The Persistence of Cultures in World History: Persia/Iran

Laina Farhat-Holzman
lfarhat102@aol.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol54/iss54/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative Civilizations Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen amatangelo@byu.edu.
My best friend in college was a regal 18-year-old blond whose profile looked like a face in a Botticelli painting. Bernadette Peters, an actress who can effortlessly play Edwardian women, has an hourglass shape, a porcelain face, a cupid mouth, and a mop of red curls. She does not look at all like today’s anorexic beauties. Certain tattooed, dirty, motorcycle gang members look exactly like the scruffy 17th century pirates from whom I suspect they descend. And I look like a 19th century aging Russian ballerina.

We see these recurring physical archetypes all around us, a roadmap of our entire genetic history. But how do cultural archetypes work? How is it that certain peoples have maintained their recognizable cultural archetypes—their mythology, art, literature, foods, and even language—in the face of the world’s violent history of warfare, displacement, and repeated disasters? If all cultures did so, we might assume that this too has some sort of genetic imprinting, but it is not so. Where are the great Sumerians today—or the Carthaginians, Cretans, and Harappans? They live only in their archaeology.

What enables some cultures to survive, to enjoy renewals, to celebrate 3,000-year anniversaries and others to disappear beneath time’s quicksands? Some mechanism must be at play for a people to sustain an identity—often through several renaissances—right into the 20th century. The Chinese, of course, are the best example of this. China today leaves a clear trail back to the China of the first Chin Dynasty. Aesthetics, family structure, language, handicrafts, technologies, foods, and governance styles are still unmistakably Chinese.

Jews provide another interesting example of cultural continuity, but differ from the Chinese in that while no longer genetically consistent with their ancient ancestors, their ancestors’ ideas have had continuity in the still very-much-alive Hebrew Bible and, to some extent, certain elements of religious ritual. The people who left the Holy Land in 60 CE are certainly not genetically the same as the current Israelis or Jews of the Diaspora, who are a mixture of all the nations among whom they lived in exile and with whom they obviously mated. One only need look at a Polish Jew and an Ethiopian Jew to see this. Genetic changes notwithstanding, the survival of Judaism as a religion and an ethnic
identity is a remarkable tribute to tenacity and willingness to suffer for a cultural ideal, even through exile.

Persians (today’s Iranians), give us another fascinating example of cultural stamina that seems rooted, as it is with the Chinese, in their psyches and, perhaps, in the land itself. We know that “purity of race” is a ridiculous illusion when we are looking at a human species that has traveled, been invaded, and interbred through our 10,000 years of human history. Being Persian has little to do with “Aryan” blood. The population has obviously received an infusion of Arab, Turk, and Mongol blood since its Indo-European origins in antiquity. Yet the people recognize their difference from other Muslims—both Arab and Turk. Their language, cultural practices, and even the form of their religion bear the stamp of ancient imperial Persia. Their concept of kingship—the divinely anointed monarch/savior—even survived an eight-century hiatus during the Muslim and Mongol periods—yet resumed as if never interrupted. Each new dynasty in Persia’s history attempted to derive its legitimacy from some connection with the previous one.

Humiliating conquests by Alexander the Great in the 4th century BCE, the Muslim Arabs in the 7th century CE, and the Mongols in the 13th century CE (the latter accompanied by the Black Death and extermination of possibly half the population), would have done in a lesser culture. Yet not only did they survive, but they transformed the cultures of their conquerors into a Persian model. Persians, like the Chinese, always co-opted their conquerors culturally. How can one account for this?

The mystery is to see today’s Iranians celebrating their Now Ruz holiday, a 13-day celebration of Spring and the New Year. On the 13th day of this festival, everyone leaves urban areas for picnics in the wilderness—somewhere near running mountain streams. There they eat food, play musical instruments, recite poetry, dance dances, all of which can be seen almost identically in 16th century illustrations found in copies of the Persian epic poem, the Shahnameh. Even many of the modern faces look like their illustrated ancestors. It is for me an uncan-ny glimpse into cultural continuity, even more remarkable in the face of so many historic assaults on it.

