

Homayun Alam (Ed.)

On the Concept of Iran and the Iranian Cultural Sphere

Iran in West-Asia

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Tectum Verlag

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation
in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten
sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie;
detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>
ISBN 978-3-8288-4602-9 (Print)
978-3-8288-7665-1 (ePDF)

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.
ISBN 978-3-8288-4602-9 (Print)
978-3-8288-7665-1 (ePDF)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Homayun Alam (Ed.)
On the Concept of Iran and the Iranian Cultural Sphere
Iran in West-Asia
262 pp.
Includes bibliographic references.
ISBN 978-3-8288-4602-9 (Print)
978-3-8288-7665-1 (ePDF)

1. Auflage 2021

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On Behalf of Humanity in a Transnational, Transcultural
and Interdisciplinary Era

*Adam's sons are body limbs, to say;
For they're created of the same clay.*

*Should one organ be troubled by pain,
Others would suffer severe strain.*

*Thou, careless of people's suffering,
Deserve not the name, "human being".¹*

¹ This aphorism – Bani Adam – is of Saad'i from Shiraz (13 century AD), translated by Vahid Dastjerdi.

Dedicated to

Mirza Mohammad Naimie Khorasani

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I. Preface

Iranian studies as a university subject in Germany elaborate the notion and the concept of the Iranian cultural sphere over the past centuries and beyond. In doing so, Iran and the Iranian cultural sphere are divided into old and new disciplines of Iranian studies (German: Iranistik).

There are diverse research fields and scopes in Iranian studies such as politics, geography, economics, culture, linguistics, myth, poetry, anthropology, mystics, ethnicity, gender, colonialism/post-colonialism, and religion. This well-known dimensions could be studied holistically or separately.

This present anthology tries to reflect a time span of the teachings, publications, conferences and thoughts of the editor from the years of 2015 to 2020. However, it was necessary to offer another perception about contemporary Iran and its cultural sphere: The notion of Iran as a proper name is often contested by mostly all neighbouring countries. The concept of culture, which is “farhang” in Persian, could be translated as education, knowledge, dictionary, and thus exemplifies its dynamic connotation. Every so often, “Iran-e-Farhang-i” is compared to the contemporary political nation-state of Iran, while the first is much more historical, and even larger by size, is the one of present-day Iran evaluated as political.

This present book consists of interviews, essays and articles. The contributors are from many domains of research, art and scholarship. To gather many viewpoints based on research and first-hand experiences was the objective, and equally the greatest challenge.

The conducted interviews in the second chapter are done with scholars of Iranian studies, history, literature, poetry, and music ethnology. All the interviewees are renowned in their field of research. In addition, the contributors of the third chapter with their essays and articles are key producers in their purview. To continue, among them one will find a photographer, filmmaker, ethnomusician and geographer. These contributors often work with interdisciplinary methodologies, thus, transnationally oriented, while their own definition of culture, identity, language, and history is based on research. In the fourth chapter, or just the postface, the editor himself is pursuing the question of “Why Middle East and not West-Asia”: It is a reflection about a notion, with the critical claim to a greater and lesser extent of a post-colonial era and its standpoints.

Transnationality

Researchers use the term transnationality as an approach to single out common roots of culture, myth, migration, and language across borders. In the contemporary political system of nation-states, nations with the same interests, pedigree, language, religion etc. are interconnected through many platforms, especially in the age of the internet. With these perspectives, one can skip political-territorial borders to celebrate, for instance, the Iranian New Year’s Eve, “Nowruz”, in the Iranian cultural sphere. Nowruz is an event that occurs once a year on March 21st to remind humankind about the awakening of nature.

Wishing to celebrate cultural fests, citizens of other nation-states are obligated to apply for a visa to enter the neighbouring country. So Nowruz, which literally means the new day, is celebrated in Iran, in all the neighbouring countries of Iran, and beyond. In recent years, the scholarship of Iranian studies, in collaboration with Iran and other neighbouring states, even developed the transnational and transcultural concept of “Nowruzistan”.

Thus far, Philip Kreyenbroek explains in his interview about Iranian religions, where he provides details about their differences and

commonalities. Sometimes, people from the Iranian cultural sphere imagine the religion of Zarathustra as the primary source of Nowruz. In the same way, Hamid Reza Yousefi discusses in his article “The Neglected and Misunderstood Teachings of Sartosht”. With his article “Xerxes’ Persia” Richard Stoneman sheds light on that same time period, which is often associated with mere war rather than flourishing cultural exchanges.

