



The Cultural Biography of Water in Rural Iran: Water Rituals and Relational Ontology

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ABSTRACT

Water in rural Iran is not understood solely as a material resource but also as a socially and culturally constituted entity embedded in relationships among humans, supernatural beings, animals, objects, and water systems. This article examines the cultural biography of water through ethnographic accounts of rain-making rituals and the marriage of qanats to human women. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork conducted in rural Iran between 2014 and 2018, complemented by documentary and ethnographic sources, the study identifies four forms of rain-making practice: supplication, appeasement, defiance, and combinations of these strategies. These practices reveal how drought is transformed from a physical condition into a social and moral crisis that can be addressed through prayer, offering, reciprocity, confrontation, and ritual inversion. The article then examines the gendering of water sources and the practice of qanat marriage, showing how qanats may be understood as male or female beings and incorporated into systems of marriage, kinship, obligation, and economic exchange. The case of qanat's wife in Arak, demonstrates how ritual personhood could also generate material mechanisms for supporting both women and hydraulic infrastructure. Drawing on anthropological approaches to cultural biography and relational ontology, the article argues that these practices should not be understood as survivals of a primitive cognitive stage. Rather, they represent dynamic ways of relating to water in which ecological uncertainty, cultural meaning, social obligation, and material practice are mutually constituted.

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Introduction

Water is indispensable to human life, yet its significance extends far beyond its material necessity. Across societies, water has been imagined not simply as a substance or natural resource, but as a powerful presence capable of giving, withholding, healing, punishing, nourishing, and transforming life. Rivers, springs, lakes, rain, wells, and subterranean water sources have consequently been incorporated into systems of ritual, mythology, morality, gender, and social justice (Labba Khaneiki et al., 2023). The anthropological significance of water therefore lies not only in how communities secure and distribute it, but also in how they imagine, experience, and relate to it. Water can become a subject of communication and ritual action, a bearer of agency, and even a participant in social relationships (Ballestero, 2019).

This article approaches water in rural Iran through this broader anthropological perspective. It asks how water becomes culturally meaningful and socially present in communities whose livelihoods have historically depended on highly localized and collectively managed water systems. Rather than treating water primarily as a physical resource over which people compete, the article examines the ways in which rural communities have constituted water through ritual practices, cosmological understandings, gender classifications, and reciprocal obligations. The central argument is that water in these settings possesses a *cultural biography*: its meaning, status, gender, agency, and social relationships are produced and transformed through human–water interactions (Bobbink & Loen, 2020). Water is therefore not merely something that people use; under particular cultural conditions, it becomes something with which people establish relationships.

The concept of a cultural biography provides a useful point of departure for this argument. Kopytoff, in his influential discussion of the cultural biography of things, demonstrated that objects acquire changing social identities as they move through different contexts and stages of their existence. Their significance cannot be reduced to their material properties or economic value because societies classify, value, exchange, personalize, and sometimes sacralize them in culturally specific ways (Kopytoff, 1986). Although Kopytoff developed this approach primarily in relation to material objects, the same analytical sensibility can be extended to water and water infrastructures. A spring, qanat, river, or rain-bearing cloud may simultaneously be understood as a material phenomenon, an economic resource, a sacred entity, a gendered being, or a participant in social relations. Its biography is consequently produced through changing relationships between humans, environments, institutions, and more-than-human entities.

Such an approach resonates with anthropological work on animism and *relational ontology*. Classical anthropological accounts, most notably Tylor's, treated animism as an early stage in the intellectual development of humankind, in which non-human phenomena were mistakenly attributed with life, intention, or agency (Tylor, 1871). Contemporary anthropology has challenged this evolutionary interpretation. Rather than assuming that animistic understandings represent an incomplete or erroneous version of a supposedly universal modern ontology, scholars such as Bird-David and Descola have examined animism as a relational mode of understanding in which humans and non-humans can be constituted through relationships of reciprocity, communication, and shared sociality (Bird-David, 1999; Descola, 1996). From this perspective, the important analytical question is not whether water *really* possesses agency, but how particular communities come to recognize, negotiate, and act upon water as an entity capable of entering into relationships with humans.

This question can be answered through relational ontology, a theoretical position in which entities do not necessarily exist, acquire meaning, or become socially recognizable as completely independent and self-contained beings; rather, their identities, qualities, and significance are constituted through their relationships with other beings and with their surrounding material and social worlds. Applied to this article, this means that water is not treated simply as an objective natural substance existing independently of society (Yates et al., 2017). A water-related entity becomes meaningful through its relationships with humans, imagined supernatural beings, places, rituals, gender categories, economic practices, and systems of obligation.

Relational ontology of water is particularly important in rural Iran, where longstanding water cultures have developed within environments characterized by pronounced spatial and temporal variability in water availability. Much of the Iranian plateau is arid or semi-arid, while other regions receive substantially greater precipitation and support different forms of agriculture and settlement. Such environmental diversity has historically required communities to develop elaborate systems for accessing, distributing, conserving, and interpreting water. Among the most important of these systems are qanats—gently sloping subterranean canals that tap groundwater at a higher elevation and convey it toward cultivated and inhabited areas (Yazdi & Khaneiki, 2019). Yet the significance of qanats cannot be understood solely through their hydraulic function. They have historically been embedded in systems of ownership, cooperation, maintenance, irrigation scheduling, ritual practice, and social hierarchy. Water infrastructure has consequently been simultaneously hydraulic and social (Semsar Yazdi & Labbaf Khaneiki, 2017).

Iranian religious and cosmological traditions provide an important historical context for these relationships. Water has occupied a prominent position in Iranian religious thought, including Zoroastrian traditions in which water is associated with purity, life, and sacred order (Rose, 2011). The veneration of Anahita, the association of rain with Tishtrya, and the ritual importance of water demonstrate that the relationship between humans and water has long exceeded the utilitarian (Goharpour & Jalalkamali, 2016). Water has been incorporated into practices of purification, prayer, sacrifice, healing, blessing, and protection. These traditions have also interacted with local beliefs and practices over long historical periods, producing highly diverse regional water cultures. Consequently, contemporary rural rituals should not be understood as isolated survivals of a single ancient belief system. They are better approached as historically layered practices in which religious traditions, local cosmologies, environmental experience, and everyday livelihood practices intersect.

This relational character becomes particularly visible in *rain-claiming ceremonies*. In many rural communities, the arrival or absence of rain is not treated exclusively as a meteorological event beyond human influence. Instead, drought can generate ritual actions through which people attempt to communicate with, persuade, pressure, appease, or otherwise influence supernatural powers associated with rain. The ethnographic material examined in this article reveals a remarkable diversity of such practices. Some communities engage in apparently confrontational or transgressive actions: socially respected norms are deliberately violated, sacred or ordinary objects are treated in inappropriate ways, individuals are humiliated or symbolically punished, and seemingly absurd or disorderly performances are enacted. Other communities adopt supplicatory practices, including collective prayer, recitation of Quranic verses, rain songs, ritual processions, and appeals for divine mercy. Still others attempt to appease

supernatural powers through offerings, food, sacrifice, or the ritual treatment of water-related objects. A fourth group combines these strategies.

These practices are analytically significant because they reveal that ritual action is not simply an expression of helplessness in the face of drought. It constitutes a particular form of relationship with an imagined agent capable of responding to human action. The apparently contradictory strategies—supplication on the one hand and defiance on the other—can therefore be understood as different relational strategies directed toward a supernatural order believed to possess authority over rain. Supplication seeks to obtain mercy; appeasement seeks to restore a favorable relationship through an offering or concession; and defiance symbolically disrupts established norms in an attempt to provoke or pressure the power believed to be withholding rain. The combination of these strategies demonstrates the flexibility of local cosmologies and the absence of a simple boundary between religious devotion, social performance, and magical action.

The article's second ethnographic focus, *the marriage of a qanat*, makes this relational ontology even more explicit. A local widow was incorporated into a marital relationship with the qanat, receiving an allowance from the community and assuming ritual obligations toward the water source. The qanat-marriage case is especially important for understanding what may be called the *social life of water*. The qanat was not simply represented as human; it occupied a position within a network of social obligations. It could be characterized as male, experience loneliness, require a wife, receive offerings, and respond to human intervention through changes in water discharge. At the same time, the marriage had a practical economic dimension. The woman's allowance was supported collectively by the qanat shareholders, and in some cases contributions associated with the marriage became incorporated into the broader financial system required to maintain the qanat. The ritual relationship therefore linked cosmology to material reproduction: the personification of water simultaneously helped organize labor, redistribution, maintenance, and community responsibility.

