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Storytelling and the Preservation of Iranian National and Religious Identity

Abstract

Storytelling, tale-making, myth-telling, and narration (*naqqali*) form part of popular culture and are considered a type of oral heritage. In UNESCO's definition, they are categorized as a subcategory of intangible cultural heritage. Storytelling in Iran has a long and notable history. This oral tradition has been performed in various ways. Sometimes the storyteller would narrate a tale in prose, while at other times they would use rhythmic language accompanied by music to recount mythological and epic stories, popular tales, local legends, and religious narratives.

In addition to being a profession and a cultural-social activity that helped people pass their leisure time, storytelling played a significant role in preserving the mythological, literary, ethical, and religious heritage of different social classes and groups through its content.

The present study reviews the history and status of storytelling and its performance methods in Iran. It also re-examines the role of storytelling in preserving Iranian national and religious identity during the Iranian-Islamic civilization period.

The findings of this research highlight the undeniable influence of storytelling—particularly in heroic, mythological, and religious themes—and its performance style in stimulating the audience's imagination across different age groups, thereby instilling and strengthening Iranian national and religious identity. Even today, despite the dominance of mass media, forms of storytelling such as Shahnameh recitation, *naqqali*, *pardeh-dari* (screen storytelling), and religious narration in the form of *rowzeh-khani* continue to have dedicated and regular audiences, and their cultural-identity impact remains inevitable.

Keywords: Storytelling, oral heritage, intangible cultural heritage, national and religious identity, civilizational identity, Shahnameh.

Introduction

Storytelling is one of the oldest forms of human communication. Ancient societies, before the development and spread of written language, relied on oral narratives to preserve their history and cultural values. These narratives, with mythological and epic themes in the form of stories, proverbs, and songs, were passed from one generation to the next. Narrative stories served as a treasure trove of social knowledge and moral education, playing a key role in preserving and continuing the cultural foundations of societies over many generations.

Iranians, with their ancient civilization and diverse oral heritage, are no exception to this cultural feature. For centuries, Iranians have preserved their cultural memory, social values, and historical awareness through oral narratives, poetry, myths, and epic and religious literature. The result of this process is a rich collection of national and religious stories that have been told throughout the history of this land.

The recognition and re-examination of Iranian stories has a long history. In the most prominent example, the epic poem *Shahnameh*, is considered a re-narration of Iran's mythological stories and national oral tradition. Some researchers who traveled to Iran or studied Iranian civilization were also influenced by Iranian stories and examined their origins and nature. These individuals are among the first scholars in the field of Iranian popular culture and oral literature. Among them are Alexander Chodźko, Valentin Zhukovsky, Douglas Craven Phillott, Basil Nikitine, Arthur Christensen, Bess Allen Donaldson, Henri Massé, Arnold van Gennep, David Lockhart Robertson Lorimer, Laurence Paul Elwell-Sutton, and William Hanaway. Some of these scholars received guidance from Iranian literary figures such as Ali-Akbar Dehkhoda, Mohammad-Taqi Bahar (Malek al-Sho'ara), and Sadegh Hedayat while collecting evidence of oral stories and Iranian storytelling.

Over time, Iranian researchers also conducted studies in this field, including Hossein Kouhi Kermani, Fazlollah Mohtadi (Sobhi), Mohammad-Ali Jamalzadeh, Abolqasem Enjavi Shirazi, Samad Behrangi, Ahmad Shamloo, Mehdi Partovi Amoli, Ali-Ashraf Darvishian, Mehdi Azar Yazdi, Mohsen Mihan-Dust, Seyyed Ahmad Vakilian, and Hassan Zolfaghari. Ulrich Marzolph is also considered a prominent contemporary researcher in this area; his book *Classification of Iranian Folktales* is a key reference. Some historians and literary scholars of Iran have also conducted research on the history of storytelling and Iranian storytellers. For example, Mary Boyce (1957) examined the *gosans* (minstrels) and Iranian singers in the Parthian period. Hossein Lisan (1966) reviewed *Shahnameh* recitation. Jalil Dustkhah was among the first Iranian researchers to examine the history of the art of *naqqali*. Seyyed Kazem Sadat Ashkouri (1975) also studied *naqqali* and *Shahnameh* recitation. Zabihollah Safa (1986) provided a brief overview of story-

telling and storytellers up to the Safavid period. Mohammad Jafar Mahjoub's article (1995) titled "The Evolution of Naqqali and Story-Reading, Training of Storytellers, and Naqqali Scrolls" is another important Iranian study in this field.

