

Iblis and the Threefold Death Motif in a Medieval Persian Hagiography

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On the basis of a comparison with the motifs of threefold sacrifice/death that are found among the various Indo-European peoples it is likely that a curious anecdote in a 12th century Persian hagiography indicates a survival of this motif in the folklore of Khurasan. This article shows that an anecdote concerning Iblis (an aspect of the Devil in the Qur'ān) and his son adheres closely to the pattern found in the earliest attestations of the threefold death motif.

The *Deep History of Stories*¹ could also qualify as an apt subtitle for the collection of saints' lives compiled and elaborated in the late 12th century by the Persian mystic Poet, Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār of Nishapur. The stories in 'Aṭṭār's *Tadkiratu'l-'awliyā'* (*Memorial of God's Friends*) proved to be immensely popular throughout the Persian-speaking Islamic world and the work is still hailed as a masterpiece of early Persian prose. One of the reasons for the popularity of *Tadkiratu'l-'awliyā'* is its engaging stories and delightful anecdotes. 'Aṭṭār was a great storyteller and incorporated many disparate sources into his compositions. A comparative analysis of his hagiography reveals elements from folklore, popular storytelling traditions, such as may be found in the *Arabian Nights*, as well as pre-Islamic religious motifs. A recurrent character in these saints' lives is Iblis, the Quranic Lucifer. Iblis often appears in these stories as a wily tempter who challenges the power of God's friends, almost always to no avail. In one anecdote concerning Iblis, however, there appears to be a far older Indo-European source, to wit, the threefold death motif, which is the topic of this article.

'Aṭṭār's most original contribution to the development of the Iblis character in Sufi literature occurs in the Life of Ḥakīm-

¹The title of the conference at which this article was originally presented as a paper on August 29, 2007 in Edinburgh.

i Tirmidī (d. circa 279/892). Al-Tirmidī says the following concerning the dangers of the *nafs* (the base self): “Beware, for Satan is located within [mankind]” (‘Aṭṭār: 462).² By way of illustrating this important point, he then relates the following anecdote:

“When Adam and Eve came together and their repentance was accepted, one day, Adam—upon whom be peace—went out to do something. Iblīs came with his own child—named Khannās— brought him before Eve and said: ‘I have something important I must do. Watch over my child until I come back.’ Eve agreed and Iblīs went away. When Adam came back he asked: ‘Who is this?’ ‘He is the son of Iblīs who has been entrusted to me,’ said Eve. Adam chastised her saying: ‘Why didst thou accept?’ He became angry and slew the child, cutting him into pieces, and hung each piece from the bough of a tree and went away. Iblīs returned and asked where his son was. Eve told him what had happened: ‘He cut him into pieces and hung each piece from the bough of a tree.’ Iblīs called to his son. He became whole again and alive and came before Iblīs. A second time he said to Eve: ‘Take him, for I have another important affair.’ Eve did not accept. [Iblīs] entreated her and lamented until she accepted and then he went away. Adam came back and asked: ‘What is this?’ Eve explained the matter to him. Adam beat Eve and said: ‘I know not what the mystery is in this that thou dost not my bidding but rather the bidding of God’s foe by whose words thou art beguiled!’ Then [Adam] slew [Khannās] and burned him, scattering half of the ashes in the water and the other half in the wind then he went away. Iblīs came back and sought his son. Eve told him what had happened and Iblīs called to his son. The pieces [of his body] came back together and he became alive and sat before that accursed one, to wit, Iblīs. Then Iblīs said again to Eve: ‘Accept him again.’ Eve would not accept, saying: ‘Adam will destroy me.’ Iblīs made her swear an oath and she accepted. Adam came, saw [Khannās] and was wroth. As many times as [Iblīs] entrusted [Khannās] to Eve, Adam beat her and slew Iblīs’ son. At last Adam said: ‘God knows what will happen. Thou heededst [Iblīs’] words and not mine.’ Then he became wroth, slew Khannās, and cooked him. [Adam] ate half and gave the other half to

²p. 462. Al-Tirmidī’s words seem to echo the *ḥadīth*: “*Inna al-Ṣayṭāna yajrī min al-īnsāni majrā’ al-dam*/Verily Satan flows through man like his blood.” Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 4 (Cairo: Dār wa maṭābi’ al-sa’b) p. 150.

