

Cultural Confusion

Competing narratives in contemporary Iran



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Dedicated to my grandfather, Naser Gholi khan Bakhtiar.

Thank you for all your love and for providing me with the most important narratives of my life.

I won't forget who I am.

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INTRODUCTION

The words *Iran* and *paradox* are often coupled together when social scientists describe the carousel-like perspective that oversees the Iranian political landscape; and for good reasons if one considers the sharply contrasting political (re)orientations of Iranians from the start of the 20th century onwards. They have revolted twice in the forms of the Constitutional Revolution of 1906 and the Islamic Revolution of 1979. In between, during the 1951-53 period, they had a functioning democracy led by Mohammad Mossadeq, who was toppled by an Anglo-American *coup d'état*. Iranians massively marched for democracy again, in 2009, under the banner of the 'Green Movement', which—as I will argue in this thesis—is paradoxical, too, regarding its inherent contradictions.

The central message of this thesis is that these paradoxical events—driven by the constant turbulence at the bottom of the Iranian society and which seems predestined to cause yet another social tsunami—can only make sense if an adequate cultural study is included. For as much as one can reduce the aforementioned events to geo-political factors, fact remains that despite all foreign interferences Iranians did establish a democratic constitution over a century ago. And while Reza Shah in 1925 and his son in 1953 were installed by British-led military coups, these circumstances can't overlook the fact that, one way or the other, the Iranian society ultimately accepted those coups.

Now, hypothetically, imagine Queen Elizabeth staging a military coup in England with the help of Iran, in an attempt to undermine her country's democracy. Would the British society accept the coup in the end or offer resistance no matter the cost? The point being made is that regardless of their nature, politics always are a cultural reflection of a society. With this realization, I set out to gain a new and alternative insight in some of the dynamics of Iranian culture.

With the help of empirical data, obtained through participant observation and in-depth interviews, chapter one focuses on four narratives who all put a political claim on the Iranian national identity. I discuss the conceptual perspective of their worldviews and briefly recap the course of their incorporation into the Iranian society. In doing so, I attempt to demonstrate that these

narratives share many bridgeable and some insurmountable differences with each other. This forms the explanatory basis to the contrasting socio-political developments of modern Iran, as the competition between these narratives and the political implications of their interactions become clear. They've shaped the society into different camps and each took a turn at dominance. In this light, the paradoxical political developments of the past 120 years are an expression of the shifting social loyalty between these narratives

However, in chapter two I move away from the macro-perspective and take a deeper dive in the acculturation processes of the Isfahani society, arguing that this shifting of loyalty hasn't been a fully conscious process. On a variety of levels and domains I link together interviews, citations and social phenomena in order to present evidence of what I shall call 'cultural confusion'; i.e. Isfahani's have forced a false cultural harmony by negotiating erroneous compromises between the competing narratives. The antinomy of their positions is caused by severe conceptual and factual unawareness.

In Chapter three I try to form a theoretical framework into which I can fit both the data and my analyses. I discuss the chief fallacies of essentialism and the main shortcomings of its postmodernist critic—constructivism. I lean on the theory of Seyla Benhabib, who sees culture as a web of narratives, and complement it with the theories of Pierre Bourdieu and Charles Taylor. In doing so, I come to a theoretical mixture, which, as I argue, strikes the right balance in the structure-agency relation. By linking the modified theory to the data, it gives a plausible account of acculturation and helps explain how the cultural confusion has come into being.

I conclude that this state of cultural confusion, in which the Isfahani society and the Iranian nation at large are entangled, has crippled their democratization and modernization processes; resolving it will be a precondition to the successful completion of both.

PROBLEM STATEMENT & METHODOLOGY

It were initially the political twists and turns in Iran's modern history, along with the findings of my BA-research in Iran, which led me to believe that various competing narratives put a political claim on the Iranian national identity. The goal of this research is to examine their interaction and social consequences.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Which narratives put a political claim on Iranian national identity and what are the cultural consequences of their competing interaction?

SUB-QUESTIONS

1. Which narratives put a political claim on the Iranian national identity and what are their specifications?
2. Which dimensions of the narratives are compatible and which are contradictive in relation to each other?
3. What are the cultural consequences of the interactions between these narratives?

METHODOLOGY

This has been an anthropological research. In accordance with the discipline, its main methods of research have been participant observation and in-depth interviews (nine in total). The research population has been split in two groups: youngsters from the age of 18 to 30 years old and middle-aged respondents from the age of 31 to 55 years old. Because of Iran's highly multi-ethnic community, all interviewees have been members of the Bakhtiari tribe. This research has been conducted in the city of Isfahan, central Iran, in two periods: June-August 2008 and June-July 2009.

CHAPTER 1: COMPETING NARRATIVES

1.1 INTRODUCTION

“*Allaho-akbar allaho-akbar*”! sounds the *azan*^A at noon from the radio, as I’m courageously facing the summer heat of Isfahan in a taxi—logically stuck in the traffic jam. “God is great; God is great”. As the *azan* continues and reaches a critical verse it makes me wonder: “Do Sunnis also say ‘Ali is God’s (closest) friend and possessor of the power to Him’ in the *azan*”?!

All the while, the new passenger’s necklace draws my attention. He’s wearing a symbol of Zoroastrianism, Iran’s Pre-Islamic religion, which in contemporary Iran also symbolizes the Achaemenid Empire. “Iran really has an ancient history”, comes to my mind, “besides an Islamic identity there is an older, Persian identity as well and, obviously, he is very proud of it”.

Next to him another young man had gotten in the taxi. He had a very trendy haircut and wore clothes of the latest fashion—the kind that the morality police would arrest him for. He had his eye-brows depilated and was wearing exotic bracelets and necklaces, which reminded me of Enrique Iglesias. Ironically, he asked the driver on a somewhat mockery tone whether he had a CD of ‘Enrico’ (Iranian pronunciation of Enrique) or at least something ‘cheerful’. The driver glanced back through the rear mirror and sarcastically asked in return: “Do I look like someone who even knows who you’re talking about? Is there anything more cheerful than the *azan*”?!

“Taxi...taxi” shouted a young lady. Walking on blue high heel shoes, wearing no socks but an anklet, dressed in light-blue three-quarter length trousers, a white coat covering anything but her thighs, and a matched light-blue kerchief that was supposed to be a scarf, she took the last place on the back seat. She was advising someone through the phone to be equals with her boyfriend and not let him boss her, insisting that “if we can’t have democracy in our relationships, we certainly won’t establish it in society”.

^A It is the Islamic ‘call’ that invites Muslims to pray and is produced by the mosque 5 times each day.

With the Azan having come to an end, the state news agency started to report on the post-election turbulence and in doing so portrayed the demonstrators as “hooligans who have been lured by a great secret Western agenda to start a velvet revolution in Iran”. The driver warned us youngsters not to be fooled by the “enemies of the Revolution”^A who fear the atomic program and want to keep Iran from becoming a world power”. The second those words left his mouth, a heated political debate set the car on fire. This had been unthinkable in the past as secret agents and the Islamic Republic’s brutal punishments are greatly feared.

The young man with the Zoroastrian necklace sharply cut through all traditional barriers by stating that “Iran’s only enemies are those who have forbidden us to be Iranians”! What followed was an inspiring, multi-sided discussion. On one hand, the driver legitimized the Islamic Republic by pointing out that Iran is an Islamic country resisting Western imperialism. On the other, the youngsters refuted the regime’s legitimacy by demanding liberty, saying that religion is a private, and thus secular, matter and claimed furthermore that the regime only plunders the country’s wealth. Their argumentation for liberty, however, had different accents and undertones as one was seeking to re-establish his idea of national identity, the other wanted to express his individuality and the lady was eager to confirm her equality and right to social liberty.

When I got out of the car, drown in thoughts about the political debate I’d just witnessed, I looked at a writing on the wall right in front of me (see front page for picture). It said *ma hastim*, meaning “we are [present]”. It is a revolutionary statement aimed at the regime and it has an ironic tone to it as well: this very writing was to be found on street walls during the Islamic Revolution in 1979, too. I had looked at it so often, but now I *really* saw through it. It suddenly hit me that beneath this political message of *we are present and we defy you* a more serious question was hidden: who is *we*?

It would be short-sighted to say that ‘we’ simply stands for the political opposition. After all, this political opposition opposes the definition that the regime provides for ‘we’. The opposition has other ideas about who ‘we’ are and what kind of political interpretation it should be handed. This

^A The Islamic Revolution is often referred to solely as the Revolution in Iran, such as in this case.

catapults the discussion in the cab, and actually the entire turmoil in Iran, to the level of interpreting the Iranian national identity.

Just like in the taxi-scene described above, I contend that various narratives put a competing political claim¹ on the Iranian national identity, in an attempt to define ‘we’. Through participant observation and interviews I have come to classify four such narratives. These are the narratives of (1) Iranian identity, (2) Islamic identity, (3) democracy and (4) modernization. With respect to their content and nature I will elaborate on each narrative separately, providing background and empirical proof of their presence, in order to discuss their interactions later on².

1.2 THE NARRATIVE OF IRANIAN IDENTITY

“Tell them that Iran is an Aryan country—not an Arabic one—and one of the beacons of history. I want you to remind them that Iran hasn’t only been the world’s greatest power during the Achaemenid and Sassanid periods, but also the frontrunner of civilization at those times—in contrast to how we’re portrayed in their ridiculous movies ‘300’ and ‘Alexander’ or in their history books. They shouldn’t think of Ahmadinejad or the Islamic Republic when they think of Iran. They don’t represent us. They should think of Cyrus the Great, of Shapur II, Ibn Sina, Khayyam and Ferdowsi. We are a liberal people, civilized and dignified and though we have ‘fallen from the saddle, we haven’t fallen from the principle’^A. Tell them to expect that, on one day, we will retake our rightful place in the world.” This is Siyavash’ response when I asked him what to tell people in Holland about Iran.

Siyavash’ face has suddenly become stiff, his gaze sharp and serene and his voice serious and bitter, as he tries to hold back his rage. Almost all Iranians that I met felt a strange kind of collective anger; strange because the focus of their anger is not easily locatable and seems continuous of nature. Sometimes it appears as if Iranians are mad at the entire world: mad at Alexander *the Macedonian*, Russia, the French, the US, Western historians, the Portuguese, Israel, the Palestinians...but above all outrageous with Arabs in general, with mullahs and with

^A A Persian proverb which plays with the words ‘asb’ (horse) and ‘asl’ (principle).

Britain. The aspect that these subjects of their anger have in common is that Iranians blame them for harming the country at some point in history. This anger is based on a sense of deprivation of the special place that they envisage for their nation in the world along with the assumption that these people and countries have time over again conspired to withhold Iran from fulfilling its potential.

1.2.1 CONTENT & PATH

When talking about the Iranian national identity, it is only logical that ‘Iranianness’^A is the primary marker. It is inclusive to all citizens as it transcends minorities and internal divisions, binding them all together: it provides nationality to the nation. But there is a lot more to Iranianness than enabling Iranians to introduce themselves to the world. In fact, the most important aspect of Iranianness is that it’s an essential instrument for Iranians to actively and constantly re-introduce themselves to their own, in a way that perhaps exceeds any other nation’s use of its nationality.

In this self-identification their ‘Persian past’ has become a multidimensional narrative that works on four levels and is especially aimed at gaining recognition. Running through all four levels is the way they contrast themselves to Arabs, as a reaction to the historic and continuous Islamic assault on their national identity, as will be discussed later on. Being the anti-pole to the “otherness” of the Islamic identity is one of the key facets of coming to a “self”.

At the first level, the matter of ethnicity comes to the front. Iranians, like Siyavash, proudly present themselves as descending from the Aryan stock. Iran literally means Aryan and the Old and Modern Persian languages are of the Indo-Iranian group of the Indo-European family (Curtis, 2005: 18). Their emphasis on this point primarily serves to distinguish themselves from Arabs, as in the case of Siyavash.

The second level concerns the historic role of the country as a superpower, founded in 557 B.C. by Cyrus the Great. “During the reign of Darius (522-486 BC) the empire reached its peak... By

^A *Iraniat* in Persian.

this date the empire extended from the Indus to the Balkans.” (idem: 13-14) It has shaped the Iranian belief that the only worthy role for the country is that of a cosmopolitan and progressive power to which they are historically entitled. Importantly, it is the Muslim Arab conquest of Iran which Iranians almost unanimously indicate as the reason for the country’s fall. Moreover, Iranians are sensitive about the descriptions of their past and emphasize their progressiveness, claiming that the European account of the Persian Empire is biased. Their claim is not unfounded³.

Thirdly, Zoroastrianism, for many Iranians, offers a religious counterpart to Islam in the same way that ancient Iranian traditions pose as the anti-poles of Islamic customs. “Persians’ main faith was Zoroastrianism which is a monotheist religion, although there were a number of beliefs in Iran during the first century BC.” (idem: 150). It must be said, however, that praising Zoroastrianism for the post-revolution generation is mainly a political act, rather than a religious one and rarely entails religious practices⁴. Besides religion, Iranians fall back on numerous traditions and holidays, the most prominent of which is Nowrouz.⁵

Fourthly, Iranians are very sensitive about the Persian language. *Doroud* says Bijan’s father very uncommonly instead of the customary *salaam*. While both mean ‘hello’, the former is a Persian word that has been replaced by the latter, which is Arabic and derives from the Muslim greeting ‘*salaam-o aleikom*’. *Doroud* has been passed to the literary domain throughout the centuries and, when used, is certain to raise some eyebrows. Mine were no exception. In response to my inquiry, Bijan’s father said that starting every conversation in an Islamic fashion with *salaam* symbolizes the Persian defeat to Arab Muslims. He found it his national duty to expel that word and offer “cultural resistance to the Arab cultural violation”.

Let us take a look at this much-discussed defeat. “In the course of the seventh century Persia was overrun by victorious Muslim armies, and the Sassanian Empire (A.D. 226-652), fabled for the splendor of its court, crumbled. The conquest proved to be far more than military, for it introduced a new religion into Persia and opened an entirely new chapter in Iranian history. The country whose soldiers had subdued faraway Yemen, captured Jerusalem, and marched to the gates of Constantinople only a few decades earlier, now came under the aegis of the caliphs and

was ruled by Arab governors for some two hundred years before it could assert its identity again. In the meantime the majority of the Persians, particularly in urban centers, converted to Islam. With conversion came a new spirit and a new social order. As the unity of the overwhelming and transcendent Allah was impressed upon the converts, the characteristic belief in the dualism of the Iranian religion disappeared. Gone, too, were the class distinctions which had been the backbone of Sassanian social and political organization. The powerful Zoroastrian church was reduced to a marginal institution catering to the spiritual needs of a declining community. The remaining Zoroastrians watched in amazement and despair as their erstwhile brethren buried their death, desecrated fire, offended dogs, and faced Mecca for their prayers” (Yarshater, 1988: 1-2).

The Persians, though, were resolute to hold on to their identity. They did convert to Islam, but in doing so they incorporated many traditions of their pre-Islamic past. Besides, the core elements of Islam had strong links with Zoroastrianism⁶. “The most effective link between the two periods of Persian history, however, was a linguistic one. Most of the countries that were conquered by the Arab armies in the first century of Islam, when the new religion was at the height of its drive, lost their language to Arabic and eventually shed their previous identities, becoming “Arab.” Such is the case with Iraq, Syria, Egypt, and much of North Africa. Persia was a notable exception: although conquered completely and absorbed inextricably into the Muslim world, it nonetheless retained its language and its identity” (Yarshater, 1988:3).

For the salvation of the Persian language Iranians owe the greatest debt to Ferdowsi⁷, the poet of their national epic *Shāh-nāma*. Ferdowsi’s work did not only aim at linguistic salvation. He also gave content to the Iranian identity through his poems. His book of mythical Persian heroism starts with the creation of the universe, goes on to the foundation of the Persian Empire, continues with heroic battles and, more importantly, ends in tragedy as the last chapters cover the Arab conquest of Iran. And it does so in an intensely disheartening manner. “We may read it as the cry of anguish of the poet himself” (Yarshater, 1988: 263).⁸

The political glorification of their Persian past, anticlericalism, and hostility to the Muslim Arab conquest of Iran are thus no new phenomena, as one would expect them to be in reaction to the regime’s overemphasis on Islam. Nationalism and the pre-Islamic identity were stressed by

Iranian thinkers as early as 1890. It also became part of the Pahlavi agenda during the reigns of Reza Shah and Mohammad Reza Shah, and nationalism was a central issue in the nationalization of oil, too (Keddie, 2003: 83, 124, 178). In fact, in the beginning of the 20th century, Kermani propagated a radical type of nationalism. He idealized pre-Islamic past and held Islam and ‘inferior Arabs’ responsible for destroying ‘this greatness’ and denounced all great Persian classical poetry except for the Shāh-nāma, which doesn’t contain Arabic/ Islamic ideas or words and has an anti-Arab nature. His radical line was continued by important figures like Ahmad Kasravi and Sadeq Hedayat. The former avoided the use of Arabic words, publicly burnt poetry that contained them, and supported anti-Shi’i Iranian nationalism. He developed a considerable following and was assassinated by a member of a religious group (idem: 178-185).

