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Zoroaster and the Ayatollahs

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CULTURE IS hard to define and even harder to change. Beneath the surface solemnities of politics and the exigencies of economics lurks the intricate web of habits and rituals, practices and privileges, that we call culture. In its overt manifestations, culture may seem a docile tool, or perhaps an efficient vehicle for political change. In reality, culture has the capacity not only to survive upheaval in

the halls of power but also to gradually and inexorably alter the nature of governance, molding politics in its enduring patterns. More than once in Iran's history, after the country was vanquished by outsiders—from Arabs to Mongols—the culture of the conquered survived and eventually molded the customs of the victors to its own pattern. It is hard to imagine that the 1979 revolution will be an exception to this enduring reality.

In that upheaval of some thirty years ago, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini surprisingly emerged as the leader of the unwieldy and incongruent coalition of cultural forces that united to overthrow the shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. In the months leading up to the revolution, Khomeini used remarkable discipline to conveniently hide his true theocratic, antimodern cultural paradigm, feigning instead support for the democratic, nationalist and leftist values and aspirations that defined the demands of the 1979 revolution. Once ensconced in power, however, Khomeini famously declared that the revolution was not carried out for economic gains but for pious ends. The economy, he said, "is for donkeys." Creating a new Islamic society, fashioning new men and women based on an Islamic model that had been perfected in the prophetic era of Muhammad some fourteen centuries earlier, finally discarding the cultural values of modernity was, he now claimed, the real goal of the revolution.

Now even regime stalwarts concede that this project of cultural remodeling has failed miserably. And the failure, along with its incumbent cultural fluidity and political instability, is in no small measure the result of the resilient societal ethos dominant in Iran on the eve of the revolution.

IT HAS become something of a commonplace to say that for more than a thousand years Iran has been defined by a bifurcated, tormented, even schizoid cultural identity: pre-Islamic, Persian-Zoroastrian elements battling with forces and values of an Arab Islamic culture. The paisley, easily the most recurrent image in the Persian iconographic tradition, is said to capture this tormented division. It represents the cedar tree that Zoroaster planted in heaven which was bent by the winds of Islamic hegemonic culture. Adapting in this way has been the key to the ability of Iranian culture to survive marauding tribes and invading armies. But Iran and its heavenly cedar bend only to lash back to their upright gait when immediate danger has passed and occasion for reasserting traditional values has arisen.

Some scholars have gone so far as to argue that even Shiism—since the sixteenth century the dominant and "official" religion of Iran—is in its fundamental structure nothing but a form of Iranian nationalism. Recent remarks by Sheik Hassan Nasrallah, the head of Lebanon's Hezbollah, that Iran's leaders in the last thirty years are all, in fact, Arabs and that their claims of being descendants of the prophet (symbolized by the black turbans they wear) reassert their Arab blood show clearly the continuing tensions between Persian identity and the Islamism of the rest of the Shia Middle East. Nasrallah needs to convince his followers thus that these Arab brothers have left nothing of a "Persian culture" to survive. These controversial comments indicate both the prevalence among ordinary Arabs of this view that Shiism might be an "un-Islamic invention"—and Iranian in origin. To justify his fealty to the country's current supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Nasrallah had to first make him an Arab.

For much of the twentieth century, these two cultural elements have been at war for domination in Iran. In power from 1925 until 1979, Reza Shah Pahlavi and then his son Mohammad Reza Shah tried to accentuate the pre-Islamic component of the country's heritage and dilute the Islamic element. The shah's infamously lavish celebration of two thousand five hundred years of monarchy in 1971—the international glitterati were invited, food was flown in from Maxim's de Paris, and the ruins of Persepolis were used as a

backdrop and a reminder of days of glory gone by—was more than anything intended to accentuate this imperial, pre-Islamic past. Even the country's calendar was changed. The year 1355 in Iran's Islamic calendar (or 1976 CE) suddenly became 2535. The beginning of the Islamic calendar went back to the journey of Islam's prophet, Muhammad, from Mecca to Medina, while the new imperial time sought its genesis in the alleged birthday of Cyrus, the founder of the Persian Empire. As the tumult of the revolution began only two years later, in a gesture of concession to the opposition, the calendar was changed yet again. But neither the hubris of retuning the clock on a whim—earlier tried by the likes of Maximilien de Robespierre in France and Vladimir Lenin in the Soviet Union—nor hackneyed concessions to the opposition could alter the stubborn realities of Iran's bifurcated culture, formed and ingrained over centuries.

