# Cultural Factors Affecting the Spread of Superstitions during Safavid Rule (1501-1736)

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**ABSTRACT---** *Safavid dynasty (1501-1736) started its rule by formalizing Shia Islam which transformed the dominant values of the culture. Poorly prepared cultural grounds and improper intellectual infrastructure of the society in Safavid reign which had been hit hard in previous eras allowed changes in values and spread of superstitious beliefs in the society in different formats. These changes survived the collapse of Safavid dynasty and were transferred in later period with some slight alterations. Cultural factors in terms of religious beliefs, values and norms influenced the spread of superstitions and thus became the focus of the study. The results revealed that the embrace of superstitions by the elite, in particular the court, caused the promotion of superstitions across the society. Fanaticism and intellectual fossilization, witchcraft, fatalism and spread of astrology were other influential factors in this process. Moreover, superficial impressions from the religion and employing religious beliefs to justify superstitions were instrumental in the demise of Safavid dynasty. Changed values and social norms of the society were important consequences of believing in superstitions in that time period.*

**Keywords---** Culture- norms- religious- Safavid- superstitious- values

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Cultural staticity is one representation of cultural pathology. Hence, if the culture of a given society is not dynamic and fails to fulfill its relevant needs, new notions and values emerge which may be in contrast to the accepted values or the dominant culture. Values and norms are viewed as the most important cultural elements. Although definitions and representations of values vary across societies, some concept such as justice, freedom and philanthropy are shared among all societies. Values of each society indicate the dominant principles and ways of thinking in that society. Values may undergo changes in response to the needs felt in a given society. If values such as thinking and reasoning change in the wrong way, superstitions and magic are posed as social values. Once the values are represented in behaviors and practices, they gain the status of norms. Norms in turn encompass traditions, customs, laws and ethnocentrism.

Following a power interregnum in Iran, Safaivds managed to start a strong central government that politically transformed Iran. Declaring Shiite as the formal religion of Iran was by far the most important measure taken during this dynasty. This radically transformed the social values and norms of Iran's society. As a result, many values were associated with religious concepts and teachings. Safavid rulers restored the foundations of Iranian national identity which had been undermined as a result of Mogul Invasion and then managed to bring about fundamental changes in the structure of the society and the monarchy via utilizing the identity element of the religion. However, these changes led to the development and spread of a large number of improper, illogical traditions which ultimately weakened the ruling class. People paid the highest respect to the ruling party, mainly because they were associated with the descendants of the prophet and thus were seen as holy. Safavid kings declared themselves as the descendants of the prophet (Peace be upon Him), saviors of the mankind and founders of the apocalypse government who would pave the way for the reappearance of Mahdi, The Savior (Islamic Messiah in Shia Islam faith) (Goudarzi,2008, p.222). This way of thinking combined with other public beliefs and a number of other factors resulted in dominance of superstitions and promotion of ignorance. Considering the religious approach adopted by Safavid kings and introduction of the king as God's representative on the earth, superstitions gradually absorbed a strong religious color and consequently permeated the deepest layers of individuals' private and public lives. This was not only restricted to the common people and had strongly affected the minds of kings and rulers as well. The continued life of many of the social and religious characteristics into subsequent periods highlights the importance of superstitions. The cultural affinity of modern-day Iran with Safavid dynasty has led

to the sustained life of most of the traditions, customs, beliefs and practices of the latter period. Therefore, one has to goes back to Safavid dynasty to seek the origin of current superstitions which have survived into the modern day for a variety of reasons. This research attempts to reach conclusions on the factors influencing the emergence of superstitions in Safavid period and at the same time recognize and explain those cultural issues which have contributed to the spread of these superstitions.

## 1.1 Conceptual frameworks of superstitions

As a part of the folk culture, superstitions have been extensively covered in fields of religion, sociology, psychology as well as other fields of social sciences, each covering particular aspects which are shared in some parts. Some of these viewpoints are as follows:

Psychological approach**:** human tends to resort to superstitious measures to overcome their fears and find appropriate solutions to their ignorance. Psychologists associate superstitions with a number of issues:

1. *Optical illusions:* Some psychologists suggest that when some individuals don't understand the cause of a given event, they start associating them with supernatural, abnormal forces.
2. *Memory lapses*: There is usually a time space between the actual time an event occurs and its reporting. This opens the door to distortion of the reality in different ways.
3. *Suggestion:* Studies suggest that it is possible to inculcate beliefs in individuals via hypnotism or medication.

Psychologists suggest an individual's expectations as another influential factor in this process. When Individuals expect an event, they tend to ascribe sudden happenings to the expected event. For example, some people believe that after sneezing, one must stop whatever they are doing or otherwise they will experience unpleasant consequences (Afshani,2012, pp.68-70). From a psychological perspective, superstitious beliefs give individuals the wrong impression of being in control of the events they can't grasp. Individuals attempt to make predictable and control the events through their superstitious beliefs and practices. These superstition-induced feelings of control help decrease the anxiety. This viewpoint associates the inclination to or rejection of superstitions with an individual's character. More a person feels malleable, hopeless and dependent on others, more they will become submissive to the feelings, ideas and behaviors of other people (Doroodi,2009, p.194).

Religious approach: The source of spiritually, initially pure and untainted, is gradually exposed to outside ideas and passes from one generation to the next. This makes this source affected by visible or undetectable contaminants which in some cases only religious scholars could detect them with their special magnifiers (Motahari,1995, pp.128-129). Some people believe religions and witchcraft come in tandem; religion helps the weary men via employing witchcraft. Witchcraft is mother that has given birth to both knowledge and religion. Islamic teachings place religion against magic and superstitions. To put other way, superstitions are deviations from both knowledge and religion. In general, superstitions are introduced in religions and societies in two ways. The first way is through old societies and cultures where superstitious ideas and practices adopt new faces. Through the course of a religious society in time, superstitions are imported through internal or foreign agents from other nations and cultures and gradually and imperceptibly permeate the ideas and religious practices and customs of that society. Here, interested parties adapt these imported goods to the requirements of the new culture and then associated them with leading religious' figures to give them a religious appearance (Afshani, 2012, pp.68-70). The association between and the interdependence of religions and superstitions were developed and highlighted once the rulers, to justify their mistakes and measures, started relating their action to religion. Generally speaking, promoters of superstitions tend to give their products a religious hue. In other words, they mix their superstitious ideas and practices with some prayers and blessings. As a matter of fact, superstitions are universal and not limited to a given religion.

