Investigating the Impact of Ancient and Heroic Rituals on Formation of Zurkhaneh Architecture in Iran

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Abstract: Ancient sports in Iran have always been under deep impacts which are rooted in ancient Persian rituals such as Mithraism. Many Of demonstrations played in Zurkhaneh- both ritual and rehearsal ones- and the elements used in Zurkhaneh architecture, and even the place where building is located, reminding us of those sacramental traditions. On the other hand, Heroic and Athletic belief are of the most important parts of the Zurkhaneh culture. By the advent of Islam and growing shi’ite tendencies amongst Iranian people, and the deep moral impact of Imam Ali- the first shi’ite Imam- on Iranians, he became the new hero for the athletes in Zurkhaneh. After the triumph of Islam in in Iran, other branches of this new born religion, like Sufism, had their own impact on Athletic sports: in the way they dressed up, and even in the way they rehearsed in Zurkhaneh; and above all, on sport’s concept and athletic morals like honesty, chastity and philanthropy. Alongside those things mentioned above, Architecture of Zurkhaneh itself is influenced by Iranian ancient belief such as Mithraism and then, Sufism and Islam.

Keywords: Heroic, Athletic, Zurkhaneh, Mithraism, Sufism, Shi’ite

I. Introduction

History of heroic sport
Discussions about the origins of religious, cultural and social sources of ancient Persians sport have been considered by researchers for a long time. Mehrdad Bahar attributes, in an article the origin of ancient and Zurkhaneh sport of Iran to a sacramental tradition (Parto Beizae Kashani, 2003). In addition to ritualism, there are similarities between ancient sport and Zoroastrian religion. In an ancient Zoroastrian book called “Mino-e-Kherad” has written “adorn your soul with wisdom, dress up with confidence and trust and hold on to the shield of honesty and trust and get ready to battle against evil with the gratefulness mace”. And in the ancient sport the “Sang-e-Takhhte” is converted to shield, the mace converted to “Meel” and the slingshot converted to “Kabbade”. The term “wrestle” originally referred to the Zoroastrian belts, a belt that’s still common in Zurkhaneh, and facts like these, undoubtedly reveals the impact of Zoroastrian religion on Zurkhaneh sports (Anvari, 2003). The Zurkhaneh has been the source of good deeds and kindness in athletes and trained them to become the ones who offer great social services and fulfill their duties towards their homeland and their nation (Mogtaba, 2004). Broad-mindedness widely spread amongst the Ayaran (Chivalrous) at the time of Parthians. In the Islam era, with the spread of Sufism, we see the combination of the Khanqah (Convent) and Zurkhaneh. Yazdi in a research examined the humorus, courage, heroism, championship and sport in the Safavid era and studied the inter-relationship between politics and Safavid period.

The concept of the athlete and chivalrous term
A Zurkhaneh sport has been a way to achieve perfection and courage. Iranians have a great interest in the humorous, rational, and chivalrous morale (Gadarzi, 2005) and Askari Nouri (2009). The interest in sportmanship and championship can be seen even in the diversity of Persian vocabulary in this regard. The diversity of the terms in Persian language such as the hero, champion, valiant, brave, cavalier, latitudinarian, athlete, and many other words representing this fact. Chivalry ritual, in cults like Zoroastranism, Sufism and Mithraism is one of the most important ceremonies that have affected Zurkhaneh. In Chivalry ritual there are behaviors and actions that are similar to ancient sports. It can be argued that behaviors such as chivalry have had impacts on the behavior and deed of Zurkhaneh athletes. Partow Beizae believes that the most rituals and actions of the Zurkhaneh are originated from chivalry and chivalry originated from Sufism. The athlete is the one who has the highest level in the Zurkhaneh and has passed all stages of the Zurkhaneh. The champions did not fight for a medal, prize, or power but they sought justice and helped deprived people of their community. As stated in the statement, "Razaz" - a great Champion. “We do not wrestle for the money and the prize and even the title of honor, but in the name of pride for Iran and its people (Ansari, 2009). Even today, athletes believe the
champions are immortal and will never die. Chivalry is a valuable and prominent feature of divine culture, and the Quran expresses it as the character of the prophets and men of God. Chivalry is a name that refers to a set of virtues such as generosity, mercifulness, and courage. Chivalry means generosity but according to Parto Beizaez is a term that is a person who is not infected by natural remedies and human opacities and has been attributed to civilian traits and has reached its ultimate perfection. Chivalry means tying to the traits of attraction and good morals (Pordavood, 2005). Kashani argues that chivalry means generosity and chivalric is a perfect person in virtues mood and away from sensual vices (Christian Sen, 2000). In some mystical books, chivalry is considered as one of the highest degrees of Persian gnosticism called “Erfan”. For example in the book of “Sad Meydan” written by Khaje Abdollah Ansari, the fourth step to reach chivalry.

