

# Representations of Cow in Different Social, Cultural, Religious and Literary Contexts in Persia and the World

Ali Zamani Alavijeh

Department of Literature and Humanities, Payame Noor University,  
Tehran, IRAN.

[zamanialavijeh@yahoo.com](mailto:zamanialavijeh@yahoo.com)

## ABSTRACT

*The present paper aims to demonstrate the special status that belongs to cow\_ as a sacred creature\_ in different cultural contexts. In this regard, the author analyzes the ancients' beliefs and rituals in different parts of the world to indicate that cow as a symbol of fertility and productivity has always been revered. Studies of religions, in the same vein, attest to the mentioned symbolic outlook towards this animal as scriptures abound with the figure of cow. Hinduism, for instance, attaches a great significance to cows. Mythology as a representation of folk beliefs and literature is an effective means to comprehend how cow is seen by the people of each society. Cow, interestingly, affects political and economic acts which are passed in parliaments. The study should be reckoned as comparative where Iran \_the author's country\_ is at the center of this social and religious analysis.*

**Keywords:** Cow, Mythology, Hinduism, Mithraism, Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Symbol, Social, Cultural, Religious

## INTRODUCTION

Cow, in Persian civilization, stands for the struggle between light and darkness. A cow feeds Freydoon with its milk and causes the rebirth of light and goodness against evil. Cow plays a significant role in the story of creation and seems to control the clouds and winds which grant the earth rain. The goddess of moon is depicted as a cow in ancient Iran. In Avesta it is said that moon is moon is the offspring of Goo Shoravan which means the spirit of cow. We are able to witness the designs of horn, crescent moon and the sun in Sasanid crowns. Cow is also a dominant figure in Mithraism. Mithra, the butcher, sacrifices the holy cow and by splattering his blood on the ground wheat grows. Sacrificing the cow according to Muslim teachers of ethics meant emancipating yourself from lust and avarice. In Persepolis we are able to see the slaughter of a cow by a lion which is engraved on the rocks. Some scholars interpret the scene as the arrival of spring and summer. In Persian folk literature, for instance in stories like Moon Forehead; cow retains its symbol of productivity and fertility. Hakim Sanaiee , the great Iranian poet, frequently refers to the public's belief in cattle. In ancient Iran\_ before Zoroastrianism we have the figure of Sarishuk Cow about which we read in Avesta too. The people could not travel from one land to the other unless on Sarishuk's back. It is kept by King Gupt who is half human and half cow. Many of the historical antiques found in excavations in Iran\_ which date back to the stone age\_ picture the body of a cow.

Sura al-Baqarah is the second and longest chapter of the Qur'an. The surah's name is in reference to the procrastinating of sacrificing a cow by the Israelites after the order of Allah (God). Thereafter, in order to know the murderer of a slain man, the flesh of the cow was used to hit the body that turned the man alive again, so he addressed the murderer. In Sura Yusuf the king (of Egypt) said: "I do see (in a vision) seven fat kine (cows), whom seven lean

ones devour, and seven green ears of corn, and seven (others) withered. o ye chiefs! Expound to me my vision if it be that ye can interpret visions." The same story exists in Bible.

According to the Hebrew Bible, the golden calf was an idol (a cult image) made by Aaron to satisfy the Israelites during Moses' absence, when he went up to Mount Sinai. In Hebrew, the incident is known as "The Sin of the Calf". It is first mentioned in Exodus 32:4. The incident of the worship of the Golden Calf is narrated in the Qur'an and other Islamic literature too. In Egypt, whence according to the Exodus narrative the Hebrews had recently come, the Apis Bull was a comparable object of worship, which some believe the Hebrews were reviving in the wilderness; alternatively, some believe the God of Israel was associated with or pictured as a calf/bull deity through the process of religious assimilation and syncretism. Among the Egyptians' and Hebrews' neighbors in the Ancient Near East and in the Aegean, the Aurochs, the wild bull, was widely worshipped, often as the Lunar Bull and as the creature of El. The Evangelist St. Luke is depicted as an ox in Christian art.