Colonialism

In the age of modernity – even though we have learnt in western terms of cultural memory to speak about “Aufklärung” in German, “Age of Enlightenment” or “Le Siècle des Lumières” in French: Countries of the global south and east have become the hinterland. In the case of Iranian cultural sphere, the current political borders were outlined because of a power struggle. The outcome was divided ethnicities and the downsizing of ancient linguistic and cultural ties. However, it should not be buried in oblivion that every great civilization has its distinct features and passes through various levels of evolution. Iran as a local empire is a case in point, which is asked through the interview with Ali M. Ansari.

How can we imagine such an evolution? Many Iranian political and even cultural capital cities prior to the idea of the nation-state were located in contemporary places such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Pakistan or the Caucasus: These countries represent the Iranian cultural sphere. In the long nineteenth century Iran lost a huge amount of square kilometres of its area due to the intervention of colonial powers.

Today, many people are confused when speaking about the concept of Iran, which is immediately linked to Persian. Above and beyond Iran, Persian is today the official language of Afghanistan and Tajikistan. It is important to keep in mind that there are many ethnic Persians and Persian-speakers in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iraq, Paki-

stan, Kazakhstan, the Persian Gulf States, India, and China. People of Persian ethnicity are called “Tajik” in the context of Central Asia, which is, according to Bert Fragner in his interview, an ascription rather than a self-attribution. For instance, before the very eruption of the colonial age in modern time history, Iran called itself “Mamalek-e Mah-ruse-ye Iran”, which means “The United States of Iran”.

Identity

The Peace of Westphalia in 1648 was a milestone for the Western and European political culture. While the term nation-state is defined by the presence of state, nation and borders, it is important to put the phenomenon of borders in contemporary time under the microscope. If someone tends to trace back borders to the first humans walked on earth, we will find out that the limits were defined by rivers, valleys, mountains or forests.

Empires such as the Persian, the Roman and the Ottoman had borders, but these were not exactly defined compared with our modern time and age. In contrast, borders are politically demarcated in our current age and codified in the international law. The modern individual has become the citizen and the subject of the state. Consequently, political and national borders are to be seen as a matter of fact.

Furthermore, citizens are documented in our time, which is more political than cultural. For that reason almost every single person on earth has an “Identity Card”. At this point, the question remains of whether a national identity card completes and for that reason represent the entire identity of a citizen or not? Taking this into consideration, it is a question of time until normative discourses and charged debates such as “majority versus minority” will become at stake.

In Iran, as well as in the Iranian cultural sphere (Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, etc.), there are ethnicities, languages and religions, which have lived side by side since the very foundation of their history, maybe from 2500 to 5000 years ago, or even

more than that. A Person from the Iranian cultural sphere is usually multilingual and has – similar to a western man or woman in its very stereotype – multiple identities and tendencies towards life.

After knowing about these facts, how does it come borders are drawn between people? Is it possible that people of the Iranian cultural sphere were not separated because of being very much different, but for the reason that of having much more in common in their time, spaces and environment?

To answer such a question, we have many references to choose an appropriate answer from: One of the first options to approach a response is the power of the colonial masters and the weakness of former Iranian leaders in the long nineteenth century. In this framework, a single ethnicity with its cultural background got the preferential right of being a nation, while measures of judgement were less lying in culture and rationality.

In this transitional process a nation runs institutions, scripts, media, language, images, history, and in the end the everyday life. In Iran, Persian became the national language – with a 1250-year history in poetry – which initiated in what is Central Asia, and then the two countries of Tajikistan and Afghanistan in present time. The poets in the Persian case were more philosophers who expressed their deep thoughts in poetic phrases. Music, music instruments and musicians are beyond forced political divisions occasionally the proper apparatus to understand the boundless influence of culture. In this case John Baily showcases with his article “The Development of the 14-stringed Herati *dutâr*” how a music instrument and its master effect for instance the vast regions of western Afghanistan and eastern Iran in a transcultural order.

In Afghanistan, Persian (Farsi-Dari) is competing with Pashto, the other national language. But, Persian remains the language of cultural production (poetry, literature, and newspaper), official institutions, media and the bridging language among all different ethnicities in Afghanistan. There is the question here among many how, for example, Afghanistan became a state. In this case, Sardar Kohistani explores

in his article “Geopolitical Position of Afghanistan” historical evidences. In Tajikistan, Persian regained its former position within society and state following the independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.