Social Approach**:** Sociologists interpret whatever is in the society and covered by social sciences as social phenomena and constructions of collective living. In this view, collective phenomena are products of societies. In sociological approach, all social phenomena and realities, at least while conducting research, are at the same level. They attempt to avoid nurturing value-based biases about the phenomena or labeling them as desired, unwanted, good or bad (Rabiei,2012, p.95). Sociologists have analyzed and placed superstitions into two main intellectual categories: A. some individuals believe the culture to be a collection of beliefs, customs, practices, traditions, values, norms, ways of conduct, arts, crafts, means of production, structures and technology. They argue that those concepts which have been wrongly termed misconceptions and superstitions are part of every society's culture. These words are our labeling of other individuals' beliefs and values. As a matter of fact, there are nothing called superstitions and/or wrong perceptions in this world; they are just a collection of values, norms and beliefs of a given society that have been labeled as superstitions because they are at variance with our own established values, norms and beliefs. Advocates of this way of thinking that belong to School of Phenomenology and Understanding intend to capture the reasons, motives and meanings embedded in development of social phenomena. They associate every mental manifestation, value and belief with some specific meaning, purpose and intent, the understanding of which is not possible without understanding the motives and characters of the actors involved. B. The advocates of the second way of thinking argue that there are illogical, unorthodox and improper traditions, customs, beliefs and norms that run parallel to the logical and proper set of norms, beliefs and values. They task sociologists with finding and rooting out this improper collection of ideas. This group seeks

the causes, is positivist and to some extent naturalist. They are primarily concerned with finding the causes while analyzing social issues and culture and do not consider the reasons and motives in their methodology. It seems that there is no a priori criterion for assessing the phenomena and recognizing them in this approach. In the first place, this approach rejects and discards bias and partiality about superstitions and instead sees them as social realities. In the second place, only social researchers are able to draw distinction between superstitions and other beliefs in studied societies.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In an article titled "a sociological assessment of women's position in Safavid era" via adopting a descriptive-historical methodology, GholiZadeh (2003) concluded that women's status had fewer changes following the invasion of Moguls and during Safavid reign. Women were deprived of their legal rights, personal freedom, private ownership and amassing wealth. The results suggest that some gender stereotypes still continue to hold sway and impede the progress of women.

In his research "a study of superstitions and their underlying causes in Iran up to Safavid period", Jafari (2012) concluded that identification of foundations and their development processes over the course of time is an important issue in sociological investigations of cultures. Superstitions are no exception in this regard as they are parts of any culture. His research was focused on the causes and breeding grounds of superstitions in Iran up to Safavid period.

However, Flanagan (2013) carried out a research titled "superstitions in contemporary urban community" on 20 subjects to evaluate the extent a person sees themselves as superstitious. In her interviews she attempted to collect more information on the prevalence of superstitions in a society. She suggests that since have integrated in the beliefs, culture and lives of people, finding out how much an individual believes in superstitions is really a challenging task. The result of her research show that even the people who don't believe in being superstitious are in fact superstitious and demonstrate this in their words and actions.

## 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study attempts to find out about the cultural factors that influenced the spread of superstitions during Safavid reign in Iran. Considering the historical characteristic of the research and the importance of studying the relevant available resources and evidence, comparative- historical methodology and comparative-qualitative content analysis approach have been adopted. After studying available resources on social history of Safavid era, common superstitions were recognized and then analyzed and explained to pave the way for capturing the cultural factors that influenced the spread of superstitions during the ruling of this dynasty. Data were collected through studying books, travelogues and evidence and documents gathered by conducting theoretical studies. Resources used were primarily first-hand resources as well as the findings of the researches carried out. For selection of books and documents, the researcher tried to use comprehensive, rich in information, reliable, clear and understandable resources to ensure the quality of the research. This research sought to identify all types of superstitions during Safavid reign in terms of religious beliefs, cultural values and cultural norms.

## 4. FINDINGS
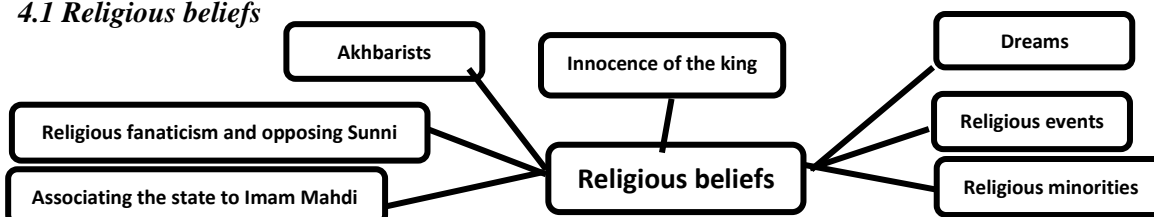
### 4.1 Religious beliefs



**Figure 1:** Religious beliefs

Iranian people were not homogenous and unified in terms of the religion practiced at the time of entering Safavid era. Some parts of the country followed Shafe'I and some other practiced Hanafi while one third of the population was Shiites. Fakirs and mystic cult had as well their followers in a large number of towns. Iranians lacked two features to form a unified nation and find a national identity: a central, independent and powerful government and religious unity across the country. Safavid's rise to power brought both of these factors to this nation (Goodarzi, 2008, p.247). Once Safavid kings established their rule and developed a religious-political structure, some of genuine religious values were replaced by new values via utilizing the ignorance of the masses to secure the interests of the ruling party. Some of these values were even in conflict with religious instructions. Generally speaking, religion functioned as a legitimizing tool for actions of the ruling party. Since Safavid kings were introduced as God's representatives with divine characters (John Foran,2015, pp.80-81), superstitions emerged about the personal beliefs of the king as well as his own personality and traits. Considering the religious background of Iranians over the course of time, a common belief which has been consistently reinforced by rulers in this country is the sanctity of the king and his relations with God. King was seen as God's representative in extreme views. Safavid kings manipulated religious beliefs to their advantage. Scharden cites

