

Holy Sheaves

The mythic aspects of wheat gathering in western Iran

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Abstract-The following article is the result of a field research, which focused on the mythic aspects of wheat harvesting ceremonies which have undergone some changes imposed by modernism in Iran's western provinces. It is attempted to study the issue employing an anthropological methodology with a symbolic interpretive approach. The techniques used to collect data were based on personal observation and social participation(participant observation) during one year of fieldwork. The results indicate that many of the mythic aspects of wheat harvesting ceremonies are still prominent despite the changes, which have been imposed by modernism. Some of these rituals are sacrifice, 'Barakatafzaee' or the increase of the crops, and weighing customs of wheat. Nonetheless, under the influence of agricultural machinery of harvesting, some other rituals have lost significance or even disappeared.

Keywords- harvesting; wheat; Iran; rituals; myths; Barakatafzaee

I. INTRODUCTION

"Eating" as a cultural matter has always engrossed the human's mind so much so that few religions can be found that do not address its significance. In Zoroastrianism, for example, because of its deep relationship with nourishment, cultivation is perceived as a religious matter and its necessity is emphasized. Eating is one of the most important human needs which are responded culturally. As Malinowski says, one should not forget the fact that even an instinct that fulfills the most rudimentary physiological function, in the long run will inevitably be appropriated by the tradition [1]. This not only includes the types of food or the way they are cooked but also extends to the ways their basic ingredients are gathered, infusing them with cultural significations. Wheat as one of the most widely cultivated farming crops in the world has developed many religious and spiritual dimensions which have endowed it with a complex holy aura. This article surveys the holy elements in wheat gathering ceremonies in the western provinces of Iran.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Since the ancient past, wheat has been one of the primary sources of food for the humans. According to Bates and Plog, the first traces of agriculture emerged in the Middle East, where wheat and barley formed the first food resources [2]. This explains the holiness of wheat in early societies. However, this holiness was not limited only to the wheat grains. For example, Iranians' common respect for the bread cannot be separated from their respect for the wheat. The same goes for a traditional dish called Samanū, in which wheat sprouts make up the main ingredient. Cooking Samanu is a ceremonial act which involves many taboos and regulations, some of which run parallel to those we found in the wheat gathering.

Accordingly the circle of beliefs formed around wheat is very old and has mythical dimensions. Apart from its nutritional value in the human diet, the most important issue about wheat is the holy aura surrounding it in all the stages of its cultivation, a reverence which often extends to products made from wheat. Harvesting wheat is not an exception. Generally, agriculture is considered a holy endeavor, and in different religions the cultivation of the cereal crops are particularly emphasized. In an Avestan text we read: "One who cultivates cereal cultivates righteousness. Indeed he carries on Mazda's religion" [3]. The act of cultivation pleases Earth goddess *Sepandar Maz*: "The happiest lands are those most cultivated" [ibid]. In this we are facing a two-sided phenomenon where on the one hand it is directly involved with fulfilling the bodily needs, while on the other hand, it carries a prominent symbolic meaning: an overarching concept that has deeply affected the social practices, and makes the creation of new cultural images possible.

The antiquity of growing wheat develops a deep link between human and a special kind of food system. Human and wheat obviously make two ends of this link. But there is a third dimension which gives wheat a range of influence greater than sheer nourishment. We can call this third dimension "culture" or a system of beliefs: signifying elements which after mixing with special symbols create a totality called culture. For determining the cultural complex, these elements have to be semantically studied beside each other and sorted out like different pieces of a puzzle. Due to the special place of wheat in the Iranian culture, the theories of cultural environmental studies or cultural

materialism cannot cover all the aspects of the phenomenon to yield us a comprehensive analysis of harvesting rites. Because of its multi-functional character, growing wheat is a complex phenomenon. Wheat in the Iranian culture occupies a sacred place and is not cultivated merely for its nutritional value. For example, in the north-western province of Azarbayjan-e Sharghi, the loss of productivity of a farmer's land is attributed to his neglect of growing wheat and cultivating other produces in his farm instead. Or for example, in Bahar, Hamadan, people do not prepare *Samanū* in the presence of those deemed impious. Therefore, it seems that symbolic anthropological theories are more suitable in this area. Clifford Geertz defines culture as a system of meanings which are couched in the form of symbols and help human beings communicate with each other. It is culture that, through its symbols, makes the world meaningful and understandable to man [4]. In other words, the "reality" under study is interpretable as a text, and the researcher should attempt to look into the phenomena in detail. It should be noted that in this process the researcher, instead of indulging in an unsystematic process of deduction and/or induction which would inevitably entail incorrect conclusions, should rather commit himself or herself to a limited and accessible stratum, and regard his or her work not as a comprehensive study but just a piece of a greater whole to emerge gradually [ibid].