Language

The language is an appropriate indication for understanding different approaches about the Iranian cultural sphere. Prior to the Islamic age, Persian had – along with Greek, Sanskrit, Chinese (Mandarin) and Latin – a history without interruption, referring to contemporary scholarships.

The Persian language (New Persian) went through a 13-hundred-year development, divided into three genres: Khorasan-i, Araq-i and Hend-i. The genre of Khorasan-i consists the contemporary states of Iran (eastern part), Afghanistan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. The genre of Araq-i entails states as Iran (western part), Azerbaijan and Iraq. The genre of Hend-i consists of states in the sub-continent, which are divided today into Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Kashmir. These three genres have also subdivisions, but as a follower of this discourse one should know the founder of Persian poetry “Rudaki”, who hails from modern Tajikistan.

In addition, the Persian language in the Ottoman Empire was used for cultural issues and court proceedings. In the same vein, Persian was a bridging tool for military and religious affairs – all Arabic words passed to Ottoman-Turkish and later to modern Turkish have their roots from Persian as the bridging language. The influence of Persian as a civilization beyond western, central and southern Asia is not much discussed. To continue, as historians wrote their accounts about Andalus for example, it seems that its dynamics has had by eclectic means other outlines, titles and denominations. Gabriele Dold-Ghadar’s article “From Balkh to Tāṅḡa” introduces the reader about the possibly unknown, or deliberately ignored, impact of Persian as a comprehended culture of the Mediterranean that reaches present-day Morocco, and as well Spain.

Persian was at the advent of Islam (7th century AD) the contact and uniting language, at least, in Western and Central Asia in general, and in the Iranian cultural sphere, in particular. It is the *Lingua Franca* in many ways until now when it comes to reading historical accounts of the Turks and the Indian subcontinent, or just to communicate among nationals in modern Iran. Nahid Morshedlou's article the "Ghaznavid's heritage beyond the Greater Iran" is an example on what scope the Persian language was used for centuries in the Indian subcontinent.

The Iranian cultural sphere is reinterpreted from two directions: From outside, through old colonial powers and the contemporary order of nation-states (*etic*), and from inside, through its diverse inhabitants (*emic*). The internal relationship could be significantly severed, if the same ethnicities, who lived together before the partition of the Iranian cultural sphere, pursued the narrative of "we vs. them", i.e. Iranians vs. Afghanistanis, Tajikistanis, Azerbaijanis, Uzbekistanis, Iraqis, Pakistanis, and so on.

Misusing identity concepts and "othering" the old ethnical, lingual and religious belongings are topics to be tackled by incumbent governments, and not only the scholarship of Iranian studies. Contemporary transnational and transcultural Iranians, like the photographer Reza Deghati, contributed to this anthology the brief autobiographical article "The long Road of Exile" along with some of his magnificent coloured portraits from different motifs. Similar to the work of Reza Deghati are the influences of Makhmalbaf Film House and that of the songwriter and composer Farid Zoland to the Iranian cultural sphere: For both, the editor has written "A brief Introduction".

Conclusion

The name of Iran etymologically stems from "aryanam", then developed into "Eran" and has subsequently become Iran: Geographically, Iran starts from the eastern highlands of Afghanistan and the western parts of Pakistan, and ends up where is going to flatten in Iraq.

This view, reminds us of nostalgia, which is not much wrong. But if we take all the languages existed before the political demarcations as an example, we will be able to detect those tongues in the same realm again. We should only reflect on the shared history of Iranian and Persian people in Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Iran, and beyond.

To continue, so why do contemporary Iranians count all the poets, poems, inventors, literary figures, scientists and philosophers of the Middle Ages as Iranians without caring to share this legacy with Persians from the other modern states? Where is the yesterday's polycentric and the many current disconnected centres of the "Persianate World"? The answers to these complex questions are offered by Ahmad Kari-mi-Hakkak in his interview.

Who is eligible to call himself/herself as the only Persian and the others as outsiders? It is necessary to focus on the present ethnic, religious, cultural and language misconceptions of North Africa, West and Central Asia. These misconceptions caused yesterday's, and are causing today's unrewarding conflicts. Social engineering processes did not work out for its masterminds the way it happened in the greater connected lands of West, Central and South Asia, but which were e. g. disconnected by the concept of nation-states.

