Martyrdom and Ecstasy

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Emotion Training in Iranian Culture

By

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THE RULES OF TRANSCRIPTION

In the main body of the book a simplified transcription of the Persian and Arabic names and terms has been used. The transcription is based on the English spelling rules. The names and terms of Arabic origin are given in the version used in the contemporary Persian Language: for example, Hoseyn instead of Arabic al-Husayn, Jalaloddin Rumi instead of Arabic Jalal ad-Din Rumi, *shohada* instead of Arabic *shuhada*, *moharram* instead of Arabic *muharram*. The terms and proper names established in the English language have been left unchanged, for example, *imam* instead of *emam*, Khomeini instead of Khomeyni.

Persian Alphabet	**Transcription**
ا	a,o,e
ب	b
پ	p
ت	t
ث	s
ج	j
چ	ch
ح	h
خ	kh
د	d
ذ	z
ر	r
ز	z
ژ	zh
س	s
ش	sh
ص	s
ض	z
ط	t
ظ	z
ع	‘

غ	gh
ف	f
ق	gh
ک	k
گ	g
ل	l
م	m
ن	n
و	v, u, o
ه	h,e
ی	i, y
ء	’

INTRODUCTION

The idea of shahadat[1] is one of the fundamental concepts in Persian culture. Nowadays, it is usually interpreted as a martyr's death of the adherents of Islam. The notion, which is well known in Islamic tradition, has developed mainly in the Iranian Imamite Shi'ism, *shi'e emamiye*,[2] also called the Twelve-Imam Shi'ism, Arabic *esna'ashariyye*.[3] It was Shi'ism that developed the idea of shahadat and gave it its own sense, which manifests itself, *inter alia*, in a well-developed cult of martyrdom. Suffering and martyrdom have been characteristic of the Shi'ite Islam almost since the beginning of its existence.

The emergence of Shi'ism is related to the first disputes concerning the supremacy over all Muslims. Following the death of Mohammad, a number of the adherents of Islam opting for the principle of heredity chose Ali, son of Abu Talib, as his successor. The followers of Ali called his leader the imam leader, a model, and they named themselves *Shi'a*, meaning "partisans" or "party." However, many Muslims opted for a democratically elected successor of the Prophet. They were called the people of the tradition, *ahl as-sunna*. Their candidate was Abu Bakr, the Prophet's closest companion and the father of his third wife Aisha. Finally, in 632 Abu Bakr was selected to become the first caliph, the Prophet's successor and plenipotentiary. Soon after, these developments caused a permanent split in Islam. The followers of the hereditary rule of Ali and his offspring did not put an end to the struggle which continued between the above-mentioned groupings for many more years to come. During this strife all the Shi'ite imams[4] were killed, which made the idea of shahadat acquire a special meaning in the Shi'ite tradition. Shi'ism gave it a profound sense which went beyond the understanding of shahadat adopted in other schools of Islam. The idea of martyrdom has met with favourable conditions especially in Iran.

The concept of shahadat and the related cult of martyrdom can be seen in the whole Persian tradition after the Arab conquest. There are ample traces proving the existence of the idea of shahadat in the Iranian culture. The importance of martyrdom may be evidenced by religious rituals commemorating the deaths of the imams. *Ta'ziye* (passion plays) are an example of a theatrical form of keeping alive the memory of the imams. The play combines the ritual fight, recital of poems written in honour of

the imams and funeral processions accompanied by self-flagellation and mourning. The cult of martyrdom is also reflected in literature. Self-sacrifice and heroism were portrayed, *inter alia*, in the Persian national epic *Shahname*,[5] Shi'ite hagiographic literature and in contemporary tales and political and religious texts. The cult of self-sacrifice permeated all Persian culture thus shaping the identity of Iranians. Being in close touch with this idea, they developed a special sensitivity to suffering and pain, which does not exist in such a form with other Muslims. Today, the willingness to self-sacrifice is one of the main national characteristics of the Iranian people.

The question arises as to why the ideas of shahadat, suffering and martyrdom are so important precisely among Iranians. Pondering such reflections, we need to answer other fundamental questions such as: how do the Persians themselves understand this concept, what does the term shahadat mean to them, what content does it carry and what patterns and norms of behaviour does it impose?

It was not easy to conceive the sense given by the Iranians to the concept of shahadat. Here, we encountered the same problems as in the case of fundamental concepts functioning in other cultures, e.g., *Tao* or *Atman*. They are related to the ancient, or even archetypal ideas, which evolved over many centuries. At times, they would lose some of their meaning, and at some other time, they would become permeated with new content. As a result, today these are equivocal concepts which evoke numerous associations in people representing a particular cultural circle and they apply to different aspects of culture. When they penetrate other communities, they are understandable there to only a limited extent, and they are usually understood in a simplified way. This was rightly pointed out by one of the contemporary Persian thinkers, Ali Shari'ati: "The concepts firmly established by specified culture carry the meanings which cannot be easily understood by somebody from outside its circle."[6]

Shahadat is an example of such a concept. More and more often it penetrates the Western World, where it is understood in the most fundamental meaning: as a martyr's death by the adherents of Islam during the "holy war." For Iranians, however, shahadat has many other meanings.

The proper understanding of the sense and content of this notion by the Persian people requires the knowledge of a broad cultural context. This type of research should employ interdisciplinary methods: starting with philological investigation, through hermeneutics to anthropology. Direct translations and philological analysis of the contemporary Iranian political and religious texts allow us to explain the word "shahadat" only at the basic level, where it denotes a testimony of faith and martyrdom. This

research, however, does not allow us to fathom the depth of the idea. Confining oneself to a mere philological analysis would mean depriving this concept of its numerous important nuances and connotations. According to L. Kołakowski, it would evidence that ”in the natural way we try to render the foreign texts in the dialect we know, and we lose the sense.”[7]

