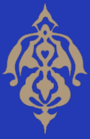

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GILĀN XV. POPULAR AND LITERARY PERCEPTIONS OF IDENTITY

GILĀN

xv. Popular and Literary Perceptions of Identity

Peoples and ethnic groups are often referred to in association with culinary habits that are regarded as peculiarly distasteful. In Afghanistan, Uzbeks are called “noodle eaters” by their neighbors and in Persia the Arabs from Khuzestan are stigmatized as *susmārḵor* “lizard eaters”.

The characterization of collective identities in Northern Persia does not escape the influence of such food comparisons: it is the preferred medium both for the Raštis and the ʿArāqis, i.e. people of the plateau or “interior” of Persia (mutual terms with a potential for stigmatization). Given the variety and contrast of their culinary practices, these are particularly fertile grounds for reflections on otherness. The Gilāni people are rice lovers—rice is traditionally eaten with all three main meals (Bromberger, 1994, pp. 187-89)—which they complement with fish, eggs, olives, and to a lesser extent, beef. This contrasts with the traditional diet of the ʿArāqis, which consists of bread, dairy products, and occasionally mutton. Observing the culinary habits of their neighbors, the Raštis take particular note of their predilection for bread, which they view at

times with amusement, and at other times with scorn. They call the people of Tehran *dahān-gošād* (“wide mouthed”), because they display their large teeth while chewing bread. According to traditional stereotypes, the ʿArāqis are poor “barley-bread eaters,” for whom rice from Gilān remains an enviable luxury. At a time when the daily culinary habits of the plateau people and the Raštis still formed two entirely distinct systems—although such differences have diminished considerably over the past thirty years—the consumption of bread represented, for the inhabitants of the Caspian plain, both an object of derision and a cause for alarm: “The Guilek,” reported Rabino and Lafont in 1910 (pp. 139-40), “does not eat bread but considers it as food unsuitable to his constitution, to such an extent that an angry man will tell his wife: ‘Eat bread and die!’” As quoted by Rabino and Lafont, Captain Arthur Conolly (1807-42?) remarked, around 1830, that Rašti parents, when scolding their children, would threaten, as a means of punishment for misbehavior, to send them to ʿArāq, where they would be bound to suffer the odious misfortune of having to eat bread. (For more on the traditional aversion to bread, see Fraser, p. 88; Chodźko, pp. 203-04; Guilliny, p. 84.)

Among the preferred diet of the Raštis, olives (prepared with pomegranate juice and ground walnut: *zeytun parvarda*), beef, and fish often arouse a deep sense of revulsion among the ʿArāqis for whom the Raštis are *kalla-māhi-ḵᵛor* (lit. “fish-head eaters), a nickname combining aversion with derision. In fact, the inhabitants of the Caspian plain only occasionally eat fried fish-head, and are generally well aware of the bemused scorn with which their neighbors view this fringe item on their menu. Even so, they praise the nutritious qualities of fish-heads, which are rich in phosphorus and are thought to stimulate the brain.

How can one be a Rašti? Connected to these culinary representations of cultural otherness is an entire set of ethnic stereotypes. At first sight, culinary representations and ethnic stereotypes form two independent, semantically unrelated textual categories. In fact, as we shall see, far from constituting independent paradigms, culinary nicknames and ethnic stereotypes form part of a macro-system of representations in which varieties of food and temperaments correspond and relate to each other.

Let us first examine the major features of the Rašti ethnic type as depicted by the man of the plateau through anecdotes and jokes. Such jokes are countless (Bromberger, 1986) and the Raštis are, in Persia, the favorite butt of these mischievous anecdotes: *Jok? begu: Rašti* (“For ‘joke,’ read ‘Rašti’”); the

association between an ethnic type and a favorite target has gained acceptance to the point where it is expressed as a proverb. Even today, a *jokestān* exists on the Internet where Rašti jokes occupy a premier position.