In many works by Jalal Khaleghi-Motlagh (1998; 2025), national stories and narratives are discussed as sources of the *Shahnameh*. Hassan Zolfaghari (2015) focused on introducing types of popular literature. Mahmoud Omidshar (2021) introduced the history of *Shahnameh* recitation in his encyclopedia entry. In recent decades, numerous studies and articles on Iranian national and religious stories and narratives have been written. Some of the more recent articles have examined the identity-forming role of these narratives and their potential for use in animation production.

Building on this research background, the present study focuses on the importance of storytelling as oral heritage, reviews the history of storytelling in Iran, and analyzes the role of this ancient tradition in shaping Iranian national and religious identity during the Iranian-Islamic civilization period.

History of Storytelling in Iran

Regarding the history of storytelling in Iran, one can refer to the role of family elders — especially women — in narrating stories (Hanaway, 1994). This custom continues today in rural and nomadic communities of Iran. Legends and stories mentioned in parts of the Avesta, especially in the Yashts, form part of the collective memory of ancient times (Allison & Kreyenbroek, 2022).

The storytelling skills of ancient Iranians were well-known for many centuries, and historical texts written centuries later contain reports about Iranian storytellers and their expertise. Ibn al-Nadim, the 10th-century cataloger, in his valuable book *Al-Fihrist*, refers to the "early Persians" as the first *musamirin* (nighttime tale-tellers) and myth-tellers (Ibn al-Nadim, 1427 AH: 300). He adds that the first written work on Iranian legends, titled *Hazar Afsan* (A Thousand Tales), was composed for the daughter of Bahman (ibid.).

Ibn al-Nadim's description of this storytelling tradition in ancient Iran can be interpreted in the context of the legendary-historical period of the Kayanian dynasty, which some early Islamic sources and contemporary studies link to the Achaemenid era.

According to Allison and Kreyenbroek, there is evidence that the Achaemenids used storytellers to spread information among the people, thereby creating a version of history that, regardless of its accuracy, was widely known and accepted (Allison & Kreyenbroek, 2022).

The oldest written historical documents about storytelling in Iran and its connection to strengthening collective identity can be found in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* (The Education of Cyrus),

written by a Greek historian contemporary with the Achaemenids. Xenophon mentions stories and songs about Cyrus that were told about two hundred years after his death, describing him as the most generous man and committed to wisdom (1.2.1).

Storytelling was also very common during the five-hundred-year Parthian period and was used as a method for educating children and youth. The Roman historian and geographer Strabo writes that the Parthians “had the most prudent teachers, who mixed useful legends into their speeches and sometimes with music and sometimes without, recounted the deeds of gods and distinguished men” (Strabo, 15.3.18). These teachers, singers, or *gosans* would narrate royal legends or Kayanian tales in court gatherings or among the people, as well as stories of Parthian kings and princes, and according to some accounts, narratives about Rostam (Boyce, 1957: 17-18).

The literary heritage of the Sasanian era shows that “both heroic and religious narratives flourished side by side—one in the domain of singers and storytellers, the other in the domain of the clergy” (Yarshater, 1989: 505). Narrative history in the Sasanian period looked to the past and future to promote and support the religious and national ideals of Sasanian leaders, while also serving educational and entertainment purposes. Thus, Sasanian narrative history had four aspects: religious, socio-political, educational, and recreative (ibid., 505-512). Throughout Iranian narrative history, a strong sense of nationalism is dominant. Descriptions of Airyanam Vaejah (the land of the Aryans) and the concept of “self and other” in the form of Iran and Aniran in the Avesta are among these themes. In this way, through stories and narrative history, Iranians remained committed for centuries to their national identity, shared heritage, and long-standing tradition in national mythology (ibid., 519-520).

