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**VIRGINS, VIRAGOS AND LION WOMEN AMONG THE BAKHTIARI
OF S.W. IRAN: AMBI-VALENT IMAGES OF THE FEMALE**

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The Love of Women

If you rule your wife outwardly, yet inwardly you are ruled by her whom you desire,

This is characteristic of Man:

The prophet said that woman prevails over the wise, while ignorant men prevail over her;

for in them the fierceness of the animal is immanent.

Love and tenderness are human qualities, anger and lust are animal qualities.

Woman is a ray of God: she is not the earthly beloved.

She is creative: you might say she is not created.

- Jalalu'l-Din Rumi (13th C)

Sweeping aside the veil of form, the poet beholds in woman the Eternal Beauty, the inspirer and object of all love, and regards her, in her essential nature, as the medium through which that Beauty reveals itself and exercises creative activity.

Ibnu'l-'Arabi went so far as to say that the most perfect vision of God is enjoyed by those who contemplate Him in woman.

- Reynold A. Nicholson

To look into the face of woman is to see Divinity

- *Jamalu'l-Din*

Rumi however agrees with the Prophetic tradition that one should seek counsel with women then act contrary to their advice, for women have less intelligence than men. The animal quality prevails in women she brings things into the material i.e. animal world, and they cause the spirit to descend into the realm of corporeal existence by seducing men into sexual intercourse. The first blood on earth, that of Abel, was shed for the sake of women.

Rumi also imagines the Nafs- carnal soul- as an ugly old crone who paints her ghastly face to seduce men.

True Reality

Of this there is no academic proof in the world

For it is hidden and hidden and hidden

- Jalalu'l-Din Rumi

Reynold A. Nicholson's translations of Jalalu'l-Din Rumi used.

Shirzan

In a history of the Bakhtiari published in 1914, Sardar As'ad, one of the leading Bakhtiari Khans, recounts the following tale concerning a Shirzan. The story is worth citing in full as it illustrates several relevant features of tribal politics, the evocativeness of mourning ceremonies, and the role this particular Shirzan played in shaping, initiating and activating a new lineage.

" The incident described took place sometime in the early part of the eighteenth century following a prolonged battle between the two major divisions of the Bakhtiari for control of the region in which Abdeh Khalil, the leader of one section, which in fact dominates to this day, was killed. His son, later to fight with honour for Nadir Shah in his campaigns in India and be confirmed as leader of all the Bakhtiari was immature, too young to follow his father as tribal leader.

"Abdeh Khalil has a brother from a different mother. After the death of his brother, Ahmad put on a cap of 'Latt', material woven from goat hair for the black tents, and he promised not to take off the hat from his head until he had avenged his brother. He tried to urge the chieftains of the Haft Lang section to another war, but nobody listened to him. No one did anything but he himself never gave up the idea and always brought up this point at any council. There was a 'Majlis Aza'- a mourning ceremony- and many of the tribal chiefs were present. Ahmad came to this Majlis and started an emotional speech, but nobody paid any attention to him. No one wanted revenge, but his words affected the women present in the Majlis and one of them rose and said

"Ahmad, do not talk to these men any more. I see no honour in them. I alone am ready to help you in this"

On saying this she slung a Mashk, -goat skin water carrier- over her shoulder, took the hand of Ahmad, making him stand and said,

"I have no weapon other than this mashk. You go, gird on your sword and let us go fight the Char Lang. After our death for the people of Haft Lang, there will remain a grand memory."

(The meaning of the skin of water for tribal people is that carrying the water and fuel is the responsibility of the women.)

The words of the Shirzan had a strong effect on the people and at that place they all decided for revenge and made war on the Char Lang... many were killed and the large cemetery from the dead of this battle is found Mt. Asnari in the winter quarters.

After this fight, the sons of Ahmad are the praised men in our family, renowned for their bravery and richness are called Tireh Ahmad Khosrovi. "

There are several recognisable themes in this tale. It is of course an origin story of a tribal section, who see themselves as descended from a brother of one of the lineal ancestors of the present dominating dynasty in the tribe. They are a high status section, who have acted in effect as servants of the ruling tribal dynasty.

