

# Reviewing the Historical Narrative of “Water and Tree” in the Islamic Era of Iran

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## Abstract

Natural phenomena such as the sun, the moon, stars, water, plants, fire, mountains, animals, the earth and the sky bear special value among different tribes. Mankind has sanctified these phenomena, has created signs and symbols for them and has attributed them to certain deities. Ancient Iranians cherished water and plants and considered them the signs of Mehr and Anahita. Religious rituals related to water and trees and the deities to whom they were attributed had their roots in Iran’s prehistoric culture, and continued to exist with new content in the Islamic era in such a way that worshipping Anahita has changed into *shafa’at* (intercession) and tawassul (supplicating to God through a prophet or saint, dead or alive).

Anahita, the goddess of water, is characterized as a lady with natural features and a developed personality and is the symbol of the fertility of mankind, animals and plants. This belief has been so strong in the Persian culture that it still continued to exist after the advent of Islam into Iran. The rain ritual and recourse to Hazrat Fatehem Zahra (SA), the daughter of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), and Hazrat Abbas (SA), the brother of Imam Hussein (SA), replaced water rituals and recourse to Anahita. Although the form of the ritual has been preserved during the metamorphosis, the content has changed from “recourse to Anahita for bringing rain” to “recourse to Islamic divine individuals for intercession with God”. Intercession with God, of course, relies on God’s permission. Water and plants are not sacred in Islamic beliefs. Nevertheless, they are revered as cherished elements of nature in Quran due to their important role in mankind's life and their relations to ancient beliefs. A great change which took place about these rituals is the reference of the ritual. While Anahita was the reference of prayers in ancient Iran, now Islamic divine individuals are resorted to as intermediaries and intercessors, and the intercession itself depends on God’s permission.

**Keywords:** Water, Tree, Anahita, Ritual worship, Shrine, Islamic era.

## Introduction

The position of sacred trees and wells that have been the symbols of fertility and wealth has been preserved in the Persian culture particularly after the advent of Islam. Respecting the elements of nature as sacred entities is common among all nations and has deep historical roots. Water, plants, the sun, the moon and stars have a high standing in the beliefs of the Iranians and other ancient civilizations like Egypt, the Mesopotamia, China and India which have manifested themselves through myths and deities.

They were specifically worshipped and were respected as sacred because men benefited from them in his daily life.

The gods and divinities to whom people pray have each associated signs and symbols which are mostly natural phenomena. These rituals and beliefs still live on with new content. Rituals of venerating Anahita and asking her for fertility were accompanied by offering sacrifices.

They were later taken into the Islamic religious rituals and are still today observed in different Iranian tribes and ethnicities. In ancient Persia, fountains, trees and many temples that were constructed for worshipping gods of love were named after the religious figures of Zoroastrianism.

Many of those names remain today in Iran and several others changed after the emergence of Islam.

No earthly or heavenly entity has ever been respected and worshipped for its own sake in Divine Religions. These divine entities –of whatever nature and form– represent the Divine God, which is the Greater Good, and they derive their existence from Him (Elyadeh, 1993: 162).

Water and tree were respected in both ancient Iran and Islam as they symbolize life, prosperity and abundance. The buttonwoods in Imamzadeh Saleh shrine in Tehran, the old buttonwood in Kashan's Niasar, Abarghu cedars, Mehriz cedars and Kashmar cedars are examples of the trees which are associated with divine rituals. Today,

sanctification of trees and springs is considered neither superstition nor blasphemy since they are a means of recourse to Imams and Islamic divine individuals.

The form of ancient rituals have been preserved, however recourse to Islamic divine individuals, which is a strong conviction among the Shia, has taken up a more peculiar form such as touching and kissing their shrines, which are usually adorned with green cloth and carvings of flowers and shrubs. The present article is meant to discuss ancient religious rituals in Iran and how they have changed and remained in place after the advent of Islam.

## The Sacred Water

The Ganges and Ganga (the goddess of the Holy Ganges) in Indian mythology, the Nile among the Egyptians, and the Water of Life among the Mexican Indians and natives of Africa have always been deemed divine.