In the religion of Hinduism, the animal called a "cow" is thought to be sacred, or very holy. Most Hindus respect the cow for her gentle nature which represents the main teaching of Hinduism, non-injury (ahimsa). The cow also represents ghee and strength. Hindus worship the cow. The cow is very honored in society, and most Hindus do not eat beef (the meat that come from cows). By honoring this gentle animal (living thing that is not a plant) that gives more than it takes, Hindus honor all creatures. The cow was possibly revered because Hindus relied heavily on it for dairy products and for tilling the fields, and on cow dung as a source of fuel and fertilizer. Thus, the cow's status as a 'caretaker' led to identifying it as an almost maternal figure (hence the term gaumata). In the olden days cattle being limited to select few fortunate folks, the cows enjoyed the status that gold or money enjoys today.

The milk of a cow is believed to refine a person. The ghee (clarified butter) from the milk is used in ceremonies and in preparing religious food. Cow dung is used as fertilizer, as a fuel and as a disinfectant in homes. Modern science states that the smoke from cow dung is a powerful disinfectant and is good against pollution. The cow's urine is also used for religious ceremonies as well as for medical reasons.

The cow is honored, garlanded and given special feedings at festivals all over India, most importantly the annual Gopashtama festival. Its nature is represented in Kamadhenu, the divine, wish-fulfilling cow. In India, more than 3,000 institutions called Gaushalas care for old and infirm cows. The gift of a cow is applauded as the highest kind of gift. According to Mahatma Gandhi, "One can measure the greatness of a nation and its moral progress by the way it treats its animals. Cow protection to me is not mere protection of the cow. It means protection of all that lives and is helpless and weak in the world. The cow means the entire subhuman world."

The reverence for the cow played a role in the Indian Rebellion of 1857 against the British East India Company. Hindu and Muslim sepoys in the army of the East India Company came to believe that their paper cartridges, which held a measured amount of gunpowder, were greased with cow and pig fat. The consumption of swine is forbidden in Islam. Since loading the gun required biting off the end of the paper cartridge, they concluded that the British were forcing them to break edicts of their religion.<sup>[1]</sup>

The Cow was also venerated by Mahatma Gandhi. He said: "I worship it and I shall defend its worship against the whole world," and that, "The central fact of Hinduism is cow

protection." He regarded her better than the earthly mother, and called her "the mother to millions of Indian mankind."

The beef taboo, known as niújiè (牛戒), has historically been an important dietary restriction in Ancient China, particularly among the Han Chinese, as oxen and buffalo (bovines) are useful in farming and are respected.<sup>[2]</sup> During the Zhou Dynasty, they were not often eaten, even by emperors. Some emperors banned killing cows.<sup>[3]</sup> Beef is not recommended in Chinese medicine, as it is considered a hot food and is thought to disrupt the body's internal balance. The ox is one of the 12-year cycle of animals which appear in the Chinese zodiac related to the Chinese calendar. The constellation Taurus represents a bull.

The beef taboo is fairly widespread in Burma, particularly within the Buddhist community. In Burma, beef is typically obtained from cattle that are slaughtered at the end of their working lives (16 years of age) or from sick animals.<sup>[4]</sup> Cattle is rarely raised for meat; 58% of cattle in the country is used for draught power.<sup>[4]</sup> Few people eat beef, and there is a general dislike of beef (especially among the Bamar and Burmese Chinese),

Historically, there was a beef taboo in Ancient Japan, as a means of protecting the livestock population and Buddhist influence.<sup>[5]</sup> Meat-eating had long been taboo in Japan, beginning with a decree in 675 that banned the consumption of cattle, horses, dogs, monkeys and chicken, influenced by the Buddhist prohibition of killing. In 1612, the shogun declared a decree that specifically banned the killing of cattle. This official prohibition was in place until 1872, when it was officially proclaimed that Emperor Meiji consumed beef and mutton, which transformed the country's dietary considerations as a means of modernizing the country, particularly with regard to consumption of beef. With contact from Europeans, beef increasingly became popular, even though it had previously been considered barbaric. The akabeko (赤べこ<sup>?</sup>, red cow) is a traditional toy from the Aizu region of Japan that is thought to ward off illness.

In Nepal, the cow is the national animal. Cows give milk from which the people produce dahi (yogurt), ghee, butter, etc. In Nepal, a Hindu majority country, slaughtering of cows and bulls is completely banned. Cows are considered like the Goddess Laxmi (goddess of wealth and prosperity). The Nepalese have a festival called Tihar (Diwali) during which, on one day called Gaipuja, they perform prayers for cows. Cows roam freely and are sacred. However, buffalo slaughtering is done in Nepal for religious purposes.

