

## Ayyāri: the Chivalry Movement in Persia

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**Abstract.** The emergence of ayyāri organizations in Iran as a kind of intellectual movement was an endeavor to forge a national alliance and elevate the intellectual abilities of the people in order to further their patriotic aims and ensure the survival of their ancestors' culture and art. The aim of this paper is to explore the emergence of ayyāri groups as socially and politically important organizations in the eastern Islamic world in the first A.H. centuries and their objectives. It seems that due to their different beliefs and oppositions to the government and organizations of their time and the dependence of poets and authors to the Royal Court, the ayyārs' ethos and manner were not recorded and argued with precision and devoid of political and religious orientations. This article discusses the origins of the word 'ayyār' and its pragmatically associated meanings. It outlines the ethical principles of ayyāri in short and explains some rituals of admissions such as drinking to cheer and taking an oath performed at special ceremonies. Finally, it records some facts regarding woman ayyārs and compares it with other chivalry movements in other countries.

**Keywords:** chivalry, ayyāri, fotovvat.

### 1. Introduction

Persian culture and literature has always gained a special place in the world due to the geographical position of Iran and its advanced civilization. Liberality, benevolence, loyalty and honor have always been the most prominent and utmost qualities of the chivalrous and Persian ayyārs. The word 'Iran' emerged from *ārya* means noble, magnanimous and liberal. It can endorse this fact that the ayyārs were originally Iranians who remained steadfast in Iranian traditions and customs. They tried to provide the conditions in this country for people to join their groups and organizations aimed at creating a utopian society in Iran.

The emergence of ayyāri organizations in Iran was a kind of intellectual movement. The members of ayyāri ethos endeavored to forge a national alliance and elevate the intellectual abilities of the people in order to further their patriotic aims and ensure the survival of their ancestors' culture and art. Indeed, they were the protectors of cultural heritage and saviors of people who faded into oblivion under the domination of Arabs and Omavi and Abbāsi Caliphs. One of the decisive factors in re-empowering Iranians and reviving their political and national independence was the establishment of different local communities and folklore movements.

The sense of nationalism and fotovvat among Iranians has made their land the realm of spiritual challenges. Among these social groups, the lutis were in close contact with people of the cities and villages during the Qajar Dynasty and very similar to the ayyārs in the ethos, spending most of their time in the House of Strength (Zoorkhaneh). The lutis believed in fotovvat and fotovvat ethos; consequently, they had strong spiritual and altitudinal bonds. They tried to live with the ideal of chivalry and protect the subordinates and the oppressed to gain the privilege of ayyāri. They supported socio-political developments

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as Sattār Khan was known as a luti in the defense of Tabriz. Bazaar lutis played an important role in social riots and revolts (Floor, 1971).

## 2. Origins of the word ‘ayyār’

Ayyār is a term that has generally been considered as having its origin in Arabic. It is traditionally been associated with negative connotations like brigandage and violence in a period of time and positive connotations such as religious warfare and chivalry in another scope of time under the effect of sectarian politics and religious disagreements (Tor, 2007). Bahar (1943) knew the origins of the word ayyār in Persian, the changed form of words ayār and ay-yār in Pahlavi. He wrote about these two words:

It seems that the words ayār and ay-yār have their origins in Persian as they are not originally Arabic and the Arabic origins have different and contradictory meanings. You cannot find the origins of the word in Qamus and other books ...it can be inferred that these words were originated from ayār in Pahlavi, written as azivār and read with gemination as ayyār and after dropping the first letter of the word ayār, yār was formed. The ayyār and ayār in Arabic have their origin in Pahlavi, both meaning yār (i.e. companion). Ayār of gold or silver is a scale to show with what metal it is accompanied. But ayyārs were a group of Iranians with ayyāri ethos to whom Arabs joined. This group then chose the name azivār – ay-yār – as the name rofaqā (i.e. companions) was chosen by the Ismailis of Alamut castle...

Nātel Khanlari (1970 ) also believed that ayyāri was associated with companionship and chivalry in Persian literature and in case it was Arabic, no semantic relation with chivalry could be found; therefore, the word must have its origins in Persian. On the other hand, some Iranian writers and poets used the word ayyār to describe their beloved and coquette. Thus, it could not have such meanings as being agile, free-spirited, nimble and wily as it means in Arabic (Nātel Khanlari, 1970).

Teschner (1979) argues in addition to religious warriors, who fought out of faith, there were some significant groups came together as fatiān (i.e. the youth). In his terms, their aim was to promote social and economical justice especially for those oppressed by the government and they did so by force. Consequently, they gained some negative publicity and clergies pointed the finger of blame at them. They were titled as ayyāran meaning brigandage at that time.