There are seven attributes for someone is known as the chivalrous:

- Powerful: Which means having physical strength
- Ingenious: Which means agility, skill and strength
- Faithful: Someone who never forgets God and always asks for help from him
- Tact: The one who In addition of his power, knows the tricks of war and masculinity.
- Eloquent: Someone who can perfectly express the soul of the myths
- Fidelity: The one who lives through the loyalty.
- Cavalier: Every hero must be humble and down to earth as possible (Arbabi, 2012).

Mithraism

Mithraism is one of the oldest Iranian religions, and even though after a while it was replaced by Zoroastrianism, Mithraism gained too many followers all over the world—such as Rome. The ritual of Mehr, or Mithraism, considered "Mehr" as "the judge of the land of Persia". God of covenant and treaty and the order, he guarantees the connection peace and friendship between human beings. They believed that life does not end in this world and the human soul would be "judged" and then go to heaven or hell (Dadvar, 2006).

Wheel is the symbol of Mehr or Mithra, and the wheel beams are representing the sun's rays and the wheel axis, is the center of the universe. In the ritual of Mehr, the ring is a symbol of the wheel and is the sign of knowledge, wisdom, insight, affection. It is also the symbol of the universe and the reign of the kingdom. The circle is a symbol of equality because all the points around it are the same (Dadvar, 2006). According to myths, the god of Mehr, after his birth, was determined to measure his power and fought with the god of Sun and wrestled with him. Sun defeated and fell on the ground, and then the Mehr helped him to get on his feet again and helped the Sun. The two gods embraced each other and shook hands. Then Mehr offered a crown to Sun, and from then they became close friends of each other. Through the Zurkhaneh wrestle, as a hero falls, the winner reaches his hand, they shake hands and hold each other’s arm as a sign of friendship and peace and if anger between two players arises, they must kiss each other and reconcile. Wrestling is also attributed to prophets such as Jacob and Adam.

Sufism

Sufism, Living like a Dervish, or being humble, is based on the rule of life and on the basis of religious law. Sufi means "dressed in wool", which is the symbol of asceticism (Sajjadi, 1993). The stimulus of the formation of Iranian Sufism goes back to the ancient prophet Mani. Mani fought against class privileges, and racial superiority. Therefore, in his religion, excellence was only dependent on worship and austerity and promotion in the spiritual classes and these concepts were re-used in Iranian Sufism too (Nafisi, 1964). The seven degrees of gnosticism in Iranian Sufism are the same spiritual levels of Mani religion. Accordingly, Sufism emerged as a kind of protest against the unequal society and tyranny of Umayyad (Zarrin Kob: 2004). So, Sufism has been a reaction against Umayyad governance. The Iranians tried to rise against cruelty of Arabs and got united with each other. The distinction between Chivalry and Sufism is crystal clear. But they are very similar in concept. In Iran, Chivalry and Athletes were attracted to Sufism because they were similar in seeking the independence, God wanting, and devotion. Nowadays we can find chivalry in the sufists behavior, so that most of the great Iranian sufists, such as “Ali bin Ahmad Pooshanj” and “Ahmad Khezroieh” were known for chivalry (Nafisi, 1998).

Ancient sports in Iran, mixed with Sufism after emergence of Islam, and athletes choose the path of chivalry, which is one of the ways of Sufism. Similarly, following the generalization of Shi’ism in Iran, Imam Ali— the first shifted Imam— was dubbed the King of Chivalries. Since then, at the beginning of any games in Zurkhaneh, athletes shout the name of Imam Ali and also once again at the end of game. Zarrinkob points out that Ali is the leader of the chivalries and calls him "King of athletes" (Zarrinkob, 1990). Zurkhaneh played an important role in the revival of Persian nationalism and anti-arab movement after Islam, as well as resurrection of language, culture and folk traditions which have been prevalent in ancient times in Iran (Charteer, 2009). Vahez Kashfi, in the introduction to “Sultan's book of chivalry”, called the science of chivalry as a branch of Sufism (Heydari and Dolatshah, 2012).
II. Legends