The ancient Egyptians sacrificed animals, but not the cow because it was sacred to goddess Hathor, and also due to the contemporary Greek myth of Io, who had the form of a cow.<sup>[6]</sup> In Egyptian mythology, Hesat was the manifestation of Hathor, the divine sky-cow, in earthly form. Like Hathor, she was seen as the wife of Ra. In hieroglyphs she is depicted as acow with a hat. The Egyptian goddess Nut is sometimes depicted with the cow having fourstars on its belly. This represents the four cosmic quadrants of the earth, and the respective flavor each directional energy freely flows through each of these corners. Cow was a symbol of fertility, richness and renewal. She was the mother of Sun. The Goddess Ahet was represented as a head of the sacred cow holding a solar disc between her horns.

According to the Hebrew Bible, an unblemished red cow was an important part of ancient Jewish rituals. The cow was sacrificed and burned in a precise ritual, and the ashes were then added to water used in the ritual purification of a person who had come in to contact with a human corpse. The ritual is described in the Book of Numbers in Chapter 19, verses 1-14.<sup>[7]</sup> Observant Jews study this passage every year in early summer as part of the weekly Torah portion called Chukat. A contemporary Jewish organization called the Temple Institute is trying to revive this ancient religious observance.<sup>[8]</sup> In Judaism, as described

in Numbers 19:2, the ashes of a sacrificed unblemished red heifer that has never been yoked can be used for ritual purification of people who came into contact with a corpse

Traditional Judaism considers beef kosher and permissible as food,<sup>[9]</sup> as long as the cow is slaughtered humanely in a religious ritual called Shechita, and the meat is not served in a meal that includes any dairy foods.

The term "geushurva" means the spirit of the cow and is interpreted as the soul of the earth. In the Ahunavaiti Gatha, Zarathustra (or Zoroaster) accuses some of his co-religionists of abusing the cow. Ahura Mazda tells Zarathustra to protect the cow.

The lands of both Zarathustra and the Vedic priests were those of cattle breeders. The 9th chapter of the Vendidad of the Avesta expounds the purificatory power of cow urine. It is declared to be a panacea for all bodily and moral evils.<sup>[10]</sup>

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

Supports from the Payame Noor University in Isfahan research council are gratefully acknowledged.

### **REFERENCES**

- [1] Chambers, W. R. (1891). *Chambers's Encyclopaedia: A Dictionary of Universal Knowledge for the People*. p. 719.
- [2] Katz, P. R. (2008). *Divine justice: religion and the development of Chinese legal culture. Academia Sinica on East Asia*. Taylor & Francis US. p. 56. ISBN 978-0-415-44345-6.
- [3] Hutton, W. (2007). *Singapore food. Marshall Cavendish*. p. 144. ISBN 978-981-261-321-9
- [4] Devendra, C., Devendra, C., Thomas, D., Jabbar, M.A., Kudo, H., Thomas, D., Jabbar, M. A. & Kudo, H. *Improvement of livestock production in crop-animal systems in rainfed agro-ecological zones of South-East Asia*. ILRI. p. 33.
- [5] Gesteland, R. R. & Georg F. S. (2002). *Marketing across cultures in Asia. Copenhagen Business School Press DK*. p. 156. ISBN 978-87-630-0094-9.
- [6] Lien, M. E. & Brigitte, N. (2004). The politics of food. Berg. pp. 125–127. ISBN 978-1-85973-853-5.
- [7] James Talboys Wheeler, *Analysis and Summary of Herodotus* (p.57). Leeds University Press.
- [8] Carmichael, C. (2012). *The Book of Numbers: A Critique of Genesis* (pp. 103–121). New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press. ISBN 9780300179187.
- [9] "Apocalypse Cow". *New York Times*. March 30, 1997.
- [10] Hersh, J. (2011). *The Kosher Carnivore: The Ultimate Meat and Poultry Cookbook* (pp. 19–21). New York: St. Martin's Press. ISBN 9781429987783.
- [11] Bhandarkar, D. R. (1989). *Some Aspects of Ancient Indian Culture* (p. 72). New Delhi: Asian Educational Services.