These accounts make the Caspian area out to resemble the Boeotia of classical literature, a land of somewhat slow and dim-witted people. A substantial number of Rašti ethnic jokes (*jokhā-ye Rašti*) mock the naïveté and gullibility of the men from that province; for example, a Rašti may ask the driver of a shared taxi about the distance between Rašt and Tehran, then ask about the distance between Tehran and Rašt. Others riding in a double-decker bus may inquire as to whether the lower deck's destination is the same as that of the upper deck. But the majority of Rašti jokes focus on the sexual lassitude of their men and the wantonness of their women. They portray an image of credulous cuckolds: a father rejoicing, for example, that his son looks like the local butcher rather than the butcher of a neighboring city or district. This reputation earned the Raštis their second nickname given by the people of the plateau: *kamar-sost* (impotent). A whole set of phrases stressing their lack of manliness is used to characterize them: they are said to be *birag* (lacking blood vessels, i.e. gutless or excessively phlegmatic), *biboḵār* (lacking in steam, i.e. dull and insipid), *biḡeyrat* (devoid of a sense of honor, and hence immune to sexual jealousy). Proverbs and anecdotes have given credence to these stereotypes, and diplomats and other nineteenth and early twentieth century visitors to Gilān have helped to spread such characterizations abroad (Abbott, fol. 23; MacKenzie, fol. 19; Rabino, 1915-16, p. 78).

This negative stereotype of Rašti virility is encouraged by both popular and recorded physiognomies. Rašti men are known for their thin and aquiline noses, a characteristic which was established as a specific feature of the "Gilaki race" by travelers, early ethnographers (see, in particular, Chodźko; p. 202; de Khanikof, p. 115) and, more generally, by the people of the plateau. Popular representations, undoubtedly influenced by ancient theories of physiognomy (*qiāfa*), associate a man's nose with his sexual prowess. A large nose indicates strength, virility and energy. Judged by these popular notions, therefore, Gilān appears as an underprivileged zone whose inhabitants' assets have little potential to arouse envy.

But what exactly is the significance of this reputation for a phlegmatic nature and lassitude? The mechanisms of this popular anthropology will be explored in two ways.

Cold and hot. To many ʿArāqis, the lethargy of the Raštis is due to the humidity of the Caspian plains. Again, according to the norms of popular geography, men's physical and sexual capacities are directly related to the temperature and the degree of humidity in the climate. In arid regions, men are virile and women are sensual, though not easily approachable (hot and dry, like the climate); on the other hand, in cold and humid countries, the men are lazy and the women are easy. This popular theory echoes the scientific traditions of Arab-Persian geography—and prior to that of Hippocratic (see HIPPOCRATES) geography—giving the climate a determining role in molding personal virtues. The earth is divided according to a tradition which combines Greek and Mazdean contributions into seven countries (*kešvar*s) or climes (q.v.) and, for example, as described by Masʿudi, organized into "a star-shaped layout" (Miquel, p. 70) around a pivotal point of reference formed by the land stretching from Babylonia to Khorasan. In this classification, Deylam (Gilān) belongs to the sixth clime and, according to Masʿudi (*Moruj*, tr. Pellat, II, p. 518, par. 1361), the men of these northern regions, which included the Turks and the Deylamites at the time, have a "cold temperament," "wet principles," and express "few sexual desires."

This interpretation of ethnic behavior as dependant upon climate is only a small part of a much broader system of representations of the world and of human beings and their features, a system organized around two major categories, cold (*sard*) and hot (*garm*), as well as two minor categories, dry (*ḵošk*) and humid (*marṭub*). This hierarchical system is used to classify climates, foods, diseases, seasons and stages of life, and also people. According to principles inherited from Hippocrates and Galen regarding body humors (see HUMORALISM, individual and collective behavior is largely dependent on the type of food consumed. Hot foods regenerate the blood—a fundamental humor—and engender an expansive temperament that sustains one's strength, vigor, and manliness. Cold foods, on the contrary, are associated with a phlegmatic temperament, and with weakness and sexual lethargy. According to the food classifications in Persia, the Gilānis are, in contrast to the ʿArāqis, eaters of cold food. They consume rice, eggs, fish, vegetables, and fresh fruits in abundance, and they like sour foods, all products and tastes considered to be "cold" (see Bromberger, 1985; idem, 1994; Nasr, 1976). The nicknames (*kalla-māhi-ḵor* and *kamar-sost*) are not, therefore, independent expressions of derision based on alterity, but part of the same system of representation in which varieties of foods and varieties of temperaments respond to, and correspond with, one another.

