

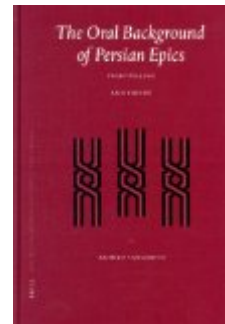
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kumiko Yamamoto. *The Oral Background of Persian Epics: Storytelling and Poetry*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003. xxiv + 191 pp. Price not listed (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-12587-2.

Reviewed by Raziuddin Aquil (Fellow in History, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta)

Published on H-Mideast-Medieval (November, 2004)



This study investigates the role of the oral tradition in the development of the written Persian epic with particular reference to the *Shah-nama* of Abul Qasim Firdausi (c. 1000 CE) and a later, “secondary epic,” the *Garshasp-nama* of Abu Mansur ‘Ali b. Ahmad Asadi (c. 1064-66 CE). Firdausi put together and transformed ancient legendary material, derived both from written and oral traditions, into a new literary genre that signified the turning point in the dissemination of the Persian “national legend.” Kumiko Yamamoto has used the term national legend in “the sense of the legends of the Persian-speaking population of the Iranian cultural era” before the emergence of Islam (p. xix, n. 1). Yamamoto suggests that the problem of the genesis of the *Shah-nama* has reached a “dead end,” particularly when it comes to the question of borrowing from a direct textual tradition. The author has therefore sought to look for indirect influence of the oral tradition, shifting the focus from the origin of the *Shah-nama* to the characteristics and structure of the text itself. Using the same framework, she also illustrates the oral features of the *Garshasp-nama*. The whole exercise—packed in five chapters with a brief introduction and a short summary of the conclusions—examines the extent to which the poets’ understanding of the nature of heroic tales was shaped by the practice of storytelling.

In view of the fact that the *Shah-nama* is a written text that is known to have recorded antecedents, the author shows in chapter 1 that the “Oral-Formulaic Theory,” generally used for evaluating oral literature, is not sufficient for the present purpose. The alternative approach is to look for a model of oral performance that can help determine the influence of oral tradition on written epics. Using the *naqqali* or storytelling as a model of Persian

oral narrative traditions, whose performance is based on a written text (*tumar*), the author proposes, in chapter 2, a set of “formal and thematic criteria” that together constitute the “Oral Performance Model” for illustrating the orality of the written epics (p. 51). As part of the formal criteria, the influence of oral tradition on a written text is shown by a series of installments or equivalents. These installments are generally of equal length and each of them is semantically complete even as it forms a part of the text as a whole; each installment comprises a chain of episodes, connected by narrative or temporal markers. In thematic criteria, a text showing influence of an oral narrative is typically organized around a “key motif.” It is also marked by the recurrent use of certain “narrative techniques and devices” (p. 52).

Yamamoto applies this set of criteria to a particular story in the *Shah-nama*, the Rustam legend. Compared to the performance of the *naqqal* or the storyteller, the author demonstrates, in chapter 4, that the story met most of the features of a text prepared for oral performance, except three: installment length, and number and length of episodes. The failure is explained in terms of Firdausi’s efforts to use the new medium of writing to break with tradition and enhance the readability of his text. Varying the speed and depth of narration by changing installment size, episode count, and its length, Firdausi has modulated the intensity of installments (pp. 107-108). It is suggested that such variations are important for a text like *Shah-nama*, which is not primarily meant for oral performance. The author maintains, however, that this does not prove the “non-orality” of the text. The above story of the Rustam legend fulfills the thematic criterion of an oral text revolving around a key motif, the theme of the hero’s participation in the war. This story then was

composed in “serial form” as if to “enact an oral performance on paper.” The same can be true of other stories as well. Thus, according to Yamamoto, Firdausi modeled his work “intuitively on oral performance, the form and technique of which were deeply imprinted in his consciousness through his experience as a listener; this was probably how he thought of heroic narratives” (p. 141).