that: Surprisingly, Iranians believe that king's mandates are supernatural. In other words, if a king orders a man to kill his son or instructs a son to kill his father, the order must be followed immediately. At the same time, people believe that God's orders supersede those of the king's and if the king issues an order which contradicts the religious, defying him is permitted. In other words, one must suffer any torture and be prepared for any risk to safeguard the rules and mandates of God (Scharden,1996, Vol.3, p.1155). Kings manipulated this belief to enforce their improper decisions without any public resistance.

"Since the king relates himself to the prophet and his household, he claims to be the commander of the religion and has used this position in the best possible way to further his plans and achieve his goals. Iranians believe the king to be always innocent and thus he may not be blamed for his actions. This is why the people don't get enraged when he does not fast or drinks wine. They maintain that the king never commits sins and thus never make him obey the religious rules and instructions since he is a descendant of the prophet (Sanson,1998, p.19")".

Shah Ismail, the founder of the dynasty, was sanctified more than any other king during Safavid reign. This belief mainly developed from exaggerated mystic- Shiite doctrine. People would complete each other to show their obedience, even if it meant losing their lives.

"During Shah Ismail stay in Maraghe where there was a tall minaret, Ilchi Bayazid the Second came before the king. To show how much his followers were ready to make sacrifices for obeying him, the king had a herald shout "those who are fond of the king jump from the minaret down". In a blink of an eye, more than a hundred people jumped down and would compete to jump sooner. In the end, Ilchi pleaded with the king to order them stop" (Monshi Ghazwini,1998, p.115).

A strange manifestation of this obedience which has been cited in many sources was eating the flesh of Shibek Khan after defeating Uzbek troops: "The king ordered his retinue and his personal, loyal guards to maul and devour the body of Shibek Khan who was covered in blood and dirt. They rushed to and crowded on the dead body. Soon the scene turned into a fracas. People took to swords to have a share of the flesh. Some people were wounded while trying to get to the body sooner. Those who were not able to access the body paid money to those nearer to get a piece and show their obeying of the king's order" (Khandamir,1990, p.71).

Since Iran was predominantly Sunni before Safavid dynasty, Shah Ismail had a difficult task to stabilize his ruling. He thus resorted to violence and made people convert to Shia Islam at the blade of the sword. Moreover, he set capital punishment for those who would refuse conversion. "It was obvious that establishing Shia Islam in a country with Sunni majority was not possible without resorting to violence and torture and prosecution of those who opposed it. In some cased death was the punishment of defiance (Sivory,1992, p.27).

Since Iranians were Shiite and Ottoman Turks were Sunni, they always had conflicts. Addressing each other with derogatory terms was one of the manifestations of this enmity.

Iranians tend to urinate when they reach a river or a stream and thus Turks would call them "Kharshahi" (Donkey-like) to humiliate them. This was because donkeys would urinate at the sight of a river or a stream. In response, Iranian called Turks "Sag-shahi" (Sag Sonni) since they would urinate by walls which is what dogs tend to do" (Olearius, 1993, 290).

It should be noted that Olearius confused "shahi" with "Shiite" due to their similar spellings in English and the latter is correct. Along the same lines, Ravandi in his "a social history of Iran" cited some verses from Jami who lived in 16th century:

| | |
|---|---|
| Oh my beloved, give me the chalice of wine | That I am tired of this Sunnis and Shiites' conflict |
| They have asked about my religion | Thanks God that I am neither Sag Sunni nor Khar Shiite |

Another belief which was promoted during this period was the reappearance of Imam Mahdi (Muslim's Messiah) once Safivid kings get to the throne. This was to associate Safavids with the reappearance of Imam Mahdi. To make arrangements for His reappearance, people built a stable for his horse.

"The theory of association of Safavid with Imam Mahdi's rule was regularly promoted from the foundation of this dynasty to its overthrow which lasted 230 years (Jafarian,2012, p.10). Scharden reports that: "In Isfahan and two other cities (Qom and Sabzevar), they always keep a stable ready for exclusive use of Imam Mahdi so they can serve him at any moment after His reappearance "(Scharden, 1995, p.1279).

He also talks about Mostovfiol Mamalek and stables for horses of Imam Mahdi: "The king has dedicated a number of stables to the Twelfth Imam, the last genuine caliph of the prophet who is called Mohammad Mahdi. Iranians calls him Sahebol Zaman (the owner of time). They believe him to be alive and hiding in an unknown place. He will return one day to fight the infidels and pagans. For this, they are keeping a number of strong, beautiful horses with elegant, expensive fittings ready round the clock. Two horses are always saddled and ready for the Imam to ride on" (Scharden,1995, p.1279).

Apart from building stables, the superstitions about the Imam and the king's relation with him became so extreme that to marry so she could marry the Imam. "It is said that King Tahmaseb I did not marry off his sister so she would marry Imam at the time of His reappearance. She is the very woman Mohtashem praised and mentioned her being single while he was dying:

"I am the Homa (the bird of luck in Iranian mythology) of the kingship of Sultan,

The grand lady, sitting on the throne, still unmarried

Please go because you are so chastised

The practices of Akhbaris (Arabic: اخبـاري are Twelver Shia Muslims who reject the use of reasoning in deriving verdicts, and believe Quran and hadith as the only source of law) was another way of highlighting the associations between the king and Imam Mahdi. They deem Hadiths and Quran sufficient and do not believe in Ijtihad (Arabic اجتهـاد). They would categorize hadiths as authentic or weak. However, they would never deny any hadith to make the associations documented and authentic. In addition, they attempted to legitimize the ruling of the kings via producing tendentious, impartial interpretations of some of the hadiths of the prophet and his descendants, some of which were unfounded.