Typically the name of the founder Ahmad is remembered, he gives his name to the section descending from him, testament to his political success. The name of the woman is not mentioned, although it was her bravery which would appear to have stirred the men into action. The combination of male and female, with the female inciting, energising the men, not only reminding them of their duty to revenge their dead leader, but stating that she will do so, acting honourable with only a goat skin of water for a weapon.

There is a carved stone lion gravestone of this 'founder' of the sub-tribe- Bard-Shir- which serves as a powerful place where barren, i.e. incomplete women, go to on moon-lit nights in the hope that the founder's completeness will be passed on to them.

Two centuries later, another very famous Shirzan appears- Bibi Mariam, or Sardar Miriam as she was also called. Bibi Mariam played a role during the First World War against the British which earned her a decoration from the German Army for her service in protecting and promoting German interests and harbouring a number of German spies.

She was the daughter of the Ilkhani of the Haft Lang, and was married to the chief of the Char Lang to help bring two opposed tribal groups together. She however, allied herself with her husband against her own tribal section, showing considerable independence as well as political acumen.

She became the mother of one of the Bakhtiari's most popular heroes- Shir Ali Merdun or Ali Fardun the lion, whose exploits are sung constantly by the Bakhtiari. He inherited his bravery and independence from his mother it is generally believed, and paid with his life for opposing the present regime.

The theme of lion, the symbol of male honour and power is one which is used generally in Iran, although only the Bakhtiari appear to consistently use the lion to express the reality of extraordinary women.

This concept of powerful female energy is given explicit recognition in the Bakhtiari concept of Shirzan. The term translates as 'lion woman'. It can also translate as heroine, or with negative connotations as virago.

It is necessary to know something about relations between the sexes to really understand this term, but for the moment it is perhaps enough to point to a number of cultural factors. Tribal women are never veiled. Their faces are never covered even in the presence of strangers and outsiders, unlike so many parts of Islamic culture. Bakhtiari women wear their veils and their jewellery covering their backs. The back symbolises the vulnerable inside. Bakhtiari women, like their men, tend to face the world full on. Separation is maintained not by the veil, but by a more invisible barrier, where access to the presence of women is controlled by the threat of really punitive violence. Women in their persons symbolise the inner self of the male world, at least in part. They symbolise man's animal nature, that passionate sensual size of man, which is seen as the antithesis of rational control, understanding and wisdom. Women, as seen from dance, symbolise that physiological

energy of the senses which is seen to embody his inferior more natural self. As in so many, if not all cultures in the world, women are seen as being closer to nature, to the physiology of the body rather than the celebrations of the rational mind. They are conceptualised as being more of nature in the raw- wild nature, than man, who is seen as closer to culture, to what man has made out of nature. Man is closer to God, to Divinity because he controls his lower animalistic self more than women. In Islam, he does this by his extreme control of women. They are secluded, veiled, restricted, and controlled in myriad ways. This in effect symbolises man's control over his baser nature, his control over animal impulses is essential for survival. In relation to settled life nomads could be seen, as they are by the Iranians, as dangerous, mobile, violent, - people of the wind as opposed to people of the earth. They are perceived as a threat to stability, rather than what they in fact are, the repositories of energy and vitality, essential to the nation's personality. The response of the Iranian government, at least partly understandable is to control them, just as males, threatened by the energy inherent in women, in nature itself, in their human nature, their natural impulses, from sex to rampant aggression, feel they must control it. Women are generally regarded as being incapable of control themselves. Men fear, most often at an unconscious level, that their women are inherently uncontrollable. Bakhtiari women are indeed unintimidated by their men-folk. They have a ribald sense of humour and often have dominant, powerful personalities. Women play an active part in public life, though not always an obvious one. There are rare examples of female Kalantars, for example, and the wives of powerful men are powerful in their own right. They are called Bibi.