In this research we classified researchable elements into groups, and subjected each of them separately to our symbolic interpretation. Naturally, a considerable part of this symbolic methodology had to do with the Iranian culture and mythology. Of course we cannot ignore the fact that there is a direct relationship between man and his corporeal needs but the dominance of ideological systems and their manifestations through symbols goes back to ancient past and stills run through our lives today. "Not only almost all forms of primitive beliefs such as shamanism, magic, animism etc. have not been eradicated from the modern world but they are actually present with us in an incredibly effective manner. So, even though exploring the psychological realm can entail many mistakes, ambiguities, and carelessness, it is inevitable that we should embark upon it." [5] On the other hand, the ancient past behind the wheat cultivation has made its symbolical interpretation more complex. Of course a lot of farming crops share a similar ancient background and in fact many great feasts and festivals of the modern world are the continuation of those harvest festivals or related to similar events in the agricultural calendar.

III. THE HOLY ELEMENTS

Reaping, harvesting, and weighing the wheat constitute the three main occasions for staging the wheat ceremonies. The unique characteristics within each three provide us with a quick look at a unique cultural system. With attention to the studies and the examples that Frazer mentions in his *The Golden Bough*, the studied

elements are: holy sacrifice, holy place, *barakat* or the increase of the crop, the first and last sheaves, and the fatal contest.

A. Holy Sacrifice

According to the field observations and existing evidence on wheat gathering customs in the regions we studied, there are four kinds of sacrifices: a sacrifice at the beginning of reaping, a sacrifice as a wish for abundance in the crop, a sacrifice as the votive for the witnessed abundance, and finally, a sacrifice at the threshing place. There is a strong tendency to sacrifice domestic animals in order to achieve the following goals: the perpetuation of cultivation, abundance in the crop, preventing an unpleasant accident such as a poor harvest or the death of a family member or an animal. Sacrificing at least one small animal during the gathering is a common practice.

Sacrifice is a religious rite which is regarded as a kind of "ransom" offered to the divinity. This religious practice has various meanings and functions and is carried out mainly to obtain a desired outcome and prevent ominous events. As Jeremy and Green point out, sacrifice is a religious rite during which an object, an animal, or a human being is offered to the deity, with the intention of creating, maintaining, or resuming a favorable relationship between Him and a person, a group of persons, or the whole society [6]. It seems that embedded in sacrifice is a kind of request for prosperity and plenitude. Ehrenberg observes that in the ancient past, primitive societies practiced human sacrifice and poured their blood on the plants and animals in order to bring about life and fertility in the womb of earth, or that of animal and human [7].

Frazer's interpretation on sacrifice rites is applicable to our case studies but cannot explain everything. For instance, votive offering for increase in the crop is a kind of transaction between man and God: when God grants the wish, the farmer has to fulfill his vow, usually by sacrificing an animal and distributing the meat among the others.

Although votive meat is consecrated and has spiritual significance, it does not mean that we can ignore the worldly motives behind it. In another example, in reaping, when a man comes last, he has to offer a sacrifice in order to prevent disaster. This is a situation in which a different kind of exchange takes place, where the supplicant, no longer in equal terms with the divine power, has to propitiate Him by offering the blood of a scapegoat in order to keep the looming disaster away from himself, his family and his stock. As mentioned earlier, Ehrenberg sees sacrifice as an act intended for the perpetuation of fertility and life. In our survey we came across the same notion. The farmers for increasing their crop would decapitate an animal in the threshing place and hide its blood in a hole under the harvest. (Of course, this was more customary in the past.) Another form of this sacrifice manifests itself in placing pieces of baked bread on the harvest. Consequently, sacrificing in the wheat field is performed for different reasons, but perhaps the main reason behind its continuance to this day is its religious heritage.

