

Overall, I really appreciated the more nuanced understanding of ‘Abduh’s life and legacy. This book is a needed corrective in our understanding of colonial and postcolonial thought in the Muslim-majority world.

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## **Maryam Nourzaei, Carina Jahani and Agnes Korn (eds): Oral Narration in Iranian Cultures**

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For millennia, the act of storytelling has played a crucial role in human communication, helping to mould our comprehension of history, culture, and personal identity. Different cultures have employed oral narration in various ways. Indigenous communities worldwide use storytelling to preserve their cultural heritage, while African cultures use it to teach children moral lessons and about their history. Western societies use storytelling for entertainment, education, and literature. In Iranian culture, oral narration has played a significant role in transmitting cultural heritage and values, with a wide range of stories including religious tales, myths, legends, and historical accounts. The unique blend of Persian, Arabic, and regional languages in Iranian storytelling reflects the country’s rich cultural diversity. Music and poetry are often integrated into the storytelling experience, adding an aesthetic dimension. Iranian oral narration serves to preserve cultural heritage, share knowledge, and promote a deeper connection to cultural identity. There are several books on the topic of oral narration, which offer a range of perspectives on the role of oral narration in Iranian culture, for example: Kumiko Yamamoto, *The Oral Background of Persian Epics. Storytelling and Poetry*, Leiden: Brill, 2003; Julia Rubanovich, *Orality and Textuality in the Iranian World*, Leiden: Brill, 2015; and Khanna Omarkhali and Philip G. Kreyenbroek, *Oral Tradition among Religious Communities in the Iranian-Speaking World*, Special issue of *Oral Tradition*, 35/2, Cambridge: Harvard University, 2022.

*Oral Narration in Iranian Cultures* offers a unique contribution to the literature on Iranian oral traditions. While previous works have focused on specific genres or periods of Iranian oral culture, this volume brings together a diverse range of perspectives on oral narration in different Iranian cultures and languages.

The book is organized into three parts, each examining different aspects of oral traditions, from the interplay between oral and written texts to the transmission of folk tales and heroic epics in lesser-studied Iranian languages.

The initial section includes two articles that serve as an introduction to the topic. In his article “Functional multilingualism and the use of standard languages”, Bo Utas compares Iran’s linguistic situation to his father’s Estonian-Swedish village in Ukraine, emphasizing the functional use of multilingualism and diverse registers. He also examines the pros and



cons of using standard languages in this context. Ulrich Marzolph surveys recent research on Iranian oral narratives, highlighting their importance in preserving cultural heritage and promoting social cohesion. He discusses the challenges that these traditions face, as well as their diversity.

The volume's second section explores the relationship between written and oral text production and transmission in the context of the *Šāhnāma* and its literary and narrative traditions. In his article "Sun, moon and star(s): a set of poetic formulations in Ferdowsi's *Šāh-nāma*", Carl Erixon examines the use of celestial imagery in the epic poem to create and emphasize themes and convey a sense of time. He provides close readings of selected passages to demonstrate how the sun, moon, and stars function as poetic motifs, and link narrative elements together.

Kumiko Yamamoto applies a model to study the influence of oral performance on Persian epics to a version of the *Barzūnāma* found in an unpublished manuscript at the French national library. This epic was originally an oral tradition, and was later written down. Julia Rubanovich analyses the interplay between oral and written forms of the Persian epic tradition, offering insights into its evolution and cultural significance. She explores the use of formulaic language, the role of performers, and the transformation of oral traditions in the *Iskandarnāma* and the *Dārābnāma*. Finally, Margaret Mills examines the relationship between oral and written narrative traditions in Afghanistan and how they have influenced each other over time, with a focus on their connection to written variants in Persian.

The third and final part of the volume discusses oral traditions in lesser-studied Iranian languages. Sara Belelli conducts a comparative analysis of several Southern Kurdish folk tales that fall under the category of "Innocent persecuted or unfortunate heroine". In his paper, Sabir Badalkhan compares a section of the Baloch epic about Mir Chakar to similar narratives found in the *Šāhnāma* and the Sindhi epic tradition. He notes that Rostam and Chanesar, heroes from these traditions, undergo a series of trials that are very similar to those experienced by Mir Chakar.

