



IRANIAN IDENTITY I. PERSPECTIVES

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i. PERSPECTIVES ON IRANIAN IDENTITY

Perspectives on Iranian identity have been influenced by competing views on the origins of nations. Three main perspectives, as ideal types or pure types, may be distinguished as answers to the question, “what are the origins of nations?” The first perspective reflects the romantic nationalist view that nations are natural and essential elements in history since time ‘immemorial.’ The second perspective, which may be described as modernist or post-modernist, rejects the romantic, primordial idea of the origins of nations and views the concept of ‘nation’ as a modern construct. The third, which may be called the historicizing perspective, recognizes that “civic nation” is the product of modernity and as such could not be applied retrospectively to pre-modern times, but it strongly rejects the modernist and post-modernist contention of a radical discontinuity between a modern nation and its historical past. These different perspectives have influenced, to varying degrees, the Iranists’ scholarship on the origins of Iranian nationhood and Iranian national identity. The same perspectives have also influenced the perceptions of the ruling elites and political groups in 20th-century Iran.

Since the 19th century the construction of the modern concepts of Iran and



Iranian identity have been particularly influenced by the romantic, nationalist perspective. It evolved with the help of a colorful repertoire of Iranian mythological and legendary traditions as well as Iran's factual history. Various forms of this perspective first emerged in the mid-19th century, and the seed grew with the literature of the Constitutional Revolution (see [CONSTITUTIONAL REVOLUTION](#) i and iii; and iv, below), ultimately serving as the ideological foundation of the Pahlavi state and helping the development of a modern nation-state in Iran. The writings of both Western and Iranian scholars played an important part in the emergence of this perspective in the field of Iranian studies and served as an ideological springboard for Iranian nationalist groups (see iv, below).

Refuting the romantic, nationalist concept of "national identity," with its proclivity towards "retrospective nationalism," a group of social scientists and historians have relocated the origin of the discourse on nations from time immemorial to modern times, to no earlier than the 18th century. According to this perspective, nations are modern constructs that are either 'invented' or 'imagined.' They maintain that nations are artificial constructs or inventions that were deliberately engineered by the ruling classes (Hobsbawm, 1990, pp. 9-10; Idem and Ranger, 1983). It may be noted that Ehsan Yarshater (1971, 1983, 1984) had already described a similar arrangement and codification of tradition for Iran in his analysis of the arrangement of Iran's traditional history during the Sasanid era. Gherardo Gnoli (1989, p. 177), too, adopted Hobsbawm's idea of the "invention of tradition" in his survey of the formation of a Pre-modern national state in the Sasanid period. However, the historicizing position of Yarshater and Gnoli, as will be discussed further in the following entries, shows that a type of pre-modern ethno-national identity was present in Iran long before the invention of modern version of the concept in the 18th and 19th centuries (see ii, below).

Under the influence of the increasingly popular modernist approach, Bert Fagner also posits a radical disjuncture between modern Iranian national identity and its historical past. He contends that modern Iranian nationalism is a prime example of how unrelated aspects of "Persian hegemony," which prevailed in the medieval period, have been used to construct a modern national culture and identity. In explaining his ideas he has introduced a useful paradigm to show how Persian, as the first "lingua franca," spread in medieval Islamic civilization as a trans-regional means of communication. Inspired by Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural "hegemony," the key element



in Fragner's formulation is the "hegemony of Persian language" (Fragner, 1999, pp. 33-99). Hegemony is realized when governing classes maintain their dominance, not simply through the use of force, but also through consensus. They achieve this goal by exerting moral and intellectual leadership through a network of institutions, social relations, and ideas (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 129-30, 139-40, 172, 144, 186-90, 341). His useful paradigm, however, seems to conflate the role of Persian hegemony in the identity formation of non-Iranian Islamic regions with its role on the Iranian plateau. It was in the lands of Iran where Persian language was deeply rooted, where the New Persian developed, where Persian culture prevailed, where Persian literati, as a dominant ethnic core with historical consciousness, were present, and where they laid the foundation for recurrent construction of pre-modern Iranian identity until modern times. Fragner's universal paradigm, therefore, is applicable primarily to the Ottoman empire, Central Asia, Mughal empire, and South-East Asia, and not to the Iranian plateau and the realm of its political community. The land of Iran was distinctively identified as "Iran" or (Mid. Pers.) *ērānšahr* during the Sasanid period and, after a period of lapses and ups and downs during the early Islamic era, has again been identified by the same name since the 13th century (see iii, below).

Another popular, modernist approach views nations as "imagined communities," arguing that the idea of communion in communities beyond primary groups with face-to-face relations, such as villages or tribal clans or neighborhoods, lives only in the mind of their members (Anderson, 1983, 1991). The metaphorical idiom of "imagined communities" has attracted the attention of a number of Iranian writers in their treatment of the origins of Iranian identity. The metaphorical reach of the concept of imagined communities (as used by Benedict Anderson) "exceeds its historical grasp," and it has been applied to the Iranian case without any reference to the rest of Anderson's theory (1991, p. 12). Thus is ignored the role played by the administrative language as an important element in promoting "proto-national cohesion" in pre-modern dynastic realms (for a skewed application of Anderson's theory to Iranian national identity with selective references to some historical sources, see Vaziri, 1993; for a historicizing review of this work, see Matin Askari, 1995; see also Karimi-Hakkak). These modernist concepts of national identity are based on the ideal types of modern, civic-territorial experiences of nationhood of European societies. Pre-modern, non-Western nations do not fit seamlessly into this model. The idea of national identity in societies of Asia is often derived from fictive genealogical and



territorial origins and vernacular culture and religion (Smith, 2004, pp. 132-34).