Ancient sports disciplines represent the combination of racing, chivalry, beauty and goodness. These disciplines exalt mind and the soul as well as body and wisdom; righteousness, and power alongside each other. Athletes are asked to act as guardians of ethic, nationality, and mystical values in order to serve their community with modesty. Values such as loyalty, courage, making sacrifice, humanity and humility, are derived from the legends that are considered as a good example for players. The legends in ancient sport create a prominent role in giving identity to those who play in Zurkhaneh. Anthropological of ancient athletes with heroic symbols and historical patterns is done at the same time along with daily practice. Some of the most famous legends that affect Zurkhaneh athletes include: Prophet Abraham, Prophet Joseph -the son of Jacob-, Imam Ali, and Iranian 19th century athlete “Yaghoob Leis Saffari”, and finally famous Iranian wrestler Pouryae Valli (Pourgio. 2005). Other ancient legends include Mansur Hallaj, Ein al-Quzat Hamedani, and Sheikh Attar Neishaboori. Among the people who have been growing in the Zurkhaneh and who have lived in the present era, we can name Takhti –the world champion wrestler- who has taught the chivalry in “Gordan” Zurkhaneh in the “Khaniabad” neighborhood in Tehran. “Sattarkhan” is also considered as one of the other contemporary Iranian champions. The title of the Pahlavan (Great Athlete) in Zurkhana is the highest position. A Pahlavan is someone who has passed all the stages of ancient sport, and no one except the great Pahlavan of the capital could turn his back on the ground. Another feature of the Pahlavan is that he can wrestle and defeat all the players in Zurkhaneh, at once. Pahlavan is owner of the crown, and the one who is known for his honor, perfection and patronage and after passing lots of tests, he will receive the “crown of poverty“. Taking the crown of poverty is also a ritual in the Mithraism.

III. Rituals and Poems

There are several rituals, and a strict moral order on Zurkhaneh, from the moment of entry to the moment of departure, which is not current in other sports. The effect of these rituals is so deep that it forms the ancient behavior of the work outside the Zurkhaneh and among the ordinary people too. And that’s because, the athlete who plays in Zurkhaneh takes the same path of Pahlavan in his society. For example, additions such as kneeling and praying are among the things that are common in Zurkhah (Aminiadeh & Boostani, 2014).

Some of these rituals are as follows:
- They begin exercising at the dawn, shortly after the rising of the sun. Today, the exercise begins at the end of the day.
- Lowering the head and bowing down, while entering the Zurkhaneh
- Pioneers and elders should enter the Zurkhaneh before the others.
- When entering or leaving, a special term is used by the mentor, as welcome or farewell, for each player with a different degree
- Moshtomalchi, who is massager or the servant of Zurkhaneh as soon as the athlete sits down, helps him to become naked, and the athlete asks for permission from the crowd to get naked.
- When they arrive in the pit -which is the place where the game is played, they kiss the ground of Zurkhaneh in honor of Pouryae Valli. In the past, they would bow on the floor of pit.
- Miandar, who is the most experienced athlete in Zurkhaneh, stays in the center of the pit and leads the athletes.
- Each part of the pit has its own orders and everyone has to stand on his own place. For example Miandar always stands in front of the mentor or spiritual guide.
- The players kiss the tools of the game before they start working with them.
- When a higher athlete enters the room, the younger ones stand up and offer their sit.
- When the team is exercising, individual sports are forbidden unless it is allowed for pioneers and nobody is allowed to go out of the pit during collective sports.
- When entering the Zurkhaneh everyone should be clean and chaste.

Another important ritual in Zurkhaneh is Golrizan which is a kind of charity and is used to collect money for those in need. Zurkhaneh is also a place for the strengthening of the spirit of nationalism at the highest level. The epic and national poetry that is read from Ferdowsi, has a profound influence on the morality of nationalism on the players in Zurkhaneh (Mohebbati, 2004). In Zurkhaneh, poems have epic and religious themes, religious poems that are more about the Imams, and create a spiritual atmosphere in Zurkhaneh. Epic poems such as Shahnameh are exhilarating and reinforcing nationalistic pride.

IV. Zurkhaneh instruments

Zurkhaneh instruments such as rods, Kabbade, rocks, and gestures like tossing are based on war fighting techniques. In fact rode is a sign of wand, Kabbade is a symbol of arc, and the stone is symbol of shield and wheel means the ability to maintain balance in the war. This tool is designed to increase physical strength and, when combined with religious epics and epic poems, enhances the spiritual sense and affects the epic and religious patterns of the ancient work. Since the movements of ancient sport with religious, epic and national references are somewhat impede the sense of individual pride and lead to the development of a chivalrous spirit,
slowness, and pious personality. The design of this sporting gear in coordination with the weapons in the past and the combination of sporting movements with religious and epic poems has been done for both physical and mental development. Some contributors interpret the use of Zurkhaneh devices not for external struggle but for the struggle against inner desires. When exercising, would create a feeling that a person has a bow and mace in the struggle for devil (Aminizadeh & Bostani, 2015).