No sooner had Ayatollah Khomeini and his clerical allies seized power than they not only began to reverse the pre-Islamic ardor of the Pahlavi era but they also moved to the other extreme, trying to dilute, diminish and at times altogether erase from cultural memory evidence of Iran's non-Islamic past. *Jahiliyyah*, or the age of darkness, has long been a concept used by Islamist historians and ideologues to derisively describe what exists in a society before the advent of Islam. Now some fifteen hundred years of Iran's imperial era was disparaged and diminished as *jahiliyyah*. In the early days of the revolution, some of the more ardent new Islamist victors moved to destroy Persepolis (and were forced to cease their destructive plans only in the face of stiff opposition both domestically and internationally), while one of Khomeini's closest confidants, Ayatollah Sadegh Khalkhali, the man infamously known as the "hanging judge"—a title he had deservedly earned for his role in the judicial murder of hundreds of ancient-regime leaders and the new-regime opponents—dismissed Cyrus as a sodomite Jew, hardly worthy of veneration by a pious nation. Even today, thirty years after the victory of the revolution, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's zealots are taking their ideological hammer to the texts taught in Iranian schools, hoping to erase from the annals of history any sign of pagan "royal historiography."

The clerics even tried to fight some of the most venerable rites and rituals of the nation. For a time, they focused their attention on eliminating, or at least diminishing in value, the ancient Persian habit of celebrating the vernal equinox as their new year (*Nowruz*). In retrospect, this anti-*Nowruz* crusade began even before the 1979 revolution, when in the sixties and seventies religious forces made a concerted effort to replace *Nowruz* with other religious holidays and feasts. While in those days many in society participated in these religious ceremonies only to spite the regime, since 1979 the tables have turned. Now, celebrating *Nowruz* is an easy way to show your sentiments about the ruling clerics. The clerical leaders have apparently reconciled themselves to the reality that they have failed in their crusade against the celebration. But their quixotic efforts at delegitimizing Persian habits have not ended. For the last three decades, they have also tried to dissuade the Iranian people from their ritualistic habit of jumping over fires on the last Wednesday of each year—said to symbolize the hope and desire to burn away the past twelve months' troubles and travails. Even as late as 2010, Khamenei issued a new fatwa declaring the practice heresy and a form of fire worship. Yet both traditions are more alive and celebrated today than ever before. When a regime politicizes all cultural and personal practices, as do the clerics in Iran, then every facet of the culture, every gesture of personal behavior, every sartorial statement (from women's defiant refusal to wear the forced veil to men's insistence on wearing ties or shaving their faces) becomes a form of dissent and resistance.

The Persian language, spoken by a majority of Iran's multiethnic society, and long considered a bastion of Iranian nationalism, has not been immune from the vicissitudes of this culture war either. While much was made of cleansing the Persian language of any Arabic words and influence during the Pahlavi era, Ayatollah Khomeini and his allies made

an equally concentrated and futile attempt to infuse the language with more and more Arabic words, phrases and even grammatical structures. For them, Arabic is the language of God and of the Koran, while to the Iranian nationalists it is a detested tool of Arab and Islamic cultural invasion. Just as the effort to create a new “Islamic society” has failed, the attempt to introduce Arabic into the Persian language has also been unsuccessful. Not only is the Persian vernacular today replete with new, cleverly constructed Persian words, but a whole generation of parents are increasingly moving away from naming their children after religious figures, opting instead for names from Iran’s mytho-history, or newly minted names conjured or coined from the Persian vocabulary. In this sense, then, the 1979 revolution was only a moment in the centuries-old culture war to define the soul of Iran; yet another attempt in the long line of efforts to eliminate or diminish in influence certain components of the country’s bifurcated identity.

