the figure of Kay Khusrau highlights the intertextual connections between the Zoroastrian Middle Persian texts and Firdausī's epic, encompassing Avestan, Middle Persian, Arabic and Neo-Persian material from myth to epic and fluctuating on the oral-written scale of transmission. Vevaina's contribution belies the fallacy – all too often voiced in Iranian studies – of the divide between the orality of Zoroastrianism as opposed to the textuality of the Islamic world, and presents instead a complex picture of a cross-generic intertextual relationship in a wide range of Zoroastrian Middle Persian texts.

Gabrielle R. van den Berg and Julia Rubanovich turn their attention to the multiformity of narratives typical of the Iranian epic tradition through the centuries. In "The Book of the Black Demon," or *Shabrang-nāma*, and the Black Demon in Oral Tradition, Van den Berg focuses on the story of Shabrang, the White Dīv's son, which forms part of the Persian Epic Cycle. This is a common denominator for a range of tales which either bridge the narrative gaps in Firdausī's *Shāh-nāma* or further develop various narrative lines arising from it. The story of Shabrang exists in both the manuscript and the oral tradition: the former is represented by the anonymous versified *Shabrang-nāma*; the latter by a number of prose stories found in *tūmārs*, the direct product of the popular storytellers' activity. Notwithstanding the fact that they both tap the popular storytelling tradition and deploy common patterns of elaborating on the seem-

ingly closed storyline from the *Shāh-nāma*, the comparison reveals widely differing treatment of the story of Shabrang. In addition to the different location in relation to the parts of the Epic Cycle, the oral versions are more entangled and amplified; they foreground and emphasize the trickster elements of the story. Moreover, they tie up any loose ends in the narrative, while the manuscript tradition leaves them unresolved.

Julia Rubanovich's article traces the transposition of a specific theme, that of Alexander's/Iskandar's birth and upbringing, between the oral and the textual, mapping the mechanisms of the interaction between the two through the centuries. Examination of versions spreading over various text genres from the fourth/tenth to the eleventh/seventeenth centuries demonstrates how the motif of the hero's birth was transformed to serve different cultural-historical agendas, the oral tradition being both the major channel and the reservoir for modification processes. The amalgamation of strands cutting across literary and oral traditions and thus contributing to the creation of idiosyncratic narratives may be considered a distinctive feature of the Alexander subject-matter in the Perso-Arabic domain.

Raya Shani addresses the circulation of orally transmitted epic materials and their integration within the written literary tradition in medieval Iran in connection with a religious pro-'Alid epic poem *Khāvarān-nāma* (the early ninth/fifteenth century) by Ibn Ḥusām. While heavily indebted to Firdausī's *Shāh-nāma*, the *Khāvarān-nāma* also exhibits thematic parallels to various descriptions of 'Alī's expeditions as found in a range of early Arabic sources pertaining to the *maghāzī* literature, Shī'ī exegesis, Ismā'īlī narratives circulating in the Fatimid period, as well as to the medieval Persian *manāqib-kh'ānī* tradition and to the Turkish narrative *Şalsāl-nāma*. Shani tracks the interrelatedness of motifs which cut across different languages, genres and modes of transmission. She argues for the crucial role of the Ismā'īlī missionaries in Iran, possibly through the mediation of the Persian-speaking *manāqib-kh'āns*, in facilitating the oral dissemination of the types of legendary tales on which Ibn Ḥusām based his work.