1.2.2 PRESENCE IN SOCIETY

The majority of the research population strongly identifies with the pre-Islamic period. Regretting the current state of the country they refer to these past times with pride and indicate it as the true place that Iran should take: a world power, forerunner, a mighty country with heroic leaders battling injustice, a cosmopolitan nation, prosperous, humane, liberal and above all *Iranian* in identity and presentation—to use some of their descriptions.

Empirically, the Iranian identity a highly evident narrative: the posters and mini-statues of Persepolis at homes, the necklaces of Ahura Mazda, the attribution of Persian names to newborns, the celebration of Persian holidays, the insistence on, and sensitivity about, the Persian language or history, the social status of the likes of Cyrus the Great and Ferdowsi, are just a few examples of its vivid expression.

1.2.3 ARCHIVE

This narrative has various archives. Obviously it’s recorded in history books and historic monuments and artifacts. It is also represented by the monarchy’s the Persian Empire is symbolized by its kings. In that light the Shah, before the revolution, was not only the central power of the country, but also the extension of its historical identity and tradition. As a

consequence Iranian kings in the past have actively tried to live up to that reputation and to confirm this extension of monarchy⁹.

While historic monuments form the exterior and historical writings describe the Iranian narrative, Ferdowsi's *Shāh-nāma* is the archive of its worldview and the main provider of content to its identity. Some Iranian nationalists go as far as saying that "it is our holy book; *our* Koran". Consequently, Ferdowsi is its greatest narrator.

1.2.4 INSTITUTION

The Shah was its most important institution. When Iran became a 'republic'^A in 1979, the only institutions of the Iranian narrative that remained are public associations which are barely tolerated by the regime. However, these small institutions are rich in numbers, inside Iran as well as abroad, and very persistent, though they don't possess organizational capacities. Also, the Zoroastrian church still exists in Iran. However, along with other religious minorities they make up 2% of the registered religion of the population¹⁰.

1.3 THE NARRATIVE OF ISLAMIC IDENTITY

Ya Ali!—said the taxi driver when I told him good bye. It means "may Ali help you". I heard it again when I got home: my nephew was watching a football match and suddenly screamed "ya Ali" when one player took a shot from distance. But why doesn't my nephew scream *ya Allah*? Why doesn't the taxi driver say "may Allah be with you" instead of Ali. Does Ali hold a Jesus-like position in Shiite thought?

1.3.1 CONTENT & PATH

The Islamic conquest of Iran took place in 637 A.D. The battle of Al-Qadisiyya is seen as the engagement during which the Persians were dealt the decisive blow and the invading Arabs went

^A Make no mistake: the Islamic Republic is not an actual republic, for it contrasts with the most basic principles of republicanism. In reality, it looks more like some kind of Islamic monarchy, with the supreme leader replacing the shah.

on to conquer the entire Empire in the following years. It has been the most significant turning page in Iranian history¹¹. One of its important dimensions is that the emergence of Islam in Iran occurred in a very harsh manner, traumatizing many Iranians still today. This traumatic encounter hasn't only provided Iranians an identification marker, but has also played a key role in the way they have come to experience Islam.

Its impressions aside, the ideological substance of Islam concerns a monotheist religious world view, which has incorporated many aspects of other religions, including Zoroastrianism. This logic leads us to assume that it cannot have been too alien to Iranians in terms of religious orientation. What was alien to Iranians, though, was its formulation: the severity with which Islam presented itself through the invading Arab forces is continued in the harsh spirit that is a dominant and defining aspect of the Koran.¹²

In Shiite mythology Ali is the valid and chosen successor of Mohammed as the caliphate of Islam, in contrast to the Sunni claim that Omar should have been the fourth caliphate. Ali's armed claim to the succession of the prophet, his eventual death and the continuous calls of his offspring form the core theme of Shiism. Central to this narrative is Ali's acclaimed heroism, pure selflessness, dedication to justice, his love for God and, more importantly, the special love and attention that he gets *from* God. He and his most prolific son Hussein are God's chronologically chosen leaders of Islam capable of supernatural deeds according to the mythology, symbolizing justice and personifying the battle of the weak against all evil. Ali and his ten descendants are claimed to have all died heroic deaths in their attempt to 'salvage Islam'. The mythology says that the eleventh offspring, Mahdi, is inside a well (called the Well of Jamkaran; in Iran) under the protection of God and will remain there until he emerges on Judgment Day, carrying the title of Imam-al-Zaman (the Imam of Time). Together they form the twelve Imams¹³ of Shiism.

Bahram Moshiri, an Iranian historian and active member of the political opposition abroad, says that "Iranians didn't get along at all with the 'Allah of Medina'. He was too hard, too one-dimensional, too demanding, and his punishments were too severe and even sadistic for the Iranian mentality to accept, which was used to the Iranian narrative of God. That's why, after the

death of Mohammed, Iranians altered Islam, and actually opposed it, by backing the underdog Ali to become his successor. They made him the symbol of justice and the extension of God's will in Shiite mythology. Yet, he was the exact opposite of what Iranians portrayed him to be. What mattered for Iranians was that this division enabled them to insert into Islam those emotional stories of heroism and battles of justice, aspects central to Zoroastrianism and Persian history telling, that were appealing to them. That made Islam somewhat more consumable for the Iranian mind, though not completely preferable. However, we must keep in mind that it wasn't a matter of preference or choice, but one of the following two options: either say '*Allah-o-Akbar* or feel our sword! This, eventually, was the birth of 'twelver Shiism'.

There are some interesting aspects worth noting in relation to Ali's place in Shiism and its implication for 'Iranian Islam'¹⁴. His personification of the battle for justice, righteousness, God—all morality—is so complete in Shiite mythology that his place is elevated above that of Mohammed. There is a Shiite hadith^A which says that Ali stood at the gates of heaven prior to Mohammed's arrival. Also, upon Mohammed's return to earth, the prophet had to crawl on his hands and knees under the feet of "Ali's infinite herd of cattle" that was passing by. This hadith straightforwardly discredits Mohammed and place the prophet below Ali. Following this logic, Shiite Muslims like the taxi driver say either *Ya Allah* or *Ya Ali* when calling for divine assistance, but never *Ya Mohamad*.¹⁵

Moshiri's take on this issue is crystal clear: "The rift between Ali and Omar and the claim of his descendants were real. But it was a matter of familial dispute over power; nothing more. Most of them were cousins and brother-in-laws to each other and Ali enjoyed no substantial support for his claim. The creation of the Shiite mythology around him has been an Iranian product since all virtues of Iranian heroism, which are actually Rostam's^B characteristics in the *Shāh-nāma*, were attributed to him. None matches his real historic descriptions: the entire mythology of Shiite Islam has been one big historical lie produced by Iranians who wanted to cope with the situations by integrating passionate aspects of Iranian culture into this religion that was forced upon them. The irony, though, is that we have actually come to believe our own lies".

^A Holy stories about the prophet and the Imams.

^B The central Iranian hero in Ferdowsi's *Shāh-nāma*.

During my participant observations I noted that this split in Islam has created a dual source of Islamic identity for Iranians. The alleged corruption of the religion by the Sunnis seems to divert the focus away from the practice of the strict Islamic teachings by the Koran, which is the first source of Shiism, and concentrates it on the battle of the effectuation of justice and the salvation of truth, Ali's battle, the second source. This provides Iranians the room to handle Islamic regulation fairly loosely. As a result, many Iranians who identify themselves as Muslims do not observe the religious regulations. When asked about their careless practice of Islamic instructions,¹⁶ one frequent argument that I was presented was that "although we don't practice Islamic law we do follow Ali's path". For them this is the true touchstone of being a Muslim. This is also reflected in how Shiites perceive Sunnis to be infidels. Therefore, Shiite Islam works along two lines, one of Ali (and his offspring) and the other of the Koran, with the former generally predominating the latter.

SHI'ISM: DEVELOPMENT FROM THE 16TH CENTURY ONWARDS

After the reunification of Iran in 1501 by the Safavid dynasty, who forcefully made Shiism the official religion, the *ulama* (religious leaders) had traditionally been at the mercy of the monarch while having popular basis, resulting in a double line of income and financial strength and they increasingly became politically active since the Constitutional Revolution (Keddie, 2003). The direction of their political activity has been hard to pin down, as they have played a rather opportunistic role: In opposition to Westernization and modernization they backed the Constitutional movement to undermine the Shah, but turned against it when they found out that it didn't include the *Sharia*^A (idem: 180). During the Pahlavi reign they were more concerned with their own position and with Islamic Law, resulting in sudden changes of alignment. For instance, in the period of the nationalization of oil, they first supported Mossadeq and then backed his fall, with the main Ayatollah Kashani being bribed by Britain¹⁷ (idem: 180). Yet, there is one sole consistency throughout their political activities: they've principally opposed secularism (idem: 180).

^A Islamic law.

Islamic institutions gained power through their connection with the *bazaari's* (the traditional merchants) in the course of the 19th and 20th centuries. This religious-economic alliance had the potential to cripple the economy. Also, religion was the only stage that the Qajar's and Pahlavi's simply couldn't close down, in contrast to the severe shut down of secularists and the *majles* (parliament). By monopolizing the political arena the Pahlavi's unwillingly prompted the mosque as the only realistic platform for the expression of political discontent (idem: 168-9). This helps explain the ability of the clergy to take over leadership from secularists during the 1979 revolution. A revolution which in essence wasn't Islamic but became so in the latter stages¹⁸: the regime's successful silencing of secularists and open attack on Khomeini resulted in the ulama control over the movement (idem: 225).

Three aspects politicized the narrative of an Islamic identity in such a way that they led youngsters to follow Khomeini and aspire to establish an "Islamic republic", disregarding the inherent incommensurability of such a concept. First, the more original Islamic thinkers, led by the influential Ali Shariati, who had received Western education and were able to deal with modern ideologies (regardless of their correct or incorrect treatment of them), blended Islam with modern ideas, arguing that religion wasn't against progress but rather in accord with democracy and science. They gave Islam an ideologically combative meaning (idem: 198-204). Shariati excelled in this strive more than any other and took the unique position of criticizing the ulama as well, which had a lot of appeal for the new generation. His ability to speak of modern ideologies, with which the youngsters had come into contact but had little understanding of, was also a huge advantage over ulama. Hundreds of thousands of his books were sold from 1977 onwards (idem: 206). Secondly, and equally important, the ideas of Khomeini and Shariati were rarely by the masses distinguished in 1978-9 (idem: 226).

Thirdly, as westernization, enforced by the Shah, was closely associated with imperialism, there was an increasing need to return to cultural roots and these writers politicized Islam further by claiming that it was the only way out. In short, they defended Islam in the face of westernization and modern ideologies. The creation of such a sense of political identity attracted a lot of followers, exemplified by the "ironic phenomenon of some women university students from the mid-1970s on readopting Muslim modes of dress as a means of stressing their identity with

Islam, seen as morally and politically superior to the ways of the regime, and/or of stressing their political opposition to the regime, whether or not they were believers” (idem: 229-30).

1.3.2 PRESENCE IN SOCIETY

After thirty one years at power, Shiite Islam manifests itself in four domains. First, it is always present during all private ceremonies, ranging from birth to death as it covers marriage, divorce, and other smaller events. During these ceremonies both lines come to the front and arguably on no other occasion in Iranian’s lives is the Koran as prominently present. Remarkably, the regime actively promotes Islamic names for children to the extent of actually giving economic benefits in return.

The second domain is that of guidance and reveals itself at Friday’s prayers and during religious holidays, which are well attended in Isfahan. Here, too, the two lines in Shiite Islam are both articulated. Yet, friction can be seen here when Mullahs usually make use of the opportunity to discredit Sunnis. Besides, wherever possible they don’t employ the Koran but the ‘problem of succession’ as the measure of addressing religious questions.

Thirdly, Shiite Islam is also present in the daily lives of people. Yet, here the Koran and the Mullah move to the background and Ali and his descendants come to the front: They are called, referred to by many Iranians whether it is when they greet each other, undertake whatever kind of action, speak out in amazement, encourage someone, call out for help or refer to superlatives and etcetera.

Yet, nowhere is the Shiite claim (competitive of nature) to full Islamic legitimacy as evident as in the hierarchy of holy sites. While Mecca still is the direction which Shiite Muslims face for their prayers, and the *Hajj* remains a holy trip, the importance of non-Shiite parts of Islam doesn’t reach far beyond these two. Many of the respondents preferred a pilgrimage to Karbala, in modern day Iraq, where Hussein is buried or Mashhad, North Eastern Iran, where Imam Reza’s tomb is located, to the *Hajj*. In fact, one respondent even said that “I wouldn’t visit Mecca even if they’d give me 5 million Euros; but I’ll go to Mashhad¹⁹ voluntarily”.

Fourthly, and most fundamentally, Shiite Islam is embodied by the Islamic Republic. The Sharia functions as the constitution and all laws and regulations of the country originate from this source. The Guardian Council of the Constitution oversees this process and ensures the Islamic level of legislation. It is here that the Islam generally causes annoyance or even indignation with the people, as rules are enforced upon them and these derive from the Koran, the less popular source.

Because of this political institutionalization of the religion, Islam has settled itself at the top of power. And power always is contested. As a result, Islamic thinking and identity are increasingly questioned and high levels of anti-Islamism can be found in the society. Although questioning the Koran and Islamic teaching remains the main source of criticism and is no new phenomenon, as the previous sub-chapter has tried to show, the novel development is the questioning of the second source of Shiism: “Ali? He was an Arab murderer! Why should he be of any concern to us Iranians?”—says one respondent.

These feelings, however, aren’t largely explored and organized, ensuring some legitimacy for the religion despite all irritation caused by (and all the objection to) the implementation of Islamic law. And this brings me to one of the most remarkable observations: the majority of the research population has an extremely superficial insight in Islam. For example, only one of the respondents had read the Koran and she had done so in Arabic, since Persian shares the same alphabet, and as a result had barely understood the content. In fact, not one participant had read the Koran in Persian and was neither planning to do so. The information they had was mostly hear-say. That fits in the larger picture: For them, the believers, the succession claim of Ali and his offspring, and their heroic and just battle within that frame, is what matters.²⁰

1.3.3 ARCHIVE

Islamic archive consists of three sources. The centre of this archive, of course, is the Koran. The second source is presented by the *hadiths* that are attributed to the Prophet and the Imams. The third authority is made up of Islamic teachings and interpretations offered by prominent mullahs with ranging levels of cleric specialization. Also here the incongruence between the two lines, the Koran and Ali’s claim, runs through the texts, their meanings and their interpretations. The

validity of a lot of these third-level sources of information is, however, to be doubted, since their reconstruction of events sharply contrasts the surviving historic coverage.

1.3.4 INSTITUTION

Ever since its inception, Islam's main institution for organizing, teaching and promoting the religion has been the mosque. In the course of centuries also specialized religious schools have been set up to focus on Islamic teaching. Such schools still exist in Iran. Although prior to the Islamic Revolution of 1979 the mosque had always been the most powerful of Islamic institutions, it has had to make room for the very same Islamic state it aspired to be.

The transformation has enabled Islam to run from the constitution to all layers of government and into the private sector as well, as Islamic quality has become the most important measure of competence, value and dignity in Iranian official spheres. The Islamic Republic, led by the Supreme Leader, projects this standard on the macro-level of politics, whether it concerns the (dis)approval of parliament members/presidency candidates or the decision making process on foreign affairs, to the very micro-level of every day life by screening the very detail of personal living modes in Isfahan, and all if Iran for that matter, through the 'morality police'. To name a few examples: the buses are split in male and female halves, social conduct is controlled so that young boys and girls, as well as men and women, can't accompany a person of the opposite sex who isn't a direct family member, and 'dress code' is periodically checked at urban centers. The traditional activity of promoting the religion has been extended from a role of Mullah's to a function of statesmen, ranging from the Supreme Leader to ordinary policemen and militants. This development has problematized the Islamic narrative and intensified its competition with the Iranian identity, setting the stage for an intensifying face-off.

1.4 THE NARRATIVE OF DEMOCRACY

Marg bar dictator! —“Death to the dictator”. Not to America or Israel for a change, but to the dictator. This is what Iranians regularly chant at the post-presidential elections' demonstrations, which have evolved into anti-structural protests that aim the entire regime. This isn't the first

time, as it will become clear, that the Iranian nation has opposed dictatorship in an attempt to establish a democratic state.

Next to focusing on the ideological content of the narrative, I will give a general, but at times detailed, account of democracy's faith in Iran because of four reasons. First, I want to contextualize the current democratic movement in a longer historic sequence.²¹ Secondly, I seek to demonstrate that the original nature of the Islamic Revolution was democratic, and that the movement *partly* turned Islamic only in the very latter stages.²² A third goal is to elaborate on the unusual rapport between mullahs and democratic movements, and hence the contemporary self-acclaimed leadership of religious figures.²³

Finally, it will allow me to point out the actual narrators of democracy in Iran,²⁴ namely Mossadeq and Bakhtiar, through whom I'll highlight the contrasts between democracy and the previous two narratives.