“Water is the first element from which everything was created, therefore it was the ancient symbol of womb and fertility as well as purification and regeneracy. There is a divine ocean prior to creation of the universe in many mythologies in India, the Middle East and Egypt” (Hal, 2001: 195). “The traditional story of primal waters which were the birthplace of different worlds can be found in many narratives concerning the universe's initial and ancient creations” (Eliade, 1372: 190&192).

The ancient Iranian goddess of pure waters was “Ardevi Sura Anahita”, while her Mesopotamian counterpart was “Ea”. Other civilizations too had gods associated with water and worshipped them through different traditions. “Water is potentially the secret of life (water of life), fertilizing lands, animals and women. The moon, the woman and the water were believed to form the “Human-Cosmic” orbit of fertility. The sign,  carved on Neolithic artifacts, signified running waters” (Eliade, 1372: 190).

This is the description of Anahita in the Avesta, the religious book of Zoroastrianism: “For the goddess of clear waters who lengthens life, increases cattle and the wealth of our country and the world and facilitates women’s giving birth and increases their breast milk ... She is the famous fecund, the river which equally flows to all seven countries, winter or summer notwithstanding ... They do much praising and offer sacrifices ...

It is she whose fertility is of widespread fame; her majesty’s greatness equals all the waters running on earth. The strong one who flows from mount “Kahar” down to lake “Farakh-Kart” ... the strong, tall, slender and glowing one in which rafting waters, as abundant as all supplies of water on earth, are running ... It is she who possesses a thousand rivers, a thousand lakes, each extending to a distance of a forty-day journey by a swift rider (Doust-Khah, 1361: 137-70).

Elsewhere, thus spoke Zarathustra: Praise be upon all good waters created by Mazda, praise be upon Ardevi Sura Anahita. May those who praise thee have glory and health and endurance and wealth and comfort and elegant children and long life, and end up in the heaven of the good and of the pure and of light (Doust-Khah, 1361: 169,170).

“Symbols which associate with Anahita due to their accompaniment with water include: lotus flowers, fish, dolphins, ducks and clay jars” (Ghirshman, 1368: 105) which appear in patterns and reliefs on different artifacts belonging to the Sassanid period. “In Iranian mythology, the lotus flower was referred to as the Nahid flower” (Yahyaqi, 1369: 429).

An evidence for veneration of water in the Islamic era of Iran is the existence of Saghanefars<sup>1</sup> at which mourners pray during Tasua and Ashura of each year (the ninth and the tenth days of Muharram in the Islamic calendar) in remembrance of Hazrat Abbas (SA), Imam Hussein’s brother and Muhammad’s grandson, who is known as

“the bringer of water” among the Shia (Javadi, 2007: 13).

The depiction of the mentioned elements in wall paintings in Mazandarn’s Saghanefars as well as some Islamic shrines and divine chambers evokes the reminiscence of the beliefs which were revived during Qajar Dynasty. The wall paintings in Babol’s Kija Tekieh (a historic temple in Babol) and Qaem Shahr’s Saghanefar are examples which continue to exist even today.

Saghanefars are also the place of prayer for prosperity and abundance at the time of cultivation and harvest. Many of the rituals related to the moon or the sun and even “Eid-e Maah” (The Festival of the Dead) held each year in Tir (June) in Mazandaran are what today remains of “Jaşne Tiregân” (Festival of Tir) and other ancient Iranian festivals related to the moon and Anahita.

Iranian ancient mythology holds that Goddess Anahita is the protector of water, and in Islamic beliefs water belongs to Fatemeh Zahra (SA), the daughter of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), and her dowry was water and mirror.

The rain prayer and recourse to Fatemeh Zahra (SA) and many other rain rituals in Iran are the evolved remainders of the water prayer and recourse to Anahita. (see Mirshokraei, 1380) The tradition of pouring a bowl of water while seeing off beloved travelers as a sign of wishing them a healthy journey as well as the tradition of including a bowl of water in Haft Seen table at the turn of the Persian calendar year is two of the rituals indicative of the significant position of water among Iranians.