This article examines two interconnected dimensions of rural Iranian water culture: rain-claiming ceremonies and the marriage of water. The first reveals how communities ritually communicate with and attempt to influence the powers associated with rainfall; the second demonstrates how a water source can become a gendered social being embedded in enduring obligations. Together, these cases illuminate a broader cultural logic in which water is constituted not simply as an object of human use but as an entity situated within a field of social, moral, religious, and economic relations. The article proposes that these practices can be understood through the combined lenses of *cultural biography* and *relational ontology*. The former draws attention to the changing social identities and material relationships of water and water infrastructures; the latter helps explain how those identities become possible within particular cultural worlds. Together, these perspectives allow water to be approached neither simply as a natural resource nor merely as a symbolic object, but as a culturally constituted presence whose changing biography connects environment, cosmology, gender, ritual, economy, and social life.

Methodology

The empirical analysis draws on qualitative ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2009 and 2017 in different regions of Iran. The study relies primarily on interviews with individuals selected for their knowledge and experience of local water practices. Participant selection was supplemented through snowball sampling, allowing the research to identify additional individuals with relevant knowledge and experience

of local water rituals, beliefs, and practices. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached.

The ethnographic material was supplemented by documentary and secondary sources, which were used to contextualize and corroborate the accounts obtained through fieldwork. This combination of ethnographic interviews and documentary and secondary materials provided a basis for examining both locally situated understandings and their broader cultural and historical contexts. The analysis does not seek to establish the historical survival of a single ancient Iranian belief system. Instead, it focuses on how local communities themselves have understood and enacted relationships with water and how these relationships have been transformed over time. The empirical material is therefore examined in relation to the ways in which water is constituted through ritual practices, cosmological understandings, gender classifications, and systems of social and economic obligation.

Results and Discussion

The ethnographic cases examined in this article suggest that *water* in rural Iran is not constituted solely as a material substance or natural resource. It is also produced through relationships, narratives, ritual practices, and systems of obligation that connect humans with supernatural beings, animals, stones, springs, qanats, and other elements of the more-than-human world. Water therefore acquires what may be described as a *cultural biography*: its meanings, identities, and social relationships change according to the circumstances in which communities encounter and interpret it.

Foucault's concept of heterotopia provides one possible way of understanding the spatial dimensions of these practices. Heterotopias bring together spaces, meanings, and social relations that would ordinarily remain separate (Foucault, 1997). Water has a particularly important role in such configurations within Iranian cultural landscapes. In religious settings, for example, water can connect ordinary and sacred spaces through practices of purification and ritual preparation. Persian gardens similarly bring together water, vegetation, architecture, agricultural techniques, aesthetic experience, and cosmological imagery within a carefully constructed landscape. The irrigation system is not merely functional but participates in the production of a symbolic space in which earthly and imagined landscapes are brought into correspondence (Sudradjat, 2012, p. 31).

Rain-making ceremonies can be understood in a comparable way. They temporarily bring together domains that are normally distinguished: the human and the supernatural, the ordinary and the sacred, the living and the dead, the orderly and the disorderly. Their apparent contradictions are therefore not incidental. They constitute the ritual language through which communities attempt to make an otherwise uncontrollable environmental condition socially intelligible and potentially negotiable. The four categories identified in this study—supplication, appeasement, defiance, and combination—represent different relational strategies rather than rigidly separated ritual types. Supplication emphasizes humility, prayer, and an appeal for mercy; appeasement emphasizes offering, reciprocity, and the restoration of a favorable relationship; defiance emphasizes confrontation, disruption, and ritual inversion; while combination ceremonies move between these modes according to the circumstances and local understandings of drought and rainfall.

The most striking feature of the defiant ceremonies is therefore not their apparent irrationality but their systematic use of ritual inversion and temporary disorder. Clothing is worn inside out, men become brides, humans are placed in bridles, dead animals are

transformed into brides, sacred spaces are deliberately disturbed, innocent people become ritual hostages, impossible floods are enacted during drought, and ordinary speech is transformed into deliberately absurd or provocative performances. Such practices temporarily suspend the expected social order precisely because that order is perceived as having failed to produce the desired environmental outcome. The ritual does not simply reproduce ordinary society; it creates an exceptional social world in which conventional distinctions can be reversed, exaggerated, or suspended.

This inversion may also explain why many defiant rituals involve actions that would otherwise be unacceptable. The point is not necessarily to reject the moral or religious order permanently, but to dramatize a crisis within the relationship between humans and the powers believed to govern rainfall. By creating an abnormal social situation, participants make the abnormality of drought visible. The ritual becomes a form of symbolic intervention through which the community communicates that something in the expected relationship between humans and the supernatural has gone wrong.

Rain-making ceremonies therefore constitute an important first stage in the cultural biography of water. Before water reaches a qanat, field, household, or mill as a material resource, it already exists within a cultural field of expectations and obligations. Rain may be understood as a divine gift, a withheld entitlement, a response to prayer, the consequence of an offering, or the outcome of successful ritual confrontation. These different understandings do not merely represent alternative explanations of the same physical phenomenon. They establish different relationships between people and water and, in doing so, give water different social identities.

The marriage ceremonies examined in this article make this relational constitution of water even more explicit. Here, a qanat is not merely associated with human society; it is incorporated into one of its most fundamental institutions. It can be gendered, personified, described as possessing desires and needs, and placed within a system of marriage, obligation, care, and economic exchange. The qanat's cultural biography consequently extends beyond its physical construction and hydraulic function to include the social identities and relationships through which villagers understand and sustain it.

The practice of qanat marriage should not, however, be interpreted simply as a survival of an earlier and supposedly more primitive stage of human thought. The concept of *animism* has a long and contested history in anthropology. Early theorists such as Tylor understood animism as the attribution of life or spirit to entities beyond the human domain (Tylor, 1871). Later anthropological approaches have challenged the evolutionary hierarchy implicit in such formulations and have instead emphasized the relational dimensions of human engagements with non-human beings (Bird-David, 1999; Praet, 2013). From this perspective, the significance of qanat marriage does not lie in demonstrating that rural communities have failed to move beyond an earlier stage of cognition. Rather, it reveals a different way of organizing relationships between humans and their material and more-than-human surroundings.

This distinction is important because the ethnographic material does not suggest that villagers simply mistake water for a human being. They know that a qanat is a hydraulic system, that water has physical properties, and that its discharge can increase or decrease. At the same time, they may understand the same qanat through a social vocabulary of gender, marriage, desire, obligation, and reciprocity. These modes of understanding can coexist. A qanat may simultaneously be an engineered infrastructure, a source of agricultural water, a male or female being, a husband, and a social institution. Its different identities become meaningful in different contexts.

The legal recognition of the Whanganui River in Aotearoa New Zealand provides an instructive comparative case. After a long history of Māori efforts to secure recognition for the river, legislation enacted in 2017 granted the Whanganui River legal personhood and recognized it as a living whole possessing both physical and metaphysical dimensions. The river became a legal entity with rights, powers, duties, and liabilities, represented by designated guardians (O'donnell & Talbot-Jones, 2018, p. 4). The comparison should not imply that Iranian qanat practices and Māori river ontology are historically or culturally equivalent. Their institutional contexts are fundamentally different. Nevertheless, both cases demonstrate that treating a water body as a social or legal person is not incompatible with sophisticated systems of governance. Personhood can function as a way of organizing responsibility and relationships rather than simply as an alternative to rational environmental management.