1.4.1 CONTENT & PATH

On August 6th 1906, the Iranian parliament voted in favor of a Constitutional Monarchy²⁵ (Keddie, 2003: 67). It was a radical break up with a history of totalitarian rule, on one hand, and the meddling of foreign powers, on the other. It is only the appreciation of the link between dictatorship and imperialism that allows the significance of the Constitutional Revolution to be comprehended.²⁶

This thesis defines democracy as the right to and the practice of national self-determination on macro-institutional levels, through elections that are protected by, and rooted in, the principles of individual liberty and equality.²⁷ Immediately the frictions between these principles and the political concepts of the Iranian and Islamic narratives can be seen. In the first place, democratic principles remove the “no-trespassing” sign at the borders of power, since they don't regard it as the inherited property of a selected few, and replace it with a “two-way street” sign, legitimized and accessed by the nation, as sovereignty belongs to the people, and periodic of nature. Of course, this is in stark contrast with the monarchical and Shiite perceptions of power in which sovereignty respectively belongs to the king or God (and in His absence to his ‘designated representatives’).

Secondly, the interests for which political power was used changed as well. Although the Shah had to derive his legitimacy from the people by means of his just reign over them, the hierarchy of interests was never questioned: Especially the Qajar dynasty prioritized its own. The democratic principle of equality challenged this uneven balance and in doing so restructured the interests of the nation on top. For the Shiite perspective this had even more sweeping implications, since the entire idea of nation is irrelevant in religious thought. In Islam, it is the *umma*, the community of believers, which is significant.²⁸ A third factor that changed was the balance in the relationship between the individual, the society and religion. In the democratic system individuals no longer had a structurally inferior position to the monarchy or the clergy. Democracy's fourth impact was the threat that its liberal nature formed for the monarchical and religious censorships, not only on word but also on thought, which were so useful in preventing their positions to be questioned.

Naturally, neither the shah nor the mullahs sat still. In fact, they joined forces: Mohammad Ali Shah staged a coup against the parliament and bombarded it, with the Russian Cossacks Brigade facilitating the move. Russian troops occupied Tehran and royal forces took control of other important cities. Only Tabriz held ground against royal forces as Sattar khan and Bagher khan led the Tabrizi resistance, but they were forced to flee the city and join Northern revolutionaries when Russian troops entered. The Bakhtiari tribe, led by Sardar Assad Bakhtiari, reacted and liberated Isfahan from royalist forces, marching towards Tehran where they were joined by the Northern revolutionaries (Keddie, 2003: 70). The revolutionaries liberated Tehran and the Shah took refuge to Russia. His son, the teenager Ahmad, was installed by the parliament as the new monarch in 1907. Although the parliament was closed again by the Russians in 1911 and political censorship was restored until 1914, marking the real end of the revolution, an important legacy was left behind for the following generations: the constitution (Idem: 71).

The struggle between the people, Shah, clergy and foreign powers was further complicated with the discovery of oil²⁹ in 1909 and the outbreak of World War I. The competition³⁰ between Russia and Britain came to an end when the latter backed Reza Khan³¹ to change the dynasty from Qajar to Pahlavi,³² becoming the new monarch (idem: 80-6). This meant the effectual death sentence of the constitution and renewed Iran's dependence on foreign powers, with the Anglo-

Iranian Oil Company (read Britain) legally owning Iranian oil.³³ Reza Shah's authoritarian reign was marked by centralization, enforced modernization and westernization.

CURVE

“Draw what curve?! Do you think that Reza Shah's service to the country was so exceptional if we consider that he, in contrast to his predecessors, had oil royalties to his disposal? He sold the country to foreigners and fled during WWII before British soldiers had even set foot on Iranian soil. And at that moment he possessed thousands of villages, instead of realizing that as a Shah you don't need to possess real estate, you head the entire country!” This is what Moshiri says in response to an Iranian journalist, Meybodi, who apparently has claimed that if a statistical comparison would be made between a variety of Iranian monarchs and their contributions to the country, Reza Shah would top the curve in the graph. Moshiri continues: “Even worse, he buried democracy alive. He killed or imprisoned all brave Iranian freedom fighters who had fought for the constitution”.

This discussion highlights a clash of differing perspectives on sovereignty between the democratic and Iranian narratives. The former looks for a type of governance in which the Shah's function is symbolic and the nation is sovereign, while the latter finds Shah's symbolism mainly in his possession of power and legitimizes his neglect of democracy with services paid to the country.

MOSSADEQ

Reza Shah's affiliation towards the Germans during World War II, followed by the German declaration of Iran as a 'purely Aryan country', concerned the allied forces. Britain and Russia occupied Iran, forced the abdication of Reza Shah and divided the country once more in three zones. The UK installed Reza Shah's son, Mohammad Reza, as the new monarch (Keddie, 2003: 105-6). Iranians found themselves in a new political vacuum and immediately pushed for democracy, led by the patriotic Dr. Mohammed Mossadeq, who wanted to nationalize Iranian oil, in contrast to the new Shah (and Great Britain). In this standoff, the nationalization act became

the symbol of Iranian independence and national self-determination. Eventually, Mossadeq successfully nationalized Iranian oil through a parliamentary vote³⁴.

Again, however, the king, ulama and foreign powers, driven by divergent interests, conspired against democracy. When the British-led international boycott of Iranian oil, enforced with gun boats in the Persian Gulf, and several attempted coups failed, the US and UK joined forces with Shah and Ayatollah Kashani to stage what is probably the most critical coup d'état of the 20th century, dubbed as operation Ajax, and overthrew Mossadeq on 19th August 1953³⁵ (idem: 125-30). The coup was followed by the life-long house arrest of Mossadeq, the complete annulment of the parliament and a new consortium which virtually put the control of oil in foreign hands.³⁶ More importantly, 28 *Mordad*—Persian calendar equivalent of August 19—became a traumatic day carved into the Iranian political recollection and a powerful political notion on its own. This highlights Mossadeq's position in the Iranian quest for democracy, who through his selfless efforts and his stress on democracy has come to embody the narrative of democratization in Iran.³⁷

“Mossadeq *is* my identity card!” says Mansour while Ali insists that “if Shah hadn't intervened the communists would have handed the country to Russia”. The friction between the Iranian and Democratic narratives again can be noticed clearly. Mansour vows for national self-determination while Ali awards the country's sovereignty to the monarch.

The coup saw the US becoming the major power in Iran, supporting the dictatorship of Shah, who by-passed the constitution in its entirety³⁸ and set up a brutal and effective intelligence agency named SAVAK. However, the pressure for democracy remained, forcing him to make the elections look more real. He introduced a two-party system, both his own creations³⁹, which in 1975 were cancelled altogether, as Mohammad Reza Shah ordered that there should be only one party, namely his own: *Rastakhiz*⁴⁰—resurgence.

While the political opposition inside and abroad was shut down, those voices that were heard all vowed for the implementation of the constitution. Even Khomeini, at this point not known to the masses, declared that “the constitution has been bought with the blood of our fathers, and we will

not permit it to be violated”. In a context that saw the Shah become ever more hypocrite⁴¹ and out of touch with reality,⁴² as highlighted by the ridiculous over-consumption of military weapons⁴³ and the economic problems that these brought along,⁴⁴ and with the Royal family corrupting further,⁴⁵ protests to his reign resurfaced during the Kennedy period and his administration’s stress on human rights. Radical guerilla groups such as the *Mojahedin-e Khalq* and the *Fedaiyan-e Khalq* became increasingly active, linking themselves to abroad.⁴⁶ Shah reacted by ruthlessly oppressing the secular forces, executing guerilla fighters and suppressing the freedom of speech further.

The widely-circulated open letter in 1977 from National Front leaders⁴⁷, whom dated back to Mossadeq, in which they voiced their demands for the compliance with human rights and the full implementation of the constitution, can be trailed as the real starting date of the revolution. This forced the Shah to replace his Prime Minister,⁴⁸ but the complete close-down of the political arena reduced secular influence in the protests that were sparked by the letter and increased ulama’s role.⁴⁹ The article “Iran and the Red and Black colonization”,⁵⁰ which attacked Khomeini and was supported by the Shah, sparked so much discontent that it definitely swung the initiative of the movement from secularists towards ulama.

The alliance of the National Front with moderate/‘novel’ Islamic thinkers⁵¹ and the ulama fooled the middle-class into thinking that the Revolution would be liberal of nature.⁵² Experienced politicians made the same mistake as supposedly ‘Mossadeqist’ National Front leaders joined Khomeini and announced that both democracy *and* Islam were the two most basic political principles (Keddie, 2003: 233). The only National Front leader to refuse the alliance with Khomeini was Dr. Shapour Bakhtiar who, as a consequence, was sacked by the National Front. Meanwhile, Khomeini declared from France that he didn’t want to rule directly and maintained a nationalist-democratic tone,⁵³ as his followers actively kept out of circulation his book “Islamic State” and he never mentioned the position of the Supreme Leader. “Many revolutionaries only knew of these French statements and not the theocratic ideas of his *Hokumat-e Islami*” (idem: 234).

BAKHTIAR

The enormous pressure forced the Shah to concede. He turned to Shapour Bakhtiar,⁵⁴ who had a long oppositional record⁵⁵ (idem: 234). Bakhtiar warned the people intensively for fascism and religious dictatorship, maintaining that all political demands of the revolutionaries could be met through the implementation of the constitution and gave full constitutional freedoms, including those of speech, press and political activity. He released all political prisoners, announced the dismantlement of the SAVAK, and promised changes in economy and foreign relations⁵⁶ (Keddie, 2003: 234; Bakhtiar, 1981: 8-9).

In retrospect, his battle is regarded as heroic by Iranians of all political orientations as a result of his “I don’t get along with neither Shah nor Khomeini”-attitude, his exceptional providence,⁵⁷ and his courageous face-off with the masses and Khomeini. During his opposition to the Islamic Republic, prior to his assassination in 1991 in France, he maintained that “when I was called on, the cancer of Khomeini had already spread to the entire body of the nation”⁵⁸ (Bakhtiar, 1982: 14).

“The representatives of the tradition [of democracy] that we support are Mohammad Mossadeq and Shapour Bakhtiar...My father’s generation heard the calling for freedom from Mossadeq and my own generation had the luck to hear this loud voice from Bakhtiar”.⁵⁹ These are the words of Ramin Kamran, an oppositional intellectual in Paris, who highlights the significance of these two narrators of democracy in Iran.

So far I’ve tried to make the following points. First, democracy has been challenging the Iranian and Islamic narratives on several levels. Second, the incorporation of democracy in the Iranian cultural plateau is still a work in progress due to divergent, nonetheless coherent, reasons such as domestic and foreign interest groups who have opposed its institutionalization. More importantly, its incompleteness is also on behalf of a generally incomplete, inaccurate and confused mass-understanding of its concept. The third point is that democracy, ever since the Constitutional Revolution, persists as a substantially significant way through which Iranians wish to identify themselves.

1.4.2 PRESENCE IN SOCIETY

Marg bar asl-e velayat-e faqih!—is what tens of thousands of protestors scream in Tehran. Their voices are broadcasted by Iranian opposition satellites. It means “death to the very principle of supreme leadership”. The very thought of it is punishable by death in Iran—let alone its declaration in public—on the charge of opposing God’s representative on earth and therefore God Himself. But, suddenly, the always present but secret resentment of the regime has found its way out of the inner consciousness of people, who on their turn have found each other in the streets.

The persistence of the democratic narrative in contemporary Iran is best expressed by the rise of massive protests since the presidential elections of June 2009, whose demonstrators are often labeled as the “green movement”. Even though the movement is unorganized, leaderless⁶⁰ and inherently discordant,⁶¹ all its political demands root from the notion of democracy. Explicit calls for democracy and democratic participation in chants, on sign boards, flags and etcetera support such a statement. Implicitly, it is expressed by the demands for individual/social equality and liberty, which can only be provided in a democratic system.⁶²

Granted, one can argue that these protests started with a political demand, namely the replacement of the president, which in theory was realizable within the regime’s system. Moreover, this demand wouldn’t result in the realization of democracy, since the position of the president in the Islamic Republic doesn’t have the necessary authority to deliver such a radical change. It’s more or less a formal function. But, from then on, these demands have moved on to become anti-structural, challenging the entire Islamic Republic. Increasingly the Supreme Leader has been insulted,⁶³ photos of him and Khomeini have been burnt, and this has been topped by the chant *tajavoz, jenayat, marg bar in velayat* which means “rape, massacre, death to this [kind of] Supreme Leadership”. Such events were unthinkable in the past and question not a part but the totality of the system. Also, explicit calls for democracy existed prior to the unrests of 2009, as can be seen in the student protests of 1999.

1.4.3 ARCHIVE

The evolution of the direct democracy of the Ancient Greeks to the modern, representative democracy developed during the French and American revolutions, has been a long process. Thus, in contrast to the Persian and Islamic narratives, democracy doesn't have one single archive that can be pointed out as its most central narration. Nonetheless, the modern notion of democracy is archived by the French, English and American revolutions, followed by democratic constitutions in the world. In short, the democratic idea of national self-determination is a very broadly spread idea, with different undertones but always founded on the cornerstones of equality and liberty.

For Iranians, however, there is one undisputable central archive of democracy: the hard-fought 1906 constitution. As I've tried to illustrate in this sub-chapter, it documented and institutionalized for the first time the notions of democracy and liberalism in Iran and its proper implementation (before Reza Shah's reign and during the Mossadeq- and Bakhtiar-cabinets) has so far been the climax of the democratic narrative.

1.4.4 INSTITUTION

It's important to start with the very institution that, in contrast to what it proclaims, is absolutely not democratic: the Islamic Republic. It is headed by the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, who holds direct power over the armed forces, judiciary and the "expediency council", the latter meaning that policies of all kind must have this council's blessing. Furthermore, he appoints six of the twelve members of the 'Guardian Council', with the other six appointed by the parliament, which in return filters the candidates for the parliament and the presidency, next to overseeing the Islamic proportion of all legislation. Thus, it is a closed and self-sustaining system of insiders that are appointed by each other, which is topped by the Supreme Leader who has legal and effectual control over all important organs.

Besides the fact that presidential and parliamentary elections are illiberal, these posts lack any significant authority which would enable them to deliver structural change. This enumeration illustrates that the republican part of the Islamic Republic is no more than a sham democracy,

which boasts the false pretence and lacks the actual essence of that concept. The need to simulate such a pretence was born out of the democratic nature of the Islamic Revolution in the first place, as I have tried to demonstrate in the previous pages, and secondly by the continuous democratic inspirations of the Iranian nation.

1.5 THE NARRATIVE OF MODERNIZATION

“Why is it so necessary to keep traditions alive forever? The value of a tradition should be measured by means of a careful analysis of its reasoning: Is it logical or not? Unfortunately, not too many people do that. Many traditions have been passed to our mothers by their previous generation, and they’ve accepted them without any careful consideration. Now, they want to pass them through to us, even by force. But I for one argue that we should focus on the substance of the argument, and not on the age of the teller, to examine the validity of a tradition: Is act X or thought Y justly prohibited when we examine them by means of logics?” This is Setareh’s response when I ask her about her older brother’s reaction to a poster in her room of Cristiano Ronaldo’s naked chest.

“He hates the picture, but why should he have a say about my life, while I’m not permitted to mingle in his affairs? I don’t see any superiority or inferiority involving men and women. None whatsoever! What is wrong with being a supporter of this man and hanging his picture on the wall? My family should first prove me wrong and if I’m convinced, then I’ll remove the poster myself! But they haven’t been able to do so until now, since their arguments lack logical foundations. In contrast to them, I’m able to reason why I hung up his picture. Therefore I don’t accept such thinking”. She continues: “If a boy goes out and finds a girlfriend, he is usually encouraged. But what if a girl finds a boyfriend and declares that at home? Her parents will go crazy! Yet I believe that such thoughts and attitudes are completely retarded and traditional”.

The emergence of the narrative of modernization has altered Setareh’s perception on at least three domains. First, she resists traditionalism and pleads for an intrinsic and comparative analysis of traditions based on logics. Second, she dismisses notions and practices of inequality between men and women. Thirdly, she rejects the ‘taboo’ that is placed on man-woman relations. Her new

positioning, all in all, can be led back to the narrative of modernization which has given her alternative instruments to assess other narratives. Setareh isn't an exceptional case: the narrative of modernization^A has taken deep cultural roots in the Isfahani society.

1.5.1 CONTENT & PATH

Setareh resists her family's demands in ways that her mother most probably wouldn't have done when she was her age. However, it doesn't mean that modernization is completely new in Iran. Modern feminism started at the end of the 19th century when intellectuals were calling out for the equal treatment of women and the latter's active attempts to participate in society. In that light, female contribution to the Constitutional Revolution shouldn't be underestimated either, since there were several excellent female writers, poets and activists in that period. In the post-1906 period, women entered factories and teaching positions and in 1925 the Patriotic Women Society was set up, with leading intellectuals joining the feminist movement. In fact, next to democracy, one of the main concerns for writers and poets during the Pahlavi-era was the social standing of women as many intellectuals took anticlerical positions and urged for feminism. Leading female figures are poets like Parvin E'tesami and Forough Farrokhzad. The latter openly wrote about her sexual feelings and activities, breaking down many traditional walls in the process (Keddie, 2003: 87, 100, 173, 179, 182).