In the twentieth century Iran was almost the only country to care about the rich Persian legacy of literature and poetry. In contrast, in Afghanistan, Persian people (so-called Tajiks) and their language were not much promoted or state-aided due to language policies– the name of their language was changed from "Farsi" into "Dari" in the constitution of 1964. This step went against the currents and nature of their own Khorasan-i language roots of Persian. Today, Persians from other countries are reclaiming their historical share of the notion of Iran, as well as Iranian and Persian legacy. As Safar Abdullah puts it in his interview: "Modern-day Iran is a part of itself."

What might be an appropriate approach for all these grievances? The obvious answer might be not aloof: The need of a common historiography. This endeavour should be taken into account under the

auspices of researchers from e.g. the three concerned countries of Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan, and other countries as well, which is not only an idealistic idea at this point.

In a time and age of transculturalism, transnationalism, global, glocal and regional migration and digital world the yesterday's version what "we" were, is getting an unfashionable model to take pride in it. The cultural memory is important for an ancient civilization in the Iranian cultural sphere in which Persian survived as one of the important languages with its literature and first and foremost poetry. Inclusion and not exclusion, inviting and not ostracizing, remembering together and not only alone: Future measurements of multiperspective nations/states/regions/cities are those, which shape a post-modern and multilateral era.

The eminent wisdom culture of the Iranian cultural sphere with the Persian language and its poetry had since the foundation of the New Persian many geographical centers. That is to state, Persian as such was not isolated or confined by politics. Undeniably, what was disconnected through the last 20–30 decades since the advent of modernity is not much easy to get close in a peaceful habit, fast pace and wishful reconnection.

In the final analysis, without the collaboration of my colleague Petros Tesfai this book would not undergo a last correction phase in a suitable sense. Finally, yet importantly, I am deeply grateful to the sponsors without whom in times of the Covid-19 pandemic nobody else could make this present publication to become true: Raffaele De Luca "Lello" and Emir Gredic.

Frankfurt am Main, Germany, October 2020

Homayun Alam

II. Interviews

1. Safar Abdullah¹

1. Please, likewise a preface, tell us on the degree and tradition of Persian language in Kazakhstan.

Generally spoken, in Kazakhstan, but more in Almaty, there are a number of Persian speakers. You can find Tajiks, Afghan migrants and a limited number of Iranians. In the southern province of Kazakhstan there're some Persian schools for Tajiks who live there for years. But two things shouldn't get in oblivion: One thing is the Persian language and the other things are Iranian languages. Here are people like Kurds of Kazakhstan whose roots are surely to be traced back to Iran and who are of Iranian descent. In this region if you travel or walk around, in every of its cities, you will detect hints of Iranian culture and civilization, also in the city of Almaty – in the square of republic you are

1 <http://www.persianacademy.ir/fa/Y020394.aspx>, last accessed on 29 July 2015. Language and literature in contemporary Kazakhstan: In conversation with Dr. Safar Abdullah. Interview was conducted by Hassan Gharibi in Persian (Translation by Hodayun Alam). "According to "Taj-News" the golden price of unity of Kazakhstan's society is given to Dr. Safar Abdullah. It is an appreciation for his great contribution in which he intended to increase the cultural and ties of friendship between the folks. Safar Abdullah contributed a lot with his researches and ouvrages to the growth of a national culture, in the same time, while maintaining close ties amid Iranian ethnicities. With gratitude of this distinguished scholar, our colleague Hassan Gharibi who is a collaborator of the "Academy of Persian Language and Literature" of Iran and a deputy at the "Centers of Science and Culture" in Tajikistan, conducted an interview with him about "Persian language and literature in Kazakhstan".

going to see a statue of a Scythes' soldier. You know that Scythes' were of Iranian pedigree. In the national museum of Kazakhstan there are many other statues about which Kazakh's researchers and scholars have written, not little.

2. **In the reign of the Soviets we knew less about other republics. After the collapse of that empire our relationship with Tajikistan improved, and visits were strengthened. Had the relationship to Kazakhstan – without taking any historical accounts into consideration – been influenced by any special communications and occasions?**

Tajikistan and Tajiks are themselves Iranian and their language is Persian and between these two countries there are no problems. If there are some complications it has to do with politics, but I myself have no relations and interference to it. Kazakhstan is a great and vast country, so my beloved Iran shares with it a common waterfront property which is the Caspian Sea. Kazakhstan is one of these countries under its subterrestrial there are all elements of the “periodic table”. To be brief, here lies the wealth of the earth: gas, gold, copper and oil. All the global richness is to be finding here. Iran's relation to Kazakhstan began from the very time on, as the latter country got its independence. Maybe, the first country who recognized officially the independence of Kazakhstan was the Islamic Republic of Iran. Now, the number plates of the Iranian embassy's cars began with the digits 002, to my mind it has to be 001.