The Alim-Abad case demonstrates that qanat marriage cannot be reduced to belief alone. Aunt Zobeideh did not merely become the symbolic wife of Kahriz Bala; she received an allowance, and the villagers collectively assumed responsibility for meeting the obligations of the qanat as her husband. In this respect, the marriage created a mechanism for redistributing resources around the water system. Its ritual significance and economic function were inseparable. This may explain the perpetuation of qanat marriage without necessarily explaining its origin. Once the institution existed, it generated practical obligations that could reinforce the cultural belief surrounding it. The marriage gave the qanat a socially recognizable identity and simultaneously provided a framework for supporting a woman whose livelihood became tied to the welfare of the water source. In some communities, contributions associated with the qanat's marital obligations could also support maintenance and cleaning. The later transformation of *nafagheh* from a wife's allowance into a contribution toward qanat maintenance illustrates how an apparently ritual institution could be translated into a new economic form even after the marriage itself disappeared. These broader theoretical insights provide the basis for examining how such relationships are expressed in specific water-related practices; the following section therefore turns to rain-claiming ceremonies, where communities ritually negotiate the presence, absence, and anticipated return of rainfall.

Rain-Claiming Ceremonies

Among the most revealing forms of intangible water culture in rural Iran are ceremonies performed to induce, request, negotiate, or otherwise bring about rain. These practices vary considerably across regions, communities, and religious contexts, yet striking similarities recur across geographically distant parts of the country. Their persistence and distribution have encouraged some scholars to search for ancient mythological antecedents. In Zoroastrian cosmology, for example, the struggle between Tishtrya, the beneficent divinity associated with rain, and Apaosha, the demon of drought, provided a powerful cosmological framework through which precipitation and drought could be understood (Moshiri, 2014, p. 136). Rain was not simply a meteorological phenomenon but part of a cosmic struggle in which humans could participate through prayer, ritual, and other forms of action.

The ancient Iranian conception of rain also involved the *Faravashi*, the sacred spirits of the dead, who were associated with the protection and prosperity of their communities. Some accounts describe the Faravashis as competing for water for their respective families, tribes, and lands (Boyce, 2001). The first month of the Iranian calendar, Farvardin, retains this ancient religious association. Such continuities,

however, should be treated cautiously. Similarities between contemporary rain-making ceremonies and ancient Iranian cosmology do not necessarily demonstrate an uninterrupted historical transmission from antiquity to the present. Local rituals are historically dynamic and have been repeatedly reinterpreted through Islamic beliefs, local customs, environmental experience, and changing social conditions. Rather than assuming a single ancient origin, it is therefore more productive to examine what these ceremonies *do* within the communities that perform them.

From an anthropological perspective, rain-claiming ceremonies are particularly significant because they reveal a relational understanding of the natural world. Rain is not treated exclusively as an impersonal atmospheric process but as something that can be addressed, requested, persuaded, provoked, appeased, or influenced through ritual action. The supernatural powers associated with rain consequently become relational partners, even when they are imagined as distant, powerful, or potentially punitive. In this sense, these ceremonies resemble what Bird-David describes as a relational mode of engaging with non-human or more-than-human beings (Bird-David, 1999): the central issue is not whether rain literally possesses human-like intentions, but how people organize their practical and symbolic relationships with forces that are understood to have consequences for human life.

The ethnographic material presented below suggests four broad strategies through which these relationships are enacted: *defiance*, *supplication*, *appeasement*, and *combinations of these strategies*. The categories are analytical rather than mutually exclusive. A single ceremony may move between confrontation and prayer, or between ritual transgression and offerings. What unites them is the assumption that drought can be addressed through social and ritual action. In each case, the community attempts to establish, repair, or renegotiate a relationship with the powers believed to control rainfall.

Defiance

The most confrontational rain-claiming ceremonies involve what may be described as *ritualized defiance*. During drought, some communities behave as though rain has been withheld from them unjustly. Their response is not simply to ask for rain but to disturb established social, moral, religious, and sometimes linguistic conventions. The apparent logic is relational: if the supernatural powers responsible for rain have failed to fulfill their obligations, people temporarily suspend the norms associated with those same powers. Ritual disorder thus becomes a means of communicating dissatisfaction.

This logic is particularly evident in the village of Kalkhoran in Ardabil. When rainfall becomes insufficient, a group of young women, and sometimes men, parades through the village carrying a wooden spoon in one hand and a small flint stone in the other. They strike the objects together to produce an unusual noise while singing a traditional song. If the ritual does not bring rain, elderly women become involved. They remove their headscarves and place a wooden yoke across their shoulders while walking through the village. The action reverses several locally significant norms simultaneously: the expected dress of women is violated, while the social status and dignity conventionally accorded to elderly women are symbolically disrupted. If rain still does not arrive, villagers collectively lever a large boulder into the Ali Dervish River. When rain finally begins, they return the boulder to its original position.

The significance of these actions lies less in their individual symbolism than in their cumulative disruption of ordinary order. The community does not merely repeat a prayer; it progressively intensifies its challenge. The ritual begins with relatively

innocuous noise-making, proceeds to violations of gender and age conventions, and culminates in physically moving an enormous stone. The sequence resembles a negotiated escalation in which increasingly conspicuous disturbances are directed toward a power believed to be withholding rain.

A similar logic appears in the village of Dehbala, Meymand, in Fars Province. Men and boys walk through the village striking two pebbles together and singing a special song. At each house, residents splash water over them and provide dried fruit. The collected fruit is subsequently dumped into a spring in a deliberately wasteful manner. Rather than preserving a scarce resource during drought, the participants publicly waste it, apparently to provoke the metaphysical powers held responsible for their predicament. The ritual then becomes more confrontational. Three participants suddenly run away while the others pursue them. Once caught, they are dragged back to the water and pushed into it. They are threatened with drowning until another person intervenes and acts as surety, promising that rain will come if they are released.

The role of the hostage is important because the ritual transforms an otherwise uncontrollable meteorological crisis into a social relationship that can be negotiated. The hostage is innocent in any ordinary causal sense, yet the community temporarily treats him as responsible for the collective predicament. The intervention of a surety creates a chain of obligation: someone promises rain, the hostage is released, and the fulfillment of the promise becomes linked to the expected arrival of rain. The ritual thereby constructs a temporary social drama around an event that would otherwise remain outside direct human control.

In Fariman, Razavi Khorasan Province, the object of ritual pressure is a *Seyyed*, a person locally believed to descend from the Prophet. The community selects a particularly revered *Seyyed* and forcibly seats him on the floor of the village mosque facing the *qiblah*. Villagers then drench him with buckets of water or even a garden hose, compelling him to pray for rain while remaining in this uncomfortable condition (Papoli Yazdi & Jalali, 1999, p. 195). Water is therefore used paradoxically: during drought, the community pours water over a person who is simultaneously expected to intercede with God for more water. The ritual combines prayer with physical coercion and thereby converts a religious intermediary into a participant in the community's demand for rain.

In other cases, ritual defiance becomes explicitly violent. Among the Mamasani tribe, a group gathers and sings a song asking God to send rain. They visit households to collect foodstuff, which is later exchanged or bartered for dates. A small round stone is concealed inside one of the dates, which are then distributed among the villagers. Whoever finds the stone becomes the ritual victim. The group beats the unlucky person until someone intervenes as surety and promises, on God's behalf, that rain will come if the victim is released. If rain does not arrive within the promised period, the surety may himself become the next victim, producing a chain of escalating obligations (Mirnia, 1989, p. 224).

Comparable practices have been reported in Sarvestan in Fars Province, Joopar and Zarand in Kerman Province, Birjand in South Khorasan Province, and Yasuj in Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad Province (Homayooni, 1992, p. 412; Khazayi, 2015, p. 159, 172, 179; Mirnia, 1989, p. 223, 224). Their geographical distribution suggests that the practice cannot be understood simply as an isolated local custom. At the same time, its regional variations demonstrate the adaptability of the underlying ritual logic.

A closely related ceremony is practiced in Rabor, Kerman Province. During drought, one person is selected to wear a shepherd's costume, blacken his face, and hang a small

bell around his neck. Known as *Louk*, he moves awkwardly through the streets while villagers follow him and sing a song addressing Louk rather than God. The song asks him to bring endless rain, provide wheat for landlords, barley for donkey owners, and millet for owners of chickens. When Louk reaches a house, the owner splashes water over him and gives wheat flour to his companions. The villagers collect the flour and conceal a green bead in the dough before baking the bread. Whoever discovers the bead in his bread is blamed for the drought. He is taken to a field, tied to a tree, and whipped until another person intervenes and stands surety for him. If rain does not come, the surety becomes liable to the same punishment (Khazayi, 2015, p. 129). The ritual therefore reproduces the same structure found among the Mamasani: collective anxiety is condensed into an individual victim, while the promise of a surety transforms violence into a temporary contractual relationship.