Hence, we should not treat philology as the only scientific method that allows us to grasp the sense of the concept of shahadat, especially that it occurs in many other cultural contexts. A more in-depth content inherent in the idea of shahadat may be unearthed only when the whole culture will be treated as one text. This is assumed by hermeneutics, that is to say, the study of interpretation theory. It requires of us to render comprehensible what has been said in a foreign language. As H. G. Gadamer notes, ”such translation may be carried out only on condition that one understands the sense of the utterance and that it is constructed from the beginning in the medium of a second language.”[8] Proper understanding, therefore, requires the knowledge of habits, myths, symbols and many other aspects of culture. Thus, the point is not only to translate from one language to another but also to render from one culture to another. This shows that such research also applies to anthropology. C. Geertz holds that C. Geertz holds that “translation is far from being a simple transformation of foreign ways of expression into domestic categories we apply to them (this measure precisely impoverishes the meaning), it rather attempts to show the logic of their [other people’s] perspective in our stylistics.”[9]

If culture is regarded as one set of different manifestations of intellectual reality, one should go back to the Iranian roots of the concept of shahadat. In order to do that, anthropological knowledge was indispensable. It allowed the author to associate the idea of shahadat with the archetypal conception of sacrifice. Especially inspiring are the views of anthropologists such as G. J. Frazer, A. E. Jensen, M. Griaule or G. Dieterlen, who maintain that sacrificial actions are closely related to the idea of rebirth through death and to the ensuing sustenance of sacral forces in the world.

The inquiry into the concept of shahadat has revealed that it is also connected with the psychic sphere, which relates to attitudes and emotions that play an important part in upbringing and shaping specific attitudes. For this reason, the proper understanding of the concept of shahadat must be based on the theory of psychological emotions. The most useful conception is D. Goldman’s notion of emotional intelligence, which enables one to realize one's own emotions and feelings of others, and determines an effective use of intellect.[10] Theories from the psychology of

emotions allow us to discern the concept of shahadat in a new light. They make it possible to show its key meaning in the shaping of human identity. Also, they help us understand how the idea of shahadat affects the attitudes of the Iranian people and how, owing to the emotions, this concept becomes firmly established in their imagination.

Taking into consideration the diverse research methods needed to investigate the idea of shahadat in the Persian culture, the book has been divided into two parts. Part One, entitled "From Sacrifice to Martyrdom", is devoted to the discussion on the origin and evolution of shahadat in Iranian culture. In quest for the Iranian roots of this idea, we went back to the archetypal notion of sacrifice, which in ancient times may be related to the issues of the cult and ritual sacrifice. The main source used for the purpose of this research is the *Yasna*, or the "Book of Worship", the most comprehensive part of the *Avesta*, the holy book of Zoroastrianism. It is the handbook of sacrificial rites of the Indo-Iranian tribes.

Another important source of information for the inquiry into the idea of sacrifice and tradition of self-sacrifice in Iranian culture are the stories and tales of legendary kings and heroes of Iran, recorded in the New-Persian time in *Shahname* by Abolghasem Tusi, popularly known as Ferdowsi. At the turn of the 10th century, he collected and wrote down the existing tales and historical traditions which were partly known only from oral accounts. In *Shahname* the idea of sacrifice is often identified with the idea of self-sacrifice. The concept of sacrifice was similarly viewed in Islamic times. The topic of martyrdom and sacrifice was already dealt with by the poets who lived in the 12th century, for example, Sana'i and Kavami of Rey. A great deal of valuable information on the idea of self-sacrifice has been mostly preserved in the Shi'ite hagiographic literature, which provides an important source for research on the Iranian Shi'ite tradition of martyrdom. In Islamic times, sacrifice was usually associated with martyrdom and this is precisely the moment when the concept of shahadat appears. The basic material used for this research comprises prose works extolling the sacrifice of the Shi'ite imams. This literature flourished under the Safavid dynasty. When the Safavids (1501-1731) came to power, the political situation of the Shi'ites changed. Shi'a came to be an official religion in Iran, which influenced further development of hagiographic literature. It gave rise to a new current called *maghtalnevisi*, which encompasses the stories of the martyrdom of Ali and his family. The first *maghtal* written in Persian by Hoseyn Vaez Kashefi (d. 1504) was *Rowzat al-shohada*.[11] An important source used for the study into the evolution of the idea of self-sacrifice are also the texts of *ta'ziye* (passion plays), that is to say, religious performances devoted to the martyrdom of

the Shi'ite imams.[12] Another trend in the development of the idea of sacrifice may be noticed when we study Sufi literature, which concentrates on the spiritual dimension of sacrifice and on the inner perfection.

The first part of the book ends with the chapter devoted to the analysis of the idea of shahadat in present-day Iran. In this respect, the most important is the period of the Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War, that is to say, the time which saw the revival of this idea. The analysis of the contemporary political and religious texts allows us to show attempts at interpretation of the concept of shahadat by present-day Iranian ideologists and thinkers.

The Second Part of the book, entitled *Shahadat and the Virtue of Bravery*, presents shahadat as part of the cultural pattern, which, owing to religious and literary tradition, has influenced the shaping of the Iranian national identity over the centuries. It includes the presentation of the symbols and patterns of behaviour connected with the idea of self-sacrifice to which the Iranians refer. It explains how they were used to shape the imagination and emotions of the Iranian people, how this affected their attitudes and relations with the surrounding reality and the type of their social and political activity. Since the idea of shahadat acquired special significance first and foremost during the 1979 Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War, it has also been presented how Iranian leaders made use of the idea of shahadat and the related ability of the Iranian people towards empathy to achieve specific political objectives.

The main source material in the second part of the book is the political and religious literature, in particular the writings of the four authors who exerted considerable influence upon the consciousness of the Iranians in modern times. These are ideologists of the Iranian Revolution: Ali Shari'ati, Morteza Motahhari, Ruhollah Khomeini and a contemporary philosopher Abdolkarim Soroush, who represents the milieu of the Iranian intellectuals open to new currents and patterns. All of them studied theology and they are regarded as representatives of Iranian religious modernism in the literature of the subject.

Iran has always had many reformers in various domains, such as literature, politics and religion. Political and religious thought in Iran flourished in the 19th century. Many intellectuals of that time launched a discussion on the role of Islam in confronting the challenges of the contemporary world, the modernization process and contacts with the West. The pioneers of this trend were, among others, Abbas Mirza, Amir Kabir or Mirza Malcolm Khan. In a way, contemporary thinkers are continuators of the traditional political and religious discourse. This does not mean, however, that they represent the same views.

