

The Iranian philosopher Manuchehr Jamali about Firdausis Shahnameh-Epic and its contemporary relevance

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TITLE IN FARSI: خردِ سرپیچ در فرهنگ ایران

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## ‘Rostam and Sohrab’

### The concept of „measuredness“ as a creative source in the ancient Iranian thinking

The ancient Iranian culture [1] was built on the idea that two forces or principles are brought into an interaction by another principle, namely that of a middle (*Mai + dhyanna*) or center, and in that way the two forces turn into a creative unit. The principle of the middle itself dissolves in the process of the binding, and the ‘two-ness’ becomes a unity. The middle stays invisible and ungraspable.

This principle was embodied by the ancient Iranian deity Vohuman which was later also called Bahman (Brahman). The deity Vohuman connected everything but stayed itself as the binding agent not inbetween the bonded units. This sort of a trinity formed the basis of all further appearances and expressed itself in phenomenons like love, measure, happiness, music and dance, for example. The principle of this invisible middle was abstract: it was for example the middle within the single person and at the same time the center between different people, or the center between the perceiving eyes and the seen objects; it connected different things without being visible or tangible itself.

This concept of appearance that was constituted by the ancient Iranian deity Vohuman has later been deprived of its substantiality by Zoroastrism. But nevertheless expressions of this view can still be found in traces, but clearly in various mythologies of the Shahnameh and other preserved literary materials. In that way original contents can somehow be reconstructed. The ancient Iranian culture which has its roots laying before Zoroastrism, brought forth concepts and images which can clearly be separated from the later teachings of Zoroaster as to how meanings interrelate.

In the teachings of Zoroaster the concept of duality was marked by the image of the twins *yimea*, which symbolize contraries and stand ‘in separation’ and in opposition towards each other. The basic idea of duality - that is of two principles or forces - in the ancient Iranian culture before Zoroaster, entailed in contrast the bond which was formed through the invisible third element of the Vohuman, and this sort of a trinity which resulted from this particular form of bondedness, formed a specific understanding of a “unity”. The principle of an invisible and ungraspable middle, which creates a trinity from itself (which evidently cannot be compared with the Christian term of trinity, but rather forms an own type of an occurrence of trinity) has despite of it’s meaningfulness so far been mostly ignored by scholars who work in the relevant fields, and the ancient Iranian concepts and forms of belief have subsequently wrongly been understood as dualistic belief systems (i.e. good and evil).

Love and harmony, which expressed itself in “measuredness” or “measure” (pers. *andazeh*, the term literally means “to walk together” or “run together” and represented the initial condition of a *Yough*, an embodiment of a form of bondedness) and “the conjoined search and

the conjoined thinking” (pers. *hamporsi*) turned “two-ness” into a unity. Zoroaster tried to substitute this old underlying concept of the ancient Iranian culture with his ideas. By doing so, he destroyed the idea of love, measure and dialogue (*hamporsi*) as the source of the world and as the conceptions about divinity. The binding principles (love, realization, etc.), as an expression of the binding middle, had originally been seen as one seed from which every individual life grew. Love, measure, realization, happiness and the ability to flexibility had been perceived as elementary characteristics which were immanent in people.

We want to try to shed some light onto a few fundamental conceptions of the ancient Iranian culture - as of how it had occurred before Zoroaster and persisted still after him in folk culture, and mainly as of how the rudiments of this ancient culture are still traceable in sources like the Shahnameh epic and other literary materials. If we manage to exemplify parts of that cultural heritage, we can hopefully revive the humanity and deepness of its ideas and beliefs. The thoughts that are to be found there, can add to the overall understanding of “culture” in our contemporary global contexts – despite having their millennia old initials.

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One of the most prominent stories of the Shahnameh epic, which Firdausi has preserved for us in his literature, is the myth about ‘Rostam and Sohrab’. We want to view an aspect of ‘Rostam and Sohrab’, that helps to create an understanding of the ancient Iranian culture. The myth of ‘Rostam and Sohrab’ has often been wrongly understood, since it had obtained a certain coloring in its interpretation in the Sassanian time which was in accordance with the conceptions of that historical era.

In the Sassanian time existed a God of time with the name ‘Zamane’ (another name of him was also ‘Zrvan’). An attribute of this important God was that he did not possess any reasonability at all, and that he decided without reasonability about the fate of people. The understanding of *time*, was strongly influenced by this unreliable God of that period, but we’ll come back later to this.

