CHAPTER 10

Professional Storytelling (naqqālī) in Qājār Iran

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Whatever the Qājār period is considered to have been in terms of political events, from the perspective of the discipline of folk narrative research it was a golden age of storytelling (Omidsalar and Omidsalar 1999; Marzolph 2001b).\(^1\) Stories of all kinds were told in Iran since times of old and certainly are still told today,\(^2\) but for no other period of Iranian history do we command such a wealth of information on professional storytelling, the storytellers and their stories as for the Qājār period. The art of professional storytelling in Iran relies on a long tradition, probably arching back as far as Parthian times (Boyce 1957). Several of the great narrative collections of world literature owe their genesis or at least their mediation into world literature to pre-Islamic and early Islamic Iran – such as *Kalīla va Dimna* (de Blois 1990), the *Sīndbād-nāma*, and the *Thousand and One Nights* (Marzolph 2007). Besides contributing to the international dissemination of numerous narratives of ‘Oriental’ origin (Marzolph 2010), these collections prove that the art of narrating was held in high esteem in Iran as in various other Oriental cultures. In the Islamic period, fables and other didactic tales were employed to illustrate points of a moral, didactic or mystical intent in numerous works of Persian literature, such as – to name but the most famous – those by ʿAṭṭār, Niẓāmī, Rūmī, and Saʿdī.\(^3\) The Iranian national epic, Firdausī’s *Shāh-nāma*, is a pivotal narrative of Iranian identity drawing on a wide array of stories that focus on mythical rulers and heroes.\(^4\) And finally, in addition to the stories told in works of elite or popular literature, folktales and fairy tales are still told orally today (Marzolph 1984; 1994a; 1994b).

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1 Of particular interest is Floor 2005, to which the present essay is heavily indebted.
4 For a new prose rendition, see Davis 2007; among numerous studies on the epic, see especially Yarshater 1983; Marzolph 2002; Yamamoto 2003.
While storytelling thus can rightfully be considered a traditional constituent of Iranian culture, it goes without saying that all kinds of storytelling have developed and changed under the influence of contemporary conditions. Whereas more specialized discussions of *naqqālī* have been published, my aim in the following is to sketch the major characteristics of this traditional Persian form of verbal art as described in the contemporary testimonies of European travellers to Iran.

The Persian art of *naqqālī* is posited somewhere in between the various strands of oral and (written) literary tradition, thus constituting the ideal subject for considerations on orality and textuality in the Iranian world (Page 1977; Floor 2005: 82–106; Yamamoto 2010). *Naqqālī,* a term that I take in the following as a general denomination for professional storytelling, is the verbal art of telling stories of a historical nature, whether relating to events that actually did happen or those that learned or popular tradition would imagine to have happened. As in the field of Oriental historiography in general, *naqqālī* rather than representing a faithful and ‘authentic’ depiction, relies on plausibility and likeliness to construct and present an appealing image of how things might have been. *Naqqālī* is an oral performance that is presented by a professional storyteller, the *naqqāl,* and that takes place in a public or semi-public context. The texts performed in *naqqālī* usually relate to heroic adventures of secular as well as religious heroes. While being performed orally, *naqqālī* to a certain extent relies on sources laid down in writing that include both manuscript and printed versions of the performed text. The specific genre of manuscript texts related to their work is the *ṭūmār,* a text that is best described as a booklet constituting a mnemonic aid for the storyteller’s performance (Maḥjūb 1381–82/2003b: 1099–1113; Yamamoto 2003: 29–52). Storytellers might retell a more or less fixed narrative, whether in prose or verse or, at times, in prose interspersed with verbatim quotations in poetry as taken from the original source (cf. Gaillard 1987: 99–100; Rubanovich 2006). The more the storytellers would deviate from their source text, the more they would employ techniques of oral composition. In particular, they would apply a large set of narrative formulas structuring the text as well as describing certain repetitive events, such as sunsets or scenes of combat.

While the techniques of oral composition have not been studied for an actual oral performance, with the exception of Kumiko Yamamoto’s attempt (Yamamoto 2003), they are prominently visible in the published versions of