ADDING TO the complexity of this cultural dualism has been the temptation of modernity. For more than a century, Iran has faced the challenges of an increasingly global modernity—an interrelated set of changes that radically alter a society’s notions of self, identity, politics, economy, spirituality and aesthetic. Culture became the arena in which these battles were most intensely fought. Every discursive realm, from poetry and painting to sermons and stories, turned into at once “instruments” and loci of contention in a culture war between different narratives of selfhood and individual and collective identity.

In response to these formidable challenges, four starkly different cultural and political paradigms, each supporting or rejecting modernity from its own prism and based on its own set of axioms and ideals, emerged. All were vying for domination on the eve of the 1979 revolution. In a sense, the shah was “unkinged” by the very cultural forces he helped to create. He was himself an advocate of Western modernization, even modernity. He supported a woman’s right to vote and the right of religious minorities to practice their faiths (affording unprecedented assistance to Iran’s Jews and Baha’is in particular). He facilitated increased contact with the West, and the training of a large technocratic class, and finally offered patronage and support for experimentation with forms of art, all of course predicated on the society’s acceptance of his patriarchic, authoritarian personal rule.

In the last decade of his reign, inspired by the cultural sensibilities of his wife, Farah Pahlavi, a student of architecture before becoming queen, the shah’s stern political paradigm was accompanied by a well-supported effort to preserve hitherto-ignored elements of Iran’s cultural tradition. Everything from establishing an office entrusted with the task of finding and preserving classics of Persian music to attempts to renovate or preserve gems of Persian architecture flourished under the queen’s patronage and support.

Throughout the seventies, in the Shiraz Arts Festival, some of the most cutting-edge thespians and playwrights in the world put on radical and innovative shows. British director Peter Brook and his Polish contemporary Jerzy Grotowski brought their new experimental productions to the city. Conservative clergy attacked these performances as lewd and lascivious, intended to undermine “Islamic moral values,” yet they were not the only critics of this display. On the other side, the democratic and leftist opposition (which embraced modernity’s values through its support of the “rights of man”) dismissed the festival as the futile and expensive facade of tolerance created by an oppressive regime. For them, the shah’s authoritarianism, his “dependence” on the West and his “original sin” of participating in the 1953 CIA-backed removal of then–Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh from power, trumped in value any cultural freedoms his regime offered or supported.

While the leftist, centrist and clerical opposition to the shah “overdetermined” politics to the

detriment of cultural freedoms, the ruler, for his part, failed to understand what increasingly became the clear iron law of culture: men (and women) do not live by bread alone, and when a society is introduced into the ethos of modernity—from the rule of reason and women’s suffrage to the idea of natural rights of citizens and the notion of a community joined together by social contract and legitimized by Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s popular will—then it will invariably demand its democratic rights. That society will not tolerate the authoritarian rule of even a modernizing monarch capable of delivering impressive economic development. The shah tried to treat the people of Iran as “subjects” and expected their gratitude for the cultural freedoms and economic advancement he had “given” them. But he, and his father (and before them, the participants in the Constitutional Revolution at the turn of the twentieth century), had helped develop a new cultural disposition by creating a parliament and a system of law wherein the people considered themselves citizens and thought of these liberties as their right—not as gifts benevolently bestowed upon them.