B. Holy place

We came across two holy spaces in wheat gathering rites in the Western Iran: the first one occurs at the announcement of the start of the new harvesting season as the crop is ready for reaping,

when several restricted areas are marked around the field, forming a temporary holy perimeter. The second instance occurs at the threshing place when a similar holy sphere forms around the winnowed harvest. These holy places have acquired a numinous place in the agents' minds, prompting an appropriate behavior. Why should the two mentioned places bear a sacred atmosphere? At these places, people act very differently. These are some of the customs the farmers observe while inside the holy perimeter: conforming to a ritual cleanliness all the time (still emphasized today), reciting the holy names while reaping and later while weighing the grains, sprinkling sacrificial blood around the harvest, transferring a little of the previous year's crop to the new harvest, separating "God's share" while weighing the wheat, eating bread near the harvest, "stamping" the harvest, keeping the immature and the insane away from the harvest, and finally, not allowing an outsider into threshing place. The mentioned customs create a holy place which is accompanied with a holy time. Although this accompaniment is not that prominent and cannot play a prominent role regarding the holy place, the holy place is still annually reproduced and forms an important part of the agents' subjectivity under the guise of such rites.

A holy practice is a major event which manifests itself in different parts of a cultural complex. Otto regards the element of fear or formidability as an integral part of a holy practice. The apprehension one feels at the presence of the holy prevents him from doing certain things, while compelling him to perform others [8]. This sense of apprehension is what links us to many systems of reward and punishment. Using Eliade's ideas, we can explain the sacredness of the wheat harvest by considering it as a reproduction of a primordial example:

"A thing or a behavior is truly right just in so far as it imitates or repeats a primordial example. Hence, it is only through repetition and contributing to that repetition that "reality" becomes accessible. Anything that lacks an example in the deep past is "meaningless" i.e. it is not real. It seems as though there is a tendency embedded in man's mind that compels him to follow the patterns and examples of the ancient past. This tendency might seem surprising to us now but in ancient cultures, man can see himself real only when he stops being himself and starts imitating and repeating someone else." [9] In Iran at the start of the reaping season, the farmer attends a holy shrine in order to receive his reward. Sacredness of a place is due to its resemblance to another sacred place. Thus we are dealing with a kind of reproduction in a holy place through which an increase of crop becomes possible.

C. *Barakat: Increasing the crop*

The single motive behind all the wheat gathering customs is to increase the fertility of the land and the crop: everything the farmers do is aimed at removing the opposing elements and supporting the favorable ones. As Ghobadi points out, "Australian Aborigines imitate the

movements of kangaroos, snakes and other animals in their rituals in order to increase the productivity of their lands." [10]. The farmers in the Western Iran too share similar beliefs, and by repetition of their rituals try to get close to the primordial examples. "Each ritual is a primordial example." [11] According to Eliade, a primordial example is always the best and most complete manifestation of an action.

In wheat harvesting rituals, in addition to remaking this primordial time we also come across the ideal first farmers as well. *Hasan Gavyar* is such a figure, whose assistance is solicited in agricultural troubles by the farmers who visit the tomb attributed to him. Eating bread during the wheat gathering is another custom practiced for increasing the harvest. Of course, after cultural transformation in the past few decades, a part of these holy rites have lost their spiritual significance. For example, in the past, the party held at the eve of last reaping day was very important, while today it is mostly regarded as a formality which has only considerable economic consequences.

Through holy concept we can draw a special custom circle around wheat harvest rites through which we can determine good or bad actions or even good or bad people. For example it is commonly believed that prosperous men and men of piety are able to bring abundance to the harvest, since it is thought that religious men are closer to the holy source. In contrast, people who do not observe their daily religious duties are regarded as standing further away from the source. Therefore, they are suspected to be the carriers of evil who can cause a poor harvest. Of course, in the public opinion the concept of "abundance" embraces much more than just material plenitude, that is, a man who longs for abundance of the harvest does not just want to have a great amount of wheat at the end of the season but also likes his prosperity to last and his family's wishes to be fulfilled.

D. *The first and the last sheaves of wheat*

In Iran, the farmers usually take the last sheaf of wheat to their houses, and put it decoratively in a vase or pin it to a little frame hanging on the wall. If that year's harvest proves plentiful, the grains coming from these sheaves are mixed with the seed of the next year's in order to perpetuate the plenty. Burying the last sheaves for the continuation of cultivation is another similar custom in Western Iran. Therefore, the first and last sheaves are of paramount importance and carry special meanings, traces of which are still evident today despite the cultural changes.

A cross section in time is very important in order to show the significance of a custom. The beginning and the end are two main points of a custom. Of course for some rites a point of climax can also be determined most of the time but in the case of wheat gathering, beginning and ending are more important than the climax. When the process of farming finishes completely in a village, the season of happiness and wedding feasts or pilgrimages to holy places (especially to Mashhad and Qom) begins. But here our attention is primarily focused on a part in which the process of reaping comes to an end.