Other ceremonies involve the identification and temporary punishment of socially recognizable categories of people. In Eshaq Abad, Nishapur, villagers write the names of forty-one bald men on a piece of paper and hang it from a tree branch, believing that rain will follow. In nearby Gir, the ceremony involves naming forty bald men while knots are tied in a thread. A pottery vessel is then taken from a house, filled with water, and combined with the ashes of the burned thread. The water is subsequently poured from a rooftop into a gutter in the hope of inducing rain (Bashguz, 1979, p. 136). Among the Bakhtiari, the logic is reversed: a similar "forty baldies" ritual is performed when rain becomes excessive and floods are feared. Forty sticks are assigned the names of forty bald men, who are then captured, tied, and beaten with their corresponding sticks. They are effectively taken hostage so that their family members will pray for the rain to stop. Senior sons or daughters subsequently go onto rooftops and appeal to God through traditional songs (Khazayi, 2015, p. 323).

A related form occurs among the Baseri tribe of Fars Province. One of the community's young men is selected and dressed deliberately awkwardly. He puts his feet into the sleeves of a felt coat, fastens it around his waist with a leather belt, hangs a bell from his neck, and wears a turban. He is sarcastically called an "old man". Accompanied by a group of people, he moves from tent to tent while pretending to be sad. Suddenly he leaps into the air and announces that he has brought the rain and deserves a reward. Each household provides rice, flour, sugar, tea, dates, oil, or another item. When asked when it will rain, he answers that rain will come in seven days. The collected flour is then used to bake a traditional bread called *Soolok*. Seven small stones are concealed inside the breads, which are distributed among the participants. Whoever first finds a stone in his mouth becomes the ritual victim and is beaten until someone stands surety for him and promises seven days of rain. When rain finally arrives, children perform a deliberately surreal song:

"It's raining, rain of spring.
My brother is riding a hound.
He's riding a rabid horse.
He's going to fight a jackal.
The jackal says that he's drunk.
A broken sword in the jackal's hand.
If I would have loved God, I should have killed the blind judge!"

The apparent incoherence of this song is analytically important. Rather than assuming that every surreal expression conceals a recoverable mythological meaning, it can also be understood as part of the ritual's deliberate disruption of ordinary communicative order. The song violates expectations of semantic coherence just as the performance

violates expectations of social behavior. Language itself becomes a medium through which ordinary order is temporarily suspended. From this perspective, ritual absurdity is not necessarily an encrypted message waiting to be decoded; it can be an enactment of disorder directed toward a world in which the normal order has seemingly failed. The community responds to drought by temporarily behaving as though ordinary rules—including the rules of meaningful speech—no longer need to be respected.

This interpretation also helps explain the ceremony of *Kooseh* in Seyf Abad, Sarvestan, Fars Province. A thin-bearded man is selected and given the name *Kooseh*, meaning smooth-faced or beardless. He wears an artificial white beard, a bell, a felt coat, large horns, and carries a stick. Children follow him from house to house, singing that it will rain if God wills. The performance soon becomes openly sarcastic. The children describe Nader Shah as *Kooseh*, although Nader Shah was in fact heavily bearded, and sing that rain is falling on rooftops when the weather is actually dry. *Kooseh* then rings his bell and asks for help. When the householder asks what has happened, he claims that a flood has carried away his children and that his jewels have disappeared down a fish's throat. The householder gives him money but pours water over *Kooseh* and his companions as they leave. *Kooseh* subsequently buys tea and sugar and lights a fire in a field. He pretends to dry his clothes over the fire, although they are not wet, while sarcastically declaring that he has been drenched by torrential rain. He then prepares tea for the children but insists that they drink it without sugar. When one child complains, *Kooseh* beats him until another child stands surety and promises that rain will come.

Here, irony and inversion dominate the ceremony. The participants describe drought as flood, dry clothes as wet, a bearded king as beardless, and a fire as a means of drying garments soaked by an imaginary downpour. The ceremony creates an alternative world in which ordinary categories are deliberately reversed. Its apparent absurdity may therefore be understood as a ritual language of complaint: the community represents the world as if rain had already come precisely because it has not.

A similar inversion is found in Samiyeh near Borazjan in Bushehr Province. The villagers select a male "bride" called *Galin*. He wears a felt cloak, a long white beard made of sheep wool, a straw hat decorated with goat horns, and a bell. His face is whitened with wheat flour, and a bridle is placed around his head before he is led from street to street. The men accompanying him ask households for food. At some houses, residents unexpectedly pour water over them from rooftops. At the end of the procession, the food is divided among the participants, but a small stone is secretly placed in one person's share. The person who discovers the stone runs away, pursued by the others, and seeks refuge in another household. The householder becomes surety and promises that rain will come within a few days. If it does not, the group returns and renews the demand (Seddiq, 1975, p. 56).

The ritual brings together several inversions: a man becomes a bride, masculine features are exaggerated through the beard and cloak, a human is placed in a bridle normally reserved for animals, and an innocent participant is blamed and punished for drought. Rather than interpreting each inversion as a separate symbolic code, the ceremony can be viewed as a cumulative performance of disorder. The community temporarily transforms the social world into an abnormal one in order to communicate dissatisfaction with the supernatural order believed to govern rainfall.

To that end, defiance takes a particularly striking form even involving a donkey's skull in many regions of Iran's central plateau. Various explanations have been proposed for the antiquity of this practice. Some scholars have associated it with pre-Islamic

sacrifice, while others have connected it to Zoroastrian mythology concerning the three-legged donkey. According to this mythology, the three-legged donkey lives in the middle of the Farakh Kart Sea and plays a role in purifying the world's waters through its urine. It is also associated with Tishtrya and the collection and distribution of water (Carnoy, 2004, p. 18). On this basis, the use of a donkey in rain rituals has been interpreted as a possible survival or transformation of an ancient water-related mythology (Papoli Yazdi & Jalali, 1999, p. 203).

Such historical connections are intriguing, but the ethnographic performances themselves point toward another possibility. In the ceremonies described below, the donkey skull is not treated as a revered sacred object. It is transformed into something deliberately ridiculous, excessive, or inappropriate. The skull of a dead donkey—an object ordinarily regarded as useless—is decorated, paraded, placed in water, taken to a cemetery, or otherwise subjected to actions that violate ordinary conventions. Its significance may therefore lie precisely in its capacity to produce ritual disorder. Rather than venerating a sacred donkey, participants may be using an intentionally degraded object to challenge the supernatural order responsible for drought.

For example, in Nazl Abad, Razavi Khorasan Province, women find a donkey skull and decorate it with makeup as though it were a bride. They place it on the end of a cane and carry it toward a water well. One woman plays a *daf* while the others follow the skull, cheering and shouting *Shabash*. At the well, they drop the skull into the water in the expectation that rain will follow (Khazayi, 2015). The ceremony brings together several forms of inversion: a dead animal is transformed into a bride, a discarded skull becomes a ceremonial object, and cheerful music accompanies a ritual performed in response to drought. A related practice in Mashhad goes further. Rather than using the skull of a dead donkey, villagers decorate a living donkey with exaggerated makeup and take it to a public bath as though preparing a bride (Khazayi, 2015, p. 192). The incongruity of the performance is itself central to its ritual force. The animal is placed in a social role ordinarily reserved for a human bride, thereby creating a spectacle of deliberate categorical confusion.

Ritualized profanation and extreme transgression

Local communities may resort to some extreme abnormal behaviors to communicate their dissatisfaction with the supernatural order responsible for drought. For example, a dramatic ceremony occurs in Bostaq, Ferdows, South Khorasan Province. Women decorate a donkey's skull, place it inside a coffin, and carry the coffin to a cemetery. At an old grave, water is poured down the clothing of a young girl standing beside the coffin so that it emerges from beneath her skirt, simulating urination over the coffin and skull. The skull is then burned while women dance around it to the sound of a *daf*. The ritual thus combines several acts that are ordinarily taboo or religiously inappropriate: the desecration of a grave, the simulated pollution of a funerary space, the burning of a dead animal's remains, and women's public dancing. The cumulative effect is one of deliberate ritual transgression.