FOR IF cultural and economic modernity, minus democracy, was the essence of the shah’s paradigm, the second-most-powerful cultural model of modernity was advocated by a disproportionately large segment of the Iranian intelligentsia. Though divided in aspects of their aesthetic and cultural sensibilities, advocates of this second paradigm included a wide variety of poets, scholars and historians who championed the idea of citizenship in a modern, democratic polity where rule of law was to be the only mode of adjudicating differences. Identity was, in this system, at once both individual and national. They advocated a modernity that was invariably “Westophile” in its disposition, looking to the Enlightenment, modernism and other Western aesthetic developments for at least part of their inspiration. They were thus culturally more or less on the same side of history as the shah and his modernizing efforts. Yet, steeped as many of these artists and scholars were in what Isaiah Berlin called the Russian concept of intelligentsia, and thereby believing that the necessary posture of an artist was criticism of the status quo, they saw the shah and his regime as an obstacle to, if not an enemy of, progress. The literary and scholarly efforts of this group cemented a sense of Iranian cultural identity. But they were often dismissed and at times harassed by the Pahlavi regime. Limits on their creativity, begot by the shah’s authoritarianism, only added to the schism between advocates of this paradigm and the Iranian ruler.

And within this paradigm was forged the uneasy relationship with the West still present in the battle to reconcile Iranian identity—particularly the pre-Islamic elements—with Enlightenment values. It may be masked beneath the heavy shroud of the current theocratic regime, but it lies in wait. Montesquieu might well have been the first to recognize the inherent difficulties of this sort of resolution when, in his *Persian Letters*, he asked how one can be at once modern and Persian. Indeed, among the advocates of a democratic polity—no less influential but far less famous—were the often self-effacing scholars, poets, historians, writers and musicians who in those years worked hard to discover, preserve, publish and display critical, often-ignored elements of Iran’s imperial era as well as its post-Islamic cultural heritage. Their efforts were indispensable to the emergence of a new form of Iranian cultural modernity that was less awed and intimidated by the West and more inclined to infuse into their work usable elements of Iran’s own tradition. From music and architecture to painting and poetry, there was initially a rush to reproduce in Iran the styles and forms that were popular in the West. But by the late sixties and early seventies, something fundamental happened to many advocates of this Westophile modernity; they forsook their earlier attempts at simply imitating the works of Western masters and began an eventful age of the “return” to native roots. Transcending the tradition of old and incorporating it into the best the West had to offer, rather than simply emulating the Western way of life, became the motto of

this new Iranian ethos.

Many cultural fields witnessed this profound process of looking inward while innovating. Actor Parviz Sayyad and filmmaker Bahram Beizai, for example, took the traditional forms of Ta'ziyeh—religious musical pageantry and passion plays—and fashioned out of them a modernist interpretation that attracted the attention of many of the theater world's most inventive directors and playwrights. Sayyad not only worked hard to preserve these traditional plays but also created for television some of the most memorable characters of modern Persian media. His Samad—a guileful peasant, ill at ease in his new urban surroundings but more than willing to milk his situation for all he could—was uncannily in capturing the pathos and pathologies in the “drama of modernization” that social scientists have long written about. And the cinematic displays of the likes of Ebrahim Golestan's *Asrar ganj darehaye jenni*, or *Mysteries of the Treasure at Ghost Valley* (describing the destructive transformations in the life of a man who suddenly discovers a wealth of artifacts buried under his field), were prescient in anticipating the revolution and underscoring the cultural dislocations that defined Iran on the eve of the uprising. Golestan's “man,” and his tragicomic effort to “modernize” his house by simply buying the accoutrements of a contemporary life, was an unmistakable allusion to the shah's inability to wisely manage the sudden surge of income.

After the revolution, more than once, artists and intellectuals have similarly used myths and metaphors to underscore the implied, but now abrogated, contract between the clergy and the people. Khomeini had promised to go to a seminary once the shah was overthrown, thereby relinquishing any role in ruling Iran. He also promised to prevent any clergy from seizing the levers of power. But once the revolution was won, he breached that contract. Today, every post of importance is divided between some three hundred top clerics in the country. The Sufi tale of Sheikh Sanaan was cleverly used by one assaying to describe and deride this abrogation. In the original story, the sheikh fell in love with the Christian daughter of a pig farmer—something that should have been anathema to him as a Muslim. In the revived and revised account, the sheikh falls in love with Power—and her temptations lead him to forget every one of his promises.