The term Shirzan is reserved for women especially dominant and successful in exercising control over their menfolk and/or participating in the decisions of their husbands. Such a woman is of considerable prestige and highly respected in the group to which she belongs.

The structure of the term is interesting and revealing of the symbolic structuring of male-female relations. The term does not translate into lioness- 'shir made' in Persian. It is made of 'shir'- lion and 'zan'- woman.

The lion is a wild animal of considerable symbolic significance. The lion epitomises male virtues. To call a man a lion is to say he maximises the potential of all men. He is a Man amongst men, brave, fierce, etc. as a lion. It is the summation of male values. The use of wild animals as metaphors for human attributes and qualities is of course worldwide.

If woman is seen as being a metaphor for man's animal nature, then the conjunction of the two - the lion, as the best of wild nature, coupled in a single term with woman- the source of controlled or domesticated energy or nature, then the power of the term Shirzan becomes readily apparent. The coupling of both wild and domesticated nature- i.e. energy, power, is massively powerful. Such a woman is more than what the lion symbolises- maximum male power,

but adds her own energy, her own natural domesticated power. A Shirzan transcends this division between male and female and symbolises the maximum power image of human nature transcending the boundary between male and female, between nature and culture. She embodies pan human values.

It is not then surprising that such a creature should inspire considerable respect if not fear. The Shirzan concept is the summation, culmination of a hierarchical set of values, which unifies through transcending the discrete conscious cultural categories such as male/female, culture/nature. It also transcends the fundamental symbolic boundary so prevalent in the Bakhtiari-that of inside-outside.

Female : male :: nature : culture. However, female : male :: inside : outside. Combining both of these we have the 'shir' -wild nature (i.e. outside of culture, man's world), coupled with 'zan'-inside nature. The energy of both adds to each giving this doubly powerful, somewhat anomalous high status figure who is more than either male or female. Such boundary crossers are dangerous and both a threat and the source of order. The woman does not overthrow the order of things i.e. the male world, but inevitably circumvents it, transcends, controls and energizes it. It is interesting that this whole notion of male and female values also reoccurs in a classic Bakhtiari song or poem-

Abdo Mahmad Lalari and Khodabas

This tragic song tells the story of a Bakhtiari called Abdo Mahmad from Lalari. Lalari is a village high in the mountains in the Mowri territory of the Bakhtiari sub-tribes. The Mowri girls are famous for their beauty and their Ti-i Kol, which means fathomless black eyes. They are forever deceiving young men who fall in love with them. Abdo Mahmad sees Khodabas, a Mowri girl swimming naked in a pool on a moon-lit night.

The muted reflected light of the moon reveals the form of the white naked body of Khodabas. The images are typically resonant of the reflecting light and the moon, water and deep pools found in the symbolism of the dance.

The names are also significantly structured. Abdo Mahmad means servant of God. Khodabas means filled with God, replete with divine energy. Here again we meet with the image of the male relationship to divinity which is inferior and separated, and that of the female who carries divinity within her. This idea is found in Sufi literature, where Jamalu'l-Din Rumi says that to look into the face of a woman is to be able to glimpse God.

Abdo Mahmad Lalari heroically rides into the Mowri encampment where Khodabas lives and abducts her. This act is the act of a hero. To violate the privacy of the camp, and carry off that most protected, most prized, least accessible and central of all man's possessions, a woman, is the act of almost foolhardy heroism. The couple ride off into the mountains.

However, Abdo Mahmad has chosen one of the most inauspicious nights of the year, when a full moon falls on a Wednesday night. The

astrological significance of this particular night is that the heavens switch direction, at least the planets do. It is a night when no Bakhtiari likes to move abroad. Abdo Mahmud inadvertently or rather thoughtlessly chose to carry off his beloved on this dire night. The consequences of this failure to read the signs, to read the true significance fall not to Abdo Mahmud, but to Khodabas, who tragically dies. She does not live to enjoy and live with the love Abdo Mahmud bears for her.

