

KHEIMEH SHAB BAZI

by Neda Izadi

Iran is an ancient country with a vast cultural heritage. We see evidence of this in the continued performances of Kheimeh Shab Bazi puppet theatre. Though it is a unique contribution to Iranian culture, it has not yet been given the recognition it deserves. It is our belief that the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) should recognize Kheimeh Shab Bazi as an under-represented cultural heritage.

A DESCRIPTION OF KHEIMEH SHAB BAZI

Kheimeh Shab Bazi is a type of Iranian musical show that has been performed with marionettes or hand puppets in different parts of Iran for many years. What is the meaning of Kheimeh Shab Bazi in English? *Kheimeh* means tent, *Bazi* means show and *Shab* means night: an evening show performed in a tent outside. In my research I have also discovered that the word *Loebat Bazi* had been used instead of Kheimeh Shab Bazi in some poems. *Loebat* is an ancient word for puppet, so *Loebat Bazi* translates as “puppet show.”

The performance space of Kheimeh Shab Bazi looks like a tent. Performers assemble poles together to create a cube-like structure that is covered by a large piece of fabric to create the puppet stage within it. This stage is simply referred to as the “Kheimeh.” In this manner, the stage is portable and performers can travel rather unencumbered around the country to perform their show.



A KHEIMEH SHAB BAZI PERFORMANCE

In Esfahan, a large city in the center of Iran, *Posht-e-Parde* is another name for Kheimeh Shab Bazi. Translated into English, *Posht* means behind and *Parde* means curtain. This title describes the style of the performance that is usually done with hand puppets, which the performer manipulates from behind a curtain. In the city of Shiraz, in the southwest of Iran, Kheimeh Shab Bazi is titled *Jijiviji* and is also performed with hand puppets. This title describes the high-pitched language of the puppets that is created by puppeteers with a *safir* (in English, a swazzle), the traditional reed noisemaker played from the back of the mouth. This unusual aspect of Iranian puppetry is used to create the voice of the trickster character Mobarak.

There are numerous parallels between puppet traditions in Iran and the Italian *Commedia dell'Arte*. Iranians have no idea where Persian puppet characters came from, but it seems likely that, during the Ottoman Empire's occupation of Italian states, they saw masked *Commedia dell'Arte* performances and took these ideas and stock characters back to Persia where they were translated into puppet characters.

GENERAL SPECIFICATIONS OF KHEIMEH SHAB BAZI AND STOCK CHARACTERS:

Kheimeh Shab Bazi is almost always performed with marionettes or hand puppets. The height of the marionettes is usually around 20 inches. The puppets' costumes are inspired by realistic costumes for each character. Female puppets have colorful traditional women's costumes, like long skirts and kerchiefs. Male puppets have traditional men's costumes, like blue or red shirts and loose black pants.

The construction of the marionettes is very simple. They do not have complicated mechanisms. Usually the puppets are carved out of wood and small pieces of leather are used for the joints. Each marionette just has three strings and a puppeteer manipulates them with a very simple control from the top of the stage.



Kheimah Shab Bazi hand puppets are generally around 15 inches tall and are made out of fabric stuffed with cotton batting. Each puppet has particular characteristics that are traditional for their character: for example, the face of Mobarak is always painted black. Mobarak relates very specifically to the Commedia dell'Arte character of Arlecchino (Harlequin in English), and is the super star of this theatre: the traditional trickster, the savvy servant. The word Mobarak means happiness in Farsi. The Iranian people chose this name for him because he is known to bring happiness with performances that continuously offer comic relief. Young and old alike enjoy watching his actions and hearing his voice. Many speculate that this character was inspired by slaves brought from African countries to Iran during the Islamic age. Some of those slaves learned to amuse their masters and were treated with more privileges.

In addition to his black face, Mobarak always wears a traditional red costume and red hat, and is famous for the high-pitched voice created by the safir, which is usually made of a copper strip, ribbon and fabric. The puppeteer holds the safir in their mouth to speak in the voice of Mobarak. The Safir makes Mobarak's voice comic, and most words are not understandable.

Pahlevan Kachal is another character of Kheimah Shab Bazi. Pahlevan means champion and Kachal means bald in English. He is a strong bald man with a big moustache who is Mobarak's friend, and together they solve problems. Pahlevan Kachal has a costume like an Iranian traditional athlete—a tank top and tights for instance—and he sometimes carries a sword. Kachal is a brave person who battles injustice. We can say Pahlevan Kachal is similar to Pulcinella di Napoli, a classical character that originated in Commedia dell'Arte in the 17th century. Pulcinella di Napoli, like Pahlevan Kachal, defends the oppressed.

Tayareh is a woman with whom Mobarak falls in love. At the end of the story, they get married. We may consider Tayareh the Iranian version of Judy, of Punch and Judy fame.

We do not have a defined number of characters for Kheimah Shab Bazi. Some characters are added or eliminated, depending on what serves the story.

THE HISTORY OF KHEIMEH SHAB BAZI

Nobody knows where and from whom the Kheimah Shab Bazi came. The oldest evidence goes back to a time before Islam. Nizami Ganjavi¹ wrote a poem about many Indian Gypsy artists who came to Iran in the time of Shah Bahram V². They came to create different kinds of performing arts, one of which was a type of puppetry.

Either Kheimah Shab Bazi was created in Iran or it was brought from another neighboring country. The characters of Kheimah Shab Bazi are very similar to other traditional puppets in other countries like Punch in England or Polichinelle

in France. There is some evidence that the Iranian people enjoyed this type of dramatic art, and even went on to make it their own, promoting and refining it.