The world turned upside down. Gilān is a favorite subject of Tehrani jibes because it provides a combination of the two main stimuli that create intercommunity mockery: proximity in space (one easily scoffs at a neighbor), and a high degree of cultural variation (strangeness and otherness). To the ʿArāqi people, the neighboring Caspian area is a topsy-turvy world, the reverse of their own identity: it is wet not dry, it is green not ochre, it is white (Safid-rud) not red (Qezel-ozon), its people grow rice not corn, they eat fish not meat, they have cows not sheep, donkeys not dromedaries, and their houses are wide open, not enclosed by exterior walls; it is a society where the sense of honor (*nāmus*) and violence between individuals and groups is less marked than in the Persian interior; it is, in a way, a feminine as opposed to a masculine society (a greater participation of women, seldom veiled, in production activities, a greater flexibility in gender relations, though obviously not to the extent suggested by the jokes). So Gilān appears, in ʿArāqi representations, as a paragon of otherness, a situation that often invites a smile.

In the end, these jokes and anecdotes about the Raštis teach us as much about the specificities (blown out of proportion in these texts) of the Caspian population as they do about the dominant values of those in the Persian interior who make up these jokes and find them amusing.

Gilān as seen through literary tradition: Hell and Paradise, a land of refuge and rebellion. In addition to the representations of the Gilāni identity characterized by ethnic jokes, there are other images of the Caspian world recorded in the literary traditions (major mythological and literary texts, travelers' stories, historical studies, etc.). Through these, the region appears at times as almost infernal, and at other times as an earthly paradise; in addition, it is described by many local writers (Faḵrāʾi, 1976; Jawādi, 1964; Kešāvarz, 1968) as a haven for Aryan culture, an academy of ancient and pre-Islamic customs, a marginal zone, protective of its independence, and a hotbed of insubordination.

Hell and paradise. The "infernal" image of the Caspian world is the result of two extremely disparate traditions: on the one hand, the tradition of Mazdean mythology, with its reverberations in the *Šāh-nāma*, and on the other hand the tradition carried on by Arab travelers and later by Europeans. In the Avesta, "the fourteenth place" created by Ahura Mazdā, "Varena and its four corners" (*Vendidad* 1.14) appears like a marginal and threatening space. According to the Great *Bundahišn* (q.v.), the people of Varena and Māzana (mythical countries located in the South Caspian region) are descendants from a

different couple than the one who begot the Iranians. The populations in these marginal areas are known as *an-ērān,* an-Aryan, foreign to the Iranian race (*Bundahišn* 15.28). As James Darmesteter notes (II, p. 370), in the Avesta and the *Šāh-nāma*, the Caspian region was to Iran what Ceylon became to India in the *Rāmāyana*. It is a strange world, home to bad blood and populated by demons (*daeva*). The geographical name, Varena—considered by several authors, with somewhat arcane philological reasoning, as the radical of Gilān—also has a homonym: the word *varena*, which means “demon of evil desire and lust.” The Avesta, as Darmesteter notes, often exploits this similarity. Thus, the expression *varenya drvant* can mean “the malicious people of Varena,” as well as “the malicious people with evil passions.” The figures that embody such brutality and lust are, according to mythical traditions, the demons who haunt the northern forests of the Caspian region by the thousands, and who battle with Hušang and Rostam in memorable episodes of the *Šāh-nāma*. The former raises an army of lions, tigers and *pari*s (fairies) to triumph over the black *Div*; the latter, Rostam, faces the white *Div*, shut up in his castle, “a place of fear, between two mountains above which no eagle would dare to fly,” which can only be reached after a “difficult and dangerous” journey; he kills him, then massacres the “thousands and thousands of divs devoted to black magic” (*Šāh-nāma*, ed. Mohl, I, p. 529). Local popular tradition preserved the memory of the legendary episode and of the site; they are located on the eastern border of Tonokābon (q.v.), on the heights of Dāniāl where a cave (*ḡār*) is said to be the remnants of the castle of *Div-e safid* (MacKenzie, fol. 44).