The significance of this poem which is sung on many occasions is much more than merely a sad song. The names we have already seen resonant significance about the relationship between male-female in relation to their divinity. The action of the poem adds to this message. The man; at the moment when he actualises the bravest and most heroic deed of a man, the abduction from a camp of a beautiful woman, when he realises through his assertive action his manhood, he brings about the death of the object of this desires through an oversight, forgetfulness, not fully understanding the world he lives in. The conjunction of the stars which determine so much of Bakhtiari life, the life in the heavens, that amorphous unknowable region in which divinity resides and is created, has been overlooked. The message is clear. That man is always fallible. The death of the woman, the woman as victim of man should be seen in its full symbolic significance, that woman symbolises man's baser nature, enshrines also within herself divinity. The poem suggests that man, through forgetfulness, actually causes the death of divinity that which he carries deep, hidden within himself. Such a horrifying idea, that man is truly alone is masked mercifully in the poem. He causes this through forgetfulness. Forgetful of his God-given capacity to know, to remember, to seek always for knowledge above all deep within himself. It suggests that man is master of his own destiny, which is ultimately God-given. That man has the capacity to destroy as well as to live, to know. This sad poem leaves Abdo Mahmud alive, the knowledge that he carries the responsibility for the death of Khodabas, of true knowledge of divinity, of the source of life. An exceedingly graphic evocative image of the condition of being human, of being fallible, of carrying the seeds of one's own destruction. The poem tells of the death through forgetfulness of the source of life, of love, of being human. It could almost be construed as a story of the continuous failure of men to fulfil his potential as a human being, through his own imperfections. It is a warning against the careless use of love for one's own gratification.

It is a plea against ignorance. A clear statement of the damning results of failure to live up to one's social and human responsibilities which in Islam is to know, to know divinity, to know oneself.

That this is not a fanciful over-interpretation is attested to by the frequency with which this song is sung to the accompaniment of tears and emotive sighs of 'akheh' or 'such is life'. It is a poignant reminder that man is inherently imperfect, but is perfectible through his own efforts. Only if he remembers divinity.

Abdo Mahmud Lalari

I started out from Lalari
Kotok is visible
The white body of Khodabas
Is visible within the water

Abdo Mahmud Lalari
Why have you not died?
Wednesday the 21st
You stole the most beautiful flower

Wednesday the 21st
I stole the most beautiful flower
If I had known she was to die
I would die in her place

Wednesday the 21st
Is not a day of God
Abdo Mahmud Lalari
His intelligence is not in place

Abdo Mahmud Lalari
Son of Ali the blind
Has plundered the camps
And stolen the women by force

I heard a big Khan
Came and made for Ardal
Abdo Mahmud Lalari
Carried off the most gorgeous of the women

The young men of the Mowri
Throw earth on their heads
Abdo Mahmud Lalari
Has taken off with the partridge

'Abdo Mahmud Lalari' is a Bakhtiari song said to have been composed by Abdo Mahmud Lalari himself and concerns a tragic event of his youth. As well as being sung, the music is played for Bakhtiari Chub bazi or stick dance.

Lalar is a settled village in the central part of Bakhtiari territory.

Seen as a whole this poem is synonymous to the message of the dance and carries in its very structure the way in which life should be lived in harmony, balancing the multiple opposed forces extant in the world of the nomads. The dance and the poem are structured on the same principle, that of balance between the inside and the outside, the phenomenal world of nature and of the social world, balanced with the true nature of things, and of the self, which is private, hidden, deep and vulnerable. Both, true to their own form

make statements about the nature of life and death, about consciousness and awareness, about striving towards harmony between the sexes, between men, and between man, nature and all within the framework of the divine creation.

The female is imaged in Bakhtiari songs in a number of ways. They have a keen eye for beauty of movement, and the partridge is popularly used to express ideas of a truly beautiful movement. The partridge walks with a slight forward and backwards motion, which the women achieve with a very erect carriage, a controlled dignified walk which swishes their heavy skirts. This movement is highly stylised in one of the women's dance rhythms as well.