Khomeini and Motahhari are, above all, traditional ulemas, i.e., high-ranking Shi'ite clergymen. Both held the title of ayatollah.[13] Khomeini was also awarded the title *marja'-e taghlid* (source of emulation),[14] the highest authority in spiritual matters. Khomeini was a man who enjoyed unusual personal charisma, and was called imam by the Iranians. As a leader of the Iranian Revolution, he sharply criticised the shah and his policies from the beginning of his activity.

Unlike Khomeini, Motahhari did not address the issues directly connected with politics in his books. Philosophy was his main domain of interest. This is reflected in his writings, most of which are devoted to the problems of philosophy, ethics and morality.

Shari'ati, who died in 1977, is also among the leading ideologues of the Iranian Revolution. However, in contrast to Khomeini and Motahhari, he represented an approach which combined modern education with the indigenous traditions of the study of the Koran.[15]

Abdolkarim Soroush represents the milieu of the post-revolutionary Iranian intellectuals open to new currents and patterns. Primarily a philosopher, in some respects he resembles Shari'ati. Like the latter, Soroush studied in the West, but at the same time his views are rooted in the traditional Persian outlook. This is evidenced, *inter alia*, by his interest in Sufism and the writings of a great mystic Jalaloddin Rumi (1207-1273), also known as Mawlavi or Moulana.[16] Like Shari'ati, many years ago, Soroush is also popular today mainly among young and educated Iranians.

The idea of shahadat is the topic of many scientific publications,[17] in which it is considered an important component of Persian culture. However, they do not present the idea in a wider perspective, which is the aim of the present book. From the perspective of the entire Persian culture, the idea of shahadat appears to be a paradigm which has become firmly established in religious and literary tradition since the pre-Islamic time until the present day. This attitude towards the idea of shahadat enables one to understand a multiplicity of its meanings, which in turn, allows us to understand such events as the Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War as well as social behaviours of the Iranian people.

Notes

[1] *shahadat* – testimony of faith.
[2] *shi'e emamiye* – Imamite Shi'ism.
[3] *esna'ashariyye* – Twelve-Imam Shi'ism.
[4] This was how the dynasty of the Shi'ite leaders (called imams) was established, Persian *emam*, in contrast to the Sunni caliphs. For more details on this topic see H. Corbin, *En Islam Iranien: aspects spirituels et philosophiques. Le Shi'ism duodécimain*, vol. 1 (Saint-Amand: 1991); A. Bausani, *Religion in Iran: From Zoroaster to Baha'ullah* (New York: 2000); M. Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism* (New Haven: 1985); W. Madelung, "Shi'a," in: *The Encyclopaedia of Islam CD-ROM Edition v. 1.0* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 1999).
[5] The English version of its title is also given in the text: *The Book of Kings*. The elaboration and selection of the excerpts of *Shahname* are also available in the English language. See *The Shahname of the Persian Poet Firdowsi*, translated and abridged in prose and verse by James Atkinson (London: 1882).
[6] A. Shari'ati, *Hoseyn vares-e Adam*, (Tehran: 1380/2001), 253.
[7] L. Kołakowski, *Horror metaphysicus* (Warszawa: 1990), 131.
[8] H. G. Gadamer, *Rozum, słowo, dzieje* (Warszawa: 2000), 135–136.
[9] C. Geertz, *Wiedza lokalna. Dalsze eseje z zakresu antropologii interpretatywnej* (Kraków: 2005), 20.
[10] See D. Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (London: 2006); by the same author: *Destructive Emotions. How Can We Overcome Them? A Scientific Dialogue with Dalai Lama* (New York: 2003). Among the greatest contributors to the study of emotions were also P. Ekman, R. J. Davidson and D. Evans.
[11] H. V. Kashefi, *Rowzat ash-shohada* (Tehran: 1334/1955).
[12] The main source used here was the collection contained in the work *Ta'ziye dar Iran* by Sadegh Homayuni, Iranian researcher of *ta'ziye* published in Shiraz 1380/2001. Fragments of the English translation can also be found in the collective work edited by P. Chełkowski entitled *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran*, published in New York in 1979.
[13] *ayatollah* – lit. the Sign of God, *ayat* – sign, *Allah* – God; a honorific title awarded to high-ranking Muslim scholars.
[14] *marja'-e taghlid* – source of imitation.
[15] For details on the issue of democracy in Shari'ati's teachings see F. Jahanbakhsh, *Islam, Democracy and Religious Modernism in Iran (1953–2000). From Bazargan to Soroush* (Leiden–Boston–Köln: 2001), 119–126.
[16] Jalaloddin Rumi, a Persian mystical poet. His spiritual verses *Masnavi-ye ma'navi* are called by many researchers the "Persian Koran." It encompasses the material relating to ethnography, science of religion and Sufi and folk literature. These sermons are often written in the form of parables or didactic folk-tales.
[17] The most important works include: M. Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam. A Study of the Devotional Aspects of 'Ashura in Twelver Shi'ism* (Haque: 1975); W. R. Husted, "Karbalā Made Immediate: the Martyr as Model in Imāmi Shi'ism," *The Muslim World*, Vol. 83, nos. 3–4; A. J. Wensinck, "The Oriental Doctrine of

Martyrs," *Mededeelingen Der Koninklijke Akademie Van Wetenschappen, Afdeeling Letterkunde Deel* 53, series A, no. 6 (Amsterdam: 1921); A. Ezzati, "The Concept of Martyrdom in Islam," *Al-Sirat* 12 (Tehran: 1986); F. Khosrokhavar, *L'Islamisme et la mort. Le martyre revolutionnaire en Iran* (Paryż: 1995); J. Winter, *Martyrdom and Suffering in Islam*, www.iranchamber.com/religions/martyrdom. E. Shahidi, *Pazhuheshi dar ta'ziye va ta'ziyekhani dar Tehran az aghaz ta payan-e doure-ye Ghajar* (Tehran: 1380/2001). See also the entry *shahid* in the successive editions of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, edited by R. Peters, E. Kolberg and W. Böjrkman, and the articles concerning the term shahadat, see Carra De Vaux and D. Gimaret, in: *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, CD-ROM Edition; *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: 1978).