### **The Sacred Tree**

Mankind has always respected trees. The ancient man believed that trees possessed souls similar to man and beast. In the 19th century when civilization had not yet reached many African tribes and inhabitants of Oceania, this belief was, and may still be, rampant (Bahar, 1998: 43).

Plants, especially trees, are the symbols of Ana-

hita. Tree and water are the two divine elements which symbolize purity, fertility and abundance in the universe. "The words 'Urvara' and Urivt are generic terms in Avesta which refer to plants, trees and whatever grows from earth. In Sanskrit, this word is similar to 'Urvara' and means tree. Generally Urvara refers to useful plants and vegetation that man and animal can consume: urva was worshipped like a god, as everything good and useful is worthy of veneration and praise in Mazdisna (praise of Ahura Mazda)" (Pourdavoud, 2001: 130). Avesta refers to the holy trees which grow along springs, and guards appointed to protect these holy elements". In Aban Yasht (which is dedicated to worshipping Anahita), the respectfulness and holiness of these elements which symbolize the goddess of Anahita is acknowledged.

The long-existing respect toward certain trees such as pomegranate, fig and grape which are grown in Iranian backyards near pools bespeak of the same as the extended, sometimes transformed form of this ancient belief in the frame of their own religious beliefs. Jašne Tiregan, in which nowadays the holding Zoroastrians pour water on each other, is the evolved form of water prayers.

Aged trees which live near springs, wells and rivers are respected by native inhabitants and many shrines have been raised up around them. In Sassanid Empire, some of these shrines (Chartaghi) were used as fire temples, and the structure of some other fire temples resembled that of a Chartaghi. These constructions were raised around springs and trees or on mountains.

Since these places were long respected among Iranians, Muslims still go to these places which are now associated with the abode or tomb of Islamic divine individuals (sons of Shia Imams, religious leaders, etc).

With the elapse of time, gravestones and zarihs<sup>2</sup> (shrines) were built in some chartaghis. Among these places is the shrine of Imamzadeh Hamzeh

located at Abali (Fig.1), which is a small chartaghi inside an aged buttonwood with a small gravestone within. Located on a hill in Abali with a small distance from this shrine, there is a stone dome (Fig. 2) built near an aged tree and on the riverbank. This dome is still visited as a fire temple which has not yet been turned into an Imamzadeh shrine.

Many shrines have been renovated and expanded in size so more pilgrims can visit them at the same time. The natives usually pray, attach cloths to the trees as a sign of their recourse, drink from the springs and pray at them. They believe that the fish living in these springs is divine and consider catching them as religiously unlawful.

For example, in Niasar of Kashan, people sacrifice sheep at the spring and near the local mosque (previously Anahita's shrine) on the day of Eid-e Ghorban (The Festival of Sacrifice), and the fish in the spring drinks from the blood of the sacrifice. The wells of Imam Zaman<sup>3</sup> (the twelfth Imam of Shia who is believed to be still alive but absent and the one to save humanity), the springs of Fatemeh Zahra and Imam Ali (SA) are samples of the places in which these rituals take place. Sassanid carvings are still visible in Ghadam-gah<sup>4</sup> of Neyshabur the aged tree and spring of which were previously attributed to Imam Ali and Fatemeh Zahra and nowadays to Imam Reza (the eighth Imam of Shia). This place was once Anahita's shrine.

There are a lot of shrines and places attributed to Islamic divine females who are referred to by titles such as Bibi, Khatoon, Dokhtar (e.g. Haft Dokhtar, Chehel Dokhtar), as well as shrines built near aged trees and springs or in the middle of cemeteries and referred to by titles such as Pir, Darvish, Bozorgvar and Imamzadeh all over Iran such as Zubaida Khatoon in Naragh, Chehel Dokhtar located at Imamzadeh Ibrahim in Karaj and the chartaghi of Nashlaj Village in Niasar of Kashan. Similar divine springs prevail all around the globe, which are highly intertwined with

old beliefs and the related rituals have been carried over unto newer beliefs. Examples of these springs upon which people turn their eye with respect abound. Some of them are attributed to the Holy Mary and Jesus Christ (PBUH) while their origin dates back to the pre-Christian era.