Since the Sassanian time interpretations of the story about ‘Rostam and Sohrab’ tended to have problems with the meaningfulness of the notion of “keeping-something-in-a-measure” as a self-dealt good and bad in the own deeds and thoughts, such as how the idea originally occurred in the myth. The concept of “measure” (*andazeh*) in its more ancient meaning, on which we are bringing our focus here, implicitly pointed to the “fundamentality” (i.e. the German: *Ursächlichkeit*) within humans and the immanence of values within people.

The term “measure” or “keeping measure” as the primary point of the story had been overlooked, notwithstanding the fact that it had been the crucial point of ‘Rostam and Sohrab’ in the text sources as how Firdowsi himself had taken them up during his time. To see a moral of an action in a self-dealt measure of doing ‘what-is-good’ and ‘what-is-bad’, was not really comprehensible in the Sassanian time, because the Zoroastrian doctrine counted the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ as matters of decision and judgment that solely the God Ahura Mazda (the Zoroastrian supreme creative deity) possessed as his domain.

The original meaning of ‘keeping-something-in-a-measure’ in the ancient Iranian culture had been that of ‘harmony’; not a pre-stabilized harmony, but a harmony that one creates or develops from oneself. This idea of “measure” as harmony, is an idea that generally stands against terms of power (in the sense of might), because this ‘harmony’ is based upon the acceptance of plurality and manifoldness. The Persian word for “Measure” is *andazeh* [2] – the older term is *ham-taacayati* – which meant ‘to run or to walk together’. This locomotion referred to the “cart of creation” which two oxen or horses were pulling and which were an image of the coming into existence of the world: The specific name for the two animals and their pulling the cart or plough was the Persian word *gardune*. The concept of “measuredness” constituted an idea of perfection, similar to a harmony between strengths and virtues. Perfection here did not mean an unlimited or infinite good, neither an infinite wisdom or infinite knowledge or an endless power. “Measure” such as how it had been understood in this ancient view, forms in that way an opposite term to the historically later abrahamic understanding of perfection, since there might and knowledge, for example, occur in an unlimited form, and perfection there equals an exclusionary form of absoluteness.

In contrast, the perfection of a “measure” which is comprised of a harmonization of ‘things which are different’, carries the feature of a continual coordination amongst powers which are relative and flexible.

An a concept of perfection which brings forth absoluteness, in the sense of a equalization of absolute power with perfection, stands against an understanding of perfection which is derived from a “measuredness”. And, following this, something that is “in the process of a mutual coordination” does not produce a perfection of light or knowledge, which again could be equaled with an absoluteness in might. Miracle stories an example of a ‘perfection’ in the sense of an ‘absoluteness’. A “measuredness” can’t bring forth a perfection of that sort.

Going along with the term of an absolute (instead of a relative) perfection, is the concept of the holiness of an absolute power, and on the heels of such holiness it follows that indefinite power is being regarded as something positive and as elated. And finally, that what is admired in a God will also be seen as positive within a society or a policy; the images reflect within these fields.

## Rostam’s battle against Sohrab

When Rostam loses the first battle against Sohrab, he asks God for help. He beseeches God to restore the limitless type of strength which he had once possessed. A power which he once possessed, but which he had given up on, because the overabundant strength posed an obstacle to his free movement (because of his unlimited power his feet got stuck in rocks and stones, more about that later in the text). So he asks God once again for an unlimited power, because he wants to take a second chance at trying to defeat Sohrab. In the instance of his defeat, a desire for victory gains a bigger value to him than the “measuredness” of strength which he had once asked of God.

But in the moment in which Rostam receives that limitless strength from God, for fighting against his conceived enemy, he simultaneously loses his ability to love and to differentiate. The unlimitedness in his strength or might, causes him to completely lose his ability to discern. Rostam does not feel any love, he doesn’t understand nor realizes: He doesn’t recognize that Sohrab who faces him a second time as his enemy is his son, and kills him.

The deeper meaning of this myth about Rostam and his son Sohrab is, that people are only able to love, to realize and to be magnanimous or giving, when they “have a measuredness” (i.e. are able to weigh out within themselves) and possess harmony. The ability of a person to decide her- or himself about good and evil within the own inner considerations, is the main point of focus here. The victory is no victory when the basic principle of life and creation: the “measure” is being hurt. It’s not even then a victory, if something desirable was reached in another place. The missing understanding about the deeper sense of the term “measuredness” (*andazeh*) must be seen as the reason why many interpretations about the story have only reached a contentwise reductive result.