This image of the Caspian forests as the cradle of wild forces is associated with a more prosaic image of an area saturated with rain, a universe of foul vapors and fevers. This apocalyptic representation was spread by Arab travelers, accustomed to a dry environment, as an expression of their astonishment at the discovery of this world of moisture. In the early 10th century, Ebn Ḥawqal used these same terms to describe the climate of the area: “It rains frequently there, it may even rain without interruption for one whole year, with no sign of the sun” (Ebn Ḥawqal, p. 371). Between the 17th and 20th centuries, Europeans who passed through the area or stayed for a time disparaged its “hothouse atmosphere” of “mephitic vapors” (Chodźko, Dec. 1849, p. 261). MacKenzie (fol. 20), speaking ironically, writes, “The fact is that no one but a water-fowl, a frog or a Gilaki can feel at home in Gilān.” Lord Curzon (I, p. 361) goes further on the subject, calling the area a “malarial hell,” and concludes his description with the proverb *marg miḵᵛāhi Gilān boro* “If you wish to die,

go to Gilān." We understand why, with an avalanche of such images, the region was perceived by the populations of the Persian interior as the *locus classicus* for banishment and exile. Jean Chardin (ed. Lecointe, VI, p. 109) and Tavernier, p. 92) both recall the same anecdote: "When the king appoints a man of good reputation as the governor of Gilān, one must wonder: 'Has he killed or stolen to warrant being governor of Gilān?'"

In contrast to the image of a malarial hell, Gilān is also, according to the same authors, an earthly paradise, with luxurious vegetation and a variety of delights. Thus Jonas Hanway (q.v.), after describing "the extreme moisture of the earth" and the moisture in the air "so productive of rust that even the work of a watch can with difficulty be preserved" (III, p. 190), compares Gilān to a sort of paradise: "The soil is exceedingly fertile, producing… every kind of fruit without culture; for besides oranges, lemons, peaches and pomegranates, here are abundance of grapes, the vines supporting themselves on the trees and growing wild in the mountains with great luxuriance; so that a considerable part of the province is quite a paradise" (Hanway, p. 191). Travelers frequently mention this image of a natural and lavish garden. It is true that the trees grown in the enclosed gardens are often the domesticated offshoots of indigenous wild species. Such is the case with walnut, hazel, plum, cherry, apricot, pear, apple, medlar, quince, fig and pomegranate trees, all of which probably originated in the Caspian area (Haudricourt and Hédin, pp. 107-20; Bazin, I, p. 73). This aura of luxuriance is reinforced by a profusion of wild vines (*raz*), "hanging like festoons between trees, as black and as big as the cables of a ship" (Chodźko, II, 1850, p. 64). Again, the Caspian area is where vine originated and here it was never domesticated.

A land of refuge and dissidence. Which episodes of Gilān's complex history do popular memory and history prefer to retain? Which images make up the regional consciousness of the past?

Several intellectuals from the region (Kešāvarz, pp. 131-32; Faḵrāʾi, pp. 212-14) evoke a powerful image of Gilān as a land attached to its independence, inclined to rebellion and insubordination, and as a custodian of specific Iranian traditions. It is indeed worth noting that for two millennia, up to its annexation by Shah Abbas I (1588-1629), the province had been spared from the lasting influence of highly organized states that had extended their dominion to its very doorstep. This tradition of resistance to invaders is a

leitmotif in the works of both regionalist and nationalist historians and writers (such as Sadegh Hedayat [q.v.], Aḥmad Kasravi, Moḥsen Azizi, Ḡolām-Ḥosayn Ṣadiqi), who describe Gilān through the ages as "a standard-bearer of Iranism," to use Minorsky's phrase (p. 1).