PART I:

FROM SACRIFICE TO MARTYRDOM

CHAPTER ONE

SACRIFICE: REBIRTH THROUGH DEATH

From the Arab conquest until the modern times the concept of shahadat has undergone considerable evolution. As a result, today shahadat is an equivocal notion which contains multiple meanings. Nowadays, it usually signifies the testimony of faith and martyrdom. The concept is also connected with a broadly conceived idea of sacrifice. Thus, in order to become familiar with the character and sense of shahadat and to understand its meaning for the Iranian people, we must trace the evolution of the idea. How did it emerge, how did it evolve and what was the source of the meanings it carries today? That is why we must go back to the time of the Indo-Iranian community and to the idea of sacrifice.

The idea of sacrifice is one of the fundamental concepts in Persian culture.[1] It can already be found in the religions and religious rites of ancient Aryans, predecessors of modern-day Iranians.[2] The information about sacrificial rituals which were widely spread among Iranian tribes is fragmentary. It was mainly found in literature which arose on the basis of archaic accounts, being usually mythical. Of significant importance are also religious texts, mainly the *Avesta*,[3] the Sacred Book of reformed Mazdaism/Zoroastrianism.[4] This is one of the most vital documents of the Iranian tradition. The oldest parts of the *Avesta* come from Central Asia and date back to the late 2nd or early 1st century BC. It is not known exactly, however, when *Avesta* was written down. Most probably, the version that has been preserved was put in writing as late as the Parthian time (ca. 247 BC – ca. 225 AD)[5] or the Sassanid period (225-651). *Yasna*,[6] which is the most important and comprehensive part of the *Avesta*,[7] contains most of the information about sacrifice. Substantial data pertaining to the religious cult and sacrificial practices are also provided by archaeological findings. Both literary sources and archaeological finds allow us to say that among Indo-Iranian tribes two major forms of sacrificial rites were most common. One of them encompassed the blood sacrifices of animals, mainly cattle, while the other one was the ritual drinking feast with the consumption of the sacred drink.[8]

The two rituals were practised in many cultures.[9] As in the case of other sacrificial rites, their sense and significance are discussed and studied by researchers representing various fields of science, including the study of religion, sociology of religion or anthropology. So far, the study of sacrifice has not resulted in one generally accepted definition of sacrifice. As A. Quack notes, a wide spectrum of different kinds of sacrifice raises doubts whether we can ever formulate any commonly valid ideology of sacrifice and whether this attempt is feasible and reasonable at all.[10]

When researchers inquire into the sense of sacrificial rites, they most often analyse a religious and socio-religious context which accompanies specific actions. Following this line of reasoning, scholars have distinguished many kinds of sacrifices, linking them with diverse religious rites.[11] Anthropologists, specialists in the study of religion and sociologists of religion give many definitions of sacrifice and the various meanings of these rites.

In this book, for the sake of this analysis of the concept of sacrifice in the ancient Persian tradition, and later on in the Iranian Shi'ism, out of different interpretations, we have adopted the concept of sacrifice elaborated by anthropologists such as G. J. Frazer, A. E. Jensen, M. Griaule, G. Dieterlen or J. Chelhold.[12] They represent the group of researchers who think that sacrificial actions are closely connected with the idea of rebirth through death and the ensuing sustenance of sacral forces in the world.

For G. J. Frazer, the sacrifice, which was ritual killing of a divine being or its personification (of a king or chieftain of the tribe), was made in order to revive the divine power in the world.[13] A similar interpretation can be found in the writings of A. E. Jensen, who holds that the primeval sense of sacrifice is revealed when it is interpreted as a dramatized re-enactment of a certain mythical event from the prehistoric times.[14] Also, M. Eliade holds that the sense of making sacrifices is concealed in an archaic theory of periodic regeneration of sacral forces. The dramatized scenario of the sacral rite is supposed to be the repetition of the primeval cosmological act, a ritual reiteration of the act of creation, and the death of a primeval creature is supposed to bring revival and rebirth of life.[15]

The idea of sacrifice as rebirth of life through death can be seen in Persian myths and in the oldest Avestan legends, traditions and texts. The belief in such revival was commonly professed already in Mazdaism, an old Persian religion which was based on the ancient cult of Ahura Mazda, lit. the Wise Lord, creator of the world and benefactor of man.[16] This is shown by one of the fragments of the *Avesta*, which states that Ahura, in

return for the sacrifice of a cow, gave life to plants. Initially, blood sacrifice was probably also made to the spirits of the underground world which took care of the seeds.[17]

The idea of rebirth through death is also found in one of the oldest Iranian cosmological myths. It tells of the attack of Ahriman, god of evil and darkness, on the first beings created by Ahura Mazda.[18] Those were: an ancient man Kayomars, ancient animal, the cow Gava Evodata and an ancient plant. All of those beings had the shape and nature of a seed. They included the features of later plants, animals and humans. That is why, when Ahriman killed an animal or a plant, they were reborn after death in a more perfect form. From cow semen animals arose, whereas from its body there grew fifty-five species of grains and twelve species of medicinal plants. Many plant species also arose out of the particles of a dried plant. Kayomars, who probably survived an attack by Ahriman, also gave rise to a new life after his death. On his grave, a rhubarb grew up, which, after many years, turned into people, the first parents of human beings Mashya and Mashyana. The death of the first creatures gave rise to new life, and, as a result, ensured the revival of the world and its persistence; it led to the sustenance of sacral forces.

The idea of blood sacrifice bringing revival is also associated with the cult of Mithra, an ancient deity of Aryans.[19] Mithraism was clearly gnostic in character and it was marked by rich symbolism. The ceremonies were a well-kept secret, so many details of the ritual forms of Mithraism remained unknown. For all we know, this information is mainly based on Roman accounts and iconographic material. In the areas of the ancient cult sites, scenes have been preserved depicting Mithra in the act of killing a bull whose blood was supposed to spur plant life. Iconographic representations of the ceremonies show Mithra, who is looking at the animal, turning his head as if in sorrow, and cutting the bull's throat. Mithra brings death but he does this for the sake of life. Like the cosmological myth, the story of Mithra also shows that the spilling of blood stimulates the plant life.