Much the same can be said of a whole genre of “film-farsi” that developed in the seventies. These movies were known for the crass and primitive quality of their production, the archetypal simplicity of their stories—rich girl meets poor boy, family objects, problems arise and then a happy ending follows. Within a few years, even some of these popular films were beginning to delve into “social issues,” showing a culture of vigilantism and at times even nascent hints of newly assertive religiosity. Since the revolution, the enormous popularity of these “film-farsi” among the urban poor has made them into one of the favorite vehicles for pedagogy in the hands of the clerical regime. Hundreds of films, extolling “martyrdom” and describing the stories of war, have been made in the last two decades. The great divide between these highly popular but aesthetically crass movies and the tradition of art-house productions was in fact one aspect of the chasm that divided the preoccupations of the intelligentsia and the cultural habits of the masses under the shah. Today, too, serious Iranian filmmakers—from Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Jafar Panahi to Abbas Kiarostami and Tahmineh Milani—are creating works that are often only shown in international film festivals and deftly defy and transcend the pious shibboleths promoted by the regime's own sanctioned cinema.

INDEED, ALONG with these aesthetic and intellectual developments, the needs of the “ordinary” Iranian have also long vied for dominance in Iran's complicated encounter with modernity. In a country whose modernization was fashioned with petrodollars and controlled

by the elites, it is no surprise then that Marxism should find itself as the third paradigm of modernity. Though by the mid-seventies there were numerous small groups and sects with varying versions of Marxism as their mottoes, the clearly dominant form was Stalinism, with its emphasis on a “statist” economy run by a totalitarian party and inclined not toward the West but the Soviet empire. Like Stalin, these Iranian Marxists also believed that culture was an auxiliary of the economy. Change the economic base, Stalin had opined, and the culture will change with it. Moreover, inspired by the same Russian tradition of “social criticism” and “committed art,” Iranian Marxists too believed that all cultural productions were nothing but instruments of the class struggle. Form was subservient to content; simple, even simpl-minded cultural artifacts, supposedly understandable to the masses, were preferred over “decadent” bourgeois productions that privileged form and aesthetic excellence.

The animosity of most of these Marxists toward the shah was driven as much by dictates of theory—the discourse of imperialism and colonialism, and the shah as their “lackey” if not “client”—as by exigencies of their “big brother,” the Soviet Union. Their surprising support for Khomeini had the same roots. They saw in the religious leader an Aleksandr Kerensky, who lost his leadership to Lenin, and believed they would inherit or grab the power Khomeini would prove incapable of managing. Moreover, toppling the shah was seen by the Soviet Union as a first step in curtailing America’s influence in the region. Finally, striking structural similarities between Khomeini’s Shiism and this form of Marxism—their belief in a messiah, their claim to a monopoly on truth, their willingness to sacrifice the individual for the greater good, their eschatological view of history, their belief that the truly pious or revolutionary are invariably in the minority, their disparagement of liberal democracy, their Machiavellian willingness to use any means necessary to achieve their ends, their peculiar epistemology where a quote from sacred texts is used in lieu of rational arguments—created a cultural consanguinity between radical Shiism and Stalinist Marxists. Politics, they say, makes strange bedfellows; authoritarian politics, like the reality of Iran in the seventies, begets monstrously ill-conceived alliances to achieve the superficially common goal of ending despotism. And thus it was that advocates of the Marxist and the secular-democratic cultural paradigms of modernity formed an alliance against the shah, who advocated his own iteration of the same paradigm. Even more strangely, this incongruent coalition chose as its leader Ayatollah Khomeini, easily the most fervent enemy of modernity in contemporary Iran.