Eve. Some say that the last time Iblīs brought Khannās in the shape of a sheep. When Iblīs came back and sought his son Eve told him what had happened saying: ‘He slew him and cooked [him in a] stew (*qaliya kard*).³ I ate half and Adam the other.’ ‘This was my goal,’ said Iblīs, ‘to place myself inside of Adam. Since his breast has become my abode my goal is achieved.’ Thus has God—may He be exalted—said: ‘[Say: I seek refuge in the Lord of mankind, the King of mankind, the god of mankind, from the evil of the Whisperer,] Al-Khannās, who whispers in the breasts of mankind among Jinn and men/[*Qul ‘a’ūdu bi-rabbi al-nās, maliki al-nās, ‘ilāhi al-nās, min šarri al-waswās*] *al-khannās alladī yuwaswisu fi šudūri al-nās, min al-jinnati wa-al-nās*.’⁴

This exegesis of *sūra* 85 of the Qur’ān occurs for the first time in ‘Aṭṭār’s *Taḍkiratu’l-’awliyā’* (‘Aṭṭār: 463-464). Nothing in the Qur’ān or *ḥadīṭ* even remotely alludes to such a succession of events, nor does it have a precedent in Sufi hagiography. Given ‘Aṭṭār’s creative gifts as a poet and storyteller, one would perhaps assume that the basis for this anecdote was entirely the product of the author’s imagination. Certainly, this is partially true insofar as ‘Aṭṭār drew on folklore and earlier storytelling traditions for some of the material that he transformed into the substance of his *maṭnavīs* (extended narratives couched in rhyming couplets) and hagiography. It is likely that the inspiration for this anecdote was Tirmidī’s own *Nawādir al-’uṣūl*, a work concerning primarily *ḥadīṭ*. In the two hundred and thirty-ninth section of the book, the following explanation is given following a quotation from Qur’ān 51:22 (And in Heaven is your daily bread and that which ye have been promised/ *wa-fi al-samā’i rizqukum wa-mā tū’adūna*) (Qur’ān: 51:22):

³Dehkhoda gives the following definition for *qaliya*: “*Gūšt bar tāba biryān karda šuda u ba isti’māl-i gūstē ki dar rawḡan miyān-i dēg biryān karda nānkhūraš sāzand... khūrašē ast ki dar ān gūšt hast...*” Dehkhodā, Aliakbar, *Loghatnāme (Encyclopedic Dictionary)* eds. M. Mo’in and Ja’far Shahidi (Tehran: Tehran University Publications, 1998) p. 18,841.

⁴This story also occurs in ‘Aṭṭār’s *masnavi*, the *Ilāhi Nāma* with a few minor differences, most notably Adam’s disposal of Khannās’ body after the first slaying. In the *Ilāhi Nāma*, he scatters the pieces of the corpse willy-nilly in a field (*bikušt ān bačča-rā u pāra kardaš/ ba šahrā burdaš u āvāra kardaš*) rather than hanging them from a tree (*ān bačča-rā bikušt u pāra pāra kard u har pāra-ē az šākh-i darakhtē dar āvēkht u biraft.*) as in *Taḍkiratu’l-’awliyā’*. ‘Aṭṭār, *Ilāhi Nāma*, p. 123.