Kazakhstan is a spacious country. Parts of Kazakhstan were in the history under the reign of Iranian empire(s), especially the southern part of it. Just have a closer look, in the culture and civilization of Iran or the Persian literature, one encounter many times with the notion of “زارط”. That's indeed the “زارط” which is often mentioned in the Persian poetry.

“Dasht-e qabchaq” is also a Persian term, the word “dasht” means in Kazakhi language “del-e”. Iranians had lifelong relations with Central Asia, in general, and in particular with Kazakhstan. But, Iranian culture geographical boundaries end not within the geographical limits of Central Asian countries. There lived nomads, Scythes. Not few archeological findings indicate that the Scythian nomads lived here for a long time. In Central Asia, in the Middle Ages, the Persian language was widespread here. Predominantly after the Samanian rule as Persian was the language of the region, and Iranian culture was at its peak. Persian was a language with which even Turkish and Mongolian rulers were proud to express themselves- it was also a case of pride knowing Persian and making Persian poetry with it. In this country there are certainly many evidences of Iranian culture. For instance, you can find a great deal of Persian words in the language of Kazakh’s people. Today, they express “dar-e-khaneh” which is the Persian word of “darou-khaneh”. Furthermore, they state not “koocheh” but “koosheh” or “avaa-daan-i” which is correctly “abadan-i” and has the meaning of region or area here.

In the mid of Kazakhs’ (language) there are thousands of Persian words and thousands of Iranian names. Even names of Persian myths like “Rostam”, “Esfandyar” or “Bijan” which was definitely in common among Kazakhs, and that is the best “pledge of friendship” of ancient activities/interactions of this region and its folks. In contemporary Iran we have correspondingly Turkish words in the Persian language, like “khanom” and “aghaa” which have Mongolian roots. In Samarkand and Tajikistan they pronounce “aghaa” as “akaa”. In the languages of Central Asia many words are of Iranian or Arabic origin which came up through the Persian language on the surface. For example, the notions of the five time prayer are all Persian: Namaz-e bamdad, namaz-e pishin, namaz-e degar, namaz-e sham and namaz-e khoftan. Five names which are totally Persian. Even now, in Central Asian countries, intention of the prayer and prayer for the dead are all in Persian language. The names of the single days in a week are in

fact in Persian. If you are familiar with the Turkish literature of Turkish people of Central Asia you will discover in the language and literature of them hundreds of compositions and phrases, and thousands of Iranian words which were used. For one, if you read a poem of the Middle Ages in the Turkish language it has hundreds of Persian compositions and properly in the Uzbek language:

لیلی سر زلف شانه می کرد
مجنون دُر اشک دانه می کرد.

In the Middle Ages it was interpreted in Uzbek language as:

لیلی سر زلف شانه ای دور
مجنون در اشک دانه ای دور.

Not only the literature in Central Asia but similarly the architecture has its roots in the Iranian architecture. Sogdian people played an essential role in the Middle Ages and even prior to Islam: Cities and all Caravansaries in the Silk Road were built by Sogdians. Nevertheless, at the frontier of China and Kazakhstan there is a city called “Jirkint” which is a Persian name, and is correctly to be called as “Yarkand”. Yarkand has the same shape as a denomination or word like “Tashkent” or “Samarkand” or “Panjkand”, and so on. People or folks of Turkish speakers of this region and Persian speakers of Iran had close ties with each other, and they even did business. They gave things to each other, and received other things from the counterpart. The contemporary important topic is that Iran has to tighten and to strengthen its cultural affairs with Kazakhstan; at least Iran has to conduct more scientific investigations to trace back its own cultural footprints to/from here. An elementary example is the library of “Abu Reyhan-e Birun-i” in Uzbekistan where you can find 43000 handwritten manuscripts of which 39000 are in Persian, and 4000 of them in other languages. Or in the city of Almaty where I have categorized the handwritten manuscripts with Dr. Kamal al-Dini, we have discovered some of them which are rare on global level. There are two books of “Abdul-Rah-