There is no reliable evidence about Kheimah Shab Bazi or other types of Persian performing arts. During the Golden Age of Islam, from the 8th to the 13th century, a number of poets were inspired by Kheimah Shab Bazi in their own epic work and allegorical writings. Their poems show us that this type of performing art was very popular with the Iranian people. Reliable evidence has been obtained from the period of the kingdom of Shah Abbas II³ from 1642-1666 AD, including performances described in the book *The Travels of Sir John Chardin into Persia and the East Indies*. Chardin was a French jeweler and traveler whose ten-volume book is regarded as one of the best works of Western research about Persia and the Near East.



Chardin writes that he saw a variety of performing arts like dance, fencing, juggling and Kheimah Shab Bazi in Nagsh-e Jahan Square in Isfahan. Nagsh-e Jahan Square (The World Square) was constructed in the center of Isfahan between 1598 and 1629 CE. During the Safavid dynasty (14th – early 20th century) the Persian and Ottoman Empires sometimes had a friendly relationship, and sometimes not. Their political relationship affected the stories of Kheimah Shab Bazi, for example the role of Shah Selim, who was based on one of the kings of the Ottoman Empire. The Iranian people took the frustration of alternating states of war and peace and used it in their stories. Little by little Shah Selim and his stories were popularized until they became one of the most important plays of Kheimah Shab Bazi.

In the Qajar dynasty (1789-1929 CE), popular audiences enjoyed watching Kheimah Shab Bazi in squares, weddings and cafés. The most complete evidence about performing Kheimah Shab Bazi was written by Baha'u'llah, the Persian religious leader and founder of the Bahá'í faith, who lived from 1817 to 1892. He wrote in a letter to one of Ottoman kings a complete description of one of

the Kheimah Shab Bazi performances which he saw in his childhood. Little by little, as western shows and movies arrived in Iran by the end of the Qajar dynasty, this type of dramatic art was no longer common anymore.

Kheimah Shab Bazi was performed in only very few places during the Pahlavi Dynasty⁴, until 1958 when the Dramatic Art University of Tehran held workshops to revive the form, wanting to reintroduce the art to preserve it for a younger generation.

Since the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979 many artists have tried to keep this type of dramatic art alive. Workshops and classes are held in newly built dramatic universities to teach Kheimah Shab Bazi to younger generations. The bi-annual Tehran International Ritual and Traditional Theatre Festival specifically includes performances of Kheimah Shab Bazi plays as an Iranian traditional dramatic art. I was privileged to see such a production during the festival in Sanglaj Hall, located in the center of Tehran. The production was quite political and discussed social problems by making a joke out of them. By using the voice of comic puppet Mobarak, the puppeteers were able to get past the censors and make their political points to the audience through laughter.

MORSHED AND MUSICIANS

Morshed in Farsi means a wise person who knows many things and can guide people in solving their problems. In Kheimah Shab Bazi, the Morshed is a human narrator figure and musician who helps Mobarak face challenges, and often gives him advice. He plays the role of father for Mobarak and Mobarak calls him "baba," a Farsi equivalent to "daddy." The Morshed sits next to the stage during the show and helps Mobarak find a solution to whatever challenge he faces in the show. He also translates Mobarak's sentences for the

audience, since the words the puppeteer speaks with a safir are unintelligible. The Morshed plays a traditional Iranian percussion instrument called a zarb.

Another musician sits at the corner of the Kheimah and plays an Iranian string instrument called the *kamancheh*, which UNESCO has named an important part of Iranian historical heritage in 2017.

These musicians are called *pa Kheimah*, meaning persons who sit next to the Kheimah. The job of musicians is to play music throughout the show, illustrating the mood of the piece.

THE STORIES OF KHEIMEH SHAB BAZI:

The construction of the stories is very simple. The stories and characters are inspired by real-life situations. The stories of Kheimah Shab Bazi have been passed down from generation to generation. Over time the stories have changed sharply, influenced by religious beliefs and political and moral issues. This type of dramatic art belongs to all classes of the society because it tells stories that deal with universal social problems and issues. Not only is it a comedy show with a happy ending, but also Mobarak with his funny accent and action can criticize social problems. Mobarak has a clean record. No government has ever arrested Mobarak because of his social criticism. However, like other forms of dramatic art, it has been subjected to distortion and censorship.

Despite all these problems and abstractions Kheimah Shab Bazi has survived from the past to the present, and now has become one of most valuable parts of Iranian heritage. It is very important to introduce this art form to the world and keep protecting it in order to transfer it to the next generation. Hopefully, UNESCO will continue to hold this art form as a part of the Iranian cultural heritage and encourage us to might protect this puppet tradition.



THE ALL-IMPORTANT CHARACTER, MOBARAK

NEDA IZADI is a second year MFA student in puppetry at the university of Connecticut. Having studied both fine and performing arts in Iran, she got her BFA in puppetry from Sooreh University in 2010, and worked as a puppeteer in Tehran for almost 6 years, but always had the feeling that she needed to know more about contemporary puppetry. She was accepted in the puppetry program at UConn, and is happy she can keep learning from very knowledgeable professors and artists. Now, she is ready to start working on her MFA project.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Nizami Ganjavi a Persian author and poet in 12th century.
- ² Shah Bahram V Known as Bahram Gor, Shah Bahram V was the fifteenth Shah of the Sasanian Empire, ruling from 420 to 438 A.D
- ³ He was seventh Safavid Shah of Iran.
- ⁴ The last Iranian royal dynasty.

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