Persia’s Mark on the World

We in the west are well versed in the basic underpinnings of our civilization: Greek thought, Roman law, and Judeo-Christian religion. The fourth part of this base is less known: the important contributions
of Persians on our religions, governance, science, art, literature, food and dress.

**Religion.** Persia gave us the world’s first monotheist religion: Zoroastrianism from which we derive our invisible god, Satan, angels, devils, heaven, hell, and final judgment. Most important of all, it was the first religion to grant man the power of responsible free will. Man, said Zoroaster, could choose to fight on the side of good against the forces of evil. No other ancient religion gave man such dignity. Nor, on the negative side, did any other ancient culture give us such a tool for demonizing “the other.”

**Empire.** Persia also gave us the first multi-ethnic empire; so brilliantly conceived and run that it became the model for Alexander, Caesar, Napoleon, the British Raj, and the Austro-Hungarians. Even the Mongols, who began with a reign of terror, succumbed to the more civilized model of Cyrus. What Cyrus the Great offered, that each of these subsequent empires attempted to do, was to demonstrate the benefits of good governance, the peace and prosperity that could accompany empire, and a show of respect for the cultures of the conquered peoples. Each of these empires also unwittingly inherited the flaw in this system: the cost of defending such holdings eventually bankrupts its subjects. The only brief empire that did not use the Persian model was Hitler’s, which followed instead the model of the equally brief ancient Assyrian Empire, which ruled by fear alone.

**Learning.** Persia’s Sasanian Dynasty became a repository of ancient learning, saving books and scholars from the destruction of Byzantine Christianity. When the Sasanians fell, the newly converted Persian Muslims disseminated this knowledge internationally through the Islamic world. An overwhelming number of Muslim scholars in such disciplines as linguistics, philosophy, botany, chemistry, optics, surgery, general medicine, agronomy, water technology, and astronomy were Persians, as were the administrators and artists-for-hire, by the international world of Islam.

**Style.** The aristocratic courts of Persia, both pre- and post-Islamic were the cultural arbiters of taste for the Arab, Spanish, Turkish, and Indian Muslim worlds, and for the three Christian worlds of Byzantium, Russia, and medieval Western Europe. Any examination of medieval European clothing and food will reveal Persian models, as will the clothing and food of the Central Asian silk route cities. The picture suits of our playing cards today show kings, queens, and jacks dressed in the Persian costumes of the early Middle Ages worn by nobil-
ity from the Atlantic to the gates of China.

Art. Persian art began as a copy of Assyrian propaganda art and monumental sculptural architecture. But by the time of the Sasanians, the full sophistication of Persian artistic genius had emerged. The central element of perennial Persian art, the magnificent carpet, had reached maturity in Sasanian times. One famous carpet of that time, a jewel-encrusted iridescent work called "the Four Seasons" (as one walked around it, the design changed) was cut into as many pieces as there were Arabs whose loot it became during the Muslim invasion. Persians still talk about this.

Just as Persians transformed Arab calligraphy, they produced the first elegant Arabesques, abstract patterns designed to replace the forbidden human and animal depictions that Mohammad regarded as Idolatry. Persian calligraphy and later the elegant return of figure and animal art that illustrated their manuscripts influenced the illuminated manuscripts of the Christian world.8

Textiles. Persian textiles from taffetas to velvets, paisleys to cloth-of-gold, all made of the silk that they learned to culture from the Chinese, dominated the clothing industry of the world west of China all the way to the Atlantic. If one were wealthy, one dressed "Persian." The medium for transference, of course, came during the First Crusade (1098 AD) when European nobility came to the Holy Land and saw Muslim culture at its height. Medieval costume took shape then, creating an insatiable appetite for Persian textiles and carpets until the Europeans learned silk weaving themselves.9

Music. The founding fathers of Islam mistrusted music, which in their world accompanied pleasures that were sinful. The popular music and belly dance music of today’s Arab world illustrate the point. The Sasanian court, however, had cultivated a sophisticated music performed on a variety of instruments ranging from stringed lutes, harps, and zithers (both plucked and played with plectrums) to a bowed violin-like instrument and flutes, oboes, and a wide range of drums. The music was played in modes meant for certain times of day or certain times of the year. Composers were much honored at court.

This music did not go underground for very long. When the Caliphate moved to Baghdad and established a very Persian-style court, the Caliphate became the new patron of the musical arts, and scholars of Muslim culture recognize this place and time as the site of Islam's greatest musical achievement. One of Baghdad's best musicians, a Persian named Ziryab,10 was lured to Spain by a very nice benefit pack-
age where he played a significant role in developing Spanish Muslim court music and manners. He created such a stir that even his haircut and perfume were imitated by his adoring public.

One Persian instrument in particular, the Barbat (swan’s breast) was taken up by musicians across the Muslim world and named in Arabic “Al ‘oud,” from which the Europeans got the word “lute,” the instrument of wandering troubadours and later of European courtiers.

The setar (meaning three-strings in Persian, although it now has four) traveled to India and grew into the monstrous sitar (30 strings). Another instrument, the tar (originally called the sheshtar, six-string) with a full-bellied tone became the pandore and guitar in the west and the balalaika in Russia.

The singing style of Persian music lives on today in the world of Flamenco at one end of Eurasia and in India at the other end.

**Foods.** The food of Arabia did not have much panache in aristocratic circles. Arabia was a place of lean pickings before Islam. A whole roasted lamb whose eyeballs are given to the guest of honor is still a traditional feast for the Saudis. Persia, however, had an old courtly food culture that quickly dominated the Muslim world and Europe. As a seat of empire, they not only made extraordinary use of their own native agriculture and horticulture, but also naturalized foods brought from South Asia and China.

Persian culinary art involves scent and all taste buds in balance. Rosewater, the lemon, basil, tarragon and dill, pomegranate paste, verjuice, walnuts, almonds, and pistachios were basic to the cuisine, enhanced by iced sweet drinks (sharbats or sherbets), cane sugar, and a mind-boggling array of melons, peaches, pears, grapes, cherries, and plums, and their elegantly semi-dried confections. Rice became the luxury staple of the rich, and Persians created the pilafs in which rice was adorned and layered with dried fruits, vegetables, nuts, aromatic herbs, meat, and sometimes gold or silver leaf. Courts in Morocco and Spain, and in Moghul India, where this style of food exists to this day, employed Persian chefs.

In Medieval Europe, the differential of what was eaten by the nobility and the peasantry can be seen in menus of the day. The poor were happy to get porridge, bread, and sometimes cheese, while the wealthy adapted Persian food styles to the best of their ability. Rosewater and ground almonds for thickening every sauce, and an almost obscene variety and excess characterized the Medieval banquet. It would be difficult for one to know in which country they were dining since everyone
imitated the same model. It was not until the foods of the New World began to trickle into Europe in the 17th century that distinct national or ethnic cuisines began to develop.\textsuperscript{13}

This amazing continuity of Persia's cultural power must have some root, and I propose that the root was language and its literature.

**The Role of Language**

Perhaps the best place to begin looking for the glue that held this civilization together and gave it its eerie continuity would be language. No other civilization overrun during the first thrust of Islam was able to save its language. (In Islam's second thrust into Central Asia and beyond, Arabic never was able to replace the native languages. During the first thrust, however, even Egypt lost its language to Arabic.) The force and majesty of Arabic and the prestige of the Koran overwhelmed every other language and culture as the Arabs swept across the Middle East and North Africa--except for Persian. The Persians converted in numbers, mastered Arabic for official purposes, and Persian went underground for two centuries, to emerge once again as an enriched language with a double vocabulary and an alphabet much more encouraging of literacy than was their old system.

Not only did Arabic not overwhelm Persian, but Persians transformed the nature of Arabian Islam. Persian administrators were in demand throughout the new Muslim Empire from Central Asia to Spain, and Islam was transformed from an egalitarian barbarian explosion to an empire in which class and culture, order and system, recovered their place. It did not take long for Persian to reappear openly as the language of trade from the Levant through to China on the age old Silk Route and the Indian Ocean.\textsuperscript{14}

Persian scholars were also in demand throughout the Muslim world. Mohammad had praised learning and knowledge, and rulers during the early centuries of Islam took this seriously. The vast knowledge accumulated in Persia (much of it Greek and Hindu) was translated and disseminated. Because they had become experts in translation and were using a new alphabet, Persians played a key role in the field of linguistics, developing comparative philology, grammars, and lexicons. The blocky Arabic script in the hands of Persians became elegant and an art form in itself.

The Persians had once before turned the conquest of Alexander the Great to their own benefit by coopting him and creating mythology that he was actually Persian, not Macedonian. They did this again under the
disaster of the Arab invasion and conquest, turning Islam to their own advantage and transforming it—governmentally and artistically—into their likeness.

The Book of Kings (Shahname)

How Persian revived as the official language of Persians is a fascinating story. What revived and gave new power to Persian as a spoken and literary language was a renaissance of Persian poetry 150 years after the Arab conquest.

Not long after the Arab conquest, a Persian poet (Ibn al-Muqaffa', executed in 759 CE) translated one of many Sasanian heroic epics from Pahlavi into Arabic, whereupon it became a popular sensation. By the 10th century, other poets worked on bits of the Sasanian epic and prose versions began to appear in Persian. One 10th-century version, of which only the introduction remains, has been analyzed and found to have only two percent of Arabic loan words—an obviously deliberate effort by the poet since the spoken Persian of the day often had as much as 50 percent Arabic vocabulary. It seems that Persians were reasserting their identity, not only by reviving their noble history but by reviving their language. During this time too, there was a resurgence of writing verses about wine drinking—obviously a cocked nose at non-drinking Islam.

In the eastern Iranian city of Tus, a poet by the name of Firdowsi was born. In 980, under the patronage of his region’s sultan, he began a 30-year project of shaping the collected stories first written down by the Parthians and then collected by the Sasanian court. They were later told by storytellers throughout Persian villages and towns—the epic history of pre-Islamic Persia, a “Chronicle of Kings” (Shahname).

He did nothing short of creating a magnificent national epic history in ringing verse—some 30,000 rhyming couplets—using the Arabic alphabet but employing a self-consciously Persian vocabulary.

Ferdowsi was as much the father of modern Persian as Chaucer was for modern English. In both cases, these poets and story tellers took a language that had been supplanted by an official language (in Persia, Arabic, and in England, Norman French) and brought it back to a written form that reflected its absorption of two vocabularies but with the grammar and style of the original popular language. Modern Persian, like modern English, is blessed by much larger vocabularies than any of the neighboring languages have—a great asset where literature and particularly poetry are concerned.
The Shahname was taken up by all classes of Iranians: recited by story tellers in villages, read aloud at night in merchant caravansaries plying the Silk Route, and proudly owned in beautifully illustrated volumes by royalty and nobility.

The stories have the barest cover of Islam in the poet’s prologue and in conventional Muslim insertions here and there, but there is no mistaking the Zoroastrian tone of the narratives. The epic covers the semi-mythical history of Iranian monarchy from the creation of the world and its first demigod king, Jamshid, through numerous royal families and their noble courtiers up to the Arab conquest, at which point the work deliberately stops.

The Zoroastrian tone lies in the cosmic battle of good and evil, the earlier champions “cleansing” the land of its demonic forebears, the Black and White Divs (devils) who lived in the country’s remote mountains. These “divs” may well have been the original inhabitants whom the Iranian invaders exterminated.

The second Zoroastrian theme is the demand for responsibility in monarchs and the decency and sense of justice in heroes. In one story known to most Persians, a bad king who has serpents on his shoulders that demand to be fed on his country’s youth, is challenged by a common blacksmith who leads a revolution against this king. There was little literature in the world of that time and until our own times that would countenance such a revolution begun by a commoner! Furthermore, the blacksmith’s leather apron became his revolutionary standard, and even today, lower-class youth belong to weight-lifting fraternities that wear stylized leather trousers and exercise to a drumbeat and the recitation of the Shahname.

It is interesting that the idea of deposing an unjust ruler passed from the Shahname and its Zoroastrian framework and formed the core of resentment against unjust rule that characterizes the Shiite sect of Islam. It is an irony that while Shiites seem to focus their ire on the succession battles of the Prophet Mohammed’s grandsons, their real ire may be a scarcely veiled resentment against the Arabs who conquered them and brought Islam in the first place. This attitude is more marked among upper class Persian men than among common people.

Despite the semi-mythical framework of the Shahname, the characters as brought to life by Firdowsi ring as true and are as moving as the characters created by Shakespeare. They are as recognizably Persian today as Shakespeare’s characters are English. The most interesting character, and a favorite of all Iranians, is Rostam, a long-lived hero.
who spends the better part of his life extricating his irresponsible monarch from scrapes he gets into, including ill-considered wars. Several times, the shah’s disgusted subjects offer the crown to Rostam—and while he is surely tempted, he always declines the honor. He knows that power corrupts.

**Nearly Fatal Challenges to Persian Survival**

**Alexander the Great.** Persia suffered a series of blows to its self-esteem throughout its long history. The conquest of Alexander seemed initially humiliating, but turned out to be a win-win situation for both. Alexander was so enchanted with Persian sophistication that he “sold out” (in the minds of some of his rougher Macedonian generals). Persia received the benefit of Greek thought and Alexander received the dubious benefit of becoming a shah, getting his legitimacy through marriage to the last shah’s daughter, and assuming all the oriental trappings that this implied. It seems to me that Persia received the better part of this confrontation.

**Muslim Invasion.** The Arab invasion had spelled the end of identity for all their initial conquests with the exception of Persia. The Persians, while ready to give up their Zoroastrian religion, were not ready to give up their identity to merge with a people they privately regarded as Bedouin rabble. To this day, the only Arab blood that an Iranian will admit to is that of the family of Mohammad himself. There are as many Persian descendents of the Prophet as there are slivers of the “true cross” in Europe. Islam became much more Persian than Persia became Arab.

**Mongol Holocaust.** The Mongols in the 13th century caused a population loss in Persia of 50 percent--some of this through warfare, but much through the accompanying Black Death. This disaster signaled a dramatic change in Persian personality that is apparent to this day. Before that century, one can see in the literature the boldness, optimism, and aristocratic pride that represented the face Persians showed the world. After the Mongols, the literature reflected a depression, cynicism, and desire to withdraw from worldly matters. Mystical Sufi cults enjoyed a big boost in membership.

Despite the horrors of this period, what was left of the population did to the Mongols what they did under previous invaders: they absorbed them. The Mongols, who began their intercontinental carnage with the idea that no city is a good city, considering civilization a cesspool of corruption, needed only a few years in luxurious Persia to
become totally corrupted themselves. They discovered the delights of bathing, eating delicate foods, making love to sweet-smelling women, and before long, they became very generous and sophisticated patrons of the arts. One more significant benefit of Mongol rule was that for the first time in almost 800 years, there was once again such a country called Persia with borders similar to those before the Muslim Arab invasion and with a monarch again. The monarch had a Mongol face, but in all other ways, he had swallowed Persian culture.

**Safavid Dynasty.** The 16th century saw one last renaissance of Persian sovereignty and international cultural ascendancy. Three Turkic dynasties, the Safavids in Persia, the Moguls in India, and the Ottomans in Turkey, all reached their high point in the 16th century. Two of the three spoke Persian and the cultural language of the third was Persian, despite their Turkic ethnicity. All of them raised luxury and extravagance to new heights and were much admired and envied by Europeans, whose ambassadors fell all over each other in their eagerness to be presented at court.

The Moguls and the Ottoman Turks initially enshrined Persian culture in their courts, but gradually other elements were added to make them distinctive. The Turks adapted much that had been Byzantine and the Moguls began to incorporate elements of Hinduism.

However, as glorious as these three empires looked to Europe and Asia of the day, they were all headed for a rapid sunset. They all declined to consider printing presses, the beginnings of the industrial revolution, and the beginnings of popular participation in governance. Persia made one more drastic error by enforcing the Shiite Sect on the population, which guaranteed an environment of sullen, reactionary hostility, both internally and externally.

So, what happened to these three shining lights? By the 17th century, Persia had become a backwater with a declining population and a religion that isolated them from everyone around them. The Moguls had met the authors of their demise—the Anglo-India Company—and would become the first Asian banquet for the British Empire. The Ottomans were not only stagnant themselves, but kept all their subject peoples stagnant as well. Economic prosperity is no substitute for mental and political evolution, a process well underway in Western Europe. Nothing breathed when the Ottoman overlords sat on them. World War I would reveal the Ottoman Empire for the hollow shell it had become.

**The Disaster of the Qajars.** By the beginning of the 20th century, Persia came fatally close to disappearing as an entity. The British and
the Russians were in the process of carving up Persia into "zones of influence," which left Persians feeling powerless and victimized. The declining population was forced to carry the tax burden of a luxurious and utterly useless dynasty, the Qajars, a Persian-speaking Turkic tribe. This dynasty that opened its reign in the 18th century by creating a pyramid of eyes plucked out of the citizens of Isfahan, a city that had resisted their siege. By the 20th century, they presided over a country totally demoralized, having only a fading memory of their past importance, and having nothing to be proud of.23

Their contemporary culture reflected their plight. In the villages, storytellers still kept the great epic stories from the Shahname alive, which was a blessing since only 10 percent of the population could read any longer. Persian New Year was still celebrated on the first 13 days of Spring, bringing with it a revival of festive cuisine dating back to Sasanian times. The rest of the year, holidays were not festive; they were bitter and self-destructive. At the annual commemoration of the martyrdom of the grandsons of the Prophet Mohammed, the populace was whipped into a frenzy of mourning, weeping, self-flagellation, and on occasion, public pogroms against such heretics as the 19th century Baha’i reformers. The cultural artifact of the day was a theatrical production, the Tazieh (Martyrdom), which reenacted the battle in which Hussein and Hassan were defeated and murdered.24

Periodic famine, poor sanitation, and endemic opium addiction endangered the national health. Cookery had gone flat and unimaginative (except for the New Year feasts), even to the extent that tea had become the national drink, in rank imitation of the Russians and the British. Survival was assured only by knowing whom to bribe. Lying and deception, so decried by their first prophet Zoroaster, was now the mode of the time. Where had the brilliance gone? Where was the pride? Where was the innovative spirit?

**The Pahlavis**

A giant hero appeared on horseback in 1921—a man who began life as a villager in the Caspian Sea region of Iran. He rose in rank through the Russian-trained and led Cossack Brigade, learned to read in his thirties, and with a combination of luck and brass, pulled off a coup d’etat. He demanded that the British and Russian "advisors" leave, and he convinced the last sickly Qajar monarch to take a permanent vacation abroad, and took over the government himself in 1926. Taking the name of Reza Shah Pahlavi, (Pahlavi was the name for the Persian lan-
language before Islam), this single-minded autocrat set about bringing the Persian soul back from oblivion.25 He intended to do nothing less than his neighbor in Turkey, Kemal Ataturk, who created modern Turkey out of the shambles of the former Ottoman Empire. Although Reza Shah would try to create a modern state out of his miserable backwater, he was less successful than Ataturk, largely because he had less to work with. Persia was so illiterate, so enmeshed in its repressive religion, and so much more isolated from the winds of change than Turkey, that it took nothing less than Reza Shah’s relentless energy to make anything change.

During his 15-year tenure, he renamed the country Iran (harking back to its origins); he set about creating a public school system and sent promising young people to school abroad; established a secular court system, a national military service, a railroad system, a modicum of modern medicine, and a professional diplomatic corps; and he followed Ataturk in outlawing the veil—in a stroke, emancipating women. He also considered replacing the Arabic alphabet with the Latin alphabet—but this daunting task not only offended the clergy, but would also render the writings of 2,000 major Persian writers unreadable. If the computer had existed then, this task would have been possible.

Alphabet was not the only issue that enraged the clergy. They had enjoyed a lucrative monopoly on education (Qoranic memorization), and the judiciary, and they constituted 50 percent of the feudal landowners, who certainly did not want to see land reform. The issue of unveiling women was also a red flag to the clergy—which it continues to be to this day. Ignorant and secluded women are the mainstay of a backward religion. The clergy seethed and waited fifty years to exact revenge.

Under British pressure at the beginning of World War II, Reza Shah abdicated his throne to his 21-year-old son, whom the old Shah had sent to Switzerland to school. While Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi was not a chip off the old block (he was weak and vacillating), he carried on the modernization process that his father had begun. There was a renaissance of literature, art, music, architecture, and crafts—including a revival of the exquisite Persian carpet and silk textile industries. Thousands of students, both male and female, were sent abroad to school and at first many of them returned to take up pioneering roles in the modernization process. It was beginning to look as if Persia had been given another lease on life—another renaissance.
The Drama Ends

If the 20th century has taught us anything, it has taught us that rapid revolutions executed without solid underpinning and the consent of the people do not have staying power. Seventy-five years of the Soviet Union under Communism, for all of its ability to educate and indoctrinate, does not seem to have made a dent in the Russian village mentality of piety toward a religion it tried to extirpate; nor did Marxism teach unselfishness and concern for community to the young capitalist exploiters zipping in their expensive cars around Moscow.

In the midst of a revolution of rising expectations, during an oil bonanza that poured far too much money into Iran in too few years, people's lives had become so uprooted both physically and psychologically that a political revolution was fomented. The man of the hour, the Rasputin of this revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, was a very dour, repressive, puritanical, and ambitious Shiite cleric. But he managed to convince the public that he would only be a figurehead of moral irreproachability. Instead, he seized power and plunged his country into a maelstrom of hysteria, war, and further decline of its already unsatisfactory human rights. He also tried to stamp out Persian identity along with its deposed monarchy and he and his party revived an ornately Arabized revolutionary vocabulary and even went so far as to discourage celebration the Persian Now Ruz, the ancient New Year. The public did not go for this.

Conclusion

Educated Iranians know their role in the history of civilization. The Pahlavi dynasty attempted to promote this identity through the public school system so that it would not be the exclusive heritage of the wealthy and lettered. But this sort of cultural education is at a low ebb in the tumultuous Iran of today, a country with, until recently, a runaway birth rate and a repressive, fundamentalist government, and without a unifying monarchy which long has been such a hallmark of its identity.

Despite all this, visitors to Iran report that the vast majority of the population, most of them under thirty, are eager to throw off the constraints of politicized Islam and to take back their Persian heritage. Persians surprisingly survived the Qajars; perhaps they will survive this theocracy as well.
NOTES


*McNeill, p. 91.


*Stewart, op. cit., pp 172-179 for color plates of carpets.


*Ibid., p. 171.

*Stewart, op. cit, p. 83 and Tannahill, op. cit., pp 141-2 and 146-7.

*Tannahill, op. cit., p. 230.


*Pellat, op. cit., p. 141.


Welch, *op. cit.*, pp. 97-8 for color plates showing “divs”.


Bird, F.L., “Modern Persia and Its Capital,” *National Geographic Magazine*, April, 1921. (Amazing photographs showing Iran at its lowest ebb.)