The people known in antiquity as the Mardi (Herodotus, I.84; Aeschylus, *The Persians* 5.294; Arrian *Anabasis*, 3.25), the Tapurians (Arrian, 3.25), the Cadusians (Plutarch, *Artaxerxes* 9.24; Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 5.2), and apparently, more recently, the Gelae ("Gelae quos Graeci Cadusios appellavere," Pliny, *Natural History* 6.16) appear as unmanageable nationalities refusing to yield to the yoke of empires. Arrian, a companion of Alexander, comments: "No one had invaded their country because of the difficulty of moving through the land and also because the Mardoi were not only poor but quarrelsome" (*Anabasis* 3.25). This tradition of insubordination and secessionism is confirmed by several episodes in the history of Iran under the Achaemenid, Parthian, and Sasanian dynasties (see, for example, Minorsky, p. 4; Ghirshman, pp. 195, 235; Rekaya, p. 123).

But, in the memory of the regional and national past, these events are of little consequence compared to "the fierce resistance" which, according to tradition, the populations of Gilān displayed against the Arab invaders. Local historians emphasize the point: "The Daylamites fueled a merciless hatred towards Arabs and used any and all occasions to attack them, which explains the existence of an important military base, established in the fortress of Qazvin called 'door of paradise'" (Faḵrāʾi, p. 23). "Any Moslem who spent at least 24 hours in this city with the intention of taking part in the holy war against infidels was guaranteed a place in paradise" (idem, p. 222). To several historians of Persia, this resistance represents a part of a national epic: "The Moslems had already invaded France, all the way to the Loire river, and this handful of men still resisted!" (Kasravi, p. 6). The facts are undoubtedly more complex, as Rekaya (pp. 149-50) points out. However, the image of an irredentist Gilān, serving as a refuge for Iranism, was further reinforced through a series of major episodes, over the course of the 8th and 9th centuries, which highlighted the relentless singularity of the area: the rebellion of the ʿAlid Yaḥyā b. ʿAbdallāh, of Māzyār, the conversion to Zaydite Shiʿism of the populations of Deylam and Bia-piš (the region east of Safidrud), the introduction of a Zaydite state into the Caspian area, and the presence of local dynasties acting like the guardians of old Iranian traditions. One of the most outstanding figures asserting this continuity was that of Mardāvij b. Ziār, founder of the Ziarid dynasty, who

controlled various areas in northern Persia in the 10th and 11th centuries. A native of the plain of Gilān, Mardāvij professed violently anti-Moslem ideas; to show the deep roots of his dynasty in the Iranian tradition, he “had a gold throne made and a miter decorated with invaluable stones to the same design as that of Sasanian King Chosroes Anurshivān” (Minorsky, p. 18). In this context, one should also mention the extraordinary exploits of the Buyids of Deylamite origin, who were Twelver Shiʿites and adopted the title of *šāhanšāh*, claiming a genealogy which made them descendants of the Sasanian kings.

The image of Gilān as a land of refuge, dissidence and Iranism has been enhanced by several episodes during the reign of the Turkish-Mongolian dynasties. The Ilkhanid ruler Ölejtü tried to annex the area, but, following a “Pyrrhic victory” (Boyle, p. 401), did not manage to control it. Under the Timurid dynasty, the province remained a frontier land (*dār al-marz*). The local dynasties then continued to claim a specific Iranian ascendancy: the Ešaqvand people, who controlled Bia-pas (the area located to the west of Safid-rud), claimed a Sasanian origin, the *sayyed* Amir Kiāʾi of Lāhijān, who ruled over Bia-piš, claimed descent from the fourth Shiʿite Imam (Rabino, 1949, p. 322). Gilān also served as a haven for the young Esmāʿil, the founder of the Safavid dynasty; he lived there as a recluse from 1493 to 1499 with “seven Sufis who remained in hiding in the forest for seven years, leaving behind their wives, children and belongings and knowing they were destined to martyrdom” (according to *ʿĀlamārā-ye Šāh Esmāʿil*, quoted by Aubin, p. 3). The establishment of the Safavid dynasty did not put an end to the insubordination of the province, and it was only under Shah Abbas that, in 1592, Gilān was conquered.

All these events, whether real or legendary, were the subject of a wide variety of differing commentaries and characterizations. Although intellectuals and historians agree on the image of Gilān as a hotbed of insubordination and as a “standard-bearer for Iranism,” the facts they describe point to opposing perceptions of “Iranity.”