The ritual of killing an animal was also known in the time when Mithraism spread throughout the Roman Empire. A Christian poet Prudentius passed down his description of one of the ceremonies which took place in the 4th century. The sacrificial bull was being slaughtered on the platform installed high above the ground. Its blood trickled down through the openings into the hollow under the platform. There the neophyte stood in the nude. The bull's blood ran down his body. The new initiate turned round slowly to let it cover his entire body. He even rubbed

his eyes and tongue with it. From that moment he became resistant to evil, purified and ready to fight.[20]

Today, the sacrificial killing of an animal can be observed during the ceremonies accompanying weddings organized in Iranian villages. The sacrificial animal is slaughtered when the bride arrives in the bridegroom's house. Its blood, which is spilled in front of his farmyard is to ensure bumper crops and good luck.

It is well known that, according to an ancient tradition, in eastern Iran during the full moon, feasts were held for which courses of cow meat were prepared. At that time, the "festival of cow" was celebrated. The ceremonies held on that day were to ensure life in the rebirth through the offspring in the future. Blood was supposed to be the source of rebirth. Mentions concerning sacrificial animals are found in the writings of Herodotus, who wrote:

> [...] but when anyone [Pars] wishes to offer sacrifice to any one of these deities, he leads the victim to a clean spot and invokes the god, usually having his tiara decked with myrtle [...] When he has cut the victim into small pieces and boiled the flesh, he strews under it a bed of tender grass, generally trefoil, and then lays all the flesh upon it: when he has put everything in order, one of the Magi standing by sings an ode concerning the origine of the gods, which they say is the incantation; and without one of the Magi it is not lawful for them to sacrifice.[21]

In the ritual described above we may discern various aspects of sacrificial actions. It could fulfil magic functions or it would serve to bribe the deity in order to ensure one's well-being. It is not unlikely, however, that such sacrificial actions were to ensure rebirth through the offspring and the resulting sustenance of sacral forces in the world.

In ancient Persian culture, the rituals of animal sacrifices were usually accompanied by ceremonial feasts during which the offering of sacred drink was of particular significance. It was prepared using the sacred plant, which was called *haoma*, *homa* or *hom* by the Iranians, and *soma* by the Hindu. The term was used to indicate both the plant and the juice squeezed from it. It was also the name of a deity identified with the plant and taking care of it.[22] One of the most important hymns of the *Avesta*, *the Hymn to Haoma*, was dedicated to this drink.[23] According to the information contained in the hymn, it was also the name of the holy sage, the first man to prepare this sacred juice from *haoma*. An Eastern anecdote says, it was precisely Haoma who discovered a plant having extraordinary properties and gave it his name.[24]

It was impossible to determine what plant was called haoma[25] by the Aryans. Today, it is often identified with the plant called *Ruta graveolens* (ordinary or common rue), which has medicinal properties.[26] Reportedly, there were miscellaneous plants that varied depending on local conditions from which juice was extracted so that the ritual drink could be prepared and consumed during the ritual ceremonies.

The rite connected with *haoma* is very old. In Mazdaism, the worship of *haoma* existed alongside the cult of blood sacrifice. Originally, both rituals were associated with the cult of the underground deities, which are referred to in Greek sources. Plutarkh claims that the Persians paid homage to the god of the underground world by consuming the drink prepared from the juice of the omomi plant mixed with the blood of a wolf. The old parts of the *Avesta* also mention a negative role of *haoma*. Over time, however, the ritual pertaining to the plant became the basis for the Zoroastrian liturgy. Zoroastrian tradition reports that Zarathustra condemned the cult of the *deva*, and then he forbade to make blood offerings. The ban imposed by the Prophet was reflected in many Avestan texts, which categorically condemn blood sacrifice. It should be borne in mind, however, that the *Avesta* was written down many centuries later in late Sassanian times (3rd-7th c.), when Zoroastrianism became a state religion of the Persian Empire. The Magi, who were responsible for the final redaction of the *Avesta,* removed the contents of the old texts pertaining to the cult of *deva*. M. Składankowa assumes that some of them were probably omitted unintentionally. She holds that this was reportedly the case of the fragment relating to the sacrifice in return for which Ahura gave life to the plants.[27] Zarathustra replaced blood sacrifice by the ceremonial feast during which the ritual of offering haoma[28] played the main role. It no longer had anything in common with the ancient cults of the gods of the underground world.

According to the Avestan texts, the ceremony of offering *haoma*, that is to say, the paramount feast of the Zoroastrian liturgy, was preceded by an equally important ritual of preparation of the sacred beverage. First, the juice was extracted from *haoma*, and then it was mixed with milk. The drink was given the name *parahom*. Milk itself, as well as water and mead with water, were also used by Iranians as ritual beverages. The drink thus prepared was offered to God. It was consumed later by the other participants in the feast.[29] During the ritual, the *Hymn to Haoma*[30] was recited.

Like the blood sacrifice, the sacred drink is closely associated with the idea of rebirth. In the *Avesta*, the *haoma* juice is considered a drink of life and good conception. The *haoma* sacrifice reportedly gave birth to a great

number of the heroes in the Iranian myths. Among them was the Prophet Zarathustra himself. According to one of the oldest legends, the Prophet's soul fell upon the earth with rain and concealed itself in the *haoma* plant. Purushaspa, the father of Zoroaster, squeezed the juice out of the plant, drank it together with the soul and passed the soul to his wife. Yima, the good shepherd, and other mythological heroes were said to have been born in a similar way.

The *Avesta* contains a story of the heroes born as a result of the *haoma* sacrifice and of the meeting between Zarathustra and Haoma.