**Some of the common sports in Zurkhaneh include:**

**Taking Stones:** Each athlete will take two large wooden lobbies, before entering the hollow, each weighing between 20 and 40 kilograms and exercise with them while sleeping. The reason and the form of this movement are attributed to a stone that Hazrat Rasoul Mohammad portrayed on the neck of Abu Jahl. Some people attribute it to the gates digging by Amir al-Mu’minin Ali. On the other hand, the rock is shielded among weapons. There used to be a special booth in Zurkhana during the old days, but today a clean corner is chosen for this job. Stone taking is one of the few solo deeds of Zurkhaneh.

2- **Swimming:** The mediator is in the middle and the other athletes wiggle their boards and swim in the bow.

3- **Bending:** It means softness and after swimming and dipping, it is led by an interlocutor

4. **Tailing:** Tails are made of wood and weigh from 10 to 30 kilograms. Remember the mace in the war, and on the other hand, it is a reminder of the martyr’s wand that was sacrificed by Ahuramazda.

5. **Wheels:** As the warriors, in the battle, rotated and sword, archaeologists also roam in the hole.

6. **Kabbade:** It is derived from the arc of war and is executed with the instrument of Paladin. The museum, from the distant past, commemorates the memory of one of the oldest warriors of Iran, the Arash Kamanggir who all of its physical strength, and ultimately, put its soul to the throes of Iran to keep the borders of Iran.

V. **Architecture**

Zurkhaneh is a small social unit which traditionally built in the alleys, the streets and in the center of the most crowded neighborhoods. Zurkhane is the heart of the district, and was responsible for educating chivalries and heroes through the daily life of the people.

With regard to the hypothesis about the relation between Mithraism and athletic rituals, at the beginning of this discussion, we refer to the characteristics of the temples of Mehr. Mehr ceremonies usually have to be performed in caves; caves representing the arc of the sky and the earth kingdom. Near these natural temples, or within them, there should be flowing water. But in the cities, were caves cannot be found, these temples were built under the ground to resemble caves. The temple reached the surface with a long step; these temples did not have windows and were dark as a cave. Sometimes the stairs ended up in a room where they prepared their followers to perform the ceremony and then from there they entered into the main courtyard of the temple. Inside, the arc of the temple was decorated as the night sky with artificial stars and moon, and in the inner space of the temple on two sides, there were two rows of platforms. Between the two rows of the platform, the rectangular courtyard and the temple gate were placed, the ceremony was carried out there and the spectators watched the ceremonies on the benches next to the platforms next to the wall. At the corner of the temple, there was a portrait of Mehr, killing the cow. Beside the entrance a basin is provided for water, which is the symbol of Anahita -the goddess of water. On the other side, just below the image of Mehr, there were two fireplaces that reminded the presence of Zervan –goddess of fire. A common point about the small size of the temple is to place limited number of worshipers. Zurkhaneh is very similar to these temples; it always reaches the street level with a long step from the underground. All of them are located in the underground and there’s a dim light inside because the Mithraism worshippers believed that in order to admire the light, there should be darkness.

Inside the Zurkhaneh, unlike the Temple of Mehr, there are no traces of two side platforms and the rectangular courtyard mentioned above; and Zurkhaneh is surrounded by a platform all around. Just like the temples of Mehr, beside the platform, the audience sits and watches the ceremony.