"These interpretations were mainly done by Akhbaris who would not pay adequate attention to the veracity of hadiths. When their cause was at its peak, they even would claim all their news and interpretations were completely true. Akhbari because which was unfounded in the eye of Islamic jurists attempted again to justify Safavid dynasty.

The hadith of "our state at the time of apocalypse" was one their hadiths which has been interpreted differently in every time period. Monshi Ghomi writes these lines about Shah Tahmasib:

"As the noble king was a symbol of remnants of Imam Ali lineage and as was truly stated, "for all people are governments and ours is in the End of Days", he shortly effected the one true religion, eliminated heresy, and sought to conquest all the inhabited parts of the earth and spread the religion of the Pure Imams at all directions, and thus the Safavid is said to be the last government before the Reappearance." (Monshi Ghomi,2004:154).

Interpreting dreams is rooted in Muslim's religious beliefs. Even there are some references in Koran to genuine dreams (Royaye Sadegheh). However, the belief in interpretations of dreams got so extreme that it came to play a part in making major decisions about the country. It is interesting to know that dreams and their interpretations had religious function during Safavid reign. However, the importance of dreams and their interpretations dates back to the time of Sheikh Safioldin and Sheikh Heydar, the ancestors of Shah Ismail, Safavid dynasty's founder who lived prior to the introduction of Safavid kings. There are numerous accounts of the dreams Shah Ismail had, some of which come as follows:

"As a child, I dreamt about being at the peak of Qaaf Mountain (a mountain in Iranian mythology), having a huge, long sword in my scabbard and a sable hat on the head. I was wondering what I was to do with this sword and hat. When I took off my hat, a shining sun would appear and when I put on the hat, it would vanish. I did this a couple of times when I woke up. This dream was tormenting my mind and so I decided to share it with Sheikh Zahed. Upon hearing my words, he told me "that sword is the sword of tutelage of people and the sun was the light of kingship cast upon you (Ibne Bazzaz,1993, p.87-88).

Considering the fact that Iranians were Muslims, lunar Hegira-based calendar (mainly used in Arabian countries) was important in addition to the solar Hegira-based calendar which was developed by Iranians themselves. The lunar calendar was followed for marking special occasions and events. The rulers would do their best to adhere by this tradition. It should be noted that these events were not immune to superstitions and soon were contaminated. Moharram and Safar months are important months in lunar calendar which have been respected by Iranians. Shiite perform special mourning ceremonies during the first ten days of Moharram, especially in Tenth day or Ashura (the day Imam Hussein, the third Imam of Shia Islam was martyred). The available reports refer to the superstitions about the events held during the day of Ashura, some of their most current are given below. Olearius reports in his travelogue:

"The event is held in the front yard of Sheikh Safi shrine where a long flag is planted next to a minaret. This flag has which been made by Fatemeh, the prophet's daughter with the horseshoes of Hazrat Abbas's horse on top of it was brought to Ardabil by Shah Sadroddin, the son of Sheikh Safi. It is said that if the name of Hussein crosses the mind, the wind strongly blows the flag. However, if these words "he got wounded by 72 cuts and then fell from the horse" are wrongly read, the flag moves so fast upward that the staff breaks and falls" (Olearius, 1993, pp. 110-113).

Another common practice was shedding blood in different ways for Imam Hussein. They believed that this would alleviate the sufferings of the prophet's household. This is still in practice and some people hit their heads with daggers in Ashura: "Dagger men put on white clothes as a symbol of shroud during the day of Ashura and on twentieth first day of Ramadan and then shave their heads. Before sunrise, they beat themselves on the head with daggers or swords. To cushion the force of daggers, some people put a staff between the head and the daggers. Those killed in this process are hailed as martyrs and will be resurrected along Imam Hussein on Judgment Day, claim Ghezelbashs. When the ceremony is over, they tie handkerchiefs round their head and bury blood-stained clothes in a special place (Azhand,1980, p.441)

The tenth day of Zi Hajjeh is the day of Eid al-Adha or the "sacrifice feast" which is second of two Muslim holidays, celebrated worldwide each year. Sacrificing a sheep, a goat, a camel or a cow is common observation of this day. The evidence suggests that Iranian performed a special ceremony by preparing and sacrificing a camel.

"Each year, three days before the day of the feast, they pick a female camel and decorate her with flowers, petals and leaves. Then they take her on a tour of the town with a procession in which many people play drums or fifes while a cleric recites prayers and hymns. People gather around the camel during her cross to collect her hair as a holy object. If the agents don't push people back when they rush towards the camel, the poor creature will be trampled under the feet of these worshipers of delusions for sure before reaching the sacrifice place (Delawale,2000, p.546).

Another superstition which demonstrated the fossilized minds of the Shiites and their prejudices against the Sunni community was holding the ceremony of "killing Ommar". According to historical accounts, Ommar (the second caliph

of Mulims) was murdered by Abou Loe Loe on the ninth day of Rabiol Awwal. Some Shiites in Yemen would celebrate this day each year. It should be noted that there are not documented, reliable sources about this event. However, it is known as "the ninth day of Rabiol Avval among the masses". A ceremony is still held in modern-day Iran under the titles "Eydol Zahra" and "Rowzeye Ommar" to mark this event. Careri has given the following report in his travelogue:

"On Wednesday, followers of Ali did a real strange thing. They made an effigy and filled it with straw. They put it on display for a while and then placed it on the back of a donkey and took the donkey to every neighborhood. People called the effigy Ommar and Ibne Marjaneh. They were so furious that burnt the effigy and the donkey at once. This clearly shows how spiteful Iranians are about the usurpers of the rights and murderers of the prophet's son. Burning the poor donkey made me, Prawley and the ambassador laugh and the same time depressed (Careri,1969, p.126).