Yet, the very first emergence of the narrative of modernization predates these events. It happened in the 19th century after the 1826 military defeat⁶⁴ Iran suffered to the modern Russian army and Iran's attempt to modernize its military as well.⁶⁵ Then, Britain introduced the telegraph in the country in 1850, as they sought rapid communication with India and saw Iran as the best overland option. But social modernization's actual jump-off came with the 1908 discovery of oil in Masjed-i-Soliman and the following British-led industrialization (idem: 72). Industrialization

^A This thesis defines modernization as the gradual incorporation of a modern scientific worldview, through interaction with science and scientific institutions, practices, techniques and products, which questions and, in many instances, breaks with those outlooks, values, structures and practices that are incompatible.

was important due to various reasons^A. First, for the workers it meant engaging with scientifically driven labor and the breaking off with traditional activities. Secondly, as a consequence of working in the industry on a daily basis, workers from the Bakhtiari tribe (and later also from other tribes) settled and stopped migration. Thus, nomadic migration declined from then on and urbanization increased.

Thirdly, and most influentially, the new industrial labor positions restructured social hierarchies: for the redistribution of social positions it meant a decisive shift from a system based on ‘ascribed statuses’ to one founded on ‘achieved statuses’. This had serious social implications, as in this progress of equality those non-egalitarian relations were disturbed. Furthermore, it strengthened the democratic notion of equality that the Constitutional Revolution promoted. As a consequence, social mobility suddenly and powerfully increased.

As far as the narratives are concerned, modernization impacted the Islamic narrative on multiple levels. Firstly, nearly claims made by Islam, or other religions for that matter, which involved explanations on the beginning and/or state of the physical world—thus disprovable—were dismantled by science.⁶⁶ When Islam was deprived of its explanatory ability, the religion’s legitimacy and authority were pressurized. Secondly, because clergy, and religious people at large, were generally unfamiliar with modern concepts, they lost further legitimacy and status. The third consequence was that the allied dimensions of modernization put humanity atop of the picking order—not God. This newly-found autonomy caused a definite and ever-growing detachment between society and religion.

The assault of the narrative of modernization on that of an Islamic identity is evident in the important role that modernly educated religious thinkers played during the Islamic Revolution, the most prominent of whom was Ali Shariati. In contrast to traditional ulama, he had the ability to defend Islam in the face of modern worldviews, although his knowledge of the West was schematic and he didn’t study the systems he combated thoroughly (idem: 207).⁶⁷

^A The reasons I will elaborate on from here are the briefly worded findings of my Bachelor-research project which resulted in the BA-thesis *The dizziness of Modernization*.

Modernization has also had far going implications, though paradoxical at times, for the narrative of an Iranian identity. Concepts such as *bozorg-o koochiki*—an Iranian proverb reminding youngsters to respect elderly and follow their will—are indisputably undermined by modernization. This is clearly evident among the research population in Isfahan, one of the most traditional cities of the country, as the case of Setareh and her poster show. Furthermore, modernization strengthened notions of equality and democracy and undermined the political position of Shah, on one hand, while modern archeological research conducted by Europeans enabled Iranians to rediscover in detail their past and triggered nationalism and ideas which supported a strong Shah, on the other. The hypothesis of the Iranian narrative being more receptive to critique is supported by the self-criticism that Iranian intellectuals engaged in prior to the 1906 Revolution, as they were concerned with catching up with the West and generally agreed that elements of Western culture should be integrated and aspects of Iranian culture should be shed (Keddie, 2003: 173, 179, 183).⁶⁸

Another modern cause for social change in the previous century was the rise of communism that has the natural tendency to emerge in industrial places. Communism too, in some ways, reinforced the democratic notion of equality. Its scientific analytical apparatus and its radically different unit of analysis—namely class instead of nation or *umma*^A—made sure that the break off with traditions and traditional modes of thought gained further momentum. This is exemplified by Mojtaba Taleqani who, prior to the Islamic Revolution, in a letter to his influential father, Ayatollah Taleqani, says that “to organize the working class, we must reject Islam, for religion refuses to accept the main dynamic force of history—that of the class struggle...it is only Marxism that provides a scientific analysis of society and looks toward the exploited classes for liberation” (Abrahamian, 1989: 11). This shouldn’t be taken lightly: a youngster with proper religious upbringing telling his father, one of the leading men of the revolution, to ‘reject Islam’ because of its theoretical inferiority.

To summarize the effect of the narrative of modernization one can argue that it caused serious frictions between ancient and modern worldviews. Iranians, thus far, have unsuccessfully attempted to reconcile the two and bridge the gap. Their failure is due to an inherent

^A In Islam it refers to the community of believers.

incommensurability between central aspects of the narrative of modernization and the narratives of Iranian and, especially, Islamic identities. In chapter two I will argue that this unsuccessful reconciliation has discharged itself into the Islamic Revolution of 1979 *and* the contemporary unrest.

1.5.2 PRESENCE IN SOCIETY

“What a beautiful full moon it is today” I told Mostafa while we were sitting on the porch during a summer evening, while the cool breeze of the wind made the temperature extremely pleasant. “I actually wanted to study astronomy once; the sky fascinates me” I continued. “You should have done so”! He said. “The moon right now is orbiting us, while we are orbiting around the sun, along with the other planets. Meanwhile, our solar system is moving in the direction of another, far larger solar system. And if we zoom out and watch the entire picture from an extreme distance, our solar system disappears, being smaller than a single dirt in relation to the desert. Let alone the earth and us humanity. Now, remember the story about Adam and Eve, the test we are going through, and how God created everything for us; and how the Koran says that mountains are actually nails holding the earth from falling. From such a perspective, one can understand how embarrassingly ridiculous religion is”.

He hates the fact that religion has such a strong presence in Iran. “Do you know what my biggest desire is”? Mostafa asked me. “It is to go to the US and work for the NASA in some distant place where I’m only surrounded by scientists. I’d love to wake up and sleep with science on my mind and to only have scientific activities. I want to eat what is scientifically proven to be good, listen to what is scientifically proven to be positive, rest when science tells me to do so. In essence, I want to be in a place where the only thing that keeps people busy is science; actual *elm* that is, not the kind that they teach in Qom^A”. *Elm* is Arabic for science and has entered the Persian language as well. There is an ambiguity about the term: it can either mean modern science or religious knowledge, as mullahs have traditionally propagated that the Koran and Islam are the most important of sciences. In this light, *ulama*, who are high clerics, means scientists. Mostafa

^A Qom is the most religious city in Iran and is located about 100 KM south of Tehran. Traditionally the most influential *ulama* and religious schools have been in Qom.

refers to the core tension between modernization and Islam: their claim to truth. His example of desiring to constantly engage with science is extravagant, but nonetheless indicative of how far modernization has crept into the Isfahani society.

Modernization is visible everywhere in Isfahan, as science and scientific products are entrenched in its society: bureaucracy, infrastructure, media, education, household, industry, recreation and etcetera are either partly or completely scientifically driven. Despite enormous academic censure, the large majority of young adults attends a university.

1.5.3 ARCHIVE

Modernization is a decentralized narrative. Not one single archive can be pinpointed that instills the majority of the narrative's dimensions. However, its roots can be retraced to the emergence of the modern sciences in Europe from the 17th century onwards to the Industrial Revolution in England. Books and literature written by its pioneers, such as Darwin or Einstein, or its practitioners all contribute to the enormous and ever-growing totality of scientific archive.

1.5.4 INSTITUTION

The narrative is institutionalized by the educational apparatus and institutions of specialist scientific research. It is necessary, though, to underline once more that these institutions are carefully monitored by the regime and that academic freedom, of pivotal importance to the existence of science, is not granted to all fields. The fields of humanities and social sciences may formally exist in Iranian universities, but in reality they don't.

CHAPTER 2: CULTURAL CONFUSION

2.1 INTRODUCTION

So far in this thesis I've tried to give an account of four separable and competing narratives which encompass unique worldviews and which directly relate to the research subject: the political expressions of the Iranian national identity. These are the narratives of Iranian identity, Islamic identity, democracy and modernization. In doing so, I've given a brief account of their incorporation and development and provided empirical evidence for their contemporary existence. Also, I've attempted to demonstrate their contradictions, struggles and, in some instances, incommensurability vis-à-vis each other.

In this chapter I'll demonstrate that the Iranian society is entangled in a state of cultural confusion, by exhibiting the inherently disjointed and conflictive conciliation that the research population has attempted between these narratives.

2.2 CONFUSION: IRANIAN AND ISLAMIC IDENTITIES

“The hell with this Arab-loving traitor! Look at how he’s insulting his own nation! And for whom? For bare-footed Arabs?”—the youngsters whom I showed Ayatollah Mottahari’s speech were absolutely outraged. Mottahari states that Pre-Islamic traditions, such as *Charshanbe Soori*,^A are retarded. “That you’re [ancestors] have been stupid donkeys, doesn’t mean that you have to be donkeys as well! The Arabs came and conquered the country from this end to the other and managed to humanize you!”

“The Arab invasion of Iran was a definite setback for our country. I don't think that Arabs added anything to our civilization at all. Because Arabs have no culture; they never have and they never will. Period! That's how I look at it. They don't have what you could refer to as civilization or culture⁶⁹ ... in the Pre-Islamic times we were a lot further. For example, Cyrus the Great was a very just ruler and Iran was a free and just society for the standards of those times and this is

^A A pre-Islamic Persian tradition held on the last Tuesday evening of the Persia calendar year and includes ritual jumping over fire meant to pass badness and unhealthiness off to the fire and receive goodness and health in return.

displayed by the position of women in the Persian Empire. Another example is the Cyrus Cylinder, which is assumed to be the first predecessor of human rights in a time that tolerance was essentially non-existent”—says Setareh. When one talks in length about Islam with Iranians, the emergence of religion in the country is inevitably discussed and hangs like a dark cloud over it. “I am a nationalist and love my country and can never forgive Arabs for what they did to Iran and neither for their attempts to make us Arabs, not knowing that we’re too great to become one. Ferdowsi put it best:

*From drinking camel milk and eating lizards,
Times have come so far that Arabs
Dare to dream of the Kiyani’ throne;^A
I spit on you wheels of time, oh I spit on you”⁷⁰*

Her recitation of Ferdowsi is warmly received by the rest of the group. They all appear to be at odds with Arabs and their anger roots back to two events: the Islamic conquest of Iran and the establishment of the Islamic Republic 14 centuries later.

Yet, they maintain to be Muslims and don’t find this at odds with their resentment of the Arab conquest. “One mustn’t confuse Islam with Arabs. I did say the “Arab invasion” of Iran, but I wasn’t talking about Islam. I’d never use the word ‘invasion’ to refer to Islam, which would be senseless as the religion is all about peace. But I understand your confusion, because unfortunately Islam was presented in Arabia and these two have become one, which is a wrong conclusion. Islam did *enter* Iran through Arabs, accompanied by their low, barbaric culture. That has caused Iran to decay. So not Islam, but Arabs were the cause for this.” She makes a distinction between Arabs and Islam and between the former’s invasion in contrast to the latter’s entrance.

“But didn’t they come in the name of Islam, under the command of Islamic caliphs? Didn’t the Arabs want to *humanize* us, to use Ayatollah Mottaheri’s words, as Islam regards everything

^A In the myth of Shāh-nāma this was a very powerful and fabulous Persian dynasty.

prior to its realization as barbaric or at least incomplete?”—I asked. “Well, the prophet and the Imams can in some ways be seen as an Arab as well” Setareh answered.

“In some ways”?! I asked. Navid comes to her rescue: “OK, they were Arab, but it pains us to say so. Everywhere there are exceptions of good and bad. And I think Arabs had such a low standard in culture and understanding that it would have been impossible to revert them into Muslims had Islam been presented elsewhere. So God was forced to present Islam in Arabia and had no choice but to pick an Arab prophet.” Their resentment of the Arab conquest is so strong that they try to excuse God from even presenting Islam in Arabia. “We might resent Arabs, but we’re proud Muslims. Islam holds the last and most complete directions from God”.

In the living room of Setareh’s house there are two pictures which draw attention. One is a framed poster of Persepolis, which was the Achaemenid palace of Darius the Great. Across the room, above the sofa, another poster hangs on the wall. It is a painting of Imam Husain’s wounded horse and refers to one of the most important events in Shiite Islam: his martyrdom. As opposite as these two posters hang across the room, such is the contrast between the narratives they symbolize. These youngsters take a merging position between the narratives of Iranian and Islamic identities which is incommensurable and confusing for several reasons.

First, they reminisce the Pre-Islamic times as glorious and woefully point out the Arab/ Islamic conquest of Iran as the main reason for the country’s decay. Yet, they are happy to have become Muslim while this wouldn’t have been possible had the conquest not occurred in the first place. Second, based on their conclusions that Arabs were responsible for the Empire’s decline, they resent, Arabs but worship their leaders: “All the savage things that happened to us were due to Arabs, not Ali”. Thirdly, they take pride in the pre-Islamic state of society, such as the status of women, and yet view Islam as offering the most complete ways. They neglect the contrasting ways of Islam and pre-Islamic Persia, which they reminisce with such sense of deprivation.

Fourthly, they resist the Arabic language and want to preserve Persian, while the Koran is written in Arabic. They, in fact, admit it to be the principle reason for not having read the Koran.

“Setareh, why did you say *Koorosh-e bozorg*^A? Isn’t *Koorosh-e kabir* more casual?” I asked her. “I didn’t want to use the Arabic word for Great, but rather the Persian when talking about Cyrus, because of the sensitivity I have about our language and identity! Besides, Persian is such a beautiful language, why would we replace it with Arabic? By the way, there is an increasing trend in Iran at weddings: next to the Koran some couples also place the *Shāh-nāma* on the *soffre-ye aqd*.^B I’m going to do that for my marriage too!”

Fifthly, they value pre-Islamic traditions more than the Islamic ones. “Of course I think our new year should be celebrated on *Nowrouz*! The Islamic Republic has been trying to ban Persian celebrations for thirty years now, but they’ll never manage! Islamic holidays are indeed holy, but at the same time depressive and tiresome. Without daring to disrespect Imam Hosain’s martyrdom, but who wants to hit himself with iron chains during Ashura?” says Dariush. “Let Arabs celebrate *Eid-e Fetr*”!

A sixth aspect of conflict is that they resist mullahs, but some go to the mosque at mourning nights during Ramadan, when Ali’s martyrdom is mourned, and listen to their speeches. Also, while resenting mullahs, they do want their presence at weddings and funerals. “After all, it is a sin if you don’t bring a mullah above somebody’s grave and not let him bless his/her soul”.

A seventh point of cultural confusion is the idea of earthly retribution, very central to Iranian narrative, and the concept of hereafter, also present in the Iranian narrative but emphasized by Islam. “When you do wrong, you see wrong. Whatever you deserve and whatever God has in mind for you, good or bad, it all comes back to you in this life”. This earthly vision starkly contrasts the orientation towards the next world.

The conciliation between the narratives of Islamic and Iranian identities is incommensurable exactly because it is a non-conciliatory matter of two conceptually loaded identities, which both exclude each other. The Iranian identity is in fact based on the pre-Islamic period, hence undermining the Islamic sequel to its history and seeks prioritized recognition for its authenticity,

^A Cyrus the Great in Persian.

^B The traditional decoration of a cloth/table during weddings. The bridal couple then sit at the *soffre* as they exchange vows.

be it linguistic, ethnic, religious, idealist, and/or mythical. It is exactly this recognition that the Islamic identity won't provide, since it can't afford to do so: how is an ideology that claims to be perfectly complete going to respect something which existed prior to its invention and is viewed as incomplete, as imperfect?

Moreover, there is a distinctive difference between the principle units of analysis that each narrative employs. The narrative of an Iranian identity is interested in the unit of nation, while Islam is concerned with the *umma*, the community of believers. The nation includes non-believers and the umma includes non-nationals. Thus, besides the intrinsic incommensurability of being an Iranian Muslim who emphasizes his pre-Islamic identity, the external dimension of the identity crisis is one of loyalty: does it belong primarily to Islamic non-nationals or to non-Islamic fellow-countrymen?

The untenable position of Setareh, Navid and their friends is not unique, but rather broadly witnessed in society. There are an immense number of living rooms in Isfahan, and in all of Iran for that matter, that give house to both narratives. While writing these very pages I came across a televised football match of an Iranian and an Arab soccer club in the course of the Asian Champions League. The game took place in Iran and the Iranian fans did two very notable things: 1) the stadium was literally filled with banners that stressed the name of Persian Gulf and opposed the growing trend of atlases which refer to the gulf as Arabian, and 2) they chanted Allah-o Akbar all game long in support of the Iranian team.

