

The Qajar Persian Women's Bath
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“Two Harem Girls”, attributed to Mirza Baba, Iran 1811-14, Collection of the Royal Asiatic Society London, 01.002

“Customs And Manners Of The Women Of Persia, And Their Domestic Superstitions”¹ was a satire on Persian society, written in Qajar Persia in the early 1800’s, then translated in 1832 into French and English. It was an acutely and irreverently observed satire of women’s culture in Persia in the early 1800’s as was “Absolutely Fabulous” of British women’s culture by Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders in the 1990s. Like most satiric humor, the epigram required “insider knowledge” to understand the nuance and “get the jokes.”

1 “Customs And Manners Of The Women Of Persia, And Their Domestic Superstition,” “Kitabi Kulsum Naneh” translated from the original Persian Manuscript; authorship attributed to Jamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Ḥsayn Khvānsārī by Kh. Mushār: cf. his *Mu'allifin-i kutub-i chāpi-i Fārsī va 'Arabī*, v.2 (1962) column 383

In chapter II, Atkinson's² translation of Thonnellier's French explanation is, "The Persian ladies regard the bath as the place of their greatest amusement; they make appointments to meet there, and often pass seven or eight hours together in the carpeted saloon, telling stories, relating anecdotes, eating sweetmeats, sharing their kalyouns."



Woman smoking a 'Kalyoun',³ detail from "Ladies around a Samovar" Isma'il Jalayir, Tehran, third quarter of the 19th century; Victoria and Albert Museum, P. 56-1941

and embellishing their beautiful forms with all the fancied perfections of the ease, dyeing their hair and eyebrows and curiously staining their fair bodies with a variety of fantastic devices, not infrequently with the figures of trees, birds, and beasts, sun, moon and stars. This sort of pencil-work spreads over the bosom, and continues down as low as the navel, round which some radiated figure is generally painted. All this is displayed by the style of their dress, every garment

² [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Atkinson_\(Persian_scholar\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Atkinson_(Persian_scholar))

³ Kalyoun is a water pipe, or hookah. The women smoked tobacco, tobacco and herbs, hashish, and marijuana. "Cannabis, Global Histories" chapter 12, Malzyar Ghiabi, "We Smoke Flowers, on "Being High" in Postrevolutionary Iran"

of which, even to the light gauze chemise, being open from the neck to that point; a singular taste and certainly more barbarous than becoming. ” (p.16, UMI facsimile of Atkinson 1832 translation) In other words, women enjoyed having henna and tattoos done on their skin, and Thonnelier disapproved of their body art.



Detail from “Two Harem Girls”, attributed to Mirza Baba, Iran 1811-14, Collection of the Royal Asiatic Society London, 01.002, showing tattoos and henna stains on a woman’s body.

IN going to the hammám it is considered absolutely requisite that the woman, the moment she reaches the first door of the hot-rooms, should crack a few walnuts with the heel of her shoe, and then walk with naked feet into the bath: this is wájib. She must then, with great care, sit ⁴

“Wajib” acts are part of Islamic law which can be obligatory on every individual (fard al-ayn), such as prayer, or on the entire community (fard al-kifayah), and such as burying the dead.

“Customs and Manners Of The Women of Persia, and Their Domestic Superstition” is written as if being proclaimed with great seriousness by five woman Islamic judges, Kulsum Nahneh.and

⁴ Chapter 2, “Of Rules Concerning the Bath” page 14, J. Thonnelier translation “Kitabi Kulsum Naneh ou le livre des dames de la Perse” James Atkinson translation, “Customs And Manners Of The Women Of Persia, And Their Domestic Superstition” 1832

others. As Islamic judges were male, this commentary could be interpreted as, “If women were making the laws instead of men, laws would be like *this*, not that.”

of eggs, and seeds, and *hul*, and *faufal*, a species of Indian nut, mixed together, and the women who accompany her must partake of the same dish: this, according to Kulsúm Naneh, is wájib; the others pronounce it sunnat. Shahr Bánú Dadeh says, one of the candles used at the nuptial feast ought to be taken into the bath and lighted there, that the life of the child may be passed in splendour. And farther, as long as the woman gives milk, whatever she sees and wishes for must be presented to her, that her milk may not be disturbed by unpleasant emotions, which would be injurious to the health and temper of the child.

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Detail from “A Nomadic Encampment”, (1539 – 43, Iran), folio from a manuscript of the Khamsa (Quintet) of Nizami, attributed to Mir Sayyid ‘Ali, Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University Art Museum 1958.75

5 Chapter 2, “Of Rules Concerning the Bath” page 17, J. Thonnelier translation “Kitabi Kulsum Naneh ou le livre des dames de la Perse” James Atkinson translation, “Customs And Manners Of The Women Of Persia, And Their Domestic Superstition” 1832

II.

There are many things which must be specially observed in visiting the hammám. The woman must enter the bath with only her cincture on, and when the kása* and soap are used, it may be taken off. It is wájib to wash the head three times with soap; and respecting the application of the núra,† it is improper for any young girl to

use that depilatory. When women wish to use the núra, they must request a female friend to rub it on; it is quite wrong to apply it with your own hands. It is wájib for them to sit in a circle, and apply the núra to each other reciprocally, conversing good-humouredly all the while. This is generally a mirthful meeting, and all kinds of tittle-tattle considered perfectly wájib. It is also wájib to take kalyúns into the bath to smoke; and previous to visiting the bath, every woman of spirit and liberality orders her servants to get ready a delicious collation to be taken there, such as lettuce and vinegar, every sort of roast and boiled, and all the fruits in season, with sherbet and scented water.* This is wájib: and the women must sit down together and partake of the collation, and laugh and talk with all the hilarity and cheerfulness of youthful hearts. Others say that when women come out of the bath they ought to dress in gay apparel, and if they have any engagement, they must first proceed to the house of their friend or lover. And if they meet a handsome young man on their way, they must cunningly re-

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6 Chapter 2, "Of Rules Concerning the Bath" pages 17 and 18, J. Thonnellier translation "Kitabi Kulsum Naneh ou le livre des dames de la Perse" James Atkinson translation, "Customs And Manners Of The Women Of Persia, And Their Domestic Superstition" 1832



Detail from Maqamat al-Hariari, Dated 1237, Paris Bibliotheque, Arabe 5847, f 58v

move a little of the veil which covers their face, and draw it off gradually, pretending “ It is very hot, how I perspire; my heart is wounded :” and talk in this manner, and stand a little, till the youth smells the perfume of ottar, and he looks captivated, and sends a message describing the enchanted and bewildered state of his mind. 7

The whole book is available through online booksellers, new, used, and electronic. It is spectacularly funny and well worth the read for researchers in anthropology, sociology, political science, and history. Current resources for his book follow here:

Customs and Manners of the Women of Persia and Their Domestic Superstitions

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by Nah'nah Kuls_um (Creator)

https://www.amazon.com/Customs-Manners-Persia-Domestic-Superstitions/dp/0371134722/ref=sr_1_1

7 Page 19 Chapter 2, “Of Rules Concerning the Bath” page19, J. Thonnelier translation “Kitabi Kulsum Naneh ou le livre des dames de la Perse” James Atkinson translation, “Customs And Manners Of The Women Of Persia, And Their Domestic Superstition” 1832

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