These stories and oral narratives, which form the basis of Iran’s national mythology (Yamamoto, 2021), were written down during the reign of Yazdegerd III (r. 633–651 CE), the last Sasanian king, and became the *Khwaday-Namag*, the main source of the epic *Shahnameh*. Of course, stories of kings had been recorded even before this compilation, and court readers would narrate them according to an ancient tradition (Khaleghi-Motlagh, 1998: 538).

In some parts of the *Shahnameh*, it is mentioned that during the reign of Bahram Gur (r. 420–438 CE), ancient letters were read to him during feasts and hunts (Ferdowsi, 2007: 6/442, 445). Hormizd IV (r. 579–590 CE), when deposed and imprisoned, asked for “a knowledgeable old man” to read stories of kings from the book (ibid., 8/6). In the final years of the Sasanian era, stories from the *Khwaday-Namag*, especially the battle narrative of Rostam and Esfandiar, were so popular that they were told even in the Hejaz, far from Iran (Ibn Hisham, 1/300; Azarnoush, 1975: 239-240).

Storytelling continued into the Islamic centuries. Storytellers, following the tradition of previous centuries, narrated local and national stories and legends in public spaces such as squares, markets, mosques, roadsides, or graveyards in cities and villages, as well as in tribal gatherings (Bolkhashi, 1996: 87; Yamamoto, 2021). These activities strengthened Iranian identity aspects. These stories were preserved either orally or in scattered written texts.

Finally, in the mid-10th century CE / 4th century AH, at the order of Abu Mansur Mohammad ibn Abd al-Razzaq, a Samanid official, and under the supervision of Abu Mansur al-Ma'mari, a group of Zoroastrian scholars collected these narratives and compiled them into the prose *Shahnameh of Abu Mansuri*. Shortly afterward, Abu Mansur Daqiqi attempted to versify the *Shahnameh*. Although his effort remained unfinished due to his death, it was completed by the poet Abolqasem Ferdowsi, resulting in the great epic *Shahnameh*.

Historical texts mention *Shahnameh* recitation as an art called *karasi*, in which a skilled performer narrated national Iranian stories, including *Hazar Afsan*, at the court of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna (r. 998–1030 CE) (Iqbal Ashtiani, 1946: 20-22; Lisan, 1966: 7). Abolfazl Beyhaqi, the 11th-century historian, provides a list of poets, singers, and storytellers or *govvalan* at the Ghaznavid court who would narrate stories with music during ceremonial events or tell nighttime tales (Beyhaqi, 1971: 153-154). He notes that ordinary people were very fond of legends (ibid., 905).

Although some viewed storytellers as leading the common people astray (Qazvini Razi, 1979: 67), existing evidence shows that *Shahnameh* recitation remained common until the late 12th century (Yamamoto, 2021). In the 13th century, during the Ilkhanid period, storytellers faced disfavor (Obeyd Zakani, 1964: 172-173). However, valuable information about storytelling in the 15th century comes from Kamal al-Din Hossein Va'ez Kashefi Sabzevari. In his *Fotovat-nameh Soltani*, he discusses the benefits of reading and listening to stories and emphasizes that storytellers should focus on historical events, use appropriate narratives for audiences, and avoid exaggeration, ambiguity, and excessive metaphors (Kashefi Sabzevari, 1971: 304).

Notably, Kashefi Sabzevari's book *Rowzat al-Shohada*, focusing on the event of Karbala in simple and moving language (Chelkowski, 2009), paved the way for the creation of *rowzeh-khani* and further popularized religious storytelling, *ta'zieh*, and *pardeh-khani*. These forms mainly attracted workers, villagers, and the urban poor (Chelkowski, 2000: 99). He composed the narrative of Karbala in a style filled with eloquence, based on storytelling, with an epic yet accessible tone for ordinary people. This contributed to the promotion of the concept of martyrdom in Persian culture and literature (Jafarian, 1995: 33-35). Thus, religious storytelling in the forms of

rowzeh-khani, *ta'zieh*, and *pardeh-khani* became one of the prominent cultural expressions of the Safavid era (1501–1736 CE).