Women are also likened to flowers, which combine beauty of form with delicate scent, and the men sing of their separation from the women, asking the North Wind to waft the smell of musk from the necks of their beloved to them. Women are often named with reference to the rose (Khosbu), spring flower, and radiant flower.

Women, the beauties of the camp can be referred to as a flock of white sheep, protected by the men.

A most important attribute of a woman is her eyes, and one tribal section are well known for the magnificence of their 'ti-e-kol', which are very dark, deep green eyes.

These Mowri women, and Khodabas of the lament by Abdo Mahmad is a Mowri, are much coveted for their seductive eyes which they boldly flash at all men they come into contact with.

The eye is enhanced with kohl, blackening the inner rim and by a blue-green tattooing in various ways around the eyes. The eyebrows used to be heavily tattooed to meet in the middle forming a thick dark blue half-moon covering the eyes, and this is considered particularly beautiful, contrasting with skin imagined in song as like ripened wheat. The contrast of colours achieved by the tattoo is particularly exciting and a song extolls the excitement of the sight of a tattooed lover's leg when crossing a river-'the contrast struck my eye like lightening'.

Many of the songs obliquely express sexual love, others very explicitly sing of stolen kisses, midnight assignations, and 'laying down together while husbands sleep'. Such assignations take place on nights of full moon. Women are generally associated with the moon, and the round and encircled faces of women are imagined as full moons. This is a time when women have certain types of power, seductiveness and fertility appear to be activated by the reflected light of the full moon. For pastoralists it is a time when men are particularly vigilant, ostensibly protecting their herds of female sheep and metaphorically their flocks of human females.

Costume

The woman's costume exhibits a very wide range of colours, some shot through with gold or silver threads. The costume consists of many skirts- ideally seven layers hanging from the hip bones, below the navel. Over this, a dress is worn split to mid-chest in the middle, allowing for easy breast-feeding. The over garment comes to knee-length and is split at the sides to the hips, thus forming a


front and back flap. Over this is often worn a sleeveless waistcoat. It is very colourful attire.

On the head of all women from about seven years upwards, is put a cap tied under the chin by two strips. This cap covers the back part of the head only, from the middle of the head. On this cap are embroidered sequins in a variety of stylised designs- trees, interlocking squares, cross-hatching with sequins in the centre of each square. They are mostly variants on a spiral theme. These designs form a band at the front of the cap.

To the back of the cap is pinned a long veil reaching to the back of the knees in brightly coloured chiffon or some such material. A chain of jewellery also hangs from the cap down the back.

The hair styles of the women are identical. The hair is parted into four sections from the crown of the head. The two forward portions uncovered by the cap, are parted at the centre, rolled into ringlets and brought round under the chin where they are secured by the tie strings of the cap. The hair thus entirely encircles the face, which is never veiled except during the marriage ceremony when the bride is entirely covered with a white veil. The back two portions of the hair are braided and hidden under the cap and veil at the back. The veil is slung over either the right or the left shoulders. There appears to be no set pattern as right or left shoulders. The exposed parts of the female body are decorated in a number of ways either to attract, enhance the appearance, or to protect against baleful influences such as the evil eye. This is done by tattooing, dots for example, on the chin, cheekbones, sides of the mouth, or the lower lip itself. These tattoos on or close to the mouth are for protective purposes. The mouth being one of the entrances to the inner body and therefore requiring protection and control.

A mark considered of some beauty is to tattoo the eyebrows, right across the bridge of the nose, thus forming a continuous undulating line outlining the eye, the sensory organ from which we look at the world. The eye is of great significance for the Bakhtiari as a source of danger as well as of beauty. Belief in the evil eye, the glance of an envious or covetous person is feared and many protective devices are used to deflect its dangerous powers. The eye is double edged. The eyes reveal the soul, the inner being, and can also project harm. Defects of the eye, such as squints are thought to be inherently dangerous.