The wheat reaping rite begins by cutting a bunch of ripe wheat. The owner of the farm browns the grains coming from the first sheaves right there beside his farm and then, wrapping them in a handkerchief, takes them to the home. While eating them at the house, extreme care is taken lest a grain of the wheat should

drop, since it is bad luck to drop a grain as it portends a poor harvest.

Similar examples have been reported about other crops: “The first stalks bowing before the breezes were called mother-rice. They were fastened all together and taken home. Not until a party was held and everyone—including relatives, friends, and even the domestic animals—had eaten of that crop would the farmer resume the reaping.” [12]

Interestingly, whenever the first sheaf of wheat is reaped, the reaper—who does not necessarily have to be the owner of the land as well—takes that to the farmer’s home and presents it to the farmer’s wife and in return receives the “first-sheaf tip”. In some cases the first sheaf is given to the landowner himself.

The last sheaves of wheat are also very important. For Frazer the last sheaf of wheat is significant because “the mother of crop” is trapped in the last sheaf. With its reaping, she either flies away or gets killed. It is in accordance with such a belief that in the west of Iran villagers engage in a fierce contest for not being the last reaper murdering the soul of the crop; a fatal contest that has been the basis of many other beliefs.

E. Fatal contest

In our study, we came across a similar contest entailing similar fatal results embodied in a custom called *bor*. Although the *bor* ceremony used to be far more serious in the past, it very well shows importance of the last sheaf of wheat and the fear of reaping it. On the day of *bor*, the reapers try to finish their jobs before everybody else so that they are not culpable of breaking the *bor*, because the one who cuts the last sheaf does it at the risk of the death of his wife or his cow.

The man who cuts the last wheat stalks, by killing the soul of crop destroys the symbol of fertility. The corresponding punishment for him is the death of the fertility symbols which he is in possession of; that is, his wife and his cow. One of these two has to be sacrificed in order to restore the fertility of the crop. Hence an alternative sacrifice is offered in order to prevent the death of the cow or the wife: a small animal. However, the ancient farmers used to believe that despite the sacrifice there was still a risk that the man’s wife or cow might die anyway, so these unfortunate souls often had to languish under the looming prospect of that disaster for the rest of their lives.

Bor is thought to appear in the shape of an animal or a human being. The most convincing reason for the existence of the “mother of crop” or the “soul of crop” in Iran (or at least in the west of Iran) is the supposed sighting of the *bor* avatar. In the past, people believed that *bor* would appear at times as a rabbit (symbol of woe and trouble), or as a seven-year-old girl (heralding wife’s death) or sometimes in the form of a wolf (a sign of farmer’s ox). In addition, sometimes the soul of crop was heard to low like an invisible cow, or spotted as a white cow or a woman in white. Nowadays such beliefs have considerably lost their credibility among the people.

According to Frazer, it seems that the soul of grain dwells in the last sheaves of wheat. When the process of gathering is done collectively, all farms that are located in a given village are pictured as a single farm. So whoever cuts the last sheaves of wheat, in fact cuts the soul of crop as well. Thus the person who injures the soul of crop has to be punished.

Frazer brings lots of examples of verbal or physical punishment levied on the last reaper of wheat. He devoted the twentieth chapter of his book “Spirit of Crop in Shape of Animal” to introduce all kinds of avatars which the spirit of the crop can appear in. In this long list, wolf, rabbit and cow are mentioned as the most prevalent shapes.

IV. THE HARVEST CUSTOMS

Wheat harvest both before the threshing and after the winnowing of the grains, symbolizes that year’s abundance or its lack. At this stage farmers try their best to give abundance to the crop.

- In the villages of Malayer, before picking the harvest, an animal is beheaded and its blood poured around the land. Only after that the weighing of wheat begins.
- In province of Lorestan, when wheat is winnowed, the farmers draw a curve in order to protect the product against the evil eye and the evil Jinn. Before transporting the sheaves of wheat to the threshing place, they evoke holy saints.
- Sometimes a snake nestles under some harvests. In villages of Khorram Abad it is believed that no one should disturb these snakes or kill them, since with the snake’s departure, the abundance of the harvest is ruined. In Alashtar too people believe that an occupied snake nest causes plenty for the harvest.