Ulrich Marzolph rounds out the essays on Iranian epic tradition with 'Professional Storytelling (*naqqālī*) in Qājār Iran,' an essay that considers the activities of professional storytellers during the Qājār period as attested in the testimonies of European travellers to Iran. Describing the role of the *naqqālī* in the oral and written/literary tradition, Marzolph highlights its development from the medieval period to present-day Iran. He offers a succinct survey of the etic evidence for the Qājār period – and slightly beyond – which ranges chronologically from John Malcolm's last visit in 1810 to Vita Sackville-West's encounter with an Işfahānī storyteller in 1925. The picture emerging from the

testimonies reveals the ambivalent attitude to the indigenous storytelling and storytellers of the European observers: while judging the local storytelling as alien and inferior to European types of theatrical entertainment, most travellers express, either explicitly or implicitly, their admiration for the storytellers' exceptional dramatic and artistic skills. Their first-hand descriptions of the local audience response to the storytellers' performance provide valuable information on the modes of reception and the ways of interaction between the storyteller and his addressees. Significantly, the testimonies of the European travellers to Iran point to a high degree of continuity of the *naqqālī* tradition between the Safavid and Qājār periods. Once flourishing, by the twentieth century professional storytelling had become almost extinct. Only at the turn of this century were conscious efforts made on the part of governmental institutions to revive the tradition of *naqqālī* as part of the Iranian national heritage.

Part Four of the volume concentrates on oral and literary traditions specifically as channels of cultural transformation. The articles by Mohsen Zakeri and Galit Hasan-Rokem address the genre of proverb, which is by definition one of the most concise and representative genres of folk literature. The flexibility, intertextuality and context-dependency inherent to the proverb enables it to cut across the boundaries of oral and written, folk and literate, and emerge as a multifunctional and cross-cultural entity. In his study of the literary use of proverbs and aphorisms by Nāṣir-i Khusrau (d. 481/1088–9), Zakeri points to the remarkably rich repertoire of proverbs and aphorisms in Nāṣir-i Khusrau's *Dīvān* and explores their function in the context of Persian wisdom (*andarz*) literature. Although aware of the need to use proverbial expressions as an essential feature of poetical rhetoric to enhance the poet's creativity, Nāṣir-i Khusrau goes beyond the constraints of style; for him, as an *Ismā'īlī dā'ī*, they become the medium for delivering and reinforcing his moral advice and religious message. Zakeri shows that while tapping both classical and folk traditions, the poet skilfully modifies and re-contextualizes established proverbs in order to explain, validate and sanction his own belief system.

While Zakeri discusses the use of proverbs in the literary, textual setting of classical Persian poetry, Galit Hasan-Rokem in 'Classical Poetry as Cultural Capital in the Proverbs of Jews from Iran: Transformations of Intertextuality' looks at a reverse development, namely a 'poetry as proverb' phenomenon, when literary quotations from classical Persian poetry are used in proverbial form, as it emerges from interviews with Iranian Jews who emigrated to Israel. Approaching the field-work data from the perspective of intertextuality and Bourdieu's 'cultural capital' concept reveals that Iranian Jews differentiate between the allegedly 'high' proverbs borrowed from classical Persian poetry and attributed to renowned Persian poets, and the allegedly 'low' proverbs,

which circulate in Judeo-Persian and are employed within the community, often in humorous contexts. Hasan-Rokem's contribution highlights the theoretical ramifications of applying literary quotations in a proverbial context, reinforcing the status of proverbs as a mediating genre between written and oral traditions.

The last two articles of the section cover contemporary oral storytelling with an emphasis on its performative aspects and the creation of complex cultural meanings as a result of specific storytelling events. In 'Gashtak: Oral/Literary Intertextuality, Performance and Identity in Contemporary Tajikistan,' Margaret Mills and Ravshan Rahmoni offer a case-study of the *gashtak*, a social institution still current in contemporary Tajikistan. Drawing on selections from two gatherings of a concrete *gashtak* which took place in February and April 2005 in Dushanbe, the authors demonstrate how members of the particular *gashtak* infuse their gatherings with oral and literary verbal art genres – legend, memorate, oral history narrative, witty joke, didactic anecdote, poetry, – and performance styles and thus create self-conscious, integrated performances of their oral and literary heritage. In the post-Soviet tangled reality in Tajikistan, the *gashtak* emerges as the ideal setting and medium for articulating and preserving its members' Tajik ethno-linguistic identity and for educating the young through shared historical consciousness and local/regional self-identification, of which classical Persian literature and culture form a substantial part. The essay uncovers the intricate social dynamics among members of the gatherings, which, although generally characterized by group solidarity and shared identity, are also coloured by socio-historical tensions reflective of the turbulent history of Tajikistan, which gives rise to a gamut of allegiances to different historical narratives – the pre-Soviet era of the Bukharan Amirs, Soviet idealism, post-Soviet nationalist politics, and finally the local, regional – Pasurkhee – identity of the group's members.<sup>13</sup>