FACED WITH the inexorable challenge of modernity, Shiism in the twentieth century in fact split into two different camps, some trying to reconcile it with democracy and rationalism, while others, led by Khomeini, rejected nearly every cultural component of modernity as a colonial construct. In a sense, this was the fourth critical cultural paradigm in Iran’s encounter with modernity. The other three offered different ways of embracing change, while this version provided reasons why the whole temptation of the progressive era should be ignored and overcome. Ayatollah Khomeini and his small band of cohorts criticized nationalism and denigrated individualism as a ploy of colonialism. Instead, they advocated “brotherhood” in an internationalist “*ummah*,” or spiritual community of the believers. As early as 1944, with the publication of his book *Kashf al-Asrar (Solving Mysteries)*, Khomeini offered a paradigm of politics and culture that not only dismissed modernity and much of the modernization project, but fought on two religious fronts as well. On the one hand, he took issue with clerics who advocated a “quietist” interpretation of Shiism like his mentor and teacher, Ayatollah Haiiri, and Ayatollah Kazem Shariat-Madari (easily the most influential and senior cleric inside Iran in 1978) who believed the clergy must limit their interventions in politics and instead attend to the spiritual demands of the flock. At the same time, Ayatollah Khomeini fought against Islamist reformists—most notably Ali Shariati and his attempt to eclectically mix Marx, Freud, Sartre, Fanon, Che and Islam—who wanted Shiism stripped of its superstition

and anachronistic rituals.

While the shah was busy fighting the cultural influence of the Left, and while the Left, ever self-congratulatory in its exaggeration of its own importance and influence, flirted with the clergy as “allies” in the anti-imperialist struggle, Khomeini and his cohorts worked quietly to enhance their own influence and strengthen their labyrinthine network of groups, mosques, neighborhood “mourning” committees and even professional organizations. They used this vast network to dominate the democratic movement that emerged in 1978 in Iran. Khomeini’s concealment of his true intentions just before the revolution, as well as his ability to portray himself both to the majority in Iran and even to the American embassy in Tehran as a proponent of democracy, allowed for the formation of the unwieldy alliance of advocates and foes of modernity against the shah’s authoritarianism.

THE COALITION that overthrew the shah brought together technocrats and merchants of the bazaar, members of the urban middle class and much of the working classes, along with the women’s movement, labor unions, students, forces of the Left and the clergy. Yet no sooner had Khomeini come to power than the coalition broke apart; the clergy successfully sidelined secular leftist and centrist factions. With Khomeini’s seizure of control, and with clerical despotism increasing its total grip on power, Iran entered a period of political strife and instability. Since 1979, disillusioned advocates of democracy and modernity have continued their sometimes overt, other times covert struggle to realize the democratic dream. For in this theocratic version of Iran, the cultural influences of its Persian past and its adaptation of those influences with the political and economic rights of man have been subsumed by the Arab Islamism foreign to the vibrant intellectual struggle of this nation to free itself of monarchical and autocratic forces. But this culture war continues to play out in the background of politics—the ethos of the “conquered” people working quietly but relentlessly to subvert, change and eventually replace the alien culture of their usurping rulers.

And this current manifestation was clear during the June 2009 uprising. Once again, that same democratic coalition that formed a foolhardy alliance with the clerical regime—and now numerically stronger than ever but still denied a chance to organize itself politically—came together to invigorate what Khomeini’s successor, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and his conservative allies hoped would be an anemic presidential campaign by a dour, uncharismatic Mir Hussein Moussavi. But the remarkable surge of social energy in support of Moussavi forced the conservatives to steal the election for Ahmadinejad. And then suddenly, the country’s seemingly docile population rose up around a beguilingly simple slogan: Where is my vote? In Tehran alone, 3 million people marched in remarkable discipline to demand their democratic rights. Their slogan pithily captured in a mere four words the hundred-year-old dream of modernity and democracy in Iran. Using thugs and guns, prison and torture, the ayatollah has so far succeeded in intimidating the people back into their homes. But a critical look at the past shows the bleak future of Khamenei and other champions of despotism. Violence can only delay but not destroy the rights of man in a nation that has embraced the cultural ethos of modernity. The hushed, brutalized quiet of today is at best a prelude to the liberating storms of tomorrow.

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