Rejecting the essentialist tenet of the romantic, primordial conception of national identity as well as the modernist and postmodernist contention of a radical historical disjuncture in the origins of nations, the historicizing perspective emphasizes the role of historical forces in the formation of modern nations. It focuses on the historical origins of ethno-cultural communities and postulates that modern nations and nationalisms are products of long-term, historical processes. The historicizing quality of the “nation” is sought in myths, memories, values, and symbols. The proponents of the historicizing perspective see ethnic communities and nations as historical phenomena that are subject to “flux and change” (Smith, 1991, 2004; Duara, 1996). Among the Iranists who have favored different versions of the historicizing perspective, one may include Ehsan Yarshater, Gherardo Gnoli (1989 and ii, below), Ann Lambton, Alessandro Bausani, Roy Mottahedeh, David Morgan, Faridun Ādamiyat, Shahrokh Meskoob, Moḥammad Rezā Šafi‘i-Kadkani, and Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi.

For Yarshater, the arrangement and codification of traditional history of Iran by the Sasanids and the “Persian presence” in the formative period of the Islamic civilization represent two intertwined historical processes that have helped shape the historicized characteristic of Iranian identity. The combined impact of these two processes provided the Iranian people with a distinct identity in the Islamic world (Yarshater, 1971, 1983, 1984, 1998; see also iii, below). Ann Lambton, too, seems to favor the historicizing perspective in rejecting the notion of a retrospective nationalism, while recognizing the existence of a “consciousness of a distinct identity ... ‘*īrānīyat*,’ (‘being a Persian’)” in medieval Persia (Lambton, 1978, p. 786). According to Lambton, this identity, defined historically and geographically, was formed by a common historical experience and the sharing of a common cultural and literary medium. In his discussion of the historical antecedents to the nationalist ideology in Iran, Ādamiyat (1967, pp. 246-68), a prolific author of the intellectual history of modern Iran, shows a tendency towards the historicizing approach to Iranian identity, though with a romantic orientation. He contends that basic elements of modern nationalism, such as the idea of Iranian lands and peoples, a common language and culture, and above all national pride and common historical consciousness, were all present in Iran even before the emergence of nationalism in modern Europe. Yet he



recognizes that a reaction to increasing Western domination in 19th-century Iran, new discoveries of the ancient history of the country by Western scholars, and the spread of emerging European nationalism in Asia following the French Revolution, all helped initiate the development of a modern national consciousness and a nationalistic ethos in Iran beginning in the latter half of the 19th century. Finally, a conscious adherent of the historicizing approach is Mottahedeh, who—in answering the question of “in what sense did the Iranians have a common agreement as to the ties which made them a people?”—suggests that the educated Iranians “saw themselves as a people joined by their shared tie to *Irān-zamin*.” This collective feeling of the Iranians of the medieval period, he emphasizes, is hardly “a mirror image” of the early modern European nationalism (Mottahedeh, 1971, pp. 181-82).

Conceptions of Iranian identity in terms of an Irano-Islamic cultural heritage have also found advocates among scholars and religious intellectuals. While critical of the romantic perspective on Iranian identity, Alessandro Bausani recognized the significance of Iran’s medieval heritage as a background to the formation of modern Iranian national identity. In the concluding chapter of his book *I Persiani* (Florence, 1962) and its revised version (Wiesbaden, 1975), Bausani contended that the foundation of Iranian culture should be relocated from a pre-Islamic Achaemenid image to the medieval Iranian Islamic culture (Bausani, 1975, p. 47). Ḥamid Aḥmadi (2005, pp. 23-45) contends that Iranian national identity has survived a functional blending of the legacy of the ancient political heritage of kingship, Persian language and literature, and Iranian religions, i.e., Zoroastrianism and Shi’ism. Aḥmadi’s view of Iranian religions as enduring pillars of Iranian identity may have been influenced by the ideas of Henry Corbin and Sayyed Hossein Nasr, who, by interpreting Islamic philosophy mainly along the lines of the Gnostic tenets of Shi’ism, believed that the latter has been deeply rooted in ancient Iranian religion (see Corbin, 1946 and 1964; Nasr, 1964 and 1968). This hybrid idea of grounding Iranian identity in Iranian Islamic culture has also found currency with the Iranian promoters of liberal Islam in the last few decades, including Ayatollah Mortazā Moṭahhari, Mehdi Bāzargān, ‘Ali Šari’ati, and ‘Abd-al-Karim Soruš (see iv, below).

The main development of Iranian identity, from its literary foundation during the Sasanid era to the present time, may be divided into the following phases: the foundation phase of arranging a pre-modern ethno-national identity with a sense of ancient ethno-nationalism during the late Sasanid era; the dormant



phase following the Arab conquest of Persia; the revival phase of Iranian cultural identity under the Iranian regional dynasties during the 9th-11th centuries; a complex phase of Iranian identity during the Saljuq era; the resurgence phase during the Mongol and Timurid periods; the formation of a hybrid Iranian-Shi'ite identity during the Safavid era; and, finally, the national phase of the formation of a modern Iranian "national identity" during the last two centuries. These phases will be discussed in the following three sub-entries. The current debates on Iranian identity since the 1979 revolution will be discussed in a supplementary entry online.

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