A comparable pattern appears in Kalateh Soleyman, Birjand, where a donkey's skull is placed on a cane, painted in bright colors, and given grass between its jaws. Women play *daf*, while seven women named Fatimah dance publicly around the skull (Khazayi, 2015, p. 165). The choice of participants adds another layer of transgression because the name *Fatimah* carries profound religious significance among Shiite Muslims, while public female dancing is locally regarded as religiously inappropriate. The ritual therefore appears to intensify its challenge by bringing together an object of low status,

exaggerated decoration, religiously charged names, and behavior that severely violates prevailing norms.

In Nimvar, Mazandaran Province, defiance is directed even toward a sacred landscape. A lake believed to have been blessed and spiritually associated with Khidr becomes the focus of the ritual during drought. Villagers deliberately dump garbage into the lake in order to anger Khidr, whom they believe will respond by sending torrential rain to save his lake from further pollution. Once sufficient rain has fallen, they return to the lake and clean it to stop the rainfall. Here, the ritual is structured as a reciprocal exchange: pollution is offered as provocation, rain is expected as a response, and cleaning follows when the desired amount of rain has been obtained. The lake is consequently not merely a physical location but a socially meaningful entity embedded in a relationship of action and response.

In Jilu, Nishapur, rain-claiming can become an act of deliberate vandalism that is culturally abhorred. Villagers secretly enter the homes of elderly women whose ovens are oriented toward the *qiblah* and destroy those ovens. Some participants distract the women by knocking on their doors and engaging them in conversation while others enter the house and damage the oven. The direction of the ovens appears to add religious significance to an otherwise ordinary household object. Therefore, vandalism, which is already unacceptable, is transformed into a heinous sin by adding two more elements: helpless elderly women and *qiblah* direction which is highly revered by all Muslims.

The most dramatic form of ritual defiance occurs in the *Gabruwa* ceremony reported from villages in Kermanshah, which involves one of the most abominable crimes; violent robbery. Villagers invade a neighboring settlement and take livestock and other possessions as booty. The targeted villagers resist, sometimes producing an actual fight involving clubs. The participants believe that such conflict can shame God into sending rain because people have begun fighting with one another as a consequence of divine neglect. If rain comes, the stolen livestock are returned; if it does not, they remain hostages (Papoli Yazdi & Jalali, 1999, p. 196). Comparable examples occur in other parts of Iran. In Maragheh, villagers reportedly steal roof gutters; in Minab, people refrain from work on a Thursday; in Zanjan, a donkey's head is washed; elsewhere, human bones are collected from cemeteries and burned. In Mazandaran and Gilan, mosque pulpits may be placed in water, while shrine doors are sometimes removed and put into water as though they were being held hostage (Zolghafari, 2016, p. 86).

Taken together, these practices suggest that ritual defiance operates through the deliberate production of social and religious disorder. The participants do not necessarily challenge the existence of divine authority; rather, they challenge its apparent failure to maintain the expected relationship between humans and the natural world. The ritual temporarily reverses or suspends ordinary rules in order to make the crisis visible and to communicate dissatisfaction. In this sense, defiance is itself a form of communication. It says, in effect, that if the expected order has failed to produce rain, the community will temporarily suspend that order until the desired response is obtained. This interpretation also helps explain why these practices can combine humor, violence, profanity, inversion, and absurdity. Their apparent irrationality is part of their communicative force. By behaving in ways that would normally be unacceptable, participants construct an extraordinary social space in which the failure of the ordinary order is publicly enacted. Rain becomes the anticipated response to that disruption.

Supplication

A second major category consists of ceremonies based primarily on *supplication*. Unlike defiant rituals, these practices do not seek to provoke supernatural powers through transgression. Instead, participants emphasize humility, collective prayer, emotional expression, symbolic thirst, and appeals for mercy. Yet the underlying relational assumption remains similar: rain is understood as something that can be requested from a higher power capable of hearing and responding to human appeals.

In the village of Samia, Bushehr Province, rainfall during October and November is particularly important for cultivation. Insufficient rain during this period therefore generates considerable anxiety. Villagers gather at a place west of the settlement known as *Qebleh Doa*, where they pray and appeal to God's compassion. They carry a rooster, a hand-mill, and an inflated leather bottle. The empty bottle, containing air rather than water, becomes a material expression of deprivation. As the villagers walk toward the site, they sing that they are going to *Qebleh Doa* in the hope that God will have mercy on them.

The supplicatory relationship extends beyond God to the landscape itself. When the procession passes a tree, participants address it directly, asking the "green tree" to help bring rain. The song refers simultaneously to the needs of the tree, the watermill, the leather bottle, and the chicken. In this way, the community's material world becomes incorporated into its appeal. As frustration increases, men remove their hats while women beat their chests in supplication. Some participants become emotionally overwhelmed, striking the rooster or blowing into the leather bottle. They subsequently return to the village singing appeals such as: "God! please look down. Look at my hungry stomach. Look at my thirsty heart. Look at my bare feet". The procession stops at houses to request flour, peas, firewood, and other provisions. The food collected is later used to prepare a communal soup, into which several coins are placed. Those who find a coin in their portion are believed to have good fortune in the future.

Supplication may also be directed toward stones. In Khour, Birjand, villagers gather around a large boulder in a moat and attempt to roll it over using wooden levers. They believe that the sky will show mercy once they succeed. After the stone is moved, it is washed and a smaller stone is placed on top. According to local belief, the large stone was once an old woman who was mysteriously petrified, while the smaller stone represents her child. After completing the ritual, villagers wait for rain, expecting it within approximately a week.

A similar relationship between stone, prayer, and rainfall is found in Ayask, Ferdows. During severe drought, women bring a large stone into the house and sit around it. The thirty-sixth chapter of the Quran, *Yāsin*, is recited forty times, with each woman reciting it once when forty women participate. The stone is subsequently taken to a cistern known as *Howz-e Haji*, tied with a rope, and suspended above the water. If the stone slips from the rope and falls into the cistern, the participants interpret this as a sign that their prayer has been accepted and that rain will soon arrive. Conversely, if rainfall becomes excessive and flooding is feared, someone dives into the cistern to retrieve the stone because rain is believed to continue while the stone remains in the water. The stone therefore becomes a material intermediary between prayer and precipitation. Its position in relation to water provides a visible and manipulable indication of whether the desired supernatural response has occurred.

On Qeshm Island, the relationship between stones and rainfall becomes even more elaborate. In the village of Giahdan, villagers collect 366 pebbles and write on them a prayer meaning, "May God quench our thirst". Each stone is given to a pious man who

recites the opening chapter of the Quran, *Hamd*, 366 times before blessing the stone. The stones are subsequently placed in a sack and dropped into a well. According to the local narrative, this practice originated during a severe drought in which people and animals were starving. After the blessed stones were placed in the well, a cloud appeared from the direction of Mecca and torrential rain began. When the rain became excessive and threatened to cause flooding, villagers asked a diver to retrieve the stones. Although most were recovered, the rain continued. They eventually discovered that one stone had been left behind in the well. Once the diver retrieved the final stone, the rain stopped. The narrative transforms the stones into active participants in the management of rainfall. They can apparently initiate rain and, when necessary, cause it to continue until they are physically removed. Whether interpreted literally by participants or analytically as a ritual representation of agency, the story illustrates the extent to which non-human objects can become embedded in causal and moral relationships between communities and water.

In Afin, Qayen, a group of children constructs a wooden figure called *Talu*. A wooden cross is dressed with a hat and a ragged coat to create a scarecrow-like figure. The children carry Talu around the village while singing, and residents splash water over the figure and provide food. A related ceremony, reported from several villages in South Khorasan, involves a doll called *Atallu*, dressed in clothing resembling that of local women and representing a poor woman wandering in the mountains in search of water. The children carry the doll from house to house and sing songs asking God to send rain onto shepherds' sticks, farmers' shovels, and herders' whips (Shateri et al., 2013, p. 99). Here, the figure of *Atallu* makes drought socially and bodily visible. Thirst is personified as a poor, vulnerable woman who wanders through the landscape asking for water. The community's appeal to God is therefore mediated through a humanized representation of deprivation.