> I. 1. At the hour of Hâvani H(a)oma came to Zarathustra, as he served the (sacred) Fire, and sanctified (its flame), while he sang aloud The Gâthas. And Zarathustra asked him: Who art thou, O man! who art of all the incarnate world the most beautiful in Thine own body of those whom I have seen, (thou) glorious [immortal]?
> II. Thereupon gave H(a)oma answer, the holy one who driveth death afar: I am, O Zarathustra
> Ha()oma, the holy and driving death afar; pray to me, O Spitâma, prepare me for the taste. Praise toward me in (thy) praises as the other [Saoshyants] praise.
> III. Thereupon spake Zarathustra; Unto H(a)oma be the praise. What man, O H(a)oma! first prepared thee for the corporeal world? What blessedness was offered him? what gain did he acquire?
> IV. Thereupon did H(a)oma answer me, he the holy one, and driving death afar: Vîvanghvant was the first of men who prepared me for the incarnate world. This blessedness was offered him; this gain did he acquire, that to him was born a son who was Yima, called the brilliant, (he of the many flocks, the most glorious of those yet born, the sunlike-one of men), that he made from his authority both herds and people free from dying, both plants and waters free from drought, and men could eat imperishable food [...].
> VI. Who was the second man, O H(a)oma! who prepared thee for the corporeal world? What sanctity was offered him? what gain did he acquire?
> VII. Thereupon gave H(a)oma answer, the holy one, and driving death afar: Âthwya was the second man who prepared me for the corporeal world. This blessedness was given him, this gain did he acquire, that to him a son was born, Thraêtaona of the heroic tribe.
> VIII. Who smote the dragon Dahâka, three-jawed and triple-headed, six-eyed, with thousand powers, and of mighty strength, a lie-demon of the Daêvas, evil for our settlements, and wicked, whom the evil spirit Angra Mainyu made as the most mighty Drug [against the corporeal world], and for murder of (our) settlements, and to slay (homes) of Asha!
> IX. Who was the third man, O H(a)oma! who prepared thee for the corporeal world? What blessedness was given him? what gain did he acquire?

> X. Thereupon gave H(a)oma answer, the holy one, and driving death afar: Thrita [the most helpful of the Sâmas], was the third man who prepared me for the corporeal world. This blessedness was given him, this gain did he acquire, that to him two sons were born, Urvâkhshaya and Keresâspa, the one a judge confirming order, the other a youth of great ascendant, ringlet-headed, bludgeon-bearing.
> XI. He who smote the horny dragon swallowing men, and swallowing horses, poisonous, and green of colour, over which, as thick as thumbs are, greenish poison flowed aside, on whose back once Keresâspa cooked his meat in iron caldron at the noonday meal; and the deadly, scorched, upstarted, and springing off, dashed out the water as it boiled. Headlong fled affrighted manly-minded, Keresâspa.
> XII. Who was the fourth man who prepared thee, O H(a)oma! for the corporeal world? What blessedness was given him? what gain did he acquire?
> XIII. Thereupon gave H(a)oma answer, he the holy, and driving death afar: Pourushaspa was the fourth man who prepared me for the corporeal world. This blessedness was given him, this gain did he acquire, that thou, O Zarathustra! was born to him, the just, in Pourushaspa's house, the D(a)êva's foe, the friend of Mazda's lore […].[31]

Like the previous rituals, the ceremony of offering the sacred drink was to serve rebirth through death and the ensuing sustenance of sacral forces. This time, the point was to show the symbolical death of the plant and the spilling of its blood, i.e., its juice. The offering of the sacred plant (the deity of Haoma) resulted in the birth of heroes. Each one of them received a blessing and became the owner of divine light, the power of which helped him oppose the evil, fight with *deva* and defend the faith and law represented by Ahura Mazda. The ritual, therefore, served not only to give birth to the heroes alone but also to bring about the rebirth of a divine element of *haoma* in heroes; this, in turn, was a guarantee of their power which ensured the maintenance of the divine order, law and good.

In Persian culture, *haoma* also appears as a drink of immortality. But this does not apply to the juice consumed during the rituals, since it did not have regenerating or rejuvenating properties. As the old stories and legends show, the drink of immortality was reserved for the few. It was said to have been prepared from the plant which grew somewhere at sea or on a remote island.[32]

The *haoma* juice is also closely connected with the idea of courage. It was to give physical and psychic strength. Its consumption was to guarantee health and courage, as well as victory over enemies.[33] The traces of such thinking can also be found in contemporary Zoroastrian communities. Even today, women originating from the circle of Zoroastrian tradition recite the *Hymn to Haoma*. They do it on behalf of

their sons. They believe that they can thus ensure them health and bestow courage and bravery upon them.

According to Persian tradition, *haoma* is also a drink of wisdom, cognition and initiation into the hidden matters. As a drink of courage, power, good conception and initiation, *haoma* could play an important part in initiation rituals which were related to the ceremony of ritual death and resurrection, and the ensuing initiation into tribal ritual. In this case, the point was to bring about rebirth which could serve initiation, that is to say, commencing a new stage of life.

In Persian culture, the rituals related to the consumption of beverages possessing revitalizing properties date back to pre-historic times. Among Iranian tribes, the rituals of drinking wine mixed with the ashes of the dead were probably widespread. This ritual was reportedly related to the belief that the body of the dead person contained a germ or semen. The drinking of the beverage prepared from wine and ashes (seeds) was to permit the preservation of the life of the soul and rebirth through the offspring. A woman could, either alone or through the intermediary of a man, give birth again to those who had died. It was enough to drink the beverage or encounter the man who drank it. People might have believed that she would get pregnant and give birth to the dead person in a new shape.

Both the idea of blood sacrifice and the offering of a sacred drink may be associated with eschatological themes. The tradition preserved in the Pahlavi writings mention sacrifices by means of which Ahura Mazda created the Universe, the first man and Zarathustra. The eschatological renewal will take place during the New Year's celebration when the dead will be raised up. Then they will be judged and they will gain immortality. That renewal, like the earlier act of creation, is, according to the old accounts, to be done through sacrifice. The Pahlavi writings describe the ultimate sacrifice to be made by the Saviour, Saoshyant (identified with Zarathustra), together with Ormuzd.[34] It will bring people resurrection, immortality and the revival of the whole world. This interpretation of the idea of sacrifice is presented by the researchers M. Molé and G. Gnoli. In their works they demonstrated that the world's revival is a direct consequence of the offerings made by priests.[35] G. Gnoli goes a step further and says that the rite of the *Yasna* allows one to reach an ecstatic experience which leads to the attainment of the state of the Magus. During that illumination, says Gnoli, the priest making a sacrifice manages to separate the spiritual nature from the bodily nature and to regain the state of purity. Since these two kinds of nature blended into one as a result of

the attack by Ahriman, the sacrificer contributes to the situation in which the primeval metamorphosis of the world is reinstated.[36]

The information contained in the Avestan texts and in the ancient stories and legends enables us to suppose that in Persian tradition the ritual of making sacrifice was strongly connected with the belief that blood is the power of life and that life is transmitted through the seeds. This way of thinking was characteristic of the communities cultivating agricultural and shepherding traditions. The Iranian tribes arriving in the Near East cherished, above all, agricultural, hunting, and later on, shepherding traditions. From the perspective of anthropology and sociology of religion, startling blood sacrifices strictly correspond to agrarian consciousness.[37]

The motif of spilling blood contained in the *Avesta*, which stimulates plant life, has become a permanent component of the Persian culture. Both blood sacrifice and ritual offering of plant beverages reportedly stimulated life. The sacrifice was to bring the rebirth of plants, people and animals. This, in turn, according to the tales contained in the myths and texts of the *Avesta*, ensured the maintenance of the worldly order, protection against the forces of chaos and the ensuing persistence of the world.