“And God did cause this water to be sent down and designated it cleansing/pure (*tahūran*). But Satan (*al-Šayṭān*), in his filth and uncleanness, found a way to enter the belly (*jawf*) of Adam and that came about when Adam—upon whom be peace—ate of the tree that the Foe (*al-ʿaduww*) indicated to him to eat thereof. The Foe forged a path to [Adam’s] stomach and made there [his] abode, and this is why it stank in [Adam’s] belly when he was cast out of the Garden, because of the filth and uncleanness of the Foe” (Al-Tirmidī: 159).⁵

‘Aṭṭār must have then elaborated the basic premise of this idea (i.e. the Devil’s physical presence in man) drawing on oral folklore, which he then adapted to the story he wanted to tell in order to elucidate *sūra* 85 in the Qur’ān. Thus, ‘Aṭṭār was responding to an Indo-European element, to wit, a variant of the threefold death motif, that had survived in the local culture of Khurasan. A comparison between the motifs in this exegetical tale and those of similar tales in the traditions of various Indo-European peoples reveals a far older source that harks back to an early Indo-European sacrificial tradition. The three ways in which Adam brings to naught the son of Iblīs: a) cutting him into pieces and hanging them from the branches of a tree; b) burning him and scattering the ashes in water and wind; and c) cooking him in a stew, are akin to the three sacrifices to the triumvirate of gods that are attested in early Germanic and Celtic pre-Christian ritual.

Among Germanic peoples three means of offering a sacrificial victim to the gods existed: by hanging, weapon, or drowning. In Celtic religion, the three means were hanging, burning, and drowning; fire replacing the weapon in the Celtic sacrifice (Ward 1970: 131-135). Although the threefold sacrifice is found in its most complete and probably oldest form in Germanic and Celtic culture as related in Latin sources, it is also attested as a folkloric/mythological motif among many other Indo-European peoples as well.⁶

The basic methodology for the analysis of the threefold

⁵Al-Tirmidī’s *Ṣawr al-umūr* also deals quite extensively with Iblīs as he is portrayed in the Qur’ān and hadīth.

⁶For further discussion of the threefold death motif in the modern folklore of Indo-European peoples see R. Brednich, *Volkserzählungen und Volksglaube von den Schicksalsfrauen*, *Folklore Fellows Communications* 193 (Helsinki: 1964) pp. 138-145.

death motif is derived from Georges Dumézil's ideas concerning tripartition in Indo-European myth, religion, and social stratification. The first of the three functions concerns religious and legal sovereignty; the second, armed might; the third, wealth and fruitfulness. These three functions are, according to Dumézil, evinced in the three social classes of ancient Indian and Celtic society, to wit, the priestly caste, the warrior class, and the agricultural/merchant class (Dumézil: 1958). Each of these functions also corresponds to a god whose domain concerns one of the three functions: sovereignty/religious authority, war, and fertility. Among the Gauls, a different sacrifice was made to the three primary gods: for Esus, the god of the first function, the victim was hanged; for Taranis, the god of the second function, the victim was burned alive; and for Teutates, the god of the third function, the victim was drowned in a vat (Evans 1979: 154).⁷

Many other similar practices may be found among ancient and medieval Germanic, Italic, Celtic, and Hellenic cultures. Medieval Irish saints lives provide a number of examples of the threefold death motif. In the *Life of Saint Moling*, there is a certain "son of malediction" named Grac who spends his time "robbing and rebelling" and steals a cow that the saint has bestowed upon a woman who has complained of having no kine. Saint Moling foretells the doom of Grac but the woman is unconvinced, saying: "The more likely, meseems, he will have a long life!" "If then, it were thy wish to burn him, [says Saint Moling] (this) would be done." "The more likely, meseems, that a great fire would be got for him if he should feel cold," says the woman. "Or if it be better to drown him, (this) would be done," says Moling. "The more likely, meseems, that a drink would be got for him if he should be athirst," replies the woman. Saint Moling then sends his followers in pursuit of him. When they reach the thief, he has already killed the cow and is taking its flesh out of a cauldron. When he perceives his would-be captors, he flees from them, climbing into the top of a tree. In the tree he is wounded, falls thence into the fire, and then into the river where he is drowned (Stokes 1966: 287). Grac's falling from the tree may be interpreted as a symbolic hanging,