The artistic dimension of supplication becomes particularly evident in Torbat-Jam and Tayebad in Razavi Khorasan. Here, musicians known as *Allah Baran* perform rain songs using the *Dutar*, a traditional long-necked, two-stringed instrument. During drought, a musician may be invited to sit on a hill wearing clean white clothes and perform emotionally for several hours. The music is believed to attract the rain-bearing clouds and gain the affection of the sky. The songs evoke red tulips suffering from thirst and longing for rain. Music in this context is not simply entertainment accompanying ritual. It becomes a medium of communication between the human community and the atmospheric world. Through voice, melody, landscape, and emotional performance, drought is transformed into an aesthetic and affective appeal. The song gives expression to a relationship of dependence in which humans, flowers, agricultural lands, and the sky are brought together within a shared experience of thirst.

Appeasement

A third group of ceremonies is based on *appeasement*. Here the objective is neither primarily to challenge the supernatural powers responsible for drought nor simply to plead for their mercy. Instead, people attempt to restore a favorable relationship by offering food, sacrifice, or care to beings believed to have influence over rainfall. On Qeshm Island, for example, local communities believe that sinister metaphysical beings may prevent rain from falling. To appease them, a group of men and women dresses in a distinctive manner, ties cloth around their waists, holds one another, and carries baskets through the village while singing. They ask households to contribute wheat, barley, sugar, rice, money, or other provisions. The food is then taken outside the settlement

and cooked without salt. No one is permitted to taste it. The prepared food is placed on clean ground as an offering to the supernatural beings.

The crucial distinction from the supplicatory ceremonies described above is that the food is not primarily intended for human consumption. It is relinquished to unseen recipients. The ritual consequently establishes an exchange relationship: food is given to the supernatural beings in anticipation of the release of rain. The community does not demand rain through force; it attempts to alter the relationship through generosity.

Appeasement may also involve animal sacrifice. In Andika, Masjed Soleiman, three large stones known as the "stones of rain" are associated with a custodian named Seyyed Jalal. Villagers wash the stones with pure water, move them toward the *qiblah*, and pray before them. A cow or sheep is then sacrificed, and its blood is rubbed onto the stones. After rain begins, villagers return to the stones and move them back to their former positions because leaving them oriented toward the *qiblah* for too long is believed to risk excessive rain and flooding. The stones are treated as intermediaries whose position matters, while sacrifice constitutes an offering through which the desired rainfall is sought.

Other ceremonies establish relationships between rainfall and non-human inhabitants of water systems. In Sabzevar, Razavi Khorasan Province, villagers construct a doll known as *Chuli Chaqal*. Children carry it through the streets while singing a song asking for rain and lower wheat prices. They visit houses and collect wheat flour, which is turned into small balls of dough. These are carried to the outlet of a qanat and placed in the water as food for the fish. The villagers hope that the fish will be satisfied and that their satisfaction will contribute to resolving the problem of drought and high grain prices. A similar practice is reported from Jilu, Nishapur, where an elderly woman known as "Mother Fish" cares for the fish inhabiting the qanat and protects them from people who attempt to catch or disturb them.

Anthony Smith reports a related belief from Jupar, Kerman Province. According to local accounts, on one particular day each year, the largest fish in the Gauhariz qanat is believed to appear wearing a golden crown. The fish is said to borrow the crown from a hidden treasure located at the bottom of the qanat's mother well. Local people regarded the fish as guardians of the qanat's water and believed that removing or killing them could cause the water to spoil, stagnate, or disappear (Smith, 1990). Although these beliefs do not necessarily constitute a rain-making ceremony in the narrow sense, they illuminate the same relational understanding of water. The fish are not regarded simply as biological organisms inhabiting an irrigation channel. They are incorporated into the moral and hydrological order of the qanat and are assigned roles that resemble those of guardians or custodians. The figures of Mother Fish and the Crowned Fish therefore extend the social world of the qanat beyond its human shareholders and users. Taken together, these cases suggest that appeasement operates through a logic of *reciprocity* and *relational care*. Food may be offered to supernatural beings, animals may be protected, and sacrifices may be made. In return, communities expect rain, protection, and continued water availability.

Combination

The boundaries between defiance, supplication, and appeasement are not always clear. Some rain-claiming ceremonies deliberately combine several strategies, moving between prayer, transgression, offerings, and ritual punishment. These combinations are especially revealing because they demonstrate that communities do not necessarily

subscribe to a single ritual theory of rainfall. Instead, they may deploy several relational strategies simultaneously or sequentially.

In Zohan, South Khorasan, villagers respond to drought by going into the desert wearing their clothes inside out. They then pray collectively for rain. Wearing clothing inside out can be understood as a mild form of ritual inversion and therefore as defiance, while the prayer constitutes direct supplication. If rain does not come, the villagers intensify the ritual by placing a donkey's skull on the top of a hill. If this still fails, they destroy crows' nests in search of a human bone that is believed to have belonged to a heretic who never prayed to God. The bone is then burned in an attempt to remove whatever obstruction is preventing rainfall. The sequence is significant because the ceremony escalates from relatively modest inversion to increasingly confrontational forms of ritual disorder. Supplication and defiance are not mutually exclusive; they are alternative strategies deployed toward the same desired outcome. The ritual therefore resembles a process of negotiation in which the community progressively modifies its relationship with the supernatural order.

Another example comes from Feyz Abad in Surmaq, Fars Province. A young man is selected and dressed in ragged clothing, with a shawl around his waist and bells around his neck. Accompanied by two men carrying sacks and another playing a *daf*, he moves from house to house collecting raisins, almonds, walnuts, sugar, and money. Household members who make donations splash water over him. The procession eventually reaches the qanat outlet, where the crowd pushes the young man into the water and prevents him from leaving until someone intervenes as surety and promises that rain will come within ten days. After being released, the young man goes to the mosque each day to pray for rain. If rain comes, the ritual ends. If not, he is again taken to the qanat and immersed until another person stands surety (and the process continues until rainfall occurs). The ceremony thus combines physical coercion and ritual prayer. The young man is simultaneously a victim, an intermediary, and an agent of the community's demand for rain. The qanat itself becomes the final setting in which the community dramatizes the relationship between human suffering, water, and supernatural power.

A final example comes from Azerbaijan, where the ceremony begins with supplication but can end in defiance. In early May, participants wrap a handkerchief around a wooden spoon to create a doll called *Chumchah Khatun*, literally "Madam Spoon". A person carries the doll through the village accompanied by young people singing to a traditional drum. Households contribute food, which is later taken to a hill and cooked in a large pot. Everyone waits for rain while the soup is being prepared. If rain arrives before the soup is ready, the participants eat it joyfully. If rain does not arrive, they overturn the pot and angrily spill the soup onto the ground (Khazayi, 2015, p. 236). The movement from hope to anger is particularly revealing. The same ritual object and collective performance initially create an atmosphere of supplication and expectation; failure then transforms the ritual into an act of rejection. The spilled soup becomes an expression of dissatisfaction with the failure of the anticipated supernatural response. The ceremony consequently demonstrates that rain-making rituals are not fixed categories but dynamic processes in which supplication can turn into defiance when the expected relationship breaks down.

Marriage of Water

Among the most striking practices associated with qanats in rural Iran is the marriage between a water source and a human being. At first sight, such a practice may appear anomalous: a woman is married to a hydraulic infrastructure that, from a modern

materialist perspective, is an inanimate object. Within the communities that practiced the rite, however, the qanat was not understood simply as an inert technological structure. It could possess qualities conventionally associated with human beings, including sex, temperament, needs, desires, and social obligations. The marriage of a qanat therefore provides an especially revealing example of how water can acquire a social biography and become incorporated into systems of kinship, gender, reciprocity, and economic obligation.

This practice is associated with a broader classification of water sources as male or female. Such gendering should not be understood simply as a linguistic curiosity or as evidence of a surviving “primitive” stage of cognition. Rather, it constitutes a cultural framework through which communities interpret differences in water behavior and establish appropriate relationships with particular sources. In several Iranian villages, people distinguish between male and female water sources according to their physical characteristics and behavior (Dadmohammadi, 2015). In Arak, Markazi Province, for example, a qanat whose water causes workers' skin to become dry and develop xeroderma is considered male, whereas a qanat without this effect is regarded as female. In Izadkhast, Fars Province, the distinction is associated with sound: a qanat that flows gently and quietly is considered female, whereas one whose water gurgles loudly is regarded as male. In Garmab, Hamedan Province, a qanat whose discharge fluctuates substantially from year to year is described as male, while one with a relatively stable discharge is considered female. In Tuyserkan, also in Hamedan Province, a qanat whose tunnel continues to receive groundwater seepage even downslope from its mother well is regarded as female (Farhadi, 1985, p. 8). Sedaqat-Kish associates some of these classifications with Zoroastrian traditions concerning Tishtrya and Anahita (Sedaqat-Kish, 2003, p. 35). Such historical associations, however, should be treated cautiously, since the contemporary ethnographic meanings of gendered water cannot necessarily be reduced to a single ancient religious origin.