This role of sacrifice in the old Persian tradition is also confirmed by the information contained in the *Rigveda*, a holy book of the Indo-Aryans. The *Rigveda* is a collection of hymns designed for recitation during sacrificial rituals. The study of the Hindu tradition shows that the sacrificial ceremony was of key importance for the Aryan cult, and that sacrificial rituals were closely connected, among other things, with the belief that the universe emerged from the primeval sacrifice. During sacrificial rituals, the priest repeats the primeval sacrifice due to which the world is born anew. A. L. Basham notes that we cannot find votive or propitiatory offerings in the *Rigveda*. According to the author, they ought to be associated primarily with ceremonies during which the feeling of power was experienced and the immortality was attained, or with the rituals which served as a medium to repeat the primeval sacrifice, and, in consequence, as a protection against chaos.[38]

Notes

[1] In the language of the ethnology of religion and the theology of religion, in lieu of the Polish word ”ofiara,” a non-Polish term ”sacrifice” is frequently used. It occurs both in French and English, and it is derived from the Latin words *sacer* – saint, and *facere* – to make. There are also synonymic terms: *immolare*, *offerande*, *oblatio*. Cf. A. Lande, *Sacrifice. Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie 2* (Paris: 1988).

[2] See more about ancient Aryans, *inter alia*, in: C. Renfrew, *Archeologia i język. Łamigłówka pochodzenia Indoeuropejczyków*, translated into Polish by E. Wilczyńska and A. Marciniak (Warszawa–Poznań: 2001); B. Składanek, *Historia Persji*, vol. 1 (Warszawa: 1999), 44 ff.; G. F. Il'yin and I. M. Diakonoff, "India, Central Asia, and Iran," in: *Early Antiquity* (Chicago and London: 1991), 378–390.

[3] *avesta* – law, basis; Middle Persian *apastak*, law. Tradition says that the *Avesta* was burned at Persepolis in the times of Alexander the Great. However, according to researchers, the Avestan texts were actually passed down orally. They had been memorized by priests for liturgical purposes. According to tradition, a collection of twenty-one books, *nasks*, came into existence at that time. The most sacred books were *gathic nasks* – hymns authored probably by the Prophet Zarathustra himself. They are included in the *Yasna* containing liturgical texts. For more details on this topic see J. Rypka, *History of Iranian Literatur*e (Praha: 1965), 7 ff.; J. Kellens, "Avesta," in: *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, ed. by Yarshater, vol. 3 (New York: 2000), 35–44.

[4] Zarathustrianism, from Greek Zoroastrianism, is the ancient religion of Persia (Iran) whose founder was the Prophet Zarathustra, Gr. Zoroaster, who is reported to have lived at the turn of the 7th century BC. The time and place of his life, and even the historicity of this figure, continue to be an object of the study. Zarathustra reformed Mazdaism, the prevailing form of religion in Iran in earlier times. The main doctrine of Zoroastrianism is the dualism and the resulting struggle between good and evil. For more details on the topic of Zoroastrianism see, for example, J. H. Moulton, *Early Zoroastrianism. The Origins, The Prophet, The Magi* (Amsterdam: Philopress, 1972); G. Gnoli, *Zoroaster's Time and Homeland* (Naples: 1980), 59–90; M. Składankowa, *Zoroaster i magowie* (Warszawa: 1963); M. Boyce, *Zaratusztrianie* (Łódź: 1988).

[5] The period of the dynasty's rule is dated after J. Rypka, *History of Iranian Literatur*e, 743.

[6] *yasna* – from Old Persian – prayer, liturgy, sacrifice.

[7] *Yasna* was written down in the language named Younger Avestan language. The Middle Persian version of the *Book of the Cult* in the Pahlavi language has also survived. A full translation of the *Yasna* and other Avestan texts was made by J. Darmsteter, *Le Zend-Avesta* (Paris: 1892–1893). Among translations of the Gathas one can mention for example: H. Humbach, *Die Gāthās des Zarathustra* (Heidelberg: 1959); Ch. Bartholomae, *Die Gāthā's des Awesta* (Strasburg: 1905); N. L. Westergard, *Zendavesta or the Religious Book of the Zoroastrians* (Copenhagen: 1852–1854); K. F. Geldner, *Avesta: the Sacred Books of the Parsis* (Stuttgart: 1889-1896); F. Wolff, *Avesta, die heiligen Bűcher der Pars*e (Leipzig: 1910). There exists a contemporary translation of the *Avesta* into the Persian language, see *Avesta, Yasna, Yaštha, Visparad, Chord Avesta*, commentary and translation by H. Razi (Tehran: 1363/1985). Translations of the Pahlavi books are contained in the work by E. W. West, *Pahlavi Texts*, in: *Sacred Books of the East* (Oxford: 1888–1897). More recent translations of the book of *Bundehishn*, some books of *Dinkart* and other Pahlavi books have been published in the work by R. C. Zaehner, *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism* (London: 1961). Fragments

of translations of the Pahlavi texts can also be found in the work by M. Molé, *Culte, mythe et cosmologie dans l'Iran ancien* (Paris: 1963).

[8] For more details on blood sacrifice see, for example, *Yasna* V: 21, 25, 29, 33, 37, 108.