Tsila Zan-Bar Tsur's article takes us to the storytelling environment of the Afghan Jewish community of Herat and focuses on a close reading of a single folktale, the Tale of the Old Woman on the Mountain. Operating within the structural template of binary oppositions and drawing on relevant anthropological studies concerning rites of sacrifice and nutrition, as well as rites of initiation and passage, the author suggests interpreting the tale from the viewpoint of subversive male perceptions of women in the traditional Jewish

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13 With regard to M. Mill's and R. Rahmoni's article, the recent volume *Remembering the Past in Iranian Societies*, which is devoted to various forms and expressions of national, communal and family memory in Iranian societies is worth of mention; see Allison and Kreyenbroek 2013.

community of Afghanistan. The examination of the symbolic value of the culinary, ritual and cosmogonic systems as reflected in the folktale attest to the intolerant attitude prevalent among the Afghan male Jewish milieu notably towards the role exercised by women in their postmenopausal phase as 'guardians of the newborn.'

The last section of the book includes the essays which deal with the concept of orality as expressed in artefacts. The contributions by Charles G. Häberl and Naama Vilozny discuss enigmatic Mesopotamian incantation bowls. Häberl examines the corpus of incantations inscribed on terracotta bowls, primarily known from the region of southern Mesopotamia during Late Antiquity. He focuses on the existence of multiple versions of each text and the significant variation between each version as hallmarks of their fundamental orality. The author also addresses the frequent use of speech acts within these incantations, in order to illustrate their essentially performative nature. Distinguishing between the aspects of production, transmission and reception, he shows that the incantations were composed and transmitted orally, and only secondarily written down. Our interpretation of these texts can be much refined by approaching them as transcriptions of ritual utterances, and therefore the actual speech of the magician. N. Vilozny's article 'Between Demons and Kings: The Art of Babylonian Incantation Bowls' treats Mesopotamian incantation bowls for their visual interpretation of Jewish magic influenced by Iranian, mainly Sasanian, artistic and iconographic patterns. Pointing to a variety of interrelationships between the painting and the text, Vilozny emphasizes the function of the paintings as unambiguous transmitters of specific cultural-symbolic messages. As such, they serve as clear codes which allow the addressee to comprehend and identify painted images.

The essay that closes the collection – Frantz Grenet's 'Between Written Texts, Oral Performances and Mural Paintings: Illustrated Scrolls in Pre-Islamic Central Asia' – stretches the boundaries of the field of Iranian art history by addressing pre-Islamic narrative wall painting in the entirety of its functions. In his discussion Grenet offers illuminating parallels and interpretations of several scenes from the Sogdian murals in Panjikent and of a wall painting from the Kushan period in Dal'verzintepe. He points to the elliptic style of the paintings which suggests their function as a support for oral presentation or props for performances by professional narrators, probably accompanied by music. The artistic execution of the paintings themselves implies the prior use of painted scrolls or of miniatures in books, from which they were transposed on the walls. Resituating the paintings along the oral-textual continuum articulates the complex interrelatedness of the oral and written media as it finds

expression in pre-Islamic Central Asian visual art: drawing on and illustrating written texts, the paintings at the same time facilitate oral performance by a storyteller who taps written and oral traditions to fill visual lacunae.

The volume thus explores the largely uncharted territory of orality in the Iranian world, mapping out new areas and foci of research. Each of the contributions provides important evidence of textual culture's intimate, extensive, and ongoing interaction with the realm of orality. As such, they refute the exclusivity of the oral and the literate worlds, suggesting instead a profoundly interdependent relationship.

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