Meanwhile, the tradition of national storytelling and Shahnameh recitation continued and became an inseparable part of coffeehouse activities, in addition to family gatherings (Dustkhah, 1966: 75). Evidence shows that from the Safavid period, storytelling in the form of *naqqali* flourished. Some older *naqqals* recount that during the time of Shah Ismail I (r. 1501–1524), dervishes were appointed to narrate heroic stories for various social groups (Yamamoto, 2021). During the reign of Shah Abbas I (r. 1587–1629), storytelling through *naqqali*, especially in coffeehouses, became very popular (Lisan, 1966: 12-13).

In the *Tazkareh Nasrabadi*, names of Shahnameh reciters and storytellers active in coffeehouses during the reign of Shah Abbas II (r. 1642–1666) are recorded (Nasrabadi, 1938: 324-325, 307, 145, and many other pages). In addition to the *Shahnameh*, stories such as *Abu Muslim-nameh*, *Eskandar-nameh*, *Sam-nameh*, *Garhasp-nameh*, *Hamzeh-nameh*, and *Faramarz-nameh* were commonly narrated by *naqqals* (Mahjoub, 1995: 2/80).

During the Safavid period in Iran and also in India, books on storytelling or collections of stories were written, including *Zinat al-Majalis*, *Seraj al-Monir*, *Khazan va Bahar*, *Bahar-e Danesh*, *Eyar-e Danesh*, *Mahbub al-Qolub*, *Dabestan-e Kherad*, *Qesseh-ye Chahar Dervish*, *Qesseh-ye Nowruz Shah*, *Navaader al-Hekayat*, *Gharayeb al-Ravayat*, and *Taraz al-Akhbar* (Mahjoub, 1995: 1/69-70; Zolfaghari & Balayi, 2020: 42).

The Qajar period (13th century AH / 19th century CE) has been called the peak of storytelling (Marzolph, 2015: 271). The storytelling tradition maintained its strong oral nature (Allison & Kreyenbroek, 2022), and the heritage of storytellers and *naqqals* was passed down to this era. In some cases, *rowzeh-khani* and *ta'zieh* reached their height (Zolfaghari, 2015: 217-218). In the Qajar period, in addition to stories from the Safavid era onward, tales such as *Samak-e Ayyar*, *Darab-nameh*, *Hamzeh-nameh*, *Hossein-e Kurd-e Shabestri*, *Amir Arsalan Namdar*, and others became part of the collective memory of Iranians.

With the introduction of radio and television in Iran, storytelling—especially Shahnameh recitation, *naqqali*, and *ta'zieh*—became content for these mass media. In recent decades, these forms have gained significant popularity. On social media, many examples can be seen of people from different age groups engaging in national and religious storytelling.

Storytelling as Oral Heritage

Storytelling, tale-making, myth-telling, and *naqqali* are part of popular culture and a form of oral heritage. As one of the oldest forms of human culture and oral heritage, storytelling is recognized

by UNESCO under “oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage,” as an example of intangible cultural heritage.

According to UNESCO’s definition, “intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature, and their history. It provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity” (UNESCO, 2024: 5).

An important point is that the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage emphasizes the need to protect these cultural expressions for future generations. In this convention, safeguarding intangible cultural heritage—including storytelling—is considered essential. Measures such as identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission (especially through formal and non-formal education), and revitalization of its various aspects are emphasized (ibid.).

It is based on this cultural policy that *ta’zieh* was inscribed on UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage list in 2010 and *naqqali* in 2011, both placed on the list requiring urgent safeguarding (UNESCO, 2010; UNESCO, 2011).

