Literary Research
Year23, NO. 91
Spring 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.2634/Lire.23.91.33

Hammam as an Institution of Cultural Exchange in Iranian Folk Literature

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Recived:14/2/2026 *Review:15/4/2026* *Accepted: 10/5/2026*

Abstract

Beyond their hygienic functions and contributions to public health, the hammam (a traditional public bath in Iran) has played a central role in the cultural and social life of communities, serving as one of the most frequented communal spaces. Despite numerous studies on the Iranian hammam, most have focused on its architecture, ethnography, or hygienic functions, while the folk literature associated with the hammam—including poems, proverbs, rituals, and popular narratives—has rarely been examined independently. Aiming to address this gap, the present study investigates the position of the hammam as an institution of cultural exchange in folk literature. Within this framework, it first analyzes wedding poems and songs performed during celebratory rituals, whose performance was well suited to the architectural and acoustic characteristics of the hammam, particularly its echoes and reverberations. It then examines the presence of the hammam as a spatial element in the formation of folk narratives, including stories of supernatural beings. Finally, 251 proverbs related to the hammam are collected and analyzed, reflecting people's everyday attitudes, beliefs, and experiences regarding this space. The research adopts a descriptive-analytical method based on library and documentary sources. The findings show that the poems, rituals, and proverbs associated with the hammam reflect its deep presence in

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the collective imagination and vernacular of the people, clearly illustrating the social status of bathhouse attendants, the common fear of darkness and dampness in the hammam, and the customs surrounding wedding ceremonies.

Keywords: *hammam in Iranian culture, bath-related proverbs, folk beliefs Regarding the hammam, Cultural Exchange and the Role of the hammam in Traditional Iranian Life.*

1, **Introduction**

Public bathhouses played a central role in the social and cultural life of traditional Iranian society. Beyond their hygienic function, they operated as communal spaces where social interaction, ritual practices, and cultural expression took place. Due to their collective nature and accessibility, bathhouses became important sites for the transmission and exchange of cultural values among different social groups.

Architectural features such as enclosed spaces, domed ceilings, and acoustic resonance encouraged poetic recitation, singing, and musical performance. Consequently, bathhouses were closely associated with various forms of folk expression, including wedding songs, ritual chants, and everyday oral poetry. These performances, alongside informal storytelling and conversation, contributed to the formation of a shared cultural memory.

Folk literature reflects the symbolic and narrative significance of bathhouses. Proverbs, poems, and folk tales frequently portray the bathhouse as a setting for celebration, social regulation, and encounters with the supernatural. Such representations reveal collective beliefs, fears, and social hierarchies, while highlighting the bathhouse as a meaningful spatial element within popular imagination.Despite extensive research on bathhouses from architectural and historical perspectives, their role within folk literature has received limited focused attention. This study addresses this gap through a descriptive–analytical examination of literary and oral materials related to bathhouses, aiming to demonstrate how these spaces functioned as sites of cultural exchange and symbolic meaning in Iranian folk culture.

Research questions:

1. How are public bathhouses represented in Iranian folk literature, including poems, songs, proverbs, and folk narratives?
2. What cultural and social functions do bathhouses perform within Iranian folk literature?

3. How do bathhouses function as sites of cultural exchange and symbolic meaning in traditional Iranian society as reflected in folk literary texts?

2. Literature Review

Scholarly research on public bathhouses in Iran has been extensive; however, most studies have primarily focused on architectural, historical, or technical aspects rather than their literary and cultural representations. As a result, the relationship between bathhouses and folk literature has remained largely underexplored.

One of the earlier studies addressing the cultural dimensions of bathhouses is Sajjadi's article *"Bathhouses and Bathing in Iranian Culture"* (2003), which examines references to bathhouses in classical Persian texts, including anecdotes from Ferdowsi and other prominent literary figures. While this study provides valuable historical insights, it does not specifically focus on folk literature or oral traditions.

Javid (2003), in his article *"Music and the Bathhouse,"* discusses musical practices within bathhouses, including horn-blowing traditions and vocal performances, and presents several examples of bathhouse-related poems. This work highlights the acoustic and performative aspects of bathhouses but remains limited in its literary scope.