One of the highlights of the competition between these two narratives concerns the main narrators of the Iranian identity, such as Ferdowsi: was he Muslim or not?! It is impossible for him to have been one,⁷¹ yet all participants thought he was Muslim.

However, not all Isfahani's wrestle with this identity Crisis. Farhad and his friends were radically anti-Islamic and pointed out some of the tensions I mentioned as reasons for their anti-Islamism. Increasingly more people are feeling these irreconcilable tensions between the Islamic and Iranian identity. Much of this owes to the Islamic Republic's attempts to banish the pre-Islamic past and stress solely the Islamic present. As a reaction, a growing slogan has been chanted in

recent demonstrations: *esteqlal, azadi, jomhuri-e Irani* which means “Independence, freedom, **Iranian** Republic”. It replaces the slogan that was chanted during the Islamic Revolution, but which had the **Islamic** Republic at its end. In doing so, the demonstrators express and prioritize their Iranian identity, indicating that Islam is being imposed on their ‘Iranianness’.

This is a truly remarkable yet completely logic⁷² development and fits in the larger picture of Iranians boasting pre-Islamic symbols, stressing the pre-Islamic past, taking more interest in history, giving children Persian names and etcetera. This tension between an Iranian and an Islamic identity, along with the political urge for democracy, lies at the very heart of the political opposition to the Islamic Republic, either when analyzing the propaganda of the opposition abroad or while considering the official ‘opposition’⁷³ inside Iran. Yet, religiously colored protests such as massive chants of *allah-o-akbar* or calling the Supreme Leader ‘Yazid’, the killer of Imam Husain, remember us that the confusion still lasts, as the affiliation with the narrative of an Islamic identity continues. More importantly, as will be explained in the next pages, the confusion continues to be expressed politically and is supported by the existence of political groups, either pre- and post-1979, dubbed as the *melli mazhabioun*, meaning “religious nationalists”. Again, for reasons cited earlier,⁷⁴ such a positioning between the two narratives of Iranian and Islamic identities is incommensurable. Yet, it remains a relatively influential political orientation, especially for the opposition among students in Isfahan, which is a religious city.

The tangled and incommensurable alliance between the narratives of Iranian and Islamic identities lays the foundation of a centuries-old cultural confusion, which was caused by the Islamic conquest in the 7th century and aggravated with the Safavid policy of enforcing Shiite Islam. This cultural confusion was complicated even more with the rise of the narratives of democracy and modernization, as the rest of this chapter will try to demonstrate.

2.3 CONFUSION: DEMOCRATIC, IRANIAN & ISLAMIC IDENTITIES

“This system is rotten and corrupt. The mullahs have exploited this country enough already and the nation’s been sidelined for too long. This isn’t why people revolted in ’79. And now, 30 years later, we’re demonstrating, risking our lives in order to get control over the country. So yes, we

really want democracy. But that doesn't mean defying our identity: we want a kind of *democracy in accordance to the traditions and culture* we have here in Iran. Too much liberty isn't good either; that leads to the degradation of social moral, as is the case in the West. We shouldn't forget that we're an Islamic nation"—says Majid.

“It's easy to blame everything on Shah, but the fact remains that we weren't ready for democracy prior to the Revolution. We needed modernization first and that's what the Pahlavi's had envisaged for the country. But the West betrayed them and imposed Khomeini on us! Now we need another Reza Shah-type of ruler to bring us up par with world civilization through force and get rid of this Islamic menace once and for all. We can only embrace democracy once our culture has reached a certain level”—explains Bijan's father.

These are two typical remarks in relation to democracy made by two radically different perspectives, with Navid taking a pro-Islamic position and Bijan's father strongly supporting an Iranian, anti-Islamic line. Each perspective makes a claim on democracy and both fall to conceptual fallacies in their attempts. The underlying reason for their failure is that the interaction between the narrative of democracy & liberalism, on one hand, and the narratives of Iranian and Islamic identities, on the other, has never been straightforward. Rather, it's been clouded by conceptual vagueness. Democratic concepts such as sovereignty, liberty, equality and its unit of analysis—the nation—haven't been able to become crystal clear to the Iranian society. In the end, the synthesis that has emerged between the three narratives is not harmonious.

2.3.1 CONFUSING DEMOCRACY WITH ISLAM

“Sure we want liberty, but that shouldn't mean that anybody should be able to say anything he desires! There are certain red lines in a society which can't be crossed. You mentioned as example that it is legal to question or even ridicule Christianity in Holland, but that's not how it must be in Iran. Maybe in Holland people are not fervent about Jesus, but we're very sensitive on Islam in Iran. So, to answer your question: I want freedom of speech, but not on everything, like insulting holy figures. Sure, if people want to drink alcohol, that should be arranged. That's not my business and an entirely different issue....But then again, I have to admit: I for one don't mind the fact that the morality police arrests and punishes boys who depilate their eyebrows or

girls that wear such tight clothes. Somebody should watch over social morality. Because when a society loses its sense of shame, it loses everything”—explains Aram.

“Do you agree with that, Azita? In a liberal Iran, would you mind if men and women would be able to walk in public with shorts and skirts like prior to the revolution? And what’s your ideal take on the position of women? For instance, what would you think if your daughter would openly want to have a boyfriend”? —I was interested in a woman’s perspective.

“I agree with the basics of what he says, although I think he is being too tough. Why shouldn’t youngsters be able to wear shorts and what’s wrong with women wearing skirts? But I do agree that liberty should have its limits. For example, people shouldn’t be allowed to go outside with too little clothes on, like women in bikinis. Because too much liberty can harm a person and make a society *bi band o bar* [‘without principles’]. That wouldn’t be good. But I naturally feel that women should have equal rights as men. As far as relationships are concerned, I don’t think it’s a crime for girls to have boyfriends, as long as their relationship is healthy. But that doesn’t mean that dating should be promoted either. If a man has a dozen of girlfriends that doesn’t matter, but if people would know that a woman has had a single boyfriend, her name will be ruined. Because women are different then men. We’re equals, but different”.

As the above quotations show, Azita and Aram have very different concepts of liberty, equality and democracy. However, both don’t recognize the true concept of liberty as they continue to meddle with other individuals’ private domain; the very privacy that liberty protects. Ironically, government interference in their own personal affairs is exactly why they demand liberty. “I want Iran to be a country in which I can voice my discontent about politics without being afraid to be hung”—says Aram. Azita argues that “I’ve become sick of the morality police harassing people for their clothes”!

Their positioning is shockingly paradoxical and reduces their political demands to a type that leans more towards the acquisition of power rather than the achievement of freedom. Aram wants the ability to express his mind but wouldn’t want to provide ‘anybody’ the ability to say ‘anything’; this relates more to the principal of power, and its exercise according to his desire,

than the unconditional freedom for everybody to say everything they want. Azita, on her turn, wishes to publicly exhibit her individuality in ways she finds correct but draws an arbitrary red line if others would disagree with her definitions of correctness and piety.

At the core of Aram's and Azita's claims to the limits that should be set on liberty is the concept of *social morality*, deriving mainly from the narrative of an Islamic identity. Instead of analyzing the two concepts and making coherent choices, they want to cling to both theories and don't recognize the irreconcilable tension between the liberal principles of democracy and the illiberal, dogmatic basis of religion. Embracing one means letting go of the other's implementation. Since they're not willing to pay that price, they settle for an untenable positioning; a positioning which I refer to as cultural confusion.

Aram and Azita are no exceptions in the Isfahani society; after all, despite the military enforcement of the morality police, there is enough social bases to shoulder its imposition. Asqar, another Isfahani to demand liberty, proudly retold the story of the morality police arresting his neighbor for exiting his house with pajamas on. "So they picked him up, drove him to the mountain, and released him at the park there. Since it was almost midnight, no one would pick him up and he was forced to make a three hour walk home! That'll show him for disrespecting people's wives and kids! Next time he leaves home, he'll make sure he has proper trousers on".

Confusing the narrative of democracy & liberalism with that of an Islamic identity is not a novel phenomenon. Its roots can be traced to 1) the long-existing cultural confusion of the narratives of Iranian and Islamic identities, 2) the unnatural and fallible alliance between secular and religious forces throughout the 20th century, 3) the influential misconceptions of "Islamic intellectuals"^A, such as Shariati and Al-e Ahmad, who claimed compatibility of Islam with democracy and science, and 4) the demagoguery of the Islamic Republic itself.

The Islamic Revolution's democratic aspirations and its eventual Islamic diversion make sense if we consider the 1979-movement as a confused push for democracy which in the end was

^A Islamic intellectualism is another classic conceptual fallacy, as will be explained in the next sub-chapter.

derailed. This confusion is probably best expressed in *the most important* slogan of the 1979 revolution: *estqlal, azadi, jonhour-e Eslami*, which means “independence, freedom, [through an] Islamic republic”. It was only Bakhtiar, the secular Prime Minister, who understood that the principles of republicanism and political Islam are incommensurable and will provide anything but ‘freedom’, as it has been demonstrated in the course of the last 31 years.

At the same time, if the political demands and orientations of the current movement, dubbed as “Green”, are analyzed, it becomes clear that that the confusion still exists. The first symptom are the chants of *allah-o-akbar*, and other religious copies of the 1979 revolutionaries, which showcase the paradox of combating religious dictatorship with the help of religion.⁷⁵

Also, the non-reformative nature⁷⁶ of the Islamic Republic isn’t recognized. Many opponents of the regime continue to believe that fundamental democratic reform is possible within the current framework. Although participants are aware that the green movement itself is organized by a non-democratic regime and that the leaders, Mousavi, Khatami and Karoubi, have been approved for presidential candidacy by the very Guardian Council that the movement opposes, still they choose to disregard these facts. This brings us to the third point of confusion, which is that participants admit that “our choice is between bad and worse”. In other words, they settle for the illiberal elections despite their liberal demands.

A fourth symptom is that even those radical parts of the movement, which are anti-structural and have gone on to oppose the Supreme Leader, still have the ‘green’ problem: green was chosen because it’s the color of Islam. Mousavi recently reconfirmed that the reason for choosing green was to represent Islam. This means that religion keeps playing an important factor, while the nature of all their political demands is secular.

Finally, a fifth indication of cultural confusion, which sums up the previous four nicely, is that the movement still seeks religious leaders and/or is unable to appoint secular ones. Naturally, religious leaders will lead the protestors away from a secular democracy. To exemplify my point, Mousavi claims that the roots of the green movement are religious and that the people will

support the movement as long as it moves in a religious direction. Nothing is less true, however, since the Islamic Republic isn't withholding anybody from practicing Shiite Islam.

2.3.2 CONFUSING DEMOCRACY WITH THE IRANIAN IDENTITY

“The politicization of Islam is what brought us to this theocracy in the first place, so I don't understand how *allah-o-akbar* is going to rescue us from it. If anything, Allah is on their side! What is a mullah as an oppositional leader going to do for this nation, when we all know that no matter how liberal he wants to portray himself he can never distance himself from the Koran and the Sharia”? For Iran to establish a democracy and retake its place among the leading nations of the world we should finally get rid of the cancer named Islam after 1400 years. It's simple; we can't participate in the Olympics when we're lying in our sickbed. Once Iran is free, we should reassert our identity again by beheading Islam”—says Davood.

He and his fellow sympathizers look back to the Pahlavi dynasty with nostalgia. Nostalgia for “Shah's splendor and the court's magnificence. After all, this country has a history of monarchy! Our entire identity is based on the Shah and the court. The Islamic Republic has exactly bereft us of that! That's why we should replace it with a democracy in the form of a constitutional monarchy”. Babak relates the discussion on democracy straight back to the uncompromising twist between the narratives of Iranian and Islamic identities. To him, democracy in Iran is predestined to a monarchical kind and actually also subordinated to it. “We had complete liberty in Iran. One could take his girlfriend to a bar and drink whatever he wanted. Women could dress the way they wanted. We had a free cinema and excellent pop artists. People were wealthy, the economy was strong, our military was one of the 5 strongest in the world, industries were built, roads were constructed...Shah modernized this country. Going abroad, one could show his Iranian passport with pride and would be treated with the utmost respect. In short, the Pahlavi's had made Iran into a heaven”.

But why would people want to rebel in a heaven? In sub-chapter 1.4 I discussed the dictatorial reasons⁷⁷ for which that happened. When I asked Babak and Davood about those dictatorial dimensions of Shah's reign, they told me that “modernization has a cost! Do you think that ruling a country in the heart of the Middle East is an easy thing to do? Besides, don't think for a second

that those people jailed or executed were innocent people. The average citizen was happy! These prisoners were all agents of either imperial England or communist Russia trying to infiltrate the country and abuse democracy for their own ends! Shah knew this and had to prevent it. That's why he sidelined Mossadeq, because the Tudeh party was about to hand the country over to Russia. But he was going towards democracy; he was just waiting for the right moment when people's culture would be 'high' enough".

Their positioning, in general, is that Iran should have a democracy but the people should be ready for it. Some argue that now the 'level of culture' has reached a satisfying level to shoulder democracy, while some find that still some Reza Shah-type of work needs to be done before Iran can become democratic. Either way, their arguments can be led back to various misconceptions. Firstly, their positioning is unclear on the matter of sovereignty. On one hand it's attributed to the Shah while on the other hand their democratic aim is to hand sovereignty over to the people. To them, the question whether sovereignty is the Shah's to give or the people's to take, is answered by the former notion. But the real question remains confusingly unanswered: does sovereignty, in the end, belong to the people or to the Shah? For if it belongs to the people they have the right to take it, which is the democratic idea on sovereignty, and if it's Shah's to possess, according to the Iranian narrative, then why should he assign it to the nation?

The second misconception is that of equality. The democratic narrative principally equalizes all citizens, while the monarchical Iranian narrative places the Shah above the law and the nation. It is he who has the right, and above all the ability, to unanimously intervene with state matters, such as stopping the alleged communist threat during Mossadeq, stop/pause democratization when he reckons the nation isn't 'ready', authorize imprisonment or execution to neutralize danger and etcetera. This brings us to the third misconception which concerns liberty, of which Davood and Babak have a limited notion. Those matters that aren't related to power are part of liberty to them, such as the usage of alcohol for example, but freedoms of speech, political activity or orientation (such as communism/ Islamism) aren't necessarily part of liberty. This, again, doesn't rhyme with their democratic aspirations, since these excluded rights are fundamental aspects of democratic theory.

The false synthesis between the narratives of an Iranian identity and democracy is another important dimension of the Iranian cultural confusion. It is the result of 1) the historic centrality of the Shah to Iranian narrative, 2) the fault conceptualization of democracy, 3) the submission of democracy to ‘modernization’, and 4) the collective anger and distrust towards foreign powers, which legitimizes Shah’s interference in democratic policy.

2.4 CULTURAL CONFUSION: MODERNIZATION AND IRANIAN & ISLAMIC IDENTITIES

“Fasten your seatbelts? Don’t be a child, these are all words. What are seatbelts going to do when your time has come? Just say *Ya Ali* and seek refuge to God. He is your protector”. This is what Setareh’s mother said while the airplane was about to take off.

I took my chances with the seatbelt. But it remains remarkable: How can one sit in a technologically produced vehicle which thrives on science and is about to take us miles high in the sky, and yet give that technology no value at all?

In sub-chapter 1.4, I described the ways in which the narrative of modernization challenged the Iranian and Islamic identities. In this sub-chapter, much like in the previous two, I argue that the interaction between the varying narratives has been faulty and problematic. As a consequence, concepts and worldviews have been obscure and the syntheses between them false.

2.4.1 CONFUSING MODERNIZATION WITH AN ISLAMIC IDENTITY

“Who says that Islam and science are incompatible? If anything, science needs to catch up with Islam. For instance, I learned at school that science has just now been able to understand that there are seven layers in the atmosphere, while the Koran mentioned the seventh heaven 1400 years ago”!

If you’re wondering what kind of teachers work at Banafsheh’s school, you shouldn’t wonder at all. The educational apparatus is heavily censored in a theocratic state in order to avoid the

questioning of the source from which legitimacy is derived; in this case Islam. But as much as a state can censure education, it can't prevent topics from popping up in society. And they do pop up a lot in Isfahan. Therefore, the Islamic republic is making an effort to harmonize the tensions between religion and its challengers. In Banafsheh's case, the efforts seem to have paid off. So far she fails to understand the incommensurable starting points of religion and science and the unbridgeable gap between the physical and metaphysical worlds they explore.

ISLAMIC INTELLECTUALISM

The title of Islamic intellectualism has been assigned to a variety of Islamic thinkers through the centuries, most notably to Ali Shariati and his co-revolutionaries prior to 1979, and stands at the basis of a grand attempt to synthesize everything with Islam: democracy, science, human rights, Olympics etcetera. Nevertheless, it rests on the false marriage between religion and intellectualism. Intellectualism denotes the pursuit of intellectual practice based on reasoning and rational analysis. Hence, with the development of modern science, which too is based on reason, and the availability of scientific explanations on essential parts of the 'creation', an intellectual is *intellectually obliged* to disregard the explanatory dimensions of Abrahamic religions on the basis of the available rational data. In other words, his intellectual devotion withholds him from becoming Muslim for he cannot neglect the overwhelming scientific evidence which disarms Islam of its explanatory ability and, consequently, the entire legitimacy of the faith.