⁷There are some complications, however, in the identification of these Celtic deities. See Claude Sterckx, *Les dieux protéens des celtes et des indoeuropéens, Ollodagos* (Mémoires de la Société Belge d'Études Celtiques) 4 (Bruxelles: 1994).

a transformation of the hanging motif that occurs in other examples of the threefold death motif. Following the death of Grac, the people bring the flesh of the cow and wrap it in its hide, whereupon Moling restores it to life. It is worth noting that Moling's revivification of the slaughtered cow recalls Iblis' revival of Khannās following the first two occurrences of his slaying by Adam. A further example of the threefold death motif is found in the Life of Saint Brendan of Clonfert, in which a certain King Diarmait is cursed to die by burning, drowning, and slaying (Plummer 1922: 87). In his work *Germania*, the Roman historian Tacitus remarks that capital punishment was meted out by the Germanic tribes in a manner that is akin to the three sacrifices of the Gauls. The condemned was executed according to the type of crime committed. A traitor was hanged from a tree, while the crime of unnatural sexual practices (i.e. contra fertility) was punished by drowning in a bog.⁸ The threefold death of Agamemnon in the *Orestia* trilogy of Aeschylus (5th century BCE) has been convincingly elucidated in Evans' article. Upon his return from the Trojan War, Agamemnon's wife, Clytemnestra, murders him by entangling him in a cloth and then slaying him with the sword of her lover, Aegistheus, while he is taking a bath (Evans 1979: 160). In comparison with the Celtic and Germanic threefold sacrifice, the entangling of Agamemnon in a cloth may be read as a symbolic hanging, while the bath may be read as a symbolic drowning. A similar occurrence of an even more symbolic rendering of the threefold death motif is found in the Welsh *Mabinogi*. In the book of *Math fab Mathonwy*, the character Lleu Llaw Gyffes reveals to his treacherous wife that he may only be killed under the following circumstances:

⁸Tacitus, *Germania*, book 12 (...*distinctio poenarum ex delicto: proditores et transfugas arboribus suspendunt... corpore infames caeno ac palude iniecta insuper crate mergunt.*)

“I cannot be killed inside a house nor outside,” said he. I can neither be killed on horseback nor on my feet. “Well,” said she, “in what manner mayest thou be killed then?” “I will tell thee,” said he. “[If] a bath be made for me on the bank of a river and the framework of a roof be made above the tub/vat (*cerwyn*) and its roof be quite watertight after that. A billy goat [must] be brought,” said he, “and placed near the tub and [I must] place one foot on the billy goat’s back and the other on the edge of the tub, whoever should strike me thus would slay me.”

His wife, wishing to have him out of the way so that she may be united with her lover, makes the necessary preparations and asks him to demonstrate how he would stand. Suspecting no treachery, Llew Llaw Gyffes does as she asks and forthwith her lover, Gronw Bebr, casts a spear at him. In this example, the fall from the tub and goat’s back when the spear hits Llew may be read as a symbolic hanging, the bath represents drowning, and the spear is, of course, the weapon (*Math uab Mathonwy*: 16).

A more recent example of the threefold death motif in Indo-European folklore was collected by D. Lorimer, a scholar of West Iranian languages, whose work includes a translation of many folk and fairy tales from the Bakhtiyārī language. In one of these, a king asks his three astrologers to speak regarding his newborn son’s destiny. The first foretells that the prince will be bitten by a snake when he is fourteen; the second foretells that at fourteen he will fall down from a height; and the third foretells that he will be drowned in the water at age fourteen. The king refuses to accept that more than one of these predictions may come true, nonetheless, he appoints a guard to watch over his young son, bidding him never to allow the boy to leave the garden in the palace courtyard. It so happened that in this garden was a tree in which a sparrow had built her nest and beside the tree was a large tub of water. In his fourteenth year, the prince climbs the tree to get the nest. When he places his hand on the nest a snake bites him, which causes him to fall down from the tree and into the tub in which he drowns (Lorimer 1919: 333-334).⁹