The gendering of water becomes particularly elaborate in the village of Hunjan, Isfahan Province. There, Zar-Cheshmeh, a water source descending noisily from the mountain, is considered male. Its water is said to scratch the skin when people place their hands in it, and its loud flow is contrasted with the quiet and soothing character attributed to female water. Villagers say that sleeping beside male water is difficult, whereas female water can lull a person into a peaceful sleep. The spring known as Ab-e Kah is likewise considered male, while Garro and Muk in Izadkhast are regarded as female. These classifications are not merely descriptive. They may generate expectations concerning how different waters should interact. According to villagers in Hunjan, when Zar-Cheshmeh begins to diminish, its declining flow is interpreted as a sign that the male water is seeking a female counterpart in neighboring Izadkhast. A ritualized form of water exchange then becomes necessary. Villagers select an agile young man to undertake the task of secretly obtaining water from a female spring in Izadkhast and bringing it back to Hunjan. The undertaking is deliberately framed as a dangerous theft. The inhabitants of Izadkhast are expected to prevent the removal of their water, and a captured “water thief” may be beaten and have his container confiscated.

The practice therefore transforms an apparently physical problem—declining water discharge—into a social and gendered narrative. The two springs are imagined as possessing relational interests, and the movement of water between them becomes analogous to the movement of a substance between social partners. Villagers in Izadkhast, for their part, fear that allowing their female water to come into contact with

male water could cause their own spring to weaken. The springs consequently become participants in a relationship that extends beyond the boundaries of the villages themselves. The water theft follows a carefully prescribed sequence. On a Thursday morning, the selected man approaches the spring while fellow villagers remain at a distance. He places a tent over the spring so that neither people nor even the sky can witness the act of taking the water. After filling his container, he hides outside the village until an inhabitant of Izadkhast appears. He then announces that he has stolen their water and immediately begins to run toward Hunjan. He must not put the container down or turn back while fleeing. The people of Izadkhast pursue him in an attempt to recover their water before he reaches Hunjan. If he succeeds, the village chief in Hunjan rewards him and sacrifices a sheep or, on occasion, a cow in his honor. The stolen water is then poured into the local spring in the expectation that it will stimulate the water source and restore its flow. A communal celebration follows, including the distribution of sweet biscuits (Fadaee, 2006, p. 176). The ritual is significant because it demonstrates that water is not simply classified as male or female; its gendered identity can also generate a social relationship between water sources and between the communities that depend upon them.

The Qanat as husband

The same relational logic becomes even more explicit when a human being enters the relationship. In several Iranian communities, a qanat could be treated as a husband and a woman could become its wife. Baghdasarian interprets such practices as possible survivals of human sacrifice to water bodies (Baghdasarian, 2002, p. 31). Such an explanation, however, remains difficult to substantiate. There is insufficient archaeological and historical evidence to establish a direct continuity between ancient human sacrifice and the modern Iranian practice of qanat marriage. Nor is it methodologically necessary to assume such continuity in order to explain the practice.

A more productive interpretation is to understand qanat marriage within the relational ontology already evident in the gendering of water sources. The qanat is not simply represented as a human husband in a figurative sense. Rather, the community establishes a practical relationship with the qanat by assigning it a gendered identity and embedding it within a recognizable social institution: marriage. Through this process, the qanat acquires obligations, receives care, and becomes the focal point of reciprocal responsibilities. The marriage consequently provides a cultural mechanism through which a community can organize its relationship with an unpredictable and increasingly vulnerable water source.

One of the clearest examples was documented in Alim-Abad, Arak, Markazi Province. The village historically depended on two qanats, Kahriz Bala and Kahriz Payin. According to local classifications, Kahriz Bala was male because its water contained more minerals and was considered difficult to digest, whereas Kahriz Payin was female because its water was fresher and purer. Yet the villagers did not seek to marry the two qanats. They believed instead that the male Kahriz Bala could derive greater benefit from a marriage with a human woman. The last such marriage took place in 1971.

According to local accounts, a severe drought affected Alim-Abad from approximately 1963 until 1971. Farms and orchards withered, many residents migrated to cities, and the discharge of Kahriz Bala declined to the point at which it could no longer adequately irrigate the village's agricultural land. The villagers attempted several responses. They sacrificed sheep at the qanat outlet in the hope that the water would increase, and on several occasions the community went into the surrounding desert to

perform mourning rituals and ask Imam Hossein to intercede with God on their behalf. None of these measures, according to the villagers, restored the qanat. Eventually, they recalled that Kahriz Bala had previously been married to a woman named Mah-Taban, who had died around 1958. The qanat was consequently described as a widower whose declining condition could be explained by the absence of a wife.

The villagers eventually selected Aunt Zobeideh, a recently widowed woman, as the qanat's new wife (Figure 1). Her selection was not arbitrary. The preferred wife was expected to be a needy widow, thereby allowing the marriage to address both the perceived needs of the qanat and the material needs of a woman within the community. A group of villagers accompanied by the village mullah approached Zobeideh to propose the marriage on behalf of the qanat. After she accepted, the parties negotiated the material conditions of the marriage, including her dowry and allowance. The allowance was to be provided collectively by the villagers on behalf of the qanat. In return, Zobeideh agreed to bathe in the qanat water at least once a week, a practice believed to benefit the qanat itself (Safinejad, 1980).

The wedding was celebrated as a genuine social event. On the following day, Zobeideh went privately to the qanat outlet and entered the water without clothing, thereby consummating her marriage with the qanat. On that occasion she received 300 kilograms of wheat. Subsequently, each villager was required to provide her with between 15 and 30 kilograms of wheat twice a year, once during the religious month of Ramadan and again during Muharram. According to local accounts, the flow of the qanat increased soon afterward.

The significance of the practice lies not simply in the belief that marital union could stimulate water. The marriage transformed the relationship between the community and its qanat into a durable social arrangement. Zobeideh was treated as the wife of the qanat, while the villagers collectively assumed the responsibilities normally associated with a husband. The qanat, although unable to provide its wife with material support directly, became the institutional basis through which the community organized that support. In this sense, the ritual produced a reciprocal relationship involving three parties: the qanat, its wife, and the villagers who acted on the qanat's behalf. The social consequences of the marriage continued long after the wedding itself. Villagers reportedly treated Zobeideh well and regarded her as having contributed to the survival of their qanat and agricultural economy. Even after she became blind in 1981, she continued to make her way to the qanat and perform what she understood to be her marital obligation.

The relationship eventually came under pressure from economic transformation. In 1986, Zobeideh sought a divorce because the traditional wheat allowance had become increasingly inadequate. The problem was not simply the quantity of the allowance but the transformation of the economic system in which it operated. Wheat, which had previously constituted a useful form of household income, had become less convenient as monetary exchange expanded and agricultural marketing changed. Traditional watermills and household bakeries had declined, while villagers increasingly relied on the market to purchase processed food and other commodities. The wheat received as the qanat's marital allowance therefore no longer possessed the same practical value. The villagers responded by renegotiating the marriage. Rather than allowing the relationship to end, they replaced part of the traditional in-kind allowance with money and other goods, including tea, sugar, and clothing. Zobeideh consequently remained associated with the qanat until her death in 1992 (Fadaee, 2006, p. 174). She is

remembered as the last wife of a qanat in Alim-Abad and, according to the available accounts, the final known example of the practice in Iran.



Figure 1. Aunt Zobeideh, the last known qanat wife in Iran (Safinejad, 1980).