Moosa Mahmoudzahi's article shows that certain place names are used in popular sayings to refer to the heroes of Balochi epics. In this way, the heroes become embedded in the cultural consciousness of the Balochi people, who use these sayings in everyday life.

Carina Jahani and Jaroslava Obrtelová examine the difference in clause-combining strategies between oral and written narration in Balochi, taking a linguistic perspective. Maryam Nourzaei compares the extent of oral tradition survival among the Baloch of Sistan in the coastal area and among the Koroshi in Fars. Lastly, Erika Friedl provides an account of her research spanning several decades in a Luri community and how her familiarity with the local people has influenced the way they narrate stories.

While the book successfully brings together a diverse range of perspectives and academic disciplines, it may appear fragmented and lacking an overarching theoretical or methodological framework that links the contributions. Furthermore, the book would benefit from a deeper investigation of the social and cultural factors that lead to oral storytelling in various Iranian civilizations. A fuller knowledge of Iranian oral traditions could be developed through looking at the importance and meaning of these customs. Further research on the effects of modernity and globalization on Iranian oral traditions and how these traditions are adjusting to shifting social and cultural circumstances would also be interesting. The importance of gender and gender dynamics in Iranian oral traditions may also need further consideration.

In conclusion, *Oral Narration in Iranian Cultures* stands as a valuable and insightful addition to the field of Iranian studies. It contributes to a deeper understanding of the rich and varied tradition of oral narration in Iranian cultures and allows for a comprehensive

exploration of the methods and models applied to studies of oral traditions in Iranian languages and cultures.

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## **R.D. McChesney: *Four Central Asian Shrines: A Socio-Political History***

**Leiden: Brill, 2021. ISBN 978 90 04 45958 8.**

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New York University Professor Emeritus Robert D. McChesney is a luminary in the field of Afghanistan, Central Asian, and Persianate studies, whose body of work echoes and takes new directions in this book composed of case studies of four shrine complexes. The shrines, whose histories are masterfully illuminated by McChesney, are the Gur-i Mir in Samarqand, the Khawaja Abu Nasr Parsa in Balkh, the Noble Rawzah in Mazar-i Sharif, and the Shrine of the Prophet's Cloak in Qandahar. The shrine complexes are interconnected in various political and stylistic ways, but they are treated as distinct ensembles of similar component parts including the *gunbad/gunbaz* domed structure that frequently serves as a mausoleum, the *khanqah/khanaqah* or Sufi lodge, *masjid* or mosque, *madrastas* or Islamic schools, the *langar khana* or "soup kitchen", as well a number of other structures including dormitories, gates, arches, walls, pools, canals, latrines, etc. The four case studies include three complexes in Afghanistan and one in Uzbekistan, and the narratives cover approximately 500 years from the Timurids, through the Mughal, Durrani, colonial, and Soviet periods, to the contemporary post-2001 era when the most recent transformations to shrines in Afghanistan were contextualized by an international military occupation. The narratives are built on McChesney's meticulous use of scores of Persian-language sources, a rich array of English and Russian texts, a smaller sampling of French materials, as well as epigraphy and 107 photographs that adorn the volume and enhance the treatment of each shrine.

The Gur-i (A)Mir shrine complex in Samarqand is the first and longest (c. 120 pages) of the four case studies, and many of the themes addressed here are revisited in subsequent chapters. The most historiographically significant of these recurring motifs are source interrogation and source comparison. In the case of this shrine ensemble, McChesney juxtaposes the writings of Sultan Muhammad Samarqandi (pen name Mutribi) and Muhammad Badi' (pen name Maliha) to contextualize and describe transformations during the seventeenth century. These and other sources highlight the regularity and importance of Mughal imperial patronage of the Gur-i Mir complex due to their dynastic lineage being traced through Timur's second son Miranshah who is also interred there. Mughal patronage of the Gur-i Mir is exemplified by a memorable poetically licensed account of an elephant, bequeathed by Akbar, going mad, killing its handlers, crashing through a gate to escape Samarqand, and fleeing all the way back to India! The chapter provides fascinating details about the context and intentions surrounding the burials and reburials