A significant part of the ancient treasure of stories can be found in oral literature. Oral literature, also called “verbal art,” includes narrative and lyrical forms, poetry and prose, sung and spoken expressions. A wide range of oral literature genres in Persian have been identified in the form of ancient stories, epic poetry, improvised elegies, and folk tales. This valuable treasure either passed down orally from generation to generation or survived as oral renditions of lost written works.

Thus, storytelling as a “cultural current” carries “part of the heritage of epic, national, ethnic, and religious culture and literature” (Bolukbashi, 1996: 87). The survival of these stories in various forms and their oral transmission over centuries constitutes part of the identity components of Iranians.

Storytelling and Identity

As mentioned at the beginning, storytelling, as a form of oral culture and literature, is a category of intangible cultural heritage and part of folklore or popular culture. It was also noted earlier that intangible heritage serves as a means to redefine the history of societies and groups and to instill a sense of identity in them (UNESCO, 2024: 5). In the 25th session of the UNESCO General Conference in Paris in 1989, folklore or popular culture was described as “a reflection of the social and cultural identity of communities” (UNESCO, 1989: Annex 1/2).

Baqer Sarukhani, a sociologist, describes folklore as “a very important tool for enhancing sensory perception and activating the historical memory of a particular society,” which creates a sense

of nostalgia in the audience and leads to identity formation, social unity, and adaptability (Ghobadi & Sarukhani, 2007: 14).

Legends in the form of magical, allegorical, heroic, and romantic stories, myths, anecdotes, proverbs, and sayings fall under popular literature and folklore (Zolfaghari, 2015: 78-79). The characteristics of these tales and oral stories include simple language rooted in people's daily lives and transmission from generation to generation (Mihan-Dust, 2002: 115; Zolfaghari, 2015: 11-13). Other features include the transmission of experiences, education, and entertainment. These characteristics had great impact in societies with less exposure to mass media.

Stories and legends are among the oldest surviving works of human thought and imagination. Their basis is sometimes a historical narrative embellished with attractive themes drawn from the creative mind of the narrator. Characters and creatures in stories exist in a space between reality and fantasy, sometimes in an undefined time and place, creating events full of twists and turns. The dynamism of these events engages the audience's inquisitive mind, allowing them to escape their surroundings for a while and enter the endless world of stories, legends, and folktales.

On the other hand, the similarity of some story situations to the audience's daily life creates empathy with the story and its characters. This familiar feeling leads to the story remaining in the audience's mind. Although legends are now considered fictional, they were once part of people's real beliefs, and their events and outcomes played an important role in education and gaining experience. Even today, narrating legends in gatherings of ethnic groups with rich historical backgrounds—such as Kurds, Baluchis, Bakhtiari, and Qashqai tribes—is one of the most attractive entertainments.

The appeal of national and religious stories, their manner of narration, and the instructive message they convey affect the audience. The message of a legend indirectly introduces and instills cultural, social values, norms, and ethical principles. The repeated narration of stories and legends leads to the recreation of these values across generations. It is within this communicative structure that part of individual and collective national and religious identity emerges.

National Identity and Religious Identity

Identity is a concept shaped by culture. Culture, in its broadest sense, encompasses distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features. It represents a unique and irreplaceable set of values, traditions, beliefs, arts, literature, and ways of life that define a society or social group and provide the basis for self-knowledge of individuals and society (UNESCO, 1982).

From a sociological perspective, in addition to the existential necessity of identity (Lawler, 2008: 17), emphasis is placed on its "construction" (Castells, 2010: 7). National identity, or the sense of collective belonging within a nation, can be created through the collection and transmission of

beliefs, memories, and experiences. The survival and revival of identity depend on the process of narration and transmission. This process has been formed and continued since ancient times based on collective memory, especially cultural memory. Cultural memory is preserved through customs, traditions, rituals, beliefs, and values (Borumand, 2016: 77).

Part of the process of forming Iranian national identity occurs through the narration of stories that crystallized in the cultural and social sphere of ancient societies and were passed down from generation to generation.