[9] For more details on the topic of the idea of sacrifice in various traditions see *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. by J. Hasting, vol. 11 (Edinburgh: 1917), 2 ff. See also S. Rabiej, *In Spiritu et Veritate. Kult ofiarniczy w chrześcijaństwie i innych religiach* (Opole: 1998).

[10] A. Quack, s.v. "Ofiara," in: *Leksykon religii. Zjawiska – dzieje – idee*, (Warszawa: 1997).

[11] In scientific literature, various types of sacrifice are distinguished; as regards the kind of the offerings made, the following main types are mentioned: blood offerings and bloodless offerings, symbolic and external (from the elements of the environment); as regards the involvement of the participants, individual and collective sacrifices can be distinguished. For more details on this topic see A. Szyjewski, "Ofiara," in: *Encyklopedia religii*, vol. 7 (Warszawa: 2003).

[12] In contemporary science, there are theories displaying various aspects of the notion of sacrifice. E. Westermark underlines expiatory and magic functions of the sacrifice that are intended to protect against evil forces. Here, the sacrifice is supposed to be a means of averting ominous forces. According to V. Turner, sacrifices probably perform the purifying functions and serve to revive bonds among members of a particular community. According to W. R. Smith, the idea of sacrifice originates from the sacramental killing and communal eating of a totem animal. E. B. Tylor, in turn, sees in the primeval offerings an attempt at corrupting a deity in order to ensure good luck to oneself. R. Caillois approaches the sacrifice in a similar way; he argues that by making offerings, the faithful turns into a creditor of the sacred powers and he expects that in worshipping them he ensures happiness and good luck to himself. The interpretation of the sacrifice made by R. Girard is also worthy of notice. By referring primarily to the idea of blood sacrifice he perceives in a sacrificial act a ritual repetition of the original act of killing, underlying diverse cultures and religions. R. Girard holds that the sacrifice represents a certain projection of violence imposed on the scapegoat. Thus, the sacrificial ritual serves to purify a particular community." (...) society, writes Girard, is seeking to deflect upon a relatively indifferent victim, a 'sacrificeable' victim, the violence that would otherwise be vented on its own members, the people it most desires to protect."Cf. R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (London 2005). A different role is played by the sacrifice in the conception of H. Hubert and M. Mauss. They see it as a means of communication of laymen with the sacred: H. Hubert and M. Mauss, "Essai sur la nature et la fonction du sacrifice", *L'Année sociologique* 2 (Paris: 1889); E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (London: 1871); V. Turner, *The Ritual Process; Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: 1969); W. R. Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (London: 1889); R. Caillois, *Człowiek i sacrum* (Warszawa: 1995). Other valuable works devoted to the idea of sacrifice include: E. O. James, *The Origin of Sacrifice. A Study in Comparative Religion* (London: 1937); J. Van Baal, "Offering, Sacrifice and Gift,"

Numen 23 (London: 1976); J. Campbell, "The Sacrifice," in: *Historical Atlas of World Mythology*, vol. 2 (New York: 1988), 1.
[13] J. G. Frazer, *Złota gałąź* (Warszawa: 1978).
[14] A. E. Jansen, *Mythos und Kult beiden Naturvölkern* (Wiesbaden: 1951).
[15] M. Eliade, *Traité d'histoire des religions* (Paris: 1949), 320.
[16] Ahura Mazda – Parthian Aramazd, Pahlavi Ohrmazd/Hormizd, New Persian Ormuzd. The Greek equivalent of Ahura Mazda is Ormuzd. Ahura corresponds to the Hindu word asura. In Hindu tradition, Asuras were evil spirits. For more details on Ahura Mazda see G. Widengren, *Les religions de l'Iran* (Paris: 1968); J. Duchesne-Guillemin, *Ormazd et Ahriman. L'aventure dualiste dans l'Antiquité* (Paris: 1953); R.C. Zaehner, *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism*; J. H. Moulton *Early Zoroastrianism. The Origins, The Prophet, The Magi* (Amsterdam: Philopress, 1972); M. Boyce, "Ahura Mazda," in: *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. 1, 684–687.
[17] For more details on this topic see M. Składankowa, *Mitologia Iranu* (Warszawa: 1989), 108.
[18] According to the oldest Iranian beliefs, the world is an arena for the struggle between the forces of Good, represented by Ahura Mazda, and the Forces of Darkness, which are symbolized by Ahriman.
[19] Mithra, who was worshipped by both Iranians and Indo-Aryans, was also known as Mihr, Mir and Mehr (love, sun, kindness or mercy). He occupied an important place among Indo-Iranian deities. Mithraism flourished in the Parthian period. The cult of Mithra was also transferred to Asia Minor and then to Rome.
[20] Cf. J. W. Kowalski, *Dramat a kult* (Warszawa: 1987), 96.
[21] Herodotus, *The Histories*, I:132 (Montana: 2005), 54.
[22] For more information about *haoma* see, for example, M. Boyce, "Haoma, Priest of the Sacrifice," in: *Memorial Volume, Bibliography of the Works of W. B. Henning* (London: 1970), 62–80; D. Taillieu, "Haoma," in: *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. 9 (New York: 1999), 659–662.
[23] See his text in J. Josephson, "The Pahlavi Translation Technique as Illustrated by Hom Yašt," *Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, Studia Iranica Upsaliensis* 2 (Uppsala: Sweden 1997). See also a German translation: H. Lommel, *Die Yasts des Awesta* (Göttingen–Leipzig: 1927).
[24] J. J. Modi, *The Religious Ceremonies and Customs of the Parsees* (Bombay: 1937), 283–284.
[25] Cf. G. L. Windfuhr, "Haoma/Soma: the Plant," in: *Acta Iranica*, vol. 9 (Leiden: 1985).
[26] The plant grows on mountain slopes in Central Asia and in Persia. This had reportedly been the rue, the plant which was also known in Europe. For more details on this topic see D. S. Flattery and M. Schwartz, *Haoma and Harmaline. The Botanical Identity of the Indo-Iranian Sacred Hallucinogen "Soma" and its Legacy in Religion, Language, and Middle Eastern Folklore, University of California Publications, Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 21 (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: 1989). In today's Iran, the rue is called *esfand*. It is used as an incense for people, especially children, to protect them from the "evil eye." Very often, this custom may be found today in traditional restaurants and tea houses. In order to