Iran during Safavid reifn was characterized by coexistence of Christians and Buddhists with Muslims. The presence of minorities with different faiths paved the way for Iranians to get to know positive and negative aspects of other cultures. Some superstitions were observed among these minorities which might have found their ways into Iranian culture over time and vice versa. For example, celebrations of Christmas showed a number of superstitious customs and beliefs.

"They make a scaffold on Zayandeh Rood River in form of a small church, covered with carpets. On the day of Nativity, all priests, staffs of the churches and Armenians living in and around Isfahan, gather in this churched with flags and crosses, attired in fine garments. They first dip the big cross into the water and then pour a holy oil in the river. All these are accompanied by reciting some special prayers. Next the priest takes all the babies and children one by one on his hand and put them in the water while saying the special prayers of baptism "(Careri,1969, p.105).

Delawale reports that: "Cremation is a religious observation strictly followed by Indians. They even make larger pyres for burning the body of wealthy individuals. This ceremony matters so much for Indians that wood has become scarce and expensive in Isfahan. Sometimes you see survivors of a dead crying and moaning hard for them as their pyre was made of only six or seven camel loads of wood while just half a load is enough to completely cremate a body" (Delawale,1969, p.74).
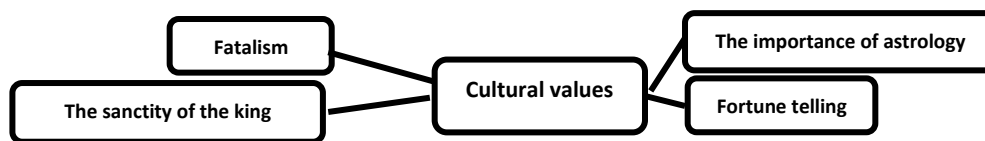
### 4.2 Cultural values



**Figure 2:** Cultural values

From a sociological perspective, values are criteria that enable a society or community to assess the importance of individuals, behavior patterns and other socio-cultural areas. Values are ways of existence or action which are recognized as ideals as individuals. They distinguish and introduce individuals and behaviors associated with them as desired entities (Azad Armaki, 2011, p.14). Cultural values are indispensable to every culture and influence all other components and fields. Values change in response to the needs and prevailing conditions of the society. When Shah Ismail took over Iran, his founded a religious stableman in form of a Shiite government and soon religious values dominated the society. Even the political structure of the country was founded on religious principles. Religious ruling combined with social, cultural and other factors radically transformed the values. As a result, determinism, intellectual fossilization and ignorance were emerged and promoted that significantly contributed to the spread of superstitions.

Astrology was a common value of Safavid era. Not only the public, but also the royal figures and authorities believed in astrology and followed it closely. The strong inclinations of both the people and the court prompted many individuals to adopt astrology as profession. From the kingship of Shah Abbas, I (996-1036 in lunar calendar), a rising trend was spotted in astrology and the number of astrologists dramatically increased. Astrology became so important that the decisions of its practitioners influenced a wide range of activities, from the decisions an average person made for their life to adoption of battle strategies to defend the country. "I do believe that no country in the world believes in astrological delusions as much as Iranians do. Iranian writers ascribe their books to Mercury and believe those born during the appearance of this planet will be intellectuals, instructors and culture-loving individuals (Scharden, 1995, p.366).

A common superstition was auspicious or ominous position of the stars: "Iranians generally believe that prosperity, success and in sum any superiority results when one wins two lucky stars. Those upon whom such bounty is bestowed is called Saheb Gheran (Scharden,1995, p.384).

The royal astrologer fills one of the most important and influential positions in the court. He is involved in everything, from minor issues to major decisions taken about the country. Most decisions are only taken with his consultation. "The king consults with the royal astrologer for anything, minor or major. For example, he asks the astrologer "Shall I go on an excursion? Is it expedient if I enter the interior halls of the palace? Is it expedient that I meet

a certain figure demanding admission outside? Here, the astrologer immediately takes out his astrolabe, studies the positions of stars and makes a suggestion based on a ready-made reckoner. His verdict is final and irrevocable. It is surprising that they are always confident that their predictions will be fulfilled and are invariable (Scharden,1995, p.989).

Fatalism is a clear representation of determinism in this age period. Since they believe one's destiny is preordained, making efforts to change or improve it is not only unwise, but also an attempt to resistance God's order.

"Iranians don't heed the good or bad events of the future. They are neither scared of unpleasant events, nor good ones excite them. They are not generous, tend to seize the day, are content with the status quo and try to make use of whatever they find. They are not worried about future and believe that what God wants will happen. They are submissive to fate and unlike other nations, will not react to change difficult situations or oppression. Sufferings and pains will not tire them. They just keep saying "it is written" which means this has been ordained for them from the beginning of the time (Scharden, 1995, p.989).

Submission to fate was so common that dealing with natural disasters and undesired events was a kind of resistance against God's decision. The banquet held by Shah Sultan Hussein at ChehelSotoon monument (literally 40-pillar building) was a clear manifestation of fatalism. "While they were having dinner, a pillar caught fire and the fire even spread to the ceiling. The king stopped any action for extinguishing the fire and justified his decision by these words" If God decides that this monument must burn, we may not act against His providence (Crosinsky,1984, p.91-92).