In examining the role of storytelling in preserving national identity, its emotional and psychological impact cannot be ignored. Stories, legends, and epics with national themes strengthen empathy, emotional attachment, social cohesion, and a sense of shared belonging. In societies that have faced invasions and cultural domination by others, or in minority and marginalized communities, a significant part of their national identity elements has been preserved through stories and the storytelling process, providing a basis for liberation from foreign cultural dominance (Bewaji, 2017).

Furthermore, some elements and characters in stories that reflect the experiences and ideals of societies—for example, in the Iranian identity sphere, the narratives of Arash the Archer, the tragedy of Siavash, and Rostam—have become symbols of national identity throughout history. Storytelling also plays a major role in preserving language, which is one of the pillars of native, ethnic, and national identity. Therefore, in many indigenous and traditional societies, storytelling is regarded as an archive of the experiences, beliefs, ethical values, and cultural-identity themes of ancestors.

Religious identity is also a deep-rooted form of cultural and social identity (Ysseldyk et al., 2010: 61). In other words, religious identity is a set of beliefs and practices within a religious tradition to which an individual is historically and culturally committed (Fuligni et al., 2011: 171). Ancestral or cultural traditions, mythological and historical background, faith, and personal experience all play roles in shaping religious identity. Religious identity also provides a sense of belonging and shared values. Part of religious identity is formed and sustained through the narration of stories and legends with religious themes. The narration of Ashura in the sphere of Shiite beliefs is a prominent example of this influence and durability.

For centuries, a considerable number of national and religious stories have been transmitted from generation to generation in Iran. Some of these stories have been particularly frequent and are examined in this study from the perspective of national and religious identity themes. These include:

- *Samak-e Ayyar* by Faramarz ibn Khodadad Arrajani (late 11th century), which describes the characteristics of *ayyari* (chivalry), including manliness, loyalty, courage, keeping promises, and supporting the oppressed—as praised aspects of Iranian identity.
- *Eskandar-nameh* (various versions from the 11th century), which portrays an idealized, non-historical image of Alexander and emphasizes identity based on knowledge and wisdom rather than bloodline.
- *Darab-nameh* by Abu Tahir Tarsusi (12th century), which highlights Iran as the center of the world and identity based on divine glory (*farr*).
- *Abu Muslim-nameh*, which focuses on religious identity based on legitimacy and collective ideals.
- *Bakhtiar-nameh*, which addresses individual identity based on wisdom and moral teachings.
- *Mush va Gorbeh* (Mouse and Cat) attributed to Obeyd Zakani, which critiques false religious and political identity without genuine ethics.
- *Tutinameh* by Zia al-Din Nakhshabi, filled with Iranian identity elements.
- *Hossein-e Kurd-e Shabestri*, which emphasizes “self and other” and preserving territorial identity.
- *Hamzeh-nameh*, which presents an ideal of the faithful hero.
- *Amir Arsalan Namdar*, which stresses the recovery of lost identity and merit over lineage.

In addition, narratives depicted in *ta'zieh*, *rowzeh-khani*, and *pardeh-dari* have all played a role in strengthening the religious identity of Iranians.

Undoubtedly, storytelling—with its subtleties and expressive features—is an effective tool and medium for educating and strengthening national and religious identity. Stories of national and

religious figures and their teachings create opportunities for both formal and informal education, instilling a sense of shared identity among students.

Although rapid urbanization and migration have distanced the new generation from oral traditions, some UNESCO approaches to documenting storytelling have paved the way for integrating this tradition into the education system. Today, digital technologies in the form of social networks and multimedia platforms play a role in influencing and sustaining national and religious identity education (Giliberto, 2021: 1-5). Digital archives make it possible to document and preserve national stories, while podcasts, video games, social media, and interactive websites play an undeniable role in sharing them within society and even globally, introducing elements of national and religious identity through storytelling.