To the majority, the resistance to Arabs, the Sasanian origins claimed by several local dynasties, and the preservation of pre-Islamic customs have made Gilān into a symbol of the national cause and long-run continuity. The underlying equation for this vision of history could be formulated as: Gilānity = Aryanity = Iranity. It should come as no surprise that this point of view, widespread among the regional literary elites, was fiercely defended by several professional historians, including Azizi and Minovi, who wrote

between 1930 and 1940, at a time when the Pahlavi regime sought to anchor its legitimacy in the multi-millennial Aryan traditions of old Iran. At a time when fascism and Nazi propaganda were at their most pervasive, this Aryan image was also promoted by intellectuals who were not sympathetic to the Pahlavi regime. Also meaningful is the fact that, later on, in the 1960s, children's magazines (*Eṭṭelāʿāt-e kudakān*, *Keyhān baččahā*) chose Mardāvij as the hero of stories and comic strips.

This vision of Gilān's past is either associated with, or opposed to, another image of the historical role of the south-Caspian provinces often portrayed as the cradles of national Islam. This view is supported by the fact that several important episodes in the historical development of Shiʿism, such as the foundation of a Zaydi state under the impulse of Alid refugees, the Buyids' "epic," and young Esmāʿil seeking refuge in Lāhijān, all took place in Gilān.

The tradition of an insubordinate Gilān was reinforced by several episodes of modern and contemporary history. In 1804, at the beginning of the Russo-Persian war, the local population fiercely resisted the troops that had landed in Anzali on their way towards Rašt, forcing them to withdraw (Curzon, p. 388; Afary, 1991, p. 147). Above all, during the Constitutional period, protests and rebellions were exceptionally intense in the province. Many associations and societies (*anjoman*s) were created in both cities and villages, fishermen went on strike, and peasants, demanding better conditions, refused to pay their land rents. This rebellion was supported and led by intellectuals and city craftsmen linked to Caucasian Social and Democratic movements. Two leaders particularly distinguished themselves in propagating revolutionary ideas in rural areas: Sayyed Jamāl Šahrāšub ("the urban rebel-rouser") and Raḥim Šišabor ("the glass cutter"). An armed rebellion, directed against the principal landowner, broke out in Ṭāleš in 1906; government troops, dispatched in 1908, did not manage to overcome it. The following year, the revolutionaries seized Rašt and marched on Tehran where they joined Baḵtiāri rebels and contributed to the fall of Moḥammad-ʿAli Shah (Afary, 1991).

As deeply rooted as they are, these images of a rebellious and unruly Gilān are eclipsed by those of Mirzā Kuček Khan, leader of the Jangali movement (q.v.; 1915-21), who became the area's emblematic hero. The symbolic space occupied today by the so-called "Commander of the Forest" (*sardār-e jangal*) is considerable. Boulevards, a natural park, cinemas, and a ferryboat (connecting Anzali to Baku) all bear his name or one of his epithets. Posters, a stamp, and murals commemorate his memory. A television series, broadcast

on several occasions in the late 1980s and early 1990s, recounts the principal events of the *Jangal.* Songs, poems, articles in local magazines (particularly in *Gilevā*), paintings (Ḥājizāda's, in particular) mention this charismatic character; his tomb, now restored, is topped by a mausoleum built in 1982. As a supreme dedication, his statue has been standing since 1999 on the square in front of the City Hall in Rašt (photo 1).

But this hero, his actions, the movement he led, the ephemeral republic he presided over in 1920-21, are all subject to contrasting interpretations, a "contentious historiography," to use Janet Afary's apt phrase (1995), even to those who claim to be his followers.