As Sarraf and Corbin (1973/1984) write the Arabic word fatā whose plural form is fatiān means young. Its Latin equivalent is juvenis and in Persian language the word javān is used. Javānmardi (i.e. youthfulness) or fotovvat literally refer to the young physique but its metaphorical meaning is sālik (i.e. wayfarer), a member of sufism who seeks perfection and the purification of the soul and attempts to realize the attributes of the Truth. Corbin proposed that the most appropriate equivalent for the word fatā is chevalier and Iranians have preferred to use the word shovāliye, the loanword from French.

In contrast, some researchers (e.g. Rashidi, 1998), however, call the Pahlavi origin of the word into question. The use of the word by some poets can be considered a kind of poetic necessity in literature. The use of ayyār to describe the beloved by some poets can also have a different explanation; the beloved is nimble and agile because she comes to and fro a lot in their mind with her smartness and nimble movements.

More analysis can throw doubt on this claim that the Arabic origin of the word has different and contradictory meanings. The name ayyār was given to this group by Arabs and especially those affiliated with Abbāsi Caliphs due to this fact that they knew this group that fought against the oppression of Abbāsi Caliphs and supported the oppressed as exotics, fugitives, betrayers, and deceptive people. They went on struggling for years and were introduced as ayyārs in literature. Afterwards, the words fotovvat, championship, chivalry and ayyāri found the same meaning.

## 3. Emergence of ayyāri ethos

As Bahar (1943) puts it into words, ayyāri has its roots in the rituals of Mehr<sup>1</sup> widely observed by Iranians. He pinpointed several similarities between ayyāri and Mehr. Accordingly, Mehr holds a string in

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<sup>1</sup> An Indio-Iranian goddess in ancient Persia that was the symbol of light and brightness, a mediation between temporary light (the created) and eternal light (the creator) (Sharifi, 2008).

hand at the time of birth and the ayyārs carry a knife with themselves. As Mehr honors pledges, the ayyārs pledge their solidarity and resolute in companionship to the death. Like the ayyārs, Mehr expresses hostility towards wickedness and lie. Mehr is vigilant and the ayyārs are night guards. Both Mehr and ayyār are experts in wrestling. In both rituals, respecting the doyens is of great importance. Last but not least, the ayyārs swear to God and to Mehr and Zand and Pāzand<sup>2</sup> when making a promise.

Regarding the trends of this social institution and the features of its foundation, it can be concluded that this organization was established after people's awakening and their struggle against the rulers of injustice and cruelty who made the life of oppressed people a misery, the period of class divisions. Nafisi (1965) knows this as one of the reasons of the establishment of the ayyārs before Islam and emergence of the mania beliefs in ayyāri.

Ayyāri could bring about a resurgence of nationalism and resistance against the Arab caliphs. The uprising by Abu Muslem in Khurāsān, the movement of Hamzeh the son of Āzarak known as Hamzeh in Sistān, and the fight of a coppersmith (saffār) named yaqub al-Layth who founded the Saffarid dynasty were among oppression-fighting attempts of people against despotic governments that empowered the ayyāri groups.

Ayyāri was socially and politically important in the eastern Islamic world in the first A.H. centuries. It seems that due to their different beliefs and oppositions to the government and organizations of their time and the dependence of poets and authors to the Royal Court, the ayyārs' ethos and manner and their involvement in social activities were not recorded and argued with precision and devoid of political and religious orientations. They continued to have political and social influence in Iran and Iraq especially in Baqḍād until one of the Abbāsi Caliphs, An-Nasir li-Din Allah (1158-1225) joined fotovvat and obliged those who decided to move in the circle of fotovvat to practice specific mores. Consequently, as Rashidi(1998) discusses, ayyāri melted in Sufism and fotovvat. As a matter of fact, ayyāri was rather moral and less social, a practical Sufism which was similar to malamatia (i.e. "blameworthy"); it was a movement against the hypocritical and insincere behaviors of some shaykhs, resulting in malamatia ethos of hiding asceticism and blaming hypocrisy.

#### **4. Ayyāri morals**

Preserving human values and observing prime ethical principles are the most salient features of the chivalrous including ayyārs in Iran, knights in the Middle Ages and samurais in Japan. The main reason of their popularity among their people can be their special characteristics. According to Fotovvatnames and books about chivalry and ayyāri, a perfect ayyār should possess 72 ethical characteristics (Arrajāni, 1989). The most prominent ones are briefly mentioned here.

Confidentiality, hospitality and providing food for hungry and poor people and passengers are primary principles of ayyāri. Ayyārs swore an oath of keeping the secrets of other, especially other ayyārs, any time, under any conditions. For them 'bread' and 'salt' were of great sanctity as they swore to them. They offered their best food and drink to their guests, whether a friend or a stranger. Among other traits, honesty, truthfulness, generosity, selflessness, patience, chastity, and perusing justice were the most outstanding.