Besides highlighting the formal and stylistic features of the Persian epic through the Oral Performance Model, the author also illustrates, in chapter 3, the external and internal evidence for the indirect influence of the Ghaznavid oral tradition on the *Shah-nama*. Based on the *Tarikh-i-Baihaqi* of Abul Fazl Muhammad b. Husain Baihaqi (d. 1077 CE), Yamamoto shows how the poets, minstrels, and storytellers played an important role in defusing the legends of “national” heroes and tales of fantastic travels in the Ghaznavid era, roughly the time when the *Shah-nama* was composed. The influence may also be discerned in certain standard phrases unevenly distributed in Firdausi’s work that could pertain to either written or oral text. According to Yamamoto, later epics continue to reveal the influence of the oral tradition. This is substantiated in chapter 5 through a display of installment divisions and narrative technique in Asadi’s *Garshasp-nama*.

However, the author has shown how the later epics do not simply imitate and reproduce the *Shah-nama*. They must be treated as a separate literary form, as the *Garshasp-nama*, for instance, moves away from the basic structure of Firdausi’s work. Here the biographical portions relate the story of Garshasp to the “national legend,” but the parts dealing with the hero’s adventures in India, China, and the Maghreb follow the “Alexander Romance,” with the addition of the catalogues of marvels consisting of lengthy descriptions of wonders in foreign lands that the hero encountered (p. 117). Though available in recorded travel accounts as well, according to the author these narratives concern the supernatural world of an enemy territory and its subjugation, and once again point to the oral background of the Persian epic.

It appears that the further exposition of the significance of the celebration of pre-Islamic Iranian legends in the late-tenth- and the eleventh-century “Persianate” world attempting to do away with the hegemony of Arabic Islam is not the concern of the author. Also, the study is not located in the political context of the period in which Iran formed a part of the empire established by the Turks of the Central Asian steppes with their base in Ghazna, now in Afghanistan. In this connection, the

need to take into account the periodic upsurge of the Afghans in Eastern Islam may also be mentioned. Confronted by the dominance of such groups as the chauvinistic Arabs (who in a typical example of “Othering” had disdainfully dubbed the Persians as a dumb people), adventurous Turks, and the resurgent Afghans, the Iranian self-perception hinged on the glorification of the militaristic and political achievements of the ancient kings. The Turkish Sultan Mahmud (r. 998-1030), to whom Firdausi presented his work, was not particularly amused by the accounts of the military exploits of pre-Islamic Persian warlords. Not surprisingly, the sultan was not so parsimonious with other poets recording the exaggerated narratives of his own achievements, particularly his much-celebrated “holy wars” in India.

Yamamoto’s bibliography ignores some major works of critical importance related to the issues mentioned above. The complete exclusion of the voluminous writings of C. E. Bosworth, A. K. S. Lambton, and M. Nazim is particularly disappointing. Further, the classic study of Persian literature in Urdu by Allama Shibli Numani and the recent work of Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi provide diverse and useful perspectives on the continuous attempts at reinventing Iran, even if the terms of reference might be the ancient heroic lore, legends and marvels, travel accounts, court-histories, poetical compositions, or the “homeless texts.” The above studies could have provided valuable introduction to the cultural milieu as well as political agenda, which informed the compilation of the Persian epic poems. An exploration of the oral background of a literary tradition, without locating it in the context in which it emerged, leaves out a lot of issues of crucial import.

The author’s insistence on a focused reading of a sample text and reticence to think of the larger questions may be understood in light of the fact that the book is based on a Ph.D. dissertation in Persian literature at the University of London in 2000. Hopefully her future work, particularly the living (or dying?) tradition of *naqqali* in Iran and the texts for oral performance, will be anchored in the broader discourses of Social Sciences, including History, Anthropology, and Cultural Studies, breaking free from the restrictions of the institutional requirements for a Ph.D. degree. The above observations should not detract from the author’s commendable efforts to overcome the challenges involved in mastering some Persian classics. Her suggestion that the hindrances were manifold in her case—a young, female foreigner researching in Tehran in early 1990s—needs to be appreciated.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-mideast-medieval>

Citation: Raziuddin Aquil. Review of Yamamoto, Kumiko, *The Oral Background of Persian Epics: Storytelling and Poetry*. H-Mideast-Medieval, H-Net Reviews. November, 2004.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10003>

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.