Neither does his pursuit of the intellect allow him to be a part-time intellectual and refuse to shed scientific light on a part of his mind, since that would mean the cease of his intellectual pursuit. At some point, the religion asks of the believer to believe and to stop questioning. This would be unacceptable to an intellectual for he has vowed to question. The point I'm trying to make is that the great fallacy of Islamic intellectualism is a strong medium to maintain cultural confusion, as it makes a strict appraisal of the two narratives vis-à-vis each other redundant.

However, I'm not suggesting at all that an intellectual couldn't be spiritual per definition. In contrast, he could be quite spiritual. The difference, however, is that his spirituality should belong to the metaphysics and not derive legitimacy from the physical world based on disprovable claims. It must be in accordance with logics.

ISLAMIC MARXISM

Another indication of confusing Islam with modern theories and notions is the rare phenomenon of Islamic Marxism, highlighted by the continuing political presence of the *Mujahedin-e Khalq*. Without wanting to get into detail, Marxism and Islam share radically different worldviews that don't relate to each other in any sense. Marxism is based on a scientifically socio-economical analysis and focuses on the improvement of worldly conditions on the basis of economic equality and uses the class its main unit of analysis. It regards faith or any other communal identity as an obstacle to class unity.

Islam, on the other hand, aims for the hereafter and has religious justice as its guideline for the earthly life. Its unit of analysis is the *umma*, regardless of their economic classes. Besides, Islam has no connection whatsoever with science. Yet, not all Iranians seem to have understood these differences in the way that Mojtaba Taleqani did.⁷⁸ The intensity of this dimension of the Iranian confusion became clear during the Islamic Revolution, as Islamic Marxists of all brands, Mujahedin and Fada'iyan-e Khalq, played an enormously important role.

2.4.2 CONFUSING MODERNIZATION WITH AN IRANIAN IDENTITY

“Here, wear this necklace so that nobody can *negatively* gaze you! Don't you know that the radiations of an 'Evil Eye' can only be reflected by a blue-colored stone? That has scientifically been proven now, says my Professor at the university”! This is what Nastaran tells me, as she tries to 'protect' me from envious and evil eyes.

Earlier I discussed the relevance of cosmic forces for the narrative of Iranian identity. The notion of evil eyes is a telling example as everywhere in the city. The blue-colored stones, which are supposed to offer protection, can be found in many cars and on much jewelry. People tap at wood to eliminate their own negative gazes when they speak in admiration of something or someone. And if one doesn't tap the woodwork, he'll surely be reminded to do so. “Tap the wood with your hand, friend”! If no wood is available, then one can suffice by saying *mashallah*—God has willed it.

In fact, this superstition is so vivid in the Isfahani society that some people have the unfortunate fame of their eyes being evil. Obviously, the evil eyes theory has to do with the interaction between the spiritual and physical worlds and so Nastaran's university claimed to have set up a research that provided the miraculous evidence. While I won't bother to discuss why the evil eye-theory can't be proven scientifically, I want to argue that Nastaran's acceptance and validation of this claim rests on a mixture between a superstitious belief, on one hand, and an incomplete notion of science, on the other.

Banafsheh, for example, on one day hesitated to accompany us to the park because she had dreamt of somebody who is really "negative in dreams". "Something bad is definitely going to happen to me". While she holds these superstitions, she also praises the modernization of the country arguing that "superstition will get us nowhere". When I confronted her with her own superstition she rejected my criticism: "*Bad dreams* aren't superstition! They're a fact".

It doesn't stop here. The narrative of an Iranian identity is filled with such superstitious beliefs, which dominate daily life. Another one of them is the notion of *qadam-e bad*, which has similarities with the previously mentioned 'bad dreams' and 'evil eyes'. *Qadam-e bad* literally means a "negative step" and holds the belief that some people will curse you by simply coming over to your house. It goes so far that believers can really get afraid if they hear that a person famed for his bad step is about to visit them. "I can't say "don't come" because that would be rude, but I don't want her to come either. I'm really scared that she's going to bring negativity^A along with her. May God protect us. Each time she comes, I always give *nazri*^B to the neighbors".

The underlying beliefs of these superstitions are *badi* [negativity] and *kheiri* [positivity]. It is believed that some kind of cosmic forces issue them and that they are usually mediated by people. Because as much as an individual can have a 'bad step', another person is famed for his 'good step' or for being 'positive in dreams'. Either way, besides the belief that *kheiri* or *badi*

^A In this context negativity means the occurrence of bad events.

^B Sacrificial charity varying from meat to soup and etcetera.

derive from good or bad deeds and are mediated by other people, in general it is believed that they correspond with one's *qesmat*—"share" [of destiny/ life]—and his *sarnevesh* [destiny].

I've met many Isfahani's who hold these superstitions to be true and many of which were highly educated students of a variety of sciences. Although important dimensions of their lives was influenced by science and they actively spoke out their desire for Iran to be "a country where science is the norm", they maintained that *qesmat*, *kheiri*, *badi*, *qadam-e bad*, evil eyes and etcetera were genuine forces dictating life. "I've seen it so many times that somebody, whose eyes are evil, compliments something or someone and the next day something *badi* comes to that item or person. Let me give you an example: last month I lent money from somebody for a project. Because he didn't have a *dast-e baz*^A and lent it with hesitation, the money had no use for me whatsoever and I didn't even know how I spent it. Also, the computer which I had financed with part of the loan crashed within a week for no good reason and cost me a lot of money to get it repaired"—says Banafsheh's brother who studied IT at the university and was "completely against religion and superstition" claiming that "these are the reasons that our country is in this sorry state and the level of our culture is so low".

^A "An open hand": a gifting hand.

CHAPTER 3: COMING TO A THEORY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

As we have seen in the previous chapters, varying currents within the Iranian culture compete for the legitimacy to define the Iranian national identity. In this competition, certain dimensions of these narratives are contradictory and some even incommensurable in relation to each other.

But how should one imagine such an inharmonious description of culture? For a variety of reasons, which will be touched upon shortly in the following pages, traditional concepts of culture cannot accommodate an inherently heterogeneous and contradictory account for they perceive and portray culture as an orderly harmonious phenomenon. By the same token, constructivist theories of culture lack generalizing capabilities. So, the final task of this thesis is to find an adequate theoretical framework within which the empirical data can be conceptualized harmlessly.

3.2 CULTURE: A CONCEPTUAL MORASS

The epistemological debate about culture has reached a point where it questions the very possibility of its concept. Distancing themselves from different traditions and schools in theorizing about culture, some writers have chosen to abandon the concept in its totality and instead move on with terms like social structure and other comparable definitions. Others still stick around cultural theory but philosophize about its nature and content, without putting forward an all-encompassing definition able to entail most claims and elucidate the majority of mechanisms. Either way, contemporary cultural theoreticians generally agree that culture is conceptually unfit to serve as a methodological instrument for the analysis of social phenomena.

Louis Menand, in reviewing K. Anthony Appiah's response to Charles Taylor's essay "*The politics of recognition*", sums up Appiah's position as the following: "This is the difficulty identified by Appiah, which is that multiculturalism is possibly more flash than substance, for the reason that 'culture' as a concept is virtually useless as a category of analysis. At a certain distance, and with the light behind it, the concept looks pretty firm and inviting; but once we get

up close and attempt to describe it, it dissolves into an unstable and nearly indiscriminate mass of particularities” (Menand 1995, 72).

Indeed, the traditionally essentialist concept of culture is too rigid to handle the dynamics, diversity and heterogeneity of a society *and* its parallels to others; the individual autonomy of members is beyond its suppressive grasp. Meanwhile, the constructivist vision of culture as an unanchored, loose, non-confinable, heterogeneous and constantly changing phenomenon is too nomadic to accommodate and settle general similarities in a society and its distinctions with others.

For example, if I would employ the essentialist concept of culture and argue that, based on my observations, the concepts of ‘science’ and modernity aren’t adequately established in the Iranian society, it would have an homogeneous consequence for my evaluation of all Iranians. It would lead to stereotyped conclusions such as “Iranians don’t have an adequate idea of modernity” and would do injustice to those Iranians who understand science and modernity very well and better than many people in Europe.

On the other hand, if I’d use the constructivist concept of acculturation and argue that those interviewees I spoke to had misconstrued their worldviews of modernity each in a unique way, then it would leave me no room to generalize the mass misconstructions of modernity that I did witness in Isfahan. It would irreversibly lead my conclusions to the type of “but many Europeans have an inadequate understanding of it as well and, hence, it is nothing specific to the Iranian society”. While that might be true, such an evaluation would disarm me of highlighting the noteworthiness of the mass-misunderstanding of science in Iran and its far-reaching implications.

To put it in a nutshell: one can explain the relatively general nature and the continuous elements of societies while the other is able to understand their dynamics and heterogeneity. But neither can do both at the same time. Yet, the recognition of this theoretical problem doesn’t allow us to abandon the concept in its totality for there is no alternative instrument to explain social generality and diversity.

Social structures, culture's most prominent substitutes, can be of help in arranging the hierarchies and strata, offering insight in the socio-economical division of the society, with the distribution of wealth and the access to power as their most important facets. And it is this last aspect, that of power, that every analysis of social structure is either linked to or finds at its very core. A lot can be evaluated with the help of these types of analyses, but eventually they will fall short of uncovering and explaining divergent worldviews, since they approach everything in socio-economical terms. Aspects of life lying beyond the socio-economical domain, like my niece's fiancée insisting that she shouldn't shake hands with men—to mention an example—can't completely, or in some cases even remotely, be examined by such concepts.

Of course, social structures could partly offer insights as to why my niece chose to accept his term. Her fiancée is relatively wealthy and marrying him offers economic safety. In part they also explain why her fiancée set this term at all: it is a criterion which his future wife's role, in their social setting, demands of them and dismissing it could have negative consequences for his social position, relations and business. But what social structures, or any other theoretical alternative for that matter, cannot conceptualize and therefore *must* neglect is the reason why this term exists at all. The term's very existence is simply being assumed and asserted, not questioned. Why is there such sensibility about women coming into (non-intimate physical) contact with other men? And even if part of the answer would be that men have dominated women from ancient times until recently, and that through this domination such sensibility has arisen, still then the following question remains: why did different societies in similar conditions develop different points of view on this matter?

Besides the fact that social structures can't deal with theology, philosophy and worldviews—in effect, with anything connected to the constitution of meaning—there is an irony in their criticism of culture, identified by Kluckhohn and Kelly in response to Radcliffe-Brown who stated that “direct observation reveals that human beings are connected by a complex network of social relations”. Kluckhohn and Kelly: “[But] the problem is of course that one can easily acknowledge that ‘culture’ is a conceptual construct and thus transcends what is straightforward empirical, but the same goes for ‘social relations’.” (Kluckhohn and Kelly, 1945: 191)

The necessity of maintaining the theory of culture is that it forms the interconnected abstraction of mankind's genius, logics and creativity. These characteristics make it not only exceptional, but above all indispensable. Other types of theories deprive humans of our humanity—our power to think and to be diverse. Accordingly, they deprive societies of their sociality—their ability to invent norms and to differ from other societies on the basis of a communal agreement shared by its members. Recognizing these aspects and giving theoretical form to their being (notwithstanding how poorly) are the main functions of culture which have proved to be irreplaceable.

Hence, to analyse the empirical data of this research I argue that the theoretical framework should be culture and any legitimate challenge to 'culture' must come from within: constructivism. And even then one can say that, despite all their epistemological fallacies, essentialist notions of culture have at least tried to provide an instrument of analysis while constructivist notions do anything but that. Regardless, they're the opposite sides of the same coin and the problem is that in this case neither heads nor tails wins. And so far, no theoretician has been able to flip this conceptual coin on its side, as the ever-changing empirical surface on which it lands is too unstable to allow such an ultra sensitive balance.

Diederick Raven sums up the despair by saying that “[the] cultural theory is a deep morass, everyone who enters it comes out dirty” (p.84). He comes to the conclusion that this morass should be abandoned. “This...is my final judgment on the concept of culture. For at a descriptive level, the culture concept remains inordinately vague and at the explanatory level it oscillates between the super ordinate power in society and the opposite extreme of an epiphenomenon providing a mere ideational representation of structure. This descriptive vagueness and these theoretical vagaries mean that culture occupies no clear place in sociological theory. ‘What culture is and what culture does are issues bogged down in a conceptual morass from which no adequate [theory] of culture has been able to emerge’” (Raven, 1991:12-13).

Raven, though, doesn't dismisses culture's existence altogether. Rather, he cares about it. “Undoubtedly tick description exhibits gossip and maybe unsuitable from a methodological point of view. But my main worry is that the notion of 'culture' is getting a heavy workout. Everything

from anorexia to *su doku* is portrayed as the product of some group's culture. It is now used in such a broad manner that it explains everything and hence nothing – 'culture's popular success is its own theoretical demise' ” (idem: 86). And with that realization, he sees no hope in the theoretical 'substitutes' put forward by constructivism. “What makes the webs of signification Traweek c.q. are dealing with into cultural webs? ...The inability to answer this and similar questions—where does one web stop and begins another—does indeed suggest that the notion of culture is beyond repair and hence it is time to abandon it” (idem:86). Yet, before abandonment, he gives a constructive clue. “Any viable elaboration of the concept of culture should be able to do two things: distinguish one cultural tradition from another and tell which differences between traditions are cultural” and warns us that “it turns out that developing a theory of culture that can meet these two criteria is extraordinary difficult” (idem: 83).

Through experimenting in this chapter I will try to develop a concept of culture that on one hand generalizes groups without disarming members of their individuality, and, on the other, is capable of identifying and examining these different groups without shirking them out of their interconnectedness. Since the viability of such a definition depends just on that, its capacity to manoeuvre between essentialism and constructivism, what is vital in the formulation will be its starting point: it mustn't view the world as divided into fixed groups, but as a whole which can flexibly be arranged and rearranged in different compositions (and not entities) of that whole over and over again, in such a way that an individual can be put into different communities at the same time, depending on the criteria of membership. In order to come to such a theory, let us recapitulate three concepts, which could merge into a tenable theory and overcome their individual shortcomings when they are complemented and modified.

3.3 POLYVOCALITY AND THE WEB OF NARRATIVES

In evaluating *the claims of culture* in the political arenas of multicultural societies, Benhabib questions the very definition of culture, since her primarily goal is to brush aside the philosophical fallacies of its definition. With that she seeks to ground the constructivist claim that all the misery surrounding the politicization of culture is inherent to the unfeasibility of its definition. “Conservatives argue that cultures should be preserved in order to keep groups

separate, because cultural hybridity generates conflict and instability: they hope to avoid the ‘clash of civilizations’...Progressives, by contrast, claim that cultures should be preserved to rectify patterns of domination and symbolic injury involving the misrecognition and oppression of some cultures by others...Whether conservative or progressive, such attempts share faulty epistemic premises: (1) that cultures are clearly delineable wholes; (2) that cultures are congruent with population groups and that a noncontroversial description of the culture of a human group is possible; and (3) that even if cultures and groups do not stand in one-to-one correspondence, even if there is more than one culture within a human group and more than one group that may possess the same cultural traits, this poses no important problems for politics or policy. These assumptions form what I will call the “reductionist sociology of culture” (Benhabib, 2002: 4).

In other words, if this reductionist sociology of culture is projected on the case on this thesis and one argues that Iran is an Islamic country, then there is no place for democracy or Iranianness. The other way around, if one comes to the conclusions that the Persian past holds an important place in Iranian culture, there is no room for ‘anti-Iranianism’ (Islam) or anti-monarchism (democracy). Yet, these are all true at the same time for the harmony that culture suggests isn’t there. Benhabib has chosen her stance in this dilemma: “Throughout this book I defend social constructivism as a comprehensive explanation of cultural differences...*cultures themselves, as well as societies*, are not holistic but polyvocal, multilayered, decentred, and fractured systems of action and signification” (2002: 25-26; emphasis mine).

In the mean time, she is the one to commit an epistemic error when she talks about ‘cultures’ in plural, supposing the existence of entities, delineable and separable from each other, to use Benhabib's own words. In fact, she states that “I do not think that it is coherent to judge cultures as a whole. Precisely because I see the idea of a “culture as a whole” as an analytical error”. In joining her analytical stance, I want to watch out for not repeating the same grammatical mistake, as the plural use of words suggests a sum of wholes. Therefore, this thesis won’t treat ‘cultures’ as a plural phenomenon. Rather, when wanting to discuss culture in relation to different societies/regions, it will use the term ‘cultural plateaus’. This formulation enables me to talk and think in terms of singling out a certain part of one larger whole.