#### **5. Admissions of an ayyār**

Admissions to ayyāri groups as chivalry organizations required the performance of specific rituals at special ceremonies that made them obliged to observe expected manners in order to be formally known as an ayyār.

'Drinking to cheer' as one of these rituals changed overtime due to religious beliefs and Islamic rules. However, it was preserved in other forms such as drinking water with salt instead of drinking wine. Drinking to someone's cheer and health as an old custom of drinking originated in ayyāri rituals. An ayyār took up the chalice of wine and drank to his mater's joy in one gulp; after pronouncing master's name, he or she announced himself or herself as master's follower and disciple (Arrajāni, 1989).

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<sup>2</sup> Zand is derived from Azanti which means reporting and translating. Zand refers to translated version of the book 'Avestā' to "Pahlavi. Pāzand, the abbreviated form of Pātāzand, is a re-translation of Avestā to Dari (Sharifi, 2008).

That idol of the young Christian, the wine-seller, well said

“Enjoy the joy of that person’s face, that purity, hath”

(Ghazal 123, Hafez Shirazi, translated by Henry Wilberforce Clarke)

Ayyārs drank to their ayyār companions’ joy and health as well in order to make themselves obliged to adhere to ayyāri principles and renew their solidarity. Although drinking to others’ cheer was a ritual of ancient Persia, with the integration of ayyāri with Sufism and fotovvat, they started to drink water with salt in a special cup called ‘kās al-fotovvat’ (i.e. bowl belonging to fotovvat). For fotovvat eating salt (a metaphor for food) in someone’s house makes you beholden to that person and water is a symbol of honesty and sincerity. On the other hand, it was strongly associated with Mohammed, the Prophet of Islam (Abd al-razzāq Kāshāni, 1991).

Another ritual of ayyāri was taking an oath; ayyārs swear to their own life in the sense that in case they broke their promise, other ayyārs could kill them. According to Nātel Khanlari (1970), ayyārs as ancient IOraninas took oath to ‘dādār’ (i.e. the Creator). Swearing to light and flame, Zand and Pāzand and the soul of great men demonstrates this fact that it is all connected to Mehr and Pareses and Zoroastrian.

In this ceremony, a length of cloth was tied around to an ayyār’s waist by the master or the doyens to imply that he is always ready to assist other especially the oppressed and needy. Discussing their special hats, shirts and shoes and the relationship between their clothes and duties involves another paper. Some ayyārs also had tattoos of animals on their arms and shoulders (Arrajāni, 1989).

## 6. Woman ayyārs

Woman ayyārs equaled man ayyārs regarding their abilities and skills. As a matter of fact, woman ayyārs could not exist because they did not have the permission to join the chivalry organizations and ayyāri groups. This can be the reason why those who had the infatuation with ayyāri dressed in men clothes. Roozafzun, daughter of one of the ayyāri doyens, is one these women. She killed her brother and father to join Samk-e ayyār. Being able to work with knife, lasso, bow and arrow skillfully and to riding horses, swimming and fighting, she could fight like a real warrior.

Despite their beauty, these women did not get married and devoted themselves to their ethos and manners. Feminine traits were evident in woman ayyārs’ behaviors though. They envied other ayyārs’ capacities and success. Their feminine sympathy and sensitiveness thwarted some ayyāri plans making male ayyārs call them ignorant and incompetent. As women were known to reveal the secrets man ayyārs did not trust them and were doubtful about the realization of the principle of confidentiality for woman ayyārs (Arrajāni, 1989).

## 7. Chivalry movement in other countries

We can compare Persian ayyārs with European knights, Japanese samurais and Kshatriya in India. In Europe of the Middle Ages, knights as the symbols of generosity and chivalry and supporters of the poor and oppressed had special principles and rituals as ayyārs did. The Islamic nature of ayyāri resembles the strong connection between knights’ activities and Christianity. The admiration of the knights’ ethos can be observed in the literary works such as Donkishot as ayyāri was a main theme in Persian literature. Their admission also requires conducting special rituals. They were trained to ride horse, do archery and use weapons. They fasted and took the oath of honesty and chivalry in the church. Samurais as a social institution fought against cruel governors and injustice in Japan. They played a crucial role in overthrowing the Shogun Dynasty and establishing a civilized Japan. They were similar to ayyārs in that they sought justice and fought oppression. Koshatriyas who were warriors fought against countries that colonized India and attempted to regain the independence of their country (Rashidi, 1998).

In conclusion, chivalry and philanthropy as universal behaviors that people from different countries and ethnic groups share make them close to each other and promote peace and companionship. In the present paper, we attempted to portrait the realization of chivalry in Persia and shed light on the universality of the movement. Finally as the current paper focused on the sense, emergence and morals of ayyāri, future research should examine the ayyāri hierarchy, their clothes and accessories.

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