The *Proceedings of the Conference on Bathhouses in Iranian Culture* (2005), published by the Cultural Heritage Organization, offers a comprehensive multidisciplinary perspective on bathhouses, covering architectural, literary, anthropological, and cultural dimensions. Among the contributions, Dabir-Siyaqi's paper *"Bathhouses in Persian Literature"* examines some of the earliest literary references to bathhouses and briefly addresses related expressions and proverbs. Nevertheless, literary analysis remains secondary to broader cultural and historical concerns.

Tabasi has made significant contributions to the documentation of bathhouse-related studies. In *Bibliography of Bathhouses* (2013), he compiled a wide range of Persian and non-Persian sources related to bathhouses, although more recent studies are understandably absent due to the publication date. In *An Introduction to Iranian Bathhouses* (2014), Tabasi initially focuses on architectural features and subsequently explores cultural aspects, including references to bathhouses in classical poetry. Additionally, his article *"Bathhouses in Persian Proverbs"* (2016) categorizes bathhouse-related proverbs thematically;

however, as acknowledged by the author, the study does not include all existing proverbs and relies on a limited selection.

Shabani and Jabbareh (2014), in their article *"Bathhouses and Their Social Functions in the Middle Ages of Iranian History,"* analyze the diverse social roles of bathhouses. The section addressing the scientific and cultural functions of bathhouses is particularly noteworthy, though literary analysis is not the primary focus.

Qasemi, Hatem, and Tehrani (2018), in *"Reconsidering the Role of History and Folk Culture in Traditional Iranian Bathhouses,"* investigate customs, beliefs, and practices related to bathing, emphasizing the continuity of folk traditions. Similarly, Bardiafar et al. (2020), in *"An Ethnography of the Transformation of Bathhouses in Tehran,"* examine the structural and functional changes of bathhouses over time, with an emphasis on social practices rather than literary production.

Despite the breadth of research on Iranian bathhouses, no study has independently and systematically examined bathhouse-related folk literature as a distinct cultural phenomenon. Existing scholarship often treats literary references as marginal or supplementary, leaving a clear gap in the analysis of poems, songs, proverbs, and folk narratives associated with bathhouses. The present study seeks to address this gap by focusing specifically on bathhouse literature and its role in reflecting and facilitating cultural exchange within Iranian folk culture.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative descriptive–analytical approach to examine the representation of public bathhouses in Iranian folk literature. The research is based on library and archival sources, including published collections of folk poems, songs, proverbs, and oral narratives in which bathhouses appear as cultural and symbolic spaces.

The selected texts were analyzed using qualitative content analysis to identify recurring themes related to social practices, rituals, beliefs, and symbolic meanings associated with bathhouses. The materials were categorized thematically to facilitate comparison across different literary forms.Through this approach, the study aims to clarify how bathhouses functioned as sites of cultural exchange and meaning-making in traditional Iranian society as reflected in folk literature.

4. Results

The analysis of Iranian folk literary materials indicates that public bathhouses are consistently represented as socially active and

symbolically meaningful spaces. Across poems, songs, proverbs, and folk narratives, bathhouses appear not merely as physical locations for bathing, but as central settings for social interaction, ritual activity, and cultural expression.The findings show that bathhouses play a significant role in reflecting collective social practices. Ritual texts, particularly those associated with wedding ceremonies, emphasize the bathhouse as a space of transition, celebration, and communal participation. In many examples, the bathhouse functions as a site where social bonds are reinforced and shared cultural values are publicly expressed.

In addition, the results reveal that bathhouses carry strong symbolic meanings within folk literature. Architectural features such as enclosed spaces, heat, steam, and water are frequently associated with concepts of purification, transformation, and liminality. These symbolic associations contribute to the portrayal of bathhouses as spaces where ordinary social order is temporarily suspended or redefined.

The analysis also highlights the presence of supernatural beliefs linked to bathhouses. Folk narratives often depict bathhouses as places inhabited by jinns or other unseen entities, particularly during specific times or conditions. Such representations reflect collective fears and belief systems, while reinforcing the bathhouse's ambiguous position between the familiar and the unknown. Overall, the results demonstrate that bathhouses function in folk literature as important sites of cultural exchange, where social norms, beliefs, and symbolic meanings are continuously produced and transmitted.

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