In popular representations, Mirzā Kuček Khan appears as a sort of Robin Hood, a symbol of regional identity in appearance and manner. Songs celebrate the purity of his light blue eyes. Mirzā spoke Gilaki and dressed in the manner of the Ṭāleš or Gāleš, wearing trousers and a jacket, both made of *šāl*, a coarse-looking fabric woven locally (see CLOTHING xxii), and wearing *pātave* (puttees) and *čumuš* (cowhide shoes) typical of regional dress. Popular memory also recalls his role as a redresser of wrongs, who solved even the most sensitive problems (disputes with landowners, irrigation-related conflicts, etc.) directly on the spot, or his role in the modernization of the region (construction of roads, schools, etc.). Mirzā Kuček and his movement are also closely associated with the forest, and with all it represents in the Caspian world. The forest is a place of refuge and freedom to which one withdraws to escape injustice; on several occasions, Mirzā Kuček withdrew to the forest from fights and conflicts, especially with the Bolsheviks. A common expression among the area's intellectuals translates this melancholic and voluntary withdrawal into the forest-refuge as *jangalzadagi*, (the "forestoxication" or "forest sickness"). The character of Mirzā Kuček incarnates this local forest imagery associating freedom with rebellion. This association is particularly strong in Ḥājizāda's paintings, two of which (pp. 58, 77) show Mirzā Kuček in the trunk of a tree.

However, beyond the standard image of a local hero, there are also polemical and contradictory representations of this uncommon character. He is a guerrilla hero, sporting wild hair and a beard (see Bromberger, 2010, pp. 31-35), a portrayer of socialist-oriented anti-imperialistic ideas such as those glorified by the revolutionary movements of the extreme left in the 1960s. Partially in memory of the *Jangali* movement and its leader, a Marxist group well established in northern Persia called the *Fedāʾiyān-e ḵalq* ("the people's

fighters") chose a site in the Gilān forest to start a sporadic guerrilla war which lasted eight years. The attack on Siāhkal's military police headquarters took place on 8 February 1971, and marked the beginning of an armed adventure which was to have important repercussions (Abrahamian, p. 159). Another movement of the revolutionary left, the Islamic movement of the *Mojāhedin-e ḵalq*, who named their newspaper *Jangal* (published between 1972 and 1975), arrogated Mirzā Kuček's image as anti-imperialistic hero. The guerrilla and opposition movements in Gilān in the early 1980s likewise appropriated the symbol.

The Islamic regime emphasizes the combat carried out by Mirzā Kuček "for the sacred values of Islam and the independence of Iran." On his tomb the following epitaph is engraved: "Commander of the Forest, Mirzā Kuček Khan the Jangali, rose up and responded to the call of Islam, and through the roar of his canon fire brought the voices of the poor and the oppressed of Iran to the ears of people worldwide."

There is no shortage of arguments to support this representation: Mirzā Kuček studied Islamic theology, and he broke with the radicals and the Bolsheviks who, at the time of their arrival in 1920, damaged mosques, conducted a campaign against religion, and questioned the status of private property. In a letter to Lenin (Chaqueri, 1983, p. 155), the Jangali leader condemns the Bolshevik propagandists "who are ignorant of the manners and customs of the Iranian people." His death, whose many different versions are transmitted by "oral tradition," fits the mold of martyrdom and links him to the "saints" of Shiʿism. A recent textbook (*Tāriḵ-e moʿāṣer-e Irān. Sāl-e sevvom-e āmuzeš-e motawasseṭa-ye ʿomumi*, pp. 137-38) emphasizes that Mirzā Kuček sacrificed himself as a martyr (*šahid*) for sacred values (*ārmānhā-ye moqaddas*), and describes the last days of his life. Abandoned by all (many of his followers either betrayed him or returned to Russia), Mirzā Kuček bid farewell to his wife, an honest country woman, and offered to divorce her to give her the possibility of remarrying; a paragon of honor, she refused. Mirzā gave her the only valuable item he possessed, a gold alarm clock: "Each time it rings, you will think of me," he said. Husband and wife parted, their eyes full of tears. Mirzā Kuček reached the mountains with his most faithful companion, a German officer known as Hušang (see Chaqueri, 1995, pp. 461-62). Surprised by a snowstorm, he died of cold; his head was cut off and brought to Tehran by Ḵālu Qorbān, one of his former lieutenants who had joined the government troops; in Tehran, Mirzā Kuček's severed head was presented to Reżā Khan,

who ordered that it be displayed on Parliament Square. Tradition has it that Mirzā Kuček's head was surreptitiously unearthed, carried to Gilān, and reattached to his body. Mirzā Kuček was finally buried in the Solaymān Dārāb cemetery on the outskirts of Rašt, by the road that leads in the direction of the forest. These episodes are in many respects reminiscent of the great tradition of Shiʿite martyrdom: betrayal, a desperate struggle with the oppressor, and even the replacement of the head, *sar-tan* (lit. "head-body"), following the example of Imam Ḥosayn, the "prince of martyrs."