Learning about one's destiny and future is a very important issue since it explains the status quo and removes fears of the future. Believing in determinism and kismetic destiny has made this issue more important. As a result, instead of trying to shape their future, individuals try to learn about a future they were not involved in its building. What primarily has made Iranian interested in starts lies in the belief that astrology is the key to all parts of their lives? Learning astrology is one of their biggest wishes. Most Iranians believe that astrology makes them prosperous and thus hold unwavering faith in the truth and influence of these superstitions, delusions and vain beliefs. The large number of astrologers, their lofty positions in the court and the huge expenses made for them give us a clear picture of Iranian's true and unfaltering belief in astrology (Scharden, 1995, p.989).
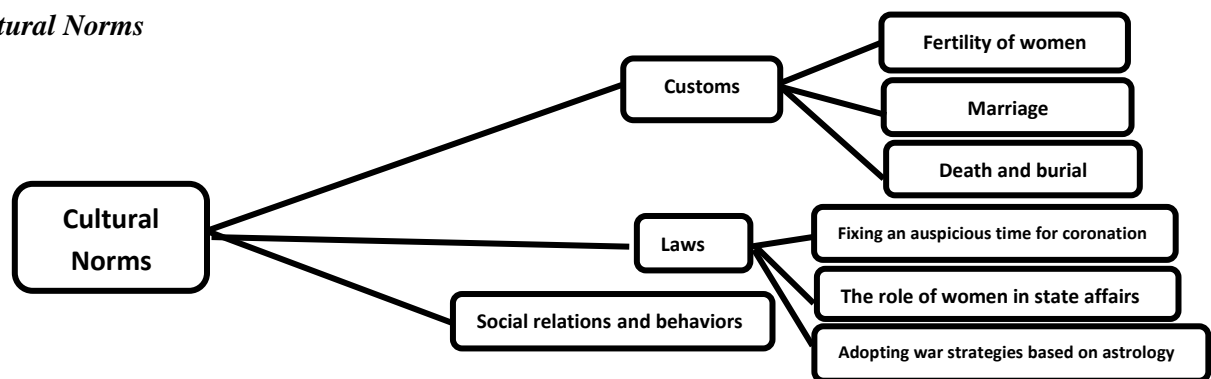
## 4.3 Cultural Norms



**Figure 3:** Cultural Norms

Social values are realized through implementation of social norms. Shared norms, rules and guidelines define what forms an appropriate behavior in a given situation. These are norms that determine how individuals should behave under certain situations in a given society. Social norms are frameworks, routes and arrangements for performing activities and duties as well as social behaviors of individuals with different social status and roles (GholiZadeh,2011, p.117-118). Although following the norms does not bring special advantages to members of a society, their violations result in rejection and humiliation of the perpetrator by others. Observing the values is a norm in itself. Considering the dominant values of Safavid reign and the norm of following them, it could be concluded that superstitions became part of the daily life through shaping the norms. Norms are divided in four categories: etiquettes and customs, rules and social ties. This chapter will address the representations of common superstitions in each category.

Social customs and rituals encompass a nation's beliefs and values. Each society has its own idiosyncratic customs, beliefs and traditions. However, some of these may deviate from their original purpose and raison d'être. If the negative aspects of customs, tradition or rituals surpass the positive ones, the culture will be negatively affected.

Since fecundity and giving birth was the most important duty assigned to a woman, those who were unable to deliver children had a lower social status in the eyes of both her husband and the society. Women would turn to anything to resolve this problem. A major portion of the superstitions about the marriage and married life were related to this issue, some of them have crossed into the modern-day Iran. Some of these superstitious ceremonies had to be conducted in special places to have effect. About the belief of Isfahan people to Seyyed Ahmadian Mosque to cure infertility, Scharden writes: "Infertile women and newlywed ladies greatly believe in this mosque where a preposterous ceremony is carried out. The parents of the infertile woman around whose head a horse tack is tied bring her from home to the mosque. She is holding a new broom and a mud container filled with walnuts. Then they guide the woman up the minaret. While climbing the stairs of the minaret, she cracks the walnuts, throws their shells on the stairs and puts the

kernels back in the container. While climbing down, she sweeps the shells aside and then takes the broom and the container to the altar. In the next stage, she mixes the kernel with raisins, hides them under her chador and then heads home. On the way home, she offers a little from the mixture to men she sees to eat (Scharden, 1995, p.1486- 1487).

Another place associated with healing powers for the infertility was the bathroom Sheikh Bahaei had built. This bathroom had a different structure and would be heated with a single candle: "There is an old copper container in the bathroom women fill and pour it water on them on Wednesday nights and in particular in the night of Chahar Shanbeh Soori (a special ceremony held the last Wednesday of each year in Iran in which people jump over fire) to become pregnant and give births. This container had been associated with Sheikh Bahaei. They say this container it is one of the seven Jaams powered by Sheikh Bahaei himself (Sheikh Bahaei,1989, p.51)

Walking under the bodies of the people hanged was another superstitious practice of the period: "On a Thursday I was walking past a square where the gallows had been planted. I saw a number of women in chador walk under the body of a man hanged. I found out that they believed this would help them get pregnant. They also paid the hangman's assistant who was standing next to the body. Hadn't seen the scene by my own very eyes, I would not have believed that there were women who believed the body of dead could make them pregnant. Another belief common among women was that jumping over the sewage pipe of men's bathroom would speed up their getting pregnant (Carery, 2004, p.46-47)

Superstitions influence the life of human from the very moment of birth to the time of death. According to the current beliefs, they also affect after-death life which is manifested in burial ceremony. Thinking about death and the world to come has always startled human. Although this event has been characterized in Koran, hadiths and other religious books and dissertations, a society inflicted with reactionary thinking and fanaticism attempts to find the solutions elsewhere.

"Before placing the body in the grave, they put it at the mouth of the grave. A cleric recites some verses of Koran and then lifts the head of the body a little before putting in back to its initial position. In the next stage, the body is placed in the grave with no coffin and then the face is adjusted towards the west, on the right. This is done out of the belief that resurrection starts from the east. The cleric picks a handful of earth and pours it on the body while reciting Koran. He then takes seven steps backward, returns again to recite some more verses and then everybody leaves. Iranian believe that the grave must be filled as soon as possible with earth since when the cleric takes seven steps backwards, two angels by the names of Nakir and Monker visit the body. They must not spot any filthy thing or pollution. Then the soul returns to the body and revives half of it so the dead can stand up and sit. At this point, these two angels test all parts of the body and then start inquiring him/her about his conduct in the world and ask some questions about God, the prophet and Imams (Olearius,1983, p.335).