Therefore, given UNESCO's emphasis on preserving intangible heritage, the use of digital technologies has been considered a solution. In the expanding sphere of global communication, preserving national stories and storytelling methods through digital technology is a way to prevent the stagnation of national and religious identity manifestations and maintain their dynamism in the future. Thus, in contemporary societies, storytelling in digital forms—such as podcasts and visual-audio creations through artificial intelligence—continues to act as a powerful tool for preserving culture and shaping identity.

Conclusion

The results of this study show that storytelling, as one of the oldest forms of oral culture, has played a fundamental role throughout Iranian history in preserving, transmitting, and reproducing Iranian national and religious identity. Examining the historical course of storytelling from ancient times to the present reveals that oral narratives, beyond entertainment and leisure, have always served as cultural, educational, and identity-forming media. Through stories, legends, epics, and religious narratives, Iranians have transmitted their ethical values, religious beliefs, historical memory, and social ideals to future generations, thereby creating a strong link between the past, present, and future of their cultural society.

The study of the history of storytelling in Iran shows that this tradition is deeply rooted in Iranian civilization. From the Achaemenid and Parthian periods to the Sasanian era, storytellers, *gosans*, and singers played an effective role in shaping collective memory and strengthening cultural cohesion by narrating heroic and mythological stories. With the advent of the Islamic period, religious narratives gained a special place alongside national ones and became an inseparable part of Iranian popular culture. The formation of traditions such as *Shahnameh* recitation, *naqqali*, *ta'zieh*, *rowzeh-khani*, and *pardeh-khani* demonstrates the continuity of this identity-forming function in the Iranian-Islamic period.

The research findings indicate that one of the most important factors in the effectiveness of storytelling is its power to stimulate the audience's imagination and emotions. Narrating heroic, epic, and religious stories creates empathy with characters and events, thereby internalizing cultural values and norms indirectly in individuals' minds and behaviors. Stories such as Rostam, Siavash, Arash the Archer, and the narration of Ashura have become symbols of Iranian national and religious identity over the centuries and have played a significant role in strengthening belonging, social solidarity, and cultural resistance. Indeed, long before the emergence of modern nationalism, the Iranian storytelling tradition provided a common framework for understanding collective past and cultural identity.

On the other hand, the present study emphasizes that storytelling is part of Iran's intangible cultural heritage, which, according to UNESCO, plays an important role in creating a sense of historical continuity and cultural identity in societies. The international registration of *naqqali* and *ta'zieh* as intangible cultural heritage highlights the importance of these traditions in Iranian culture. This heritage not only expresses the cultural creativity of Iranian society but also serves as an effective tool for preserving the Persian language, transmitting historical experiences, and continuing religious and ethical values.

Given the results of this research and the fundamental role of storytelling in preserving and transmitting Iranian national and religious identity, attention to less-studied aspects of this field can pave the way for deeper and more applied future studies. Accordingly, the following suggestions are offered for future research:

- Conducting field studies on storytelling methods among Iran's ethnic groups and local communities, especially in rural and nomadic areas, to identify and document oral narratives at risk of being forgotten.
- Future research should examine the role of women, elders, and native narrators in transmitting storytelling traditions.
- Comparative studies on the role of storytelling in shaping national and religious identity in Iran with other Eastern and Islamic civilizations.
- Utilizing national and religious stories for cultural identity education, social ethics, and strengthening national belonging in schools and universities.

- Research on the psychological and sociological functions of storytelling, especially in creating social solidarity, strengthening collective memory, and reducing identity crises among the new generation.
- Applied studies on methods of safeguarding, reviving, and reproducing this heritage in contemporary society, given that *ta'zieh* and *naqqali* are registered on UNESCO's list.
- With rapid social changes and the spread of new media, storytelling still has high potential for cultural influence. Digital technologies, social networks, podcasts, animations, and AI tools have enabled the recreation and transmission of national and religious narratives in new forms.
- In general, the development of interdisciplinary research in the fields of storytelling, intangible heritage, media, and cultural identity can lead to a better understanding of the capacities of this ancient tradition in preserving cultural cohesion and strengthening Iranian national and religious identity in the contemporary world.

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