Wrists, the backs of hands, ankles, and the lower limbs are also often tattooed. The wrists may be encircled with a line-- a protective design. Stylised Allahs are also tattooed. Inverted swastikas (the sign of peace) and circles of dots are also common. The structure of these tattoos are that of enclosing- a sort of grasping to control a potential intrusion of harmful forces. This recurrent theme of enclosure is yet again seen in the protective amulets and in the many talismans sown onto the garments, particularly of the young. They each replicate this dominating structuring principle of a protected and enclosed inside.

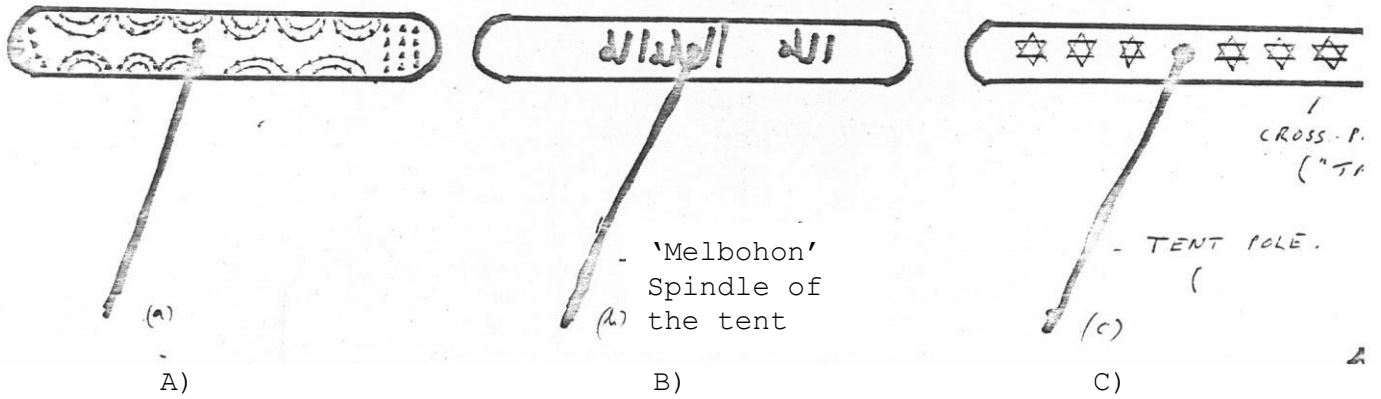
Miniature Qurans are wrapped up in green cloth and concealed within the clothing or are attached to the surface of the clothes, invariably to the upper arm or the upper back of a child, on the shoulder, or on babies sown on to their caps, along with coins, blue buttons, cowrie shells. Verses of the Quran written on pieces of paper are also wrapped up usually in green cloth. Green is a holy colour in Islam.

A somewhat different talisman, but structured identically are those which are wrapped up claws of leopards, or wolves, or the hair of a wolf wrapped up and pinned in a child's upper back. Here it is not divine power that is wrapped up and used to deflect malevolent forces, but part of a powerful and dangerous wild animal- the power of wild nature, wrapped and controlled by green holy coloured cloth. Again the purpose is to deflect external forces and dangers by mobilising the trapped power of wild nature, metonymically symbolised by a small part of the wild animal- hair, or claw or tooth.

Reflecting objects, such as the sequins sown on women's caps, or little mirrors, shiny coins are also used to deflect and reflect back on itself malevolent powers from the outside.



Private Domestic Space



The decorations on the cross-pieces which support the tent are carved:

- A) Semi-circles- symbol of creativity and female principles.
- B) Allah carved into the centre of the crosspiece- unity.
- C) 'Seal of Solomon'- union of opposites... complementary

FEMALE
LEFT
PRIVATE
COOKING
(BOILING)
(STEWING)
(BREAD)

MALE
RIGHT
PUBLIC
KEBAB COOKING

Design of the 'Lackak' - veil and bonnet

The bonnet fits over the back half of the head only and is fastened with 2 cloth ties under the chin. The hair coiled down on either side of the face hides the ties. The front part of the head is thus exposed.

Symbols express female principles and life. Other patterns include semi-circles and triangles.