All around Europe (Italia, Spain, France and Portugal), Christians pray at shrines built near monasteries and on high mountains and associated with the Holy Mary and other divine individuals such as Saint Ann. Some of these European shrines such as the famous Shrine of Fatemeh in



Fig 1. Imamzadeh Hamza, Chahar-Taqi building close to an old buttonwood tree by a river, Ab-Ali road, Tehran, Iran. Photo: Shohreh Javadi, 2011.



Lisbon of Portugal are visited by European Muslims as well. Another example would be the divine spring and the statue of the Virgin Mary in Lourdes Village in France.

Many of the shrines which exist in graveyards and near springs and aged trees were once Anahita's and Mitra's shrines which, with the passage of time, turned into water and fire temples. Some of them were reconstructed as Imamzadeh or mosque and are now visited by Shia and Suni Muslims.

Examples are Naysar (The Temple of Nahid) located in the city of Sanandaj in Kurdistan and Pirshaliar<sup>5</sup> located in the city of Uraman in Kermanshah (Fig. 3).

A ritual in veneration of water in Qazvin, which is known as Panjaheh (the fiftieth), is held fifty days after the new year (Nowruz), and Qazvin natives go to nature and throw their Sabze (wheat

, lentil, and mung, etc. which they have grown for Nowruz) into water. During Panjaheh, native women attach a piece of cloth to an aged tree and drink from spring water and take some for the sick and pray at the spring for good health. In ancient times, women used to bathe in divine springs, including the one in Qazvin, and prayed to Anahita for abundance, fertility and good health. Such rituals are still held in some regions of Iran such as Chechmeh Ali in Damghan (from which people drink water and take some for the sick). Another ritual is Qali Shuyan (carpet washing) which is held on the second Friday of Mehr (early October) which today marks the martyrdom of Imamzadeh Muhammad, however the form of the ritual and its date reveals something about a much older belief related to the water prayer. With the emergence of a new religion and new beliefs, religious rituals found new mean-



Fig 2. Stone Chahar-Taqi building adjacent to an aged tree on a hill in Ab-Ali road, Tehran, Iran. Photo, Right : Shahrzad Khademi, Left : Rasoul Rafat, 2011.

ings as well. That old rituals and customs still prevail in a nation bespeaks of a truth which has been one and the same throughout history and in different religions. Among such customs are the ones related to veneration of water and plants, the two elements which are closely interconnected with man’s life and health. Respect toward

nature and its symbols, which is emphasized in Zoroastrianism, dates back to older traditions and the worship of Mitra and Anihita. After the spread of Islam in Iran, such traditions and rituals continued to pervade among Iranians, given the Holy Quran's encouragement of Muslims to respect nature.

## Conclusion

As was mentioned, ancient rituals and traditions related to water and tree were carried over unto the Islamic era with a difference in their divine references. In the pre-historic Iran, Anahita and Mehr were the two divinities worshipped by Iranians.

Although no clear evidence is at hand about their real position among Iranians, all rituals and ceremonies related to water, the sun and plants were attributed to these two goddesses, and no other divinity is known to share their high rank. This means two things: first, these divinities belong to a period during which the materialistic life of man was endangered by natural phenomena, and therefore natural elements took up such sanctity. Second, no other divinity exists apart from the mentioned ones, and it



Fig 3. Naysar (Nahidsar) shrine, the old tree and the spring, Sanandaj, Iran. Photo: Shohreh Javadi, 2009

seems that the mentality of ancient Iranians did not reach nor fathomed any other divinity. On the other hand, these two divinities had not been devised all of a sudden but had their roots in nature and life. In Zoroastrian era, these two divinities came to be known as the goddesses of water and the sun. The then Zoroastrians believed in Anahita and Mehr alongside Ahura Mazda (the all good) and Ahriman (the all evil), however, not at the same rank but below them. The Yasht hymns in Avesta testify to this. Nonetheless, rituals and traditions related to water and tree have intertwined with the names of Mehr and Anahita, and the addressees in these rituals are the ancient divinities.