The Alim-Abad case demonstrates how the cultural biography of a qanat may change over time. Kahriz Bala was successively understood as a water source, a male entity, a widower, a husband, and an economic institution with obligations toward its wife and community. These identities were not merely attached to the qanat through storytelling; they structured material practices, including bathing, agricultural production, food distribution, marriage payments, and collective maintenance. The biography of the qanat was therefore simultaneously ecological, social, and economic.

Qanat marriage was not unique to Alim-Abad. Comparable practices have been reported from Bakhsh-Abad in Damghan, Semnan Province (Ashtiani, 2004, p. 11; Farhadi, 1997, p. 177), Tafresh in Markazi Province (Tafreshi, 1982, p. 58), Hosseincheh in Isfahan Province (Safinejad, 1980, p. 243), Ben in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari Province, and Delijan in Isfahan Province (Fadaee, 2006, p. 175). Although the details vary between localities, these cases indicate that the marriage of water was part of a wider cultural repertoire through which communities responded to declining or vulnerable water sources.

The economic dimension of qanat marriage is particularly important because it shows that ritual and material practice cannot easily be separated. A qanat requires continuous maintenance. Its underground galleries, shafts, mother wells, and outlets must periodically be inspected, repaired, and cleaned. Consequently, a cultural practice that appears at first to be purely symbolic could also generate resources for the continued functioning of the hydraulic system.

In some communities, qanat marriage was reportedly performed when a qanat was approaching desiccation. The wedding followed the conventions of an ordinary marriage, including the provision of an allowance to the wife. Because the qanat itself could not fulfil the husband's economic obligations, the villagers collectively contributed to the allowance on its behalf. In some cases, the contributions reportedly exceeded the woman's immediate needs, with the surplus being used for the repair and maintenance of the qanat. The practice thus created an indirect financial mechanism through which the community could invest in its water infrastructure.

This economic dimension helps explain why the practice could persist even when its supernatural rationale became less persuasive. The marriage created an institutionalized channel through which collective responsibility for the qanat could be expressed. The community did not merely believe that the marriage would increase water; it also

created a social obligation to maintain the hydraulic system on which agricultural livelihoods depended. The persistence of the concept of *nafagheh* provides an especially revealing example of this transformation. In Persian, *nafagheh* refers to the financial support or maintenance allowance owed to a wife. In some qanat communities, however, the term has also come to refer to contributions collected from shareholders for the repair and cleaning of a qanat (Figure 2). The social institution of the qanat wife may have disappeared, while the economic vocabulary associated with her allowance survived and was redirected toward the maintenance of the water system (Labba Khaneiki, 2020).



Figure 2. A qanat bill known as Nafagheh, used to collect shareholders' contributions for the maintenance of the qanat at Hossein-Abad Rostaq, Yazd Province.

Conclusion

The cultural biography of water identified in this study points to a broader epistemological issue underlying contemporary water problems in Iran. The cases examined here suggest that one important dimension of the water crisis lies in the transition from locally embedded water knowledge toward forms of knowledge in which water is increasingly constituted as an autonomous natural object. In locally embedded knowledge systems, water is rarely conceived independently of the human relationships through which it is accessed, distributed, interpreted, protected, and reproduced. Its material properties are inseparable from the social, cultural, moral, legal, and ecological relationships within which those properties become meaningful. By contrast, modern scientific approaches have necessarily sought to isolate water as an object of systematic observation and measurement, emphasizing its physical and chemical properties as phenomena that remain valid independently of human presence. The tension between these epistemological orientations becomes particularly significant when complex water problems are addressed solely through the latter perspective.

From the perspective of locally embedded water knowledge, therefore, water is more than H_2O . Once water enters a particular cultural landscape, it acquires meanings and relationships that become part of how communities understand the water itself. This does not mean that local knowledge denies the material properties of water. Rather, it incorporates those properties within a broader field of relationships. A qanat, for example, is simultaneously a hydraulic structure, a groundwater source, an agricultural infrastructure, a property regime, a social institution, and, under particular circumstances, a gendered and personified being. Its condition cannot be understood

completely within a narrative that attributes declining discharge only to physical processes such as sediment accumulation. For the communities examined in this study, a decline in water discharge could also signify a disruption in the relationship between the qanat and the human community responsible for it.

The case of qanat marriage illustrates this epistemological difference particularly clearly. From a strictly hydraulic perspective, the decline of a qanat may be explained through processes affecting groundwater availability, tunnel obstruction, or groundwater drawdown. Within the local cultural narrative, however, a qanat with declining or fluctuating discharge could be understood as a male qanat suffering from the absence of a female companion. The marriage of the qanat to a widow consequently established a set of human obligations: the woman received an allowance, villagers assumed collective responsibility for her, and contributions associated with the marriage could also support the maintenance and cleaning of the qanat. The relationship therefore connected an apparently symbolic act to material practices of care, redistribution, and hydraulic maintenance. Whether or not the villagers' explanation corresponds to a modern hydrological account of increased discharge is not the central issue. What matters is that the local narrative generated human action, and that human action became part of the material reproduction of the water system. What may appear from one epistemological perspective as an explanation of water through supernatural agency may, from another perspective, contain a complex mechanism through which cultural meaning organizes collective action around a material water system.

The same distinction extends beyond qanat marriage to the governance of groundwater. In locally embedded water knowledge, questions of ownership, entitlement, access, obligation, and customary law may be understood as intrinsic to the identity and usability of a water source rather than as separate social issues imposed upon an otherwise purely hydrological resource. A groundwater reserve that is physically available but subject to an established communal right may therefore be understood differently from water that is physically available but socially unowned or inaccessible. The quality and quantity of water are consequently only part of the knowledge through which a community understands its groundwater. The social relationships governing who may access it, when, how, and under what obligations are equally constitutive of the water's meaning and practical availability.

This epistemological distinction is important for understanding the transformation of Iran's traditional water systems. Modern scientific knowledge has provided indispensable tools for measuring groundwater levels, modelling aquifers, assessing water quality, and identifying physical processes of depletion. Yet when water is represented exclusively through these dimensions, the social and cultural relationships through which water has historically been governed may become analytically secondary. The result can be a separation between hydrological processes and the institutions, customary rules, collective responsibilities, and cultural meanings that have historically shaped human behavior toward water. The decline of traditional water systems cannot therefore be understood only as a consequence of changing rainfall, groundwater extraction, technological development, or hydraulic inefficiency. It also involves transformations in the knowledge systems through which people recognize what water is, who is responsible for it, and what kinds of relationships can be established with it.

The findings of this study consequently do not support a linear narrative from *superstition* to *science*, or from *animism* to *rationality*. Nor do they suggest that indigenous knowledge should replace modern hydrological science. Rather, they

demonstrate the importance of recognizing that different knowledge systems may attend to different dimensions of the same water reality. A qanat can simultaneously be a physical conduit carrying groundwater, an agricultural infrastructure, a habitat for fish, a property regime, a gendered being, a husband, a sacred or socially significant entity, and an object of collective investment. These meanings do not necessarily cancel one another. They constitute different dimensions of the same water relationship.

The concept of the cultural biography of water is useful precisely because it makes these changing relationships visible. Water's biography is not a linear movement from one fixed meaning to another. It is a continuing process through which ecological conditions, religious ideas, social institutions, economic relations, technologies, and forms of knowledge interact. When water becomes scarce, this biography may become particularly visible because drought intensifies the relationships through which communities interpret, negotiate, and respond to water uncertainty. Rain-making ceremonies, qanat marriage, customary water rights, and collective maintenance practices can therefore be understood not simply as remnants of an earlier worldview, but as historically situated forms of knowledge and action through which communities have attempted to maintain relationships with water.

Ultimately, the Iranian cases examined in this article suggest that addressing contemporary water problems requires attention not only to the physical behavior of water but also to the epistemological and social relationships through which water becomes knowable and governable. Water is not simply something that communities possess, measure, extract, or use; it is also something with which they establish relationships. The erosion of those relationships may be as consequential as the physical depletion of the resource itself. Recognizing the cultural biography of water therefore opens a space for bringing hydrological knowledge into dialogue with local histories, customary institutions, social obligations, and culturally embedded understandings of water. Such an approach does not require abandoning scientific explanations of water. Rather, it calls for a broader understanding in which the physical properties of water and the human relationships surrounding it are examined as interconnected dimensions of the same socio-hydrological reality.

Data availability

Data will be made available upon request.

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