Since laws have a positive connotation while superstitions are associated with negative concepts, the manifestations of lawlessness must be sought to detect the relation between the laws and superstitions and have a proper understanding of the issue. Although Safavids had set up relatively reliable, appropriate judicial structure, the influence of superstitions was strong that in some cases rational decision-making about the country and law enforcement was replaced with the suggestions and interpretations of astrologers and the positions of the stars and constellations. Even coronations were postponed almost for all the kings of this dynasty to allow the astrologers find an appropriate time for this event. This was an obvious case of irregularity as the king had to quit the administration of the country to wait for an auspicious time. This belief held sway during the terms of all the kings. "When Tamaseb Mirza, son of Shah Ismail entered Qazvin as the capital to hold coronation, he did not go to the royal palace immediately so the astrologer announces the right time for his sitting on the throne. His waiting postponed the coronation for 10 days". (Hintz, 1990, p.78).

Since the king would spend most of their time in harems feasting and drinking, in particular after the death of King Abbas I, the women residing there found a special place in the eye of the king and thus started to influence the court's decisions. During the invasion of Afghans, instead of finding the solution and developing war strategies, Shah Sultan Hussein took refuge in his harem. Harem's women gave her some superstitious solutions.

"When the king went into the seraglio, beautiful women with shining faces like the moon and glossy black hair along a large number of servants and maids of honors circled the king and started fawning him" may we be sacrificed for you the king of the universe. Why are you pale? Why your heart has been filled with despair and sorrow instead of happiness? We have made great vows for ruination of your foes and have damned them which. Our curses are more powerful than any swords. We have made vows to cook Sholleh Zard for you and have recited "There is no God but Allah" thousand times for each of its 7000 chickpeas. This will vanquish all your enemies. Then why are you still agitated? (Assef,1972, p.140).

The influence of the astrologers had paved the way for their involvement in decisions taken about wars. They arranged war strategies and tactics based on the position of the stars. It should be noted that their suggestion was put into practice after receiving the approval of the king. "Astrologers and fortune tellers enjoyed lofty positions in Safavid court. They took their profession very seriously and expected their decisions to be closely followed. When Ottomans made another effort to recapture Baghdad, Movlana Mohamad Taher Yazdi who was a senior astrologer of Shah Abbas court, predicted, based on the position of starts and other celestial signs, that Ottomans would not breach the siege of the town. Since Shah did not seem to be convinced, the astrologer requested joining the people and the soldiers under the siege to prove the truth of his prediction (Savory,1992, p.223).

Superstitions bring about destructive consequences for the society should they spread to daily life and common social practices. This leads to replacement of reasoning with magic, witchcraft and belief in spells and consequently kick-starts the decadence of a society. In a society where the scientific ignorance was the received wisdom, social classes and structures underwent radical changes. Doctors have always been found in every society and time period and thus have challenging tasks on their hands. This in turn has given the doctors an important position in society. However, doctors' position was degraded in Safavid era. This story by Schraden clearly demonstrates the status of doctors during Safavid reign and the influence of superstitions on this community.

"Most cemeteries in Iran are located outside towns and villages. However, there are some cemeteries in some cities such as Isfahan. There was a doctor who would cover his face whenever he wanted to walk past a cemetery. When a man asked him about the reason for this, the doctor replied" I know most of those buried here took the medicines I prescribed for them and then lost their lives. Now I am worried they might recognize me and take me to their community". (Scharden, 1995, p.1035- 1037).

The custom of moving a tray around to cure diseases was another superstitious belief adopted by the people:

"Another ludicrous superstition of Iranians is moving a tray around in the hope of finding a cure for the sick. They fill a tray with money and some foodstuff and move it round the heads of the sick for half an hour to treat them. During this process, they murmur prayers and imprecations and claim this to be the atonement of the sins the sick has committed. Then they hand out the content of the tray to the poor and believe the sick will be relieved of their afflictions (Scharden, 1995, p.1063).
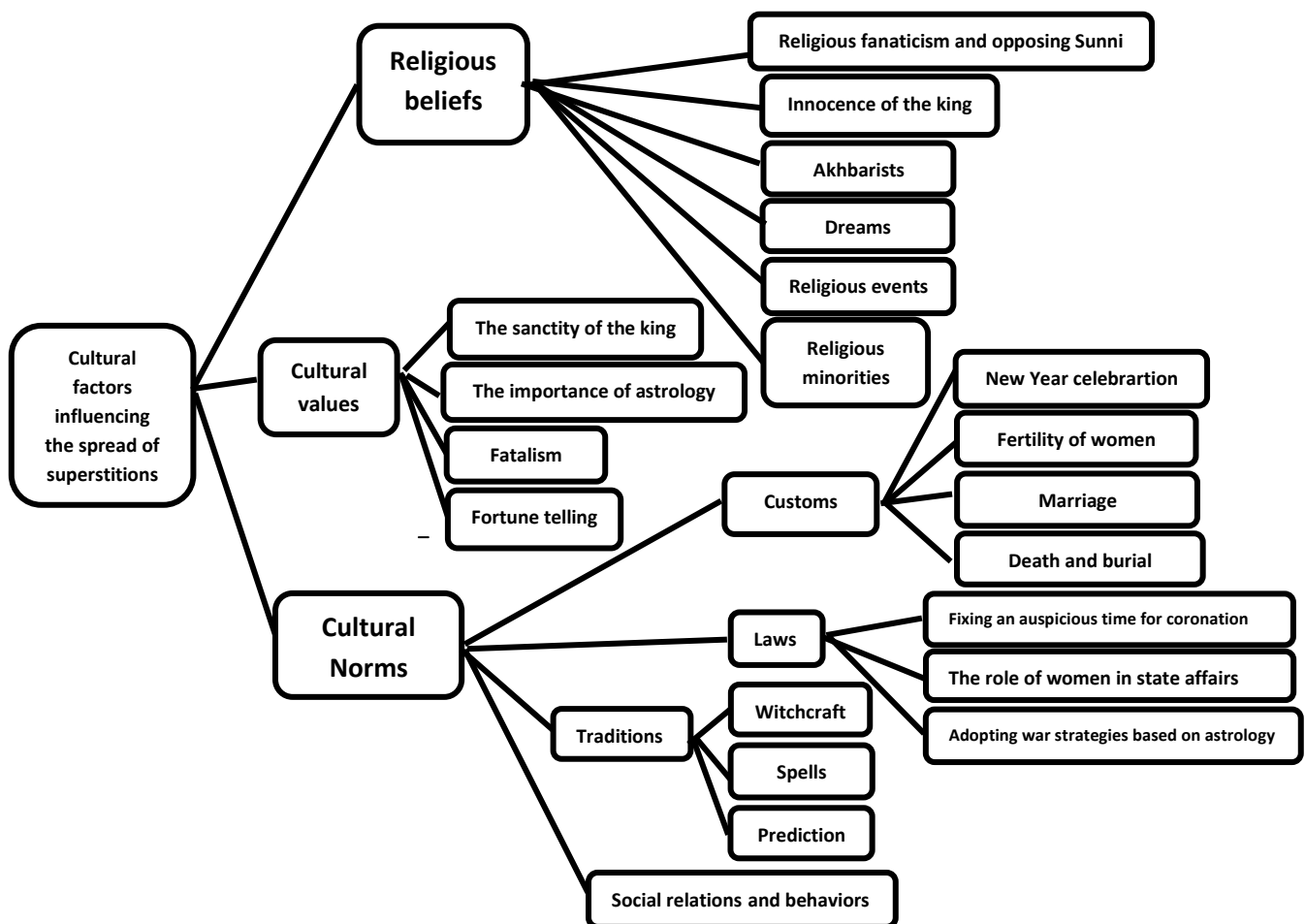


**Figure 4:** Cultural factors influencing the spread of superstitions

## 5. ONCLUSION

Beliefs are one of the essential components of the culture of a given society. Promotion of beliefs with strong, value-laden intellectual supports could insure the survival of a society and transcendence of its members. In contrast, a society that plays host to ignorance and superstitions will fall to its decadence. Poorly prepared cultural grounds and improper intellectual infrastructure of the society in Safavid reign which had been hit hard in previous eras allowed changes in values and spread of superstitious beliefs in the society in different formats. These superstitions were embraced by public in a way that they even survived the demise of Safavid dynasty and appeared in later ages with some

minor alterations. The studies revealed that biased definition of the king's position made the public believe in the sanctity and innocence of the kings. The development and spread of these superstitions combined with unbreakable links between religion and politics, the king's position was not purely political. The religious background of the king just stabilized his ruling. Since people maintained that the king was innocent and holy, many wrong or even illegitimate decisions had religious justifications. Therefore, opposing or defying the king's decisions would mount to resisting God's order and thus was a cardinal sin. The assumption of divine nature of their state and that they were regents of Imam Mahdi as well as the claim of being the descendants of the prophet (for which there is no cogent proofs as yet), gave Safavid kings free reins in their decision making and acting in order to further their policies. This religious and social supports gave rise to violations of laws. Promotion of Akhbarism was one of the most important blights of that time period which allowed the kings to claim they were sent by God via referring to inauthentic narrations. This not only disgraced the pillars of Shia Islam, but also gave the chance to next kings to manipulate the society. Following the accession of Shah Ismail to the throne, Ghezelbashs who were instrumental in this accession entered the politics and practically took over the state affairs. The influence of this community in Safavid's power structure significantly contributed to spread of superstitions in the society in general and in Shiites in particular.

The presence of several non-Muslim minorities who had their own cultures and lifestyles also contributed to emergence of a number of superstitions. These minorities were influenced by and influenced Iranian culture it in some parts. Christian Armenians, Indians, Jews and Zoroastrians comprised the largest portion of majorities in Iran. Their populations reached its maximum in Isfahan as a result of Shah Abbas's commercial objectives and economic policies. Generally, it could be concluded that religious beliefs and practices were simply instruments for development and encouragement of promotions. This has made some people suggest that religions and superstitions have a cause and effect relationship. When reasoning and its associated values are discarded by a given society, rational and reasoned arguments and practices disappear gradually. As a result, fatalism takes over in a society which was the case in Iran during Safavid rule. The overthrow of a dynasty and fall of the capital was deemed by Safavids as the divine providence and thus no effort was made to stop the invasion of Afghans. The dramatic development of superstitions during Safavid reign could be associated with failure to use wisdom and throwing the reasoning aside which was a breeding ground for ignorance and superstitions. After the stabilization of Safavid dynasty which based on mysticism and given the characteristics of Iran's culture and improper impressions of the religion, mystic beliefs and ways of thinking became inalienable parts of Iranian culture. Once monasteries and fakirs rose to power, they not only spread mystic thoughts, but also incorporated superstitions into the society. Looking into the customs and traditions of a society is one way of measuring the spread of superstitions in public norms. The established relations between the customs and traditions and religious beliefs held by the public and the state facilitated the embrace and stabilization of these beliefs in then culture. These beliefs were so powerful and common that it was very difficult to distinguish superstitions from other issues. The influence of superstitions which were mainly promoted by royal figures and the court on the public life dealt massive blows to the social-cultural structure of Safavid dynasty. These blows which were mostly irrecoverable as well as other factors paved the way for the fall of this dynasty.

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