The story has often been understood so, that when the old Rostam kills the young Sohrab, it would mean that “the old” (as somewhat similar to a metaphor for the preceding, older cultural foundations) is seeking to destroy “the young” and the new; in other words that “the old” seeks to win over “the young”, and this with artifice and trickery. This way of interpretation can only hint at a gap in knowledge amongst many Iranian modernists, and likely produces an underestimation of the Shahnameh-epic.

In the predominant belief of the Sassanian time, the time-god Zamane loves and hates without reason, and also he decides about the fates and destinies of the people in a fully unreasonable manner. This implied that everything that happened in the world and in the individuals live, would base on a source of non-reason. It is so in reality, that a person cannot find a form of sense in the own meaning and in the outer events of the world, that could be grasped straightforwardly by the means of reason or will. This means, that one does not see a logical connection between ones actions, ones punishments and ones experienced favors. This lack of ability reflected itself in this image of a God.

In the ancient linguistic meaning “measure”, *andazeh*, had been seen as the source from which the Creation sprang.

*Andazeh*: the literal meaning is  $\approx$  ‘to walk together’, it’s the source of the *yough* (the *gardune*, the plough that two animals moved forward together)

In the ancient Persian conceptions the term “measure” (*andazeh*) was understood as inseparably linked to the fundamental and underlying nature of the world. The question is of course why the older meaning of “measure” had been forgotten in the interpretations of the myth about ‘Rostam and Sohrab’. The direct answer would be: because the original connotation of the term “measure” contradicted the Zoroastrian doctrine. The ancient original concept of “measure” was eliminated by Zoroasters teachings.

The framing concept that Zoroaster had drafted, based on the twinship: *yimea* or *yema* (*yam* = twin), and the Zoroastrian understanding of “measure” was tied to this concept about the *yimea*, the twinhood. There existed various images-of-thought that captured or described the concept of the *yough* as the superordinate term for a state of bondedness (the English word ‘yoke’ is also related to the ‘yough’, i.e. a device that binds). The term ‘twin’ had an equal meaning as *yough*, and *yimea* and *yema* was one of many of different terms for one very basic idea.

In the ancient Iranian image- or symbol-language, “measure” (*andazeh*) was made up of two different powers or principles that coordinate themselves amongst each other, move along together or create something: there existed the core idea, that the world had been created by two oxen or horses that pull a plough (the Persian word for this team itself is: *gardune*). The basic representation of a creative union was called the *yough*. Zoroaster denied the existence

of a 'twoness' as something correlating, where pace and speed would go along harmonically, such as how it was depicted in the image of the *gardune*. But the harmony amongst that-what-is-different originally had constituted the basis of the "measure" (*andazeh*) and the capability of love amongst people. Zoroaster's image of the twins, *yimea*, and also his new observations about the *yough* – which originally was first conceived as an affirmative expression of bondedness – proposed a new antagonistic 'twoness', standing contrariwise towards each other; through this shift in perspectives "measure" and harmony became lost as the sources of creation and as inherent characteristics of humans.

At a given time and across time spans the term of the "yough" (a bondedness) found its expression in a whole multiplicity of symbolical images (or conceptual images). The important point with the twin-concept of Zoroaster was, that this 'twin' or 'gemini' was marked by a specific contrariness. In that figure of the *yimea* the substantial terms of live and anti-live have been antinomically polarized. The twins were opposites and they were also against each other. The image which Zoroaster had designed with the *yimea* decided his view of the original substance of the universe and of all and any events and occurrences in the world. The concept of the *yema* or *yimea* was not a sole aesthetical framework of thought and conceptualization, such as how some scholars who studied the Gathas tended to suggest. With his concept of the *yimea*, Zoroaster sought to disfunction the corner stone of the ancient Iranian world-view of a trinity in the sense of two forces being bound by an invisible third aspect. For Zoroaster the initials of life were battle, conflict, enmity and war.

.....THIS IS SO FAR ONLY AN EXCERPT! STILL HAS TO BE CORRECTED ALSO.

[1] "Ancient Iranian culture (or civilization)" here means a continuum which doesn't only comprise the time span before Zoroaster, but instead the civilization which existed before Zoroaster and continued from this past in different forms, and which has been passed on in folk belief with its deep roots and it's validity in a majority of people in that cultural regions.

[2] Another term for *andazeh* in Pahlavi is *handaa + jak*. This term confirms and further clarifies the meaning: *Handaa + yak* means "The mother's body" and "source of the yough".

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