It is probable from a comparison with the motifs of

⁹A similar tale is found in the medieval Spanish *Libro de buen amor*, however, the death predicted by the king’s astrologers concerning his son is fivefold: stoning, burning, falling, hanging, and drowning. Juan Ruiz, *The Book of Good Love*, trans. E.D. Macdonald (London: Everyman, 1999) pp. 40-43.

threefold sacrifice and death that are found among the various Indo-European peoples as attested in ancient, medieval, and modern sources, that the anecdote concerning Iblīs and his son, Khannās, is based on a survival of this motif that was ostensibly current in the folklore of 6th/12th century Khurasan. An analysis of the three ways in which Adam slays Khannās reveals this tale's conservative adherence to the threefold death motif. In the first slaying, Adam kills Khannās, cuts him into pieces, and then hangs the pieces from a tree. In consideration of the many symbolic ways in which the threefold death motif has evolved in Indo-European folklore, it would be no great stretch of the imagination to interpret the bedecking of a tree with the rent pieces of Khannās' flesh as a symbolic hanging. The second slaying hardly needs analysis insofar as the manner of killing is concerned. The burning of Khannās by Adam conforms closely to the earliest attestations of this second-function sacrificial slaying among the Celts of Gaul. The third slaying, to wit, killing Khannās and cooking him in a stew, may be interpreted as a symbolic drowning as the cooking of a stew implies the use of some type of vessel such as a pot or cauldron. Thus it may be posited that the "drowning" of Khannās in a stew is akin to the other examples of drowning a victim in a vat or barrel.

The slaying of Khannās by Adam is not the only occurrence of the threefold death motif in *Tadkiratu'l-'awliyā'*. In the Life of Ḥallāj, with which 'Aṭṭār concludes his hagiography, the execution of the subject at the command of the Abbasid caliph exhibits clear signs of the threefold death motif: he is hanged from the gallows/crucified (*bar sar-i dār šud*); he is slowly dismembered, beginning with his hands and feet, followed by the plucking out of his eyes, the cutting out of his tongue, and finally he is beheaded; the next day they burn his body and the words "'anā al-Ḥaqq/I am the Truth/God" are heard coming from his ashes; on the third day they cast his ashes into the Tigris river. Thus Ḥallāj dies on the first day by hanging, on the second day by dismemberment by a weapon, and on the third day by burning and drowning. Ḥallāj foretells the threefold nature of his impending doom when, following his arrest, a dervish asks him concerning the meaning of love (*'išq*): "Today, tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow thou wilt behold [the meaning of love]" ('Aṭṭār: 516-518).

In light of the evidence for the threefold death as a

sacrificial, legal, and folkloric/mythological motif among Indo-European-speaking folk, the analysis of the tale of Iblīs, Khannās, and Adam and Eve that occurs in ‘Aṭṭār’s *Tadkiratu’l-’awliyā*’ in the Life of Ḥakīm-i Tirmidī contains what is undoubtedly a manifestation of this motif. Although the Bakhtiyārī folktale confirms the existence of the threefold death motif among Iranian-speaking peoples, its occurrence in *Tadkiratu’l-’awliyā*’ is startling in its preservation of the motif as it is found in ancient sources (e.g. Celtic and Germanic pagan religious practices). Not only does the analysis of the story of Iblīs and Adam and Eve broaden our understanding of the rich folkloric element that is manifested throughout *Tadkiratu’l-’awliyā*’ but it also casts new light on our knowledge concerning the diffusion among the Indo-European-speaking peoples of the threefold death motif in its various guises.

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