With that determined, let us get back to Benhabib's account of how this phenomenon is constructed: "Culture presents itself through narratively contested accounts for two principal reasons. First, human actions and relations are formed through a double hermeneutic: We identify *what* we do through an *account* of what we do... The second reason why culture presents itself through contested accounts is that not only are human actions and interactions constituted through narratives that together form a "web of narratives" (Arendt [1958] 1973), but they are also constituted through the actors' evaluative stance toward their doings. In other words, there are second-order narratives entailing a certain normative attitude toward accounts of first-order deeds. What we call "culture" is the horizon formed by these evaluative stances, through which the infinite chain of space-time sequences is demarcated into "good" and "bad", "holy" and "profane", "pure" and "impure". Cultures are formed through binaries because human beings live in an evaluative universe" (Benhabib: 2002: 6-7).

In coming to a theory this thesis will use the main components of Benhabib's concept as fundamentals. In that light I applaud the concept of a 'web' for it has four virtues that either essentialism or constructivism (partly) miss. A web, in the first place, is interconnected, which means that, if imagined as covering more than a single society, the faulty assumption of cultural delineability is neutralized, since the threads of the web cross through territories.

The second theoretical advantage of a conceptual web is its categorical ability: threads of a web are detectable, separable and traceable. The third plus-point is that a web can be decentred, an epistemic requisite for any cultural theory willing to accommodate heterogeneous accounts. Its fourth virtue is that a web is 'multi-layered' and 'polyvocal'.

Benhabib, though, gives little insight in how these narratives exactly work. "To be and become a self is to insert oneself into webs of interlocution; it is to know how to answer when one is addressed and to know how to address others (cf. Benhabib 1999e). Strictly speaking, we never really *insert* ourselves, but rather are *thrown* into these webs of interlocution, in the Heideggerian sense of "thrownness" as *Geworfenheit*: We are born into webs of interlocution or narrative. From familiar and gender narratives to linguistic ones and to the macro-narratives of collective identity. We become aware of who we are by learning to become conversation partners in these narratives.

Although we do not choose the nets in which we are initially caught, or select those with whom we wish to converse, *our agency consists in our capacity to weave out of those narratives our individual stories*. There are only so many ways in which a cultural code may be varied; beyond them, one may run the risk of becoming an outcast or a convert, a marginal figure or a deserter of the tribe. But just as it is always possible in conversation to drop the last remark..., so too do we always have the options in telling a life story. These options are not ahistorical but culturally and historically specific, inflected by the master narratives of family structure and gender roles into which each individual is thrown. Nonetheless ...socialization and acculturation do not determine an individual's life story or his or her capacity to initiate new actions and new sentences in a conversation" (Benhabib, 2002:15; emphasis mine).

Interpreting the acculturation process as one based on narratives is a percipient approach. In the first place, it immediately puts forward the importance of language. As much as culture may be expressed through our actions, it is explained, taught and debated through our words. I argue that language *is* our ability of culture *and* our cultural ability, since culture resides in language. Secondly, narrations provide room for individuality while in the same time they can be interconnected through their topics, by the language in which they are narrated and through our dialogue partners, hence possibly tackling the stalemate between essentialism and constructivism. Thirdly, languages offer a more reliable source of indicating cultural plateaus, since essential parts of narratives are encoded in language.

Yet, as refreshing as this perspective is, still Raven's questions remain: Where do these narratives originate? What can we qualify as a narrative and what not? How do we become an outcast to these narratives in which we are 'thrown'? This brings me to an interesting detail that catches the eye: Benhabib has changed her position from 'inserting one self' (1999) to 'being thrown' (2002) in these webs of narratives. It signifies that she, as a defender of constructivism, has come to acknowledge the dominant influence of situational factors during acculturation. And rightly so: the extreme constructivist position that the individual is building his character and worldview in complete consciousness passes over the question of how that consciousness has been acquired in the first place, for it mistakenly assumes that we are born with it, and not only that but also to an extent which sets us free from all external influences.

And this is my main problem with constructivism: its misrepresentation of human capabilities in the form of overestimating them in response to their underestimation by essentialism. What I basically conclude on this issue is that constructivism overdid its apt reply to essentialism, that humans are able of a unique individuality, in an almost allergic way.⁷⁹

3.4 HABITUS

Andreas Wimmer, in *Nationalist Exclusion and Ethnic conflict*, discusses Pierre Bourdieu who views the relation between the member and the society as one based on incongruence. Bourdieu presupposes an unequal distribution of economical, political and cultural sources, in effect the idea of a social structure. Individuals internalize their position by slowly developing a ‘habitus’: a system of tendencies determining action, perception and interpretation. It consists of a repertory of strategies of action and patterns of cognition, which have become routine for members of the society (Wimmer, 2002).

Thus, the individual views the world from certain dispositions made available to him by his social position. Selectively they are being activated in daily thought, perception and action, suggesting that the individual is not solely playing a role designed by the society but internalizes a matrix that is built from his own environment through learning processes. As generous as this attempt may be to hand the individual some autonomy and sovereignty, according to this theory the habitus makes an individual want exactly what his social position allows him to want. Wimmer’s disagreement lies exactly here, as he argues that Bourdieu emphasizes too much a peremptory character of society that empirically isn’t sustainable.

The habitus, however, does give insight into the “gravity” of narratives and how we get all tangled up in dispositions presented by society. The more one grows into one habit, the harder it becomes to take a different stance, even if one believes that the act or thought in question is not logical or beneficial at all⁸⁰. For example, an old woman I met during my research in Isfahan had come to question a lot of aspects of religion, even its very validity, as a result of coming into touch with narrative of modernization. Yet, while she playfully says that religion probably must be a big lie and nothing of it is true—“how can a spider cover up the entry of a cave with his

web?”⁸¹—she still prays and maintains that “this is the way that I have lived my whole life. Whether logical or not, I cannot change my ways anymore”.

3.5 IDENTITY FORMATION: DIALOGUE AND RECOGNITION

With Bourdieu providing insight in the stickiness of the threads that make up the web of narratives, let us turn to Charles Taylor to see matters from the perspective of the individual, who introduced the concept of ‘recognition’ in the multicultural debate. “Our identity is shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or a group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or the society around them mirror back to them a confining and demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves” (Taylor, 1992: 25).

From Taylor’s perspective, language is the foremost important facet in identity development. Benhabib sums it up in the following way: “Language, for Herder as well as for Charles Taylor, is the paradigmatic cultural achievement of humanity (see Taylor 1985, 230-34). Through language a world is constituted; languages are the primary filter through which we experience the world as “our” world. All natural languages are thus informed by a unique worldview; it is through language that a people express its “genius,” its historical memory and sense of future identity. “Language,” writes Taylor, “does not only serve us to *depict* ourselves and the world, it also helps *constitute* our lives” (1985, 10)...His positive appreciation of the contemporary politics of recognition is based upon an understanding of culture in analogy with language. He views culture, like language, as a world-constituting set of discursive practices through immersion in which the self becomes who it is” (Benhabib, 2002: 55).

In this line of reasoning, conversation partners and the conversation itself become very important. Taylor seeks to emphasize the dialogical character of this process. “I am a self only in relation to certain interlocutors: in one way in relation to my achieving self-definition; in another in relation to those who are now crucial to my continuing grasp of languages of self-understanding—and, of course, these classes may overlap. A self exists only within what I call ‘webs of interlocution’ ” (Taylor, 1989, 36).

I second Benhabib who states that the interlocution of the self happens in the web of narratives that she put forward. The dialogue, which takes place between the self and the other, is conditioned by its threads, each representing another narrative or sub narrative. Just like the 'other' has a unique narration of narrative X, the 'self' will come to a unique narration, too, and with that it will take a different and individual stance, but nonetheless one that is linked to the other narrators through their shared narrative. Since we are all constantly in touch with (other) narratives through conversations, readings, media and etcetera, our own narrations keeps changing, hence explaining the constant mutation of the self⁸² and, when summed up, that of the society.

The second aspect of Taylor's effort that is of importance is his emphasis on language, which strengthens the idea of culture as made out of narratives. The stance an individual takes towards a certain narrative can definitely be influenced by language, since narration itself is a linguistic act. For example, many research participants who claimed to be Muslims hadn't actually read the Koran "because it is written in Arabic". They also resented Arabic and Islamic classes at school for linguistic reasons. Accordingly, as it has become clear in the course of this thesis, their own entire narration of an Islamic identity has been heavily influenced hereby. This highlights the importance of language in indicating where a certain narrative starts and ends or at least alters. Hence, the Islamic narrative, either Shiite or Sunni, in Iran must be seen as an altered version—a spin off if you will—of its Arabic counterparts, precisely because of their linguistic difference.

3.6 CULTURE: A WEB OF NARRATIVES

So far this in chapter I have discussed narratives and sub-narratives on different kinds of level. I believe that various sorts of them, each with their own unique specifications, make up culture. It is through the interaction with these narratives that the individual is acculturated and 'accultures' himself to a unique and multi-layered identity. Here, too, the parallel between cultural heterogeneity and a conceptual web of narratives firmly stands.

Like the threads of a web, narratives can be thicker than each other, one being of short range while the other running across the entire web. As far as their categorization is concerned I plea

that there are 4 sorts of narratives with which the individual is engaged. These are the master-narrative, macro-narrative, meso-narrative and micro-narrative.

Though operating on different levels, their nature is the same. They are all non confinable and in constant reproduction, their location depending of where their narrators and institutions are. Each narrative represents a different and unique worldview, at times evolving from other narratives, from which norms and rules have been deduced, and usually traceable to a starting point in time and place. That starting point can either be a person, a location or a group. Either way, the existence of a certain narrative means the emergence of a unique worldview in a certain period, which has been able to draw narrators. Narratives can fade when their narrators either cease to follow or cannot identify themselves as a group anymore. When the recognition of such a group stops, this narrative becomes remote but can always be revived by possible future narrators.

Their variety roots in their length and thickness, with their length being a geographical factor based on its reach. I classify a master-narrative as intercontinental, a macro-narrative as (inter)national, the meso-narrative as provincial/tribal, and the micro narrative as either familial or absolutely local in a micro sense. The thickness of a narrative, however, concerns its strength and the stronger a narrative, the more organized it is through institutions, promoters and archive and the more narrators it has. For instance, the Christian narrative is one such strong master-narrative, crossing through continents, archived in the bible or at holy sights and artefacts, organized and promoted through the church.

The interaction of these narratives with each other in society results in less organized social agreements on specific matters, which I refer to as sub-narratives. Sub-narratives are not as organized, but they are traceable to one or more narratives.

Hence, this thesis argues that culture consists of narratives and a cultural plateau is the depiction of an ever evolving composition of them. Therefore, culture is best visualized as a web which is spread out on the atlas. The main threads of this web are narratives, each representing a different worldview, and through immersion with each other sub-narratives evolve as short branches. This web is constantly changing: the size of threads vary constantly, they move, some disappear and

others emerge. Our experience of cultural difference between groups is not the result of the interaction of different cultures in the plural sense of the word, but the encounter of people with different compositions⁸³ of (in many case the same and in some cases different) narratives. Nonetheless, all of these compositions share some ‘universal’ threads with each other. For example, the entire Christian, Jewish and Islamic countries are tied together through these narratives which are historically linked.

As this web is one whole, except for rarely isolated cases, the social scientist who is researching a certain population will have to select, isolate and analyze *a part of that whole*, studying those threads that influence his research population and subject. In doing so, only qualitative study will be able to grasp the worldview of the research population and judge which threads are relevant and which not. I do recognize the hazard of labelling interpretation as a scientific process, but at the same time I argue that the data and its analysis can internally be questioned to a scientific measure. At the same time, any cultural analysis or description expires at the very moment that the data were gathered due to the dynamics of change. This requires a temporal approach from the social scientist which means that he must regard the data as belonging to a very specific period of time. This ‘temporality’ withholds the social scientist from falling to essentialist traps⁸⁴.

RAVEN’S TEST

Earlier in this chapter Diederick Raven hinted that any viable account of culture should be able to do two things: 1) separating cultural traditions from each other and 2) point out which tradition is cultural or not. The theory of a web of narratives as I built through the works of Benhabib, Bourdieu and Taylor meets the first criterion in two ways. In the first place it makes a distinction between narratives through its conceptual threads. Hence, the Iranian and Islamic narratives are separated and so too are their respective customs and traditions. Secondly, this theory makes distinction between cultural plateaus through their differing compositions. With this the social scientist is enabled to refer to entire societies without falling to essentialist traps, since the theory allows room for heterogeneity and recognizes human agency. It is exactly the agencies that it binds and not their pale stereotypes.

As far as the second criterion is concerned, each narrative represents a unique worldview. Therefore, a tradition which isn't symbolic, and hence lacking a worldview, cannot be labelled as a cultural tradition. For example, if the members of a certain society remarkably engage in activity X because of necessity and not choice or symbolism, then that activity won't be recognized as a cultural tradition or belonging to a certain narrative. It will, however, when the activity transcends its function of merely fulfilling a necessary criterion and becomes symbolic: If some of those members migrate to another society and continue with that activity, although not anymore out of necessity—as they have more options at disposal— but out of choice. The function of the activity has altered and become symbolic. Now, it's an identity marker. In this case, the activity would become cultural.

The theory of a web of narratives, into which the self is thrown and subjected to the gravity of its threads, on one hand explains the dynamics of personal and social change based on human agency, while on the other it unmistakably ties these unique selves to each other through its threads. In doing so, it accommodates the similarities of individuals in a certain society—it becomes an operable tool for social analysis.

The theory provides this thesis the conceptual framework to encompass competing streams into the same culture, despite all their contrasts and incommensurabilities, and allow room for social heterogeneity. Furthermore, the concept of culture as a web of narratives enables me to theorize about the context of, and the extent with which, individual respondents display contrasting and incommensurable positions vis-à-vis these narratives. Conceptually untenable narrations of the same respondent can be linked with the contrasting dimensions of the narratives involved.

CONCLUSION

In the wake of a 14 centuries' old identity crisis, the Iranian struggle to formulate a coherent national identity has become visible during the past 120 years. The nation's inability is mainly due to four competing narratives who all hold public legitimacy to provide a definition. These are the narratives of Iranian identity, Islamic identity, Democracy and Modernization.

Their competition has always had sovereignty at stake and been marked by political expressions of a confusing variety: the 1906 Constitutional Revolution was the first appearance of the democratic narrative that handed sovereignty to the people; the 1925 coup d'état of Reza Shah Pahlavi marked the reaffirmation of the Iranian narrative, which prescribes sovereignty to the king; it went back-and-forth to the people and then again to the Shah in 1951 and '53; suddenly, in 1979, Iranians handed sovereignty to Allah as the Islamic narrative monopolized the social conversation; finally, after 31 years of Islamic governance, the Iranian and democratic narratives are coming to the forefront again, despite all kinds of resistance and suppression. In the meantime, Iranians have tried to modernize, mostly at the cost of democracy, but not quite ready to accept its consequences for monarchy or religion.

The match-ups between these four narratives has never been as straightforward and clear-cut as I just described. Quite the reverse, it has been clouded, blurred and glossed over by conceptual and factual vagueness, which has left the Iranian society divided and crippled by dizziness and indecisiveness. The national identity crisis and these political disorientations are the outcomes of the much graver state of **cultural confusion**, which has been caused by this ever-intensifying competition, and manifested itself politically throughout the 20th century, most notably by the Islamic Revolution. The core goals of the revolutionaries were liberal and democratic of nature and it is only their confusion that allowed the revolution to become Islamic in its latter stages. The context that allows for such a confusion to exist is one of severe factual and conceptual vagueness and mistakenness, which reaches back to the Islamic conquest of Iran and worsened in the 20th century with the entrance of the narratives of democracy and modernization.

However, this thesis won't conclude that the phenomenon of cultural confusion is distinct to the Iranian society. For example, titles such as 'Christian/Islamic intellectual' are ascribed in

contemporary Europe, too. What it will argue, though, is that the political expressions and implications of the Iranian cultural confusion are unique in kind.

This thesis' observations can neither be accommodated by traditional theories nor by constructivist concepts. The essentialist theory fails to see the turbulence beneath the surface of the Iranian social ocean, for it has no eyes for the immense and contradictive streams which often cross paths. Its lack of depth is due to a dogma of homogeneity, which presupposes a harmoniously structured sea and corresponds with the deceptively silent surface. At the other side of the theoretical scale, constructivist theories generally focus on the micro-heterogeneities within the ocean and overemphasize their distinctive micro-paths. However genuine these observations may be, constructivism generally lacks the generalizing ability to zoom out and recognize the commonalities between these observations. Hence, it fails to see the path of the larger stream and their social gravitation forces. Following Benhabib's theory, I too have made the case that culture is best theorized as a web of narratives. With regards to the research subject, the complemented theory allows for contradictory narratives to exist in the same cultural plateau. I argue that through these theoretical glasses 1) the silent surface, 2) the contradictive streams beneath it and 3) the distinctive and ever-changing composition of these streams can be seen altogether.

The final conclusion of this thesis is that the confusion is reaching its climax. The streams are increasingly clashing with each other. This is beginning to disturb the surface, as was evident during the 2009 demonstrations—a forerunner of the storm to come. I make this prediction based on the heating cultural debate, in which an increasing number of Iranians continue to question longstanding cultural assumptions. This is a very promising development, because when these streams find their way to the surface, the massive waves which they create will make a final run to the shore. The silence that comes after the storm will be more representative of the newly-realized harmony at the heart of the ocean.