A. Marking the harvest

“Stamping” the cleaned harvest is another means for making wheat holy. In the past it had the additional function of separating one farmer’s harvest from another, but nowadays marking the harvest is mainly done for increasing the crop. Moreover, the stamping tools have also changed from those in the past.

- In Lorestan after gathering the cleaned wheat grains in a corner of threshing place, the holy name of “Ali” is marked on them with the finger or a stamp bearing that name. The villagers believe that this protects the wheat against theft.
- In Hasan-Abad, Lorestan, the farmers inscribe the holy names on the harvest and then they place an egg and three gray beads in the middle. The gray beads are believed to divert the evil eye while the egg supposedly causes the increase of the product.
- In the village of Samen, Hamadan, after winnowing the wheat, and stacking the grains, a black stone weighing two or three kilograms called “Ha” is placed under the pile. This stone is thought to increase the crop. The stones that prove effective are kept for next years. The malfunctioning ones are discarded.

B. Weighing the wheat

Weighing the wheat is done in the threshing place after the grains are separated.

- In Lorestan when unmixed wheat is gathered, the person weighing the wheat stands facing *kiblah*, and having placed a stone behind the pile, sets aside the first cup for the poor.
- In the Chaghoolandi section of Lorestan, about 15 kilograms is put aside as “God’s share”, and is given to the first beggar that reaches the threshing place. After separating enough wheat for domestic use and the seeds of the next year, the remainder is taken to the city for sale. The one who weighs the wheat is called *Kial*. He first performs the ablution, and says prayers for increasing the crop, and then starts weighing the grains.
- In the villages of Khorram Abad, on the day of weighing the crop, the farmers, first of all, perform ablution and, moving to the harvest, cut into slices a kind of bread called *chezenak* and pour animal oil on them. They scatter these oil-soaked slices around the harvest and then eat the rest for themselves.
- In the village of Firozabad, Alashtar, the farmers fill up the cups while facing *kiblah*. If a poor man happens to approach, they invariably give him alms. It is believed that children and specially girls should not come near the threshing place, as they would cause decrease in the harvest.

V. CONCLUSION

Agriculture is so immensely important that in some myths the first humans are envisioned originating from the plants. In wheat gathering rites the focus has been mainly on increasing the harvest. Every factor which contributes to the increase is reinforced while those running counter to it, are avoided.

This indicates the presence of a sacred aura around wheat because how much exactly a harvest will yield is deemed a matter of supernatural factors, to a realm beyond human’s personal power.

By and large, man is involved in three different worlds, only one of which is tangible and accessible to him. The spiritual realms of the holy and the unholy are beyond his reach and are made accessible only by surmounting a hosts of obstacles.

Meanwhile, there is a world that is neither holy nor unholy: an ordinary world wherein man deals with plant and animal life, and although not as good as the holy world, is certainly better than the unholy one.

Humans try to find ways to tap into the holy, to attain goodness and keep themselves further away from the evil unholy. These aspirations play out themselves in wheat gathering rituals in Western Iran. From reaping the first sheaves of while chanting the holy names, to the last supper at the end of the weighing, every single practice is intended for recruiting the holy forces.

Naturally, symbols are needed in order to provide us with palpable means for expressing these aspirations. In

other words, symbols and symbolic behavior are the manifestations of a belief system hiding in the psyche of the people, through which a link to a primordial example is established.

For example, drawing a line around the harvest or “stamping” it for increasing the harvest is a symbolic act which indicates the presence of an accepted psychological system among social agents, flouting of which would entail the disruption of the primordial example and subsequently cause a divine punishment. This is especially true about the wheat harvesting rituals in which an obsession with a holy principle gives rise to a whole set of customs.

A mentality carrying in itself some or all of the parts of a holy principle perpetuates itself in the shape of a deep-rooted custom. The power of the ceremony lies in the power of mind. According to Geertz every meaning network is unique. Similarly one could say that every religious rite is also a unique phenomenon that can be interpreted only from within.

Another important note worth mentioning once again is the ancientness of Iranian culture and the dynamic interactions it has had with its neighboring cultures. Of course, we can find many archetypes common to different human cultures. Iranian culture is not an exception: believing in the feminine “soul of crop” in west of Iran is the remnant of an ancient belief about the role of women in fertility and its effect on farming.

Even more interesting is hybridization of these old beliefs with those coming in a later age from Islam and Zoroastrianism. Notwithstanding the enormous influence these two have had on wheat gathering rituals, we can still come across traces that go back to pre-Zoroastrian era.

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