Thus, the Islamic Republic portrays Mirzā Kuček as a defender of Islam, an enemy of foreign powers and Bolshevism, and an ancestor of sorts to the 1979 Revolution. Nevertheless, the image of the guerrilla, heralding that of Third World resistance fighters, with their socialist-oriented ideas, was perceived as a threat, especially since armed movements hostile to the regime (*Fedaʾiyān*, *Mojāhedin*; see above) tended to appropriate the legendary figure for their own purposes. To thwart this image, officials insisted on the religious dimensions of Mirzā Kuček's battle, and often portrayed him as a mulla. A painting on display at the Rašt Museum in 1982, showing the hero in religious garb, was accompanied by the caption: "Mirzā Kuček Khan, a great revolutionary man, a victim of the complicity between East and West" (photo 2). But such a portrayal is too far from the tough and deeply rooted image of the disheveled guerrilla hero to be credible. In the end, Islamic authorities accommodated themselves to this disturbing image by emphasizing the deeply religious character of the Jangali movement. And so the caption on a poster published by the *pāsdārān* (Revolutionary Guards) recalls Mirzā Kuček's words: "We will resist to the last ditch and will sacrifice ourselves for the defense of Islamic powers" (photo 3).

"The Forest General" thus expresses, in various proportions, a symbol of the regional identity, a champion of the fight for national freedom, a herald of the religious struggle. His mausoleum has become a place of pilgrimage (*ziāratgāh*), particularly on 11 Āḏar (2 December), the anniversary of his burial. Honored today by opposing currents of public opinion, the memory of Mirzā Kuček was obscured during the Pahlavi regime and degraded by the Iranian Communists, who criticized his "regionalism," his "obscurantism," his break with the Bolsheviks, and especially the killing of their leader, Ḥaydar Khan ʿAmu-oḡli (q.v.). The proliferation of material devoted to the Jangali movement and its charismatic leader (a partial assessment of references can be found in Afary, 1995; Chaqueri, 1995; Harris), is a testament to both the

originality of this episode in the history of Persia, and to the diversity of the related images. These events have become a contested field of symbolic interpretation in Persia and Gilān today.

Thus, the image of Gilān is a mix of contradictory representations: that of a land of Beotians, a ransom for the originality of a singular way of life, that of hell and paradise, that of a standard-bearer of Iranism, and finally that of an endemic hotbed of rebellion where a modest people resist an overbearing stranger. In popular tales (see ʿEbādallāhi), the symbol of this rebellious and cunning resistance is *bāqāle qātoq*, a lima bean stew (so named after a typical dish of Gilān), who defeats *ḡul,* the giant who is parching the land.

Contemporary literature bears witness to the conflicting images associated with Gilān. For example, in *Sāya-ye Moḡol*, Sādeq Hedayat emphasizes the luxuriant and frightening nature of northern landscapes and depicts the Caspian world as a standard-bearer of Iranism. The main characters bear pre-Islamic names, and the dagger with which the Mongol arch-villain is killed has an inscription in Pahlavi on its blade. Some writers focus on specific features of local folklore. Thus, Moḥammad Ḥejāzi (q.v.), in his short story *Širin-kolā*, gives a vivid description of *varzā jang*, a traditional bullfight (see GĀVBĀZI). In the works of poets and writers of the left, including Afrāšta, Faḵrāʾi, Kasmāʾi, and Beh-āḏin, the tension between the landowners and the peasants often appears as a major theme. In Beh-āḏin's *Doḵtar-e raʿiyat*, for example, the conflict is between Aḥmad-gol, a proud peasant, and Ḥāj Aḥmad, a landlord who colludes with the British during World War I, while the Jangali movement was gathering momentum. Finally, another image of Gilān appears throughout popular and literary discourse: that of an area which is often at the forefront of political and social changes, and hence one that anticipates historical movements.

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