The hollow figure is taken from the sixth and octagonal geometric shapes that are based on the 6th corner grave of Imam Hussein (AS) and 8th Imam Reza (AS). Some people believe that the hole of Zurkhaneh is an imitation of a dug that was built in the middle of the house, which makes it the importance and sanctity of water. According to another account, the octagonal shape of the hole of the Zurkhanes may also be derived from the eight-pointed star that has been customary in Islamic ornamentation. The hole of Zurkhaneh is about 80 centimeters deep and about 7 meters wide and is about 1.5 meters from the people's seat. In the past, there were pavilions like booms, around the hut to sit and watch or put on sports gear or clothes. From this, the interior space of the Zurkhanes is somewhat similar to that of old baths. The reason for the hole of the Zurkhanes may have been that from the old days, people used to watch the wrestling from the high, perhaps in accordance with their customary customs, to emphasize the fall of the wanderers. Another narrative refers to the inspiration from Imam Hussein's hole that was murdered in it, in the plain of Karbala. Usually they filled the bottom of the hole to get a springy state with thistle and stubble and threw it on the ground and they repeated this operation sometimes to maintain spring quality. Zurkhanes are shaped from the outside and are simple and cubic, and often have domes that shed their stems. The dimensions of the Zurkhanes are like small temples that can only accommodate a small group. There is one thing in the Mehr temples that is not in the Zurkhaneh, and this is role
of the Mehr in killing the cow. The reason for the complete elimination of this scene is that although killing the traditional cow is a Mitratian, but in Zoroastrianism, the killing of the cow was attributed to the devil and thus, there is no place for it to exist on walls in Iran. As the walls of the temples of Mehr were sacred roles, there were also pictures and roles of Rustam and other pilgrims in Zurkhanes (Sikhon, 2012). The old Zurkhanes had two doors, one was big door which was in front of out and a short door which reached to short corridors and entered to the Zurkhanes. Short on the entrance is such that the person should bend for exit and entry. A person with a glimpse at the threshold of a Zurkhaneh, and on the arrival of a person, respects others without language and speech and thus, Zurkhaneh has power and humility at the same time. On the other hand, the short of entrance door is one of the oldest protection methods because it makes a pause for the enemy to move into space.

Like Mehr temples, there is a bladder before the entrance of Zurkhaneh which today has lost its original use. Instead of the fireplaces that were located in the sanctuary at the end of the courtyard and on the two sides of the Mehr image, in the Zurkhaneh in front of the "Sardam" there is an oven, which today is used to warm the beer and make hot drinks. Sardam is placed with a meter away from the entrance; in order that to provide the possibility of the ceremonies and customs of Zurkhaneh for the master. It is as a wooden platform or with building materials. Sardam is a place signing that is located in a chamber connected to hallway and there is a stick in front of which the bell is hanged. Sardam located on the platform and there is an oven on the platform that is use for warming the beat of Zurkhaneh. Another ritual of Zurkhaneh is ringing and that is a bell that is hanged with a chain on the Sardam of Zurkhaneh and the master sounds when the big horseman are arriving in order that all be informed from their arrival. There is also found a bell in the temples of Mehr, which they suspect to call it when showing the image of the Mehr at the end or beginning of the ceremony but it may be that if our idea of the relationship between Zurkhaneh and the temples of Mehr is correct, then this call was singing in the temple of Mehr on the arrival of the elders of religion. Art and aesthetics in Zurkhaneh have been integrated by both the movements and in the Zurkhaneh tools and equipments. The arts are like reading poetry, calligraphy, playing beat, a variety of sporty movements and the shape of the Zurkhaneh building. In fact, the arts that are in Zurkhanæ are in harmony with ancient morals, so that as ancient arts and art available in that are complementary. Even an artist and architect who design artistic effects in Zurkhaneh, has a profound connection with this sport (Amini et al, 2012).

VI. Discussion and Conclusion

In general, the findings of the research show that the origin and source of ancient Iranian sport, as its name suggests, dates back to pre-Islamic times. This sport has taken many influences from pre-Islamic religious beliefs such as Mithraism and Zoroastrian religion, and many beliefs, rituals and, consequently, the architecture of these religions have appeared in the architecture of Zurkhaneh, where the games are held. Even after the emergence of Islam and Zoroastrian and Mithraism, losing ground in Iran, these cases remain intact. After the advent of Islam, this sport has been influenced by Sufism and Shiite cult. And with the appointment of the first Imam of the Shiites, manliness and chivalry have also been added to the principles of sporting championship. In addition of legends, Zurkhaneh tools and instruments also have symbolic and applied concepts simultaneously such as the myth of removing Khyber’s gates to the ground, by Imam Ali. The design of the sport devices is made to strengthen the spirit and the soul along with the strengthening of the physical dimensions of the body. It seems that the design of these tools is also proportional to the weapons of war, alongside the spiritual and epic conditions. The national and epic poems such as Shahnameh by poet Ferdowsi provoking the sence of nationality, and religious poems cover emotions, religious affections, and impulses of the Imams.

Ultimately, the effect of all of the above is evident in the architecture of the Zurkhaneh building. Zurkhaneh is a dark and cave-like building, which is usually built near water and these specifications can be found in temples which was made for Mithraism. Short doorways, domes and arcs can be found in any Islamic building and the pit, which is the center of the Zurkhaneh is very similar to Persian fountains. Almost in every historic building in Iran, spiritual and symbolic aspects can be found alongside utility and functional aspects, and so is Zurkhaneh.

References