In the Islamic era, these rituals continued to exist, albeit with changes intrinsic to the new age. The addressees of the rituals changed from Anahita and Mehr to Islamic divine individuals. Another important change was the interpretation of the rituals by Islamic thinkers who permitted their perpetuation. Regarding Islam's emphasis on monotheism and oneness of Allah, to believe in any source of existence other than Allah is considered heresy and is strongly prohibited in Islamic beliefs and rituals. Therefore, it would be unacceptable to assume that the metamorphosis of Mehr and Anahita into Islamic divine individuals confers the same rank and dignity to them from Islam's perspective. Based on a principle known as "recourse" which is highly prevalent among the Shia, and which derives its validity from the Holy Quran and Hadith (a collection of Islamic traditions containing sayings of the prophet Muhammad), Islamic divine individuals act as intermediaries between the supplicant (man) and the Answerer (Allah). Citation of, for example, the name of Fatemeh Zahra (SA), in a prayer indicates the supplicant's belief in Zahra as the transferor (of the recourse) and not as the answerer of the prayer. The Shia resort to Islamic divine individuals as transferors of prayers and intercessors with God, according to the text of the Holy Quran, whereas the Suni have replaced the ancient divinities with Islamic great leaders and preceptors. And so we experience a change in the names and actors in the metamorphosis of the ancient rituals.

## Result

Today, rain rituals and water and tree veneration ceremonies are held all around Iran. Praying at the foot of aged trees and divine springs and recourse to them for fertility, productivity and prosperity was highly valued among ancient farmers and shepherds. Mitra, the great Aryan goddess who possessed vast plateaus, and Anahita, the goddess of fertility and waters, were worshipped at divine springs and trees, and sacrifices were made in their names. The prophet Zoroaster emphasized on keeping pure the water, the element which brought life and good health to all being. Islam and the Holy Quran as well respect nature and mention natural phenomena as the signs of God, and this is why religious orders related to veneration of water and plants are very prevalent among Muslims.

What is certain is that Iranians, especially Muslim Iranians, have never worshipped neither water nor tree. However, these elements have always remained a medium between man and the beyond. The rain prayers and recourse to Fatemeh Zahra (SA) is the evolved ritual of Anahita’s worship. Recourse to Hazrat Abbas (SA) in Saghanefars, recourse to sons of Islamic Imams performed on specific days and dawns and sunsets, traditional rituals held near springs and shrines of divine individuals at cultivation and harvest times are all remainders of the ancient time which have endured in form but have changed in content as they have become aligned with new beliefs. In modern life as well, water and plants are highly respected as they have an essential role in man’s materialistic and spiritual life.

Water and tree are respected in modern life as well. European environmentalists and nature activists hold fast to the belief that water and plants highly influence materialistic and spiritual aspects of life. Therefore, both traditional and modern societies attach special value to water and plants because of either sanctity or environmental and biological significance, and use these natural phenomena in construction of urban areas and parks.

## Endnote

1. Ancient Iranians used to pray at and bring sacrifices to Anahita’s shrines. This ritual is performed for recourse to Hazrat Abbas (SA) at Saghanefars in Mazandaran. A Saghanefar is a small wooden room constructed on tall poles. They exist in most Mazandarani mosques and Tekiehhs. At some places, Saghanefars can be seen in paddy fields where farmers pray at these Saghanefars during cultivation and harvest times. For more information see Javadi, 2007: 12-21.
2. Enshrined tombstones are tombstones enclosed with a wooden or metal grid, to which people fasten wish ribbons and around which they do circumference.
3. Imam Zaman is the 12th Shia Imam who is still alive and will reappear on the resurrection day with Jesus Christ and Khezr, the Prophet. There is a common belief in an apocalyptic savior in all religions.
4. A footstep is a place where a spiritual, holy figure has once stepped or passed from. Most of these footsteps supposedly belong to the first Shia Imam Ali (AS), Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), Hazrat Fatemeh (SA) or the 3rd and 8th Shia Imams.
5. Pirshaliar, the son of Jamasb, was a Mogul Zoroastrian who converted into Islam. The monument, the old tree, the cave, and the divine stone in the mountain shrine belong to the era of Anahita and Mehr (Varham, 2006: 5).

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