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NOTES

¹ With a political claim I don't primarily refer to organized representations at the national level that bring forward their claims in a top-down system. Rather, I argue that these claims are driven from bottom-up and only get political expressions in the final stages when they reach the national discussion of government.

² I do want to point out, however, that the goal of this elaboration is not to engage in a detailed historic reconstruction of these narratives' developments. Instead, key information will be provided so that the modern Iranian perceptions on these narratives can be considered in a reasonable framework.

³ Introducing a major exhibition centered on the Achaemenid era of ancient Persia at the British Museum, John Curtis says that "our information about the wars and about much else in connection with the ancient Persians comes from Greek authors such as Herodotus. These accounts are inevitably written from a Greek rather than a Persian perspective, and it is because of them that the conflict is often represented as a contest between freedom and democracy on one hand, and tyranny and despotism on the other. One of the aims of the exhibition will be to redress this negative Eurocentric view of the ancient Persians" (Curtis, 2005: 9) This thinking is strengthened by the Cyrus Cylinder. "The cylinder... is sometimes called the first Bill of Human Rights...Cyrus is especially revered by the writers of the books of Ezra-Nehemiah and Isaiah. Because of these biblical references, Cyrus was for centuries regarded as a proponent of religious tolerance and a champion of human rights. Political theorists like Machiavelli portray him as the model king and Europeans long revered him as the ideal ruler" (Curtis, 2005: 6).

⁴ That's more the case with 'traditional' Zoroastrians, who form a minority and are largely located in Yazd, central Iran.

⁵ "Although Iranians had become Muslims...they preserved their old Iranian heritage, such that even today the chief holiday in Iran is *nauruz*, "new year's day". This continuity is unequalled elsewhere in the Near East, where in Egypt for example, two great changes erased the memory of the pharaohs from the minds of the inhabitants: first Christianity and then Islam. In Iran Christianity had little influence and Islam was adapted to Iranian customs" (Frye, 1975: xii).

⁶ "There were powerful links between the pre- and post-Islamic eras of Persian history. Changes which appeared radical at first, proved to be less trenchant as the old habits and traditional modes of thought returned in a new guise. Many of the old religious beliefs and practices found a home within "Iranian Islam"...albeit with a different terminology. People continued to expect a savior who would rise one day, punish the wicked, and fill the world with justice. They continued traditional practices: visited sacred shrines, revered the spirit of the death... but now they called Soshyant, their expected messiah, "Mahdi", named the Chinvat Bridge to be crossed by the death on the Day of Judgment "Pol-e Serat", and replaced Mashya and Mashyana with Adam and Eve" (Yarshater, 1988:3).

⁷ "Perhaps no single man of letters, with the possible exception of Homer, has had such a profound and decisive effect on the language and life of his people as Ferdowsi has had on Persian and the survival of an Iranian cultural identity... He set out to render into Persian verse hardly admixed with Arabic words, a late Sasanian recension of an Iranian universal history; that is to say, a comprehensive and self-revealing Iranian view of the world and the nation's place and role in it. With this heroic stroke he succeeded in snatching from extinction a veritable lexicon of the Persian language, and endowing that language with a self-assured and enduring literary expression. With the same stroke he rescued from oblivion a mythicized and profoundly structured world outlook that embodies the process of interactions of cosmic forces, moral values and human relations with all their complexities, paradoxes and dynamic tensions" (Yarshater, 1988: 257).

⁸ This is another important indication that the cultural wounds of the Iran's Islamic conquest have been severe. Their rejection of an Arab identity can be traced back to Ferdowsi who 'instrumentalized' the Iranian identity and the Persian language as the cultural trenches against the Arabization of Iran. His most famous rhyme, a verse many Iranians (even illiterates) know by heart, can textually be translated as "although I have suffered a lot during these thirty years; I revived Iranians through this Persian [language]". Other Iranian poets have opposed and questioned Islam, too, but they did not make use of the Iranian identity in their opposition. Such poets are Hafiz, who casts doubts over Islamic premises and practices while walking a fine line, and Omar Khayyam, the renowned mathematician and astronomer, who rejected and resented Islam, and religion in general, straightforwardly through philosophical quartets. Hence, the most important narrator of the Iranian identity is Ferdowsi.

⁹ For example, Mohammad Reza Shah in 1971 invited world leaders to the Celebration of 2500 years of Iranian Monarchy at Persepolis, which is a myth because Iran didn't have monarchy between 640-1501 (Keddie, 2003: 167). There, at the tomb of Cyrus the Great, he infamously said: "Cyrus, sleep in peace as we are awake". 8 years later the Monarchy collapsed.

¹⁰ In interpreting this figure one must not forget that the liberal self-ascription of religion doesn't exist in Iran.

¹¹ This thesis doesn't allow the room to fully elaborate on this claim but some reasons for the significance of the Islamic conquest for the Iranian nation have been outlined in the previous sub-chapter.

¹² In this regard one cannot neglect the fact that the vast portion of the Muslim holy book consists of Allah's direct quotations, thus leaving little room for personal interpretation (notion put forth by Diederick Raven in the course of the 2007-08 study year).

¹³ A very crucial distinction between Shiites and Sunnis is their different use of the label "Imam". While in Sunni Islam the title has a meaning similar to that of priesthood in Christianity, Shiites only use it in reference to Ali and his offspring. Hence, the title is exclusive, protected, elevated and mystified. This perfectly fits in the Shiite intention to separate and elevate Ali and his claim. An important side note is that Khomeini in the latter months of the Revolution was mystified to the position of Imam and he accepted the title after the Revolution. Now, he is dubbed the 13th Imam. On one hand this occurrence is truly exceptional, on the other it corresponds with the Shiite line of mystifying leaders.

¹⁴ It's crucial to identify another aspect that has been inserted from the Iranian into the Shiite Islamic narrative: The 'royal line' of Iranian Shahs, passing the monarchy from father to son, has been altered into the 'holy line' of Imams who pass "Imamhood" over from father to son. This concept is non-existent in the Sunni brand of Islam.

¹⁵ This has serious implications for Islamic theory as well as for the prophet. First, it means that Ali possessed supernatural powers while Mohammed on the occasions in which he is said to have pulled a miracle was helped by God. To put it more simply, the prophet had to place an order while Ali had divine powers at his immediate disposal. Secondly, saying 'Ya Ali' now means that Ali *still* has powers to descend help on followers. That makes him an extension of God.

¹⁶ Such as not praying, fasting, upholding clothing instruction, or drinking alcohol, dating, having premarital sex, and not going to Mecca for *Hajj* etcetera.

¹⁷ This brings us to another important facet pointed out by many Iranians, which is ulama's long-record of pro-British activity and bribe, as early as the then-highest cleric Behbahani who opposed the Tobacco movement that sparked the Constitutional Revolution. The British were keen to prevent the constitution from materializing.

¹⁸ Another important fact that supports the idea of the Revolution of 1979 not being Islamic in origin is that the ulama, in the face of modern ideologies and theories, had lost appeal among modernized youth (idem: 225). In the next sub-chapters I will argue this case more in detail.

¹⁹ The tomb in Mashhad is so richly decorated and so intensely worshiped that one can argue that it has come to resemble the very 'holy statues' that the monotheistic Islam prohibited during its foundation. Many visitors believe that their wish will be fulfilled by only touching the shrine. The necessity to visit these holy sites is so great that an enormous amount of smaller shrines throughout the country, ascribed to the 'offspring of the Imams', have the status of holiness and attract people.

²⁰ This group's religious information vastly consists of hadiths about the succession. It is the fanatically religious part of the society that is well-informed in both 'fields', meaning the Koran and the succession claims.

²¹ The positions, setting, concepts and actions of various actors in this movement can only be understood if their historic roots have been traced.

²² Establishing this point helps linking the current democratic movement to pre-Revolution ones and exposes some roots of the current situation.

²³ This, in turn, will be a run-up to my theory of cultural confusion. Moreover, making this point will demonstrate the inherent discrepancy between religious and democratic leadership.

²⁴ This is important to my concept of culture at the level of narratives. Equally important, it helps clarify the narrative of democracy.

²⁵ Why was Iran the first Third World country to establish a constitution and why did it occur in 1906? What were the exact conditions? These are intriguing questions that this thesis unfortunately cannot accommodate, except for shortly touching on three crucial points. First of all, the Qajar dynasty was heavily dependent on foreign powers, most notably Britain and Russia, allowing them great interference in domestic policy (Keddie, 2003: 37, 49-52, 56, 63-7). Secondly, because of the growing exploitation of the country and the disastrous economic conditions, which the people linked to the monarch's dependency, an unusual and inherently conflicting alliance between secular reformists, clergy and bazaaris was established (idem: 59). Thirdly, the Russian Revolution lessened Tsarist influence and the successful Japanese resistance to Russia, which was allotted to Japan's constitution, supported the idea that an Iranian constitution could improve the conditions of the country and secure its independence (idem: 67). Together they provided the context in which a new narrative was incorporated in the Iranian cultural plateau and manifested itself through the Constitutional Revolution.

²⁶ The push for democracy in Iran started mainly due to the lack of justice and equality in the country as well as its exploitation by foreigners. Moreover, these two facets were interlinked as imperialism worked through dictatorship, since Iran never was a direct colony.

²⁷ The meaning of democracy, in some ways like cultural or all other concepts of the social sciences, is contested and no unambiguous definition exists. Since this thesis doesn't have the room to accommodate the discussion, I choose to provide a broad definition myself, no matter how contested it may be.

²⁸ And also within that framework, there is an unequal relationship between the umma and the clerics, which roots in the caliphate system; for example, there are instructions in the Koran to send one-fifth of the loot to the caliphate before splitting the rest.

²⁹ Not anymore only the geo-political aspect of Iran was of importance to imperial powers, but now also its natural resources.

³⁰ Although Iran declared neutrality, the country was divided in three spheres of influence: North (Russia), neutral, and South (Britain). Russia and Britain engaged in a political battle to control the neutral zone where the oil was discovered, which resulted in the third parliament being dissolved in 1915 (idem: 73).

³¹ Britain had already supported Reza Khan's rise to the top of the Cossacks Brigade and later to the position of minister of war. Furthermore, they backed his coup to replace the pro-Russian Prime Minister, Sephadar, and later to oust his replacement, Sayyed Zia. In the end, they supported his move to change the dynasty. From this it can be concluded that Britain had severe influence over Reza Shah.

³² He chose this name of historic importance as his family name in order to link himself to the pre-Islamic dynasties.

³³ Iran received low percentages of royalty. "The total net profits of the AIOC from 1945 to 1950 after deducting high British taxes, royalties, and exaggerated depreciation figures were £ 250 million while royalties were £ 90 million. The AIOC paid much more in income taxes to the British government than it did in royalties to the Iranian government...The refusal of the AIOC to meet the 50-50 profit-division pattern seen in new American oil agreements, until it was too late, moved many moderates to favor nationalism" (Keddie, 2003:124).

³⁴ Britain took the case to the International Court of Law in The Hague, where Mossadeq successfully defended the nationalization act as the Court unanimously ruled that it had no jurisdiction to overrule the Iranian parliament (Keddie, 2003: 124-5).

³⁵ MI6 comes up with an overthrow plan, which was modified by CIA and carried out by Kermit Roosevelt, the grandson of the great Roosevelt. Shah, left leaders and ulama (Kashani) were in the plot. On 17th of August '53 CIA hired crowd to pretend themselves as leftist Tudeh supporters and to bring down Pahlavi statues, which forces Mossadeq to order police to suppress the riots. This cut off Tudeh from unity and withheld them from notifying Mossadeq from the coup, a move that resulted in strong self criticism later on by Tudeh leaders. On 19th August the CIA hired a protesting group of Bazaari's which were joined by military forces on orders of key men whose cooperation had been 'received', and ulama's (Kashani and Behbahani) support; Tudeh did nothing and the government was overthrown. Mossadeq was arrested, received three years of prison sentence followed by a lifelong house arrest, and the nationalist foreign minister Fatami was executed (128-30).

³⁶ Iran received 50% of the royalties; in this way nationalization existed only in theory (Keddie, 2003: 137).

³⁷ Nearing 50 years after his death, his wish to be buried among the students that were killed during pro-Mossadeq demonstrations hasn't been honored yet neither by the Shah nor by the Islamic Republic, both fearing the symbolic power of its grave. Mossadeq rests buried in his house in Ahmad Abad.

³⁸ Subsequent parliaments were firmly controlled and candidates filtered.

³⁹ The Melliyun (Nationalists) party, headed by Prime Minister Eqbal and the so-called opposition part named Mardom (the People's) party whose leader was Asadollah Alam, a long-time confidant of the Shah. There were no real differences between these parties (Keddie, 2003: 140).

⁴⁰ Membership was obligatory for students and government employees.

⁴¹ He was afraid of another man's popularity, sacking his successful minister of agriculture because of getting to popular (Keddie, 2003: 152).

⁴² Shah expected that Iran would become one of the world's top five powers in the 20th century (Keddie, 2003: 157-8)

⁴³ The consumption of military weapons took such ridiculous forms that Iran occasionally bought not yet produced/tested weapons and at one time had more Chieftain tanks than the British had in their own army (Keddie, 2003: 163-4).

⁴⁴ Shah at times outlawed housing projects because the cement was needed to shelter the newly bought arms! Partly because of this and partly because of the economic position of the foreign engineers who were brought in to handle these weapons, house prices rose enormously. This strengthened anti-American feelings.

⁴⁵ For example, Princess Ashraf, Shah's sister, received 10% of company stocks gratis in return for delivering important licenses to foreign companies (Keddie, 2003: 159).

⁴⁶ They found ties with the Iranian Students Confederation, which was active abroad.

⁴⁷ Most notably Dr. Shapour Bakhtiar, Karim Sanjabi and Bazargan.

⁴⁸ Twelve year long Prime Minister Hoveyda was replaced by another insider, Amuzegar (Keddie, 2003: 217).

⁴⁹ Ulama's mosques, again, became the only relatively untouchable platform for expressing political discontent (Keddie, 2003: 167-9).

⁵⁰ The article, published in January 1978 in *Ettela'at*, violently attacked and discredited Khomeini and sparked protests during which seventy people were killed in Qom (Keddie, 2003: 225).

⁵¹ Ali Shariati's Islamic thoughts, which were novel in contrast to Khomeini's traditionalism, attracted youngsters that were out of Khomeini's reach and so did the more moderate position of grand-Ayatollah Shariatmadari. Also the connection to National Front's Bazargan was important to broaden the range of revolutionaries (Keddie, 2003: 193, 195, 205)

⁵² These events, described under the previous point, gave the westernizing and modernizing middle class two illusions: "first thinking that the shah's regime would stay in and reform, and later that the revolution would allow them a significant postrevolutionary role" (idem: 230-1)

⁵³ He was advised on this by his Western educated entourage, such as Bani Sadr.

⁵⁴ Bakhtiar accepted the position on three conditions: 1) the Shah would have to leave Iran indefinitely, 2) a Regency Council had to be set up, and 3) his appointment as the new Prime Minister had to be constitutional by undergoing a parliamentary vote first. Keddie hasn't included this third condition, but Bakhtiar elaborated on this issue himself in an interview published in the book *Si-o haft rooz pas az si-o haft sal* (1982).

⁵⁵ He maintained a pro-constitution line, despite several attempts of his niece, Queen Soraya Esfandiari Bakhtiari (Shah's second wife), and his cousin, General Teimur Bakhtiar (head of SAVAK) to convince him of working with the Shah.

⁵⁶ He closed the embassies of South-Africa and Israel on the basis of their governments employing apartheid-regimes in their respective countries.

⁵⁷ Besides his accurate warning of religious dictatorship and fascism, of which he said the very thought gave him the shivers, Bakhtiar resisted army pressure to shoot down Khomeini's airplane when he returned to Iran. He insisted that Khomeini's martyrdom would have devastating cultural impacts in the long run, saying that his death would make him a second "Imam Husain" (who is the most mourned Shiite Imam) and me "Yazid" (Imam Husain's killer).

⁵⁸ Evidence suggests that the US backed the revolution as well, enforcing the impartiality of the army. The United States had contacts with high clerics and anti-leftist part of the movement, thinking that after the revolution Khomeini would allow the moderates to rule “The State Department seems to have approved a late, abortive plan for a National Front-Clerical ruling alliance with the shah effectively to bow out...by late 1978 many in the embassy and the State Department were convinced that the Shah couldn’t last and were in contact with secular and religious figures who might enter a governmental coalition with which the American government could deal” (Keddie, 2003: 235). Everything points in the direction of US envoy General Huyser convincing Iranian generals to declare the impartiality of the army on February 11th 1979. The Islamic Revolution was a fact.

⁵⁹ The full citation of this part of Dr. Kamran’s interview, with Voice of America as broadcasted by this network is the following: “The representatives of the tradition that we support are Mohammad Mossadeq and Shapour Bakhtiar...My father’s generation heard the voice and calling of [the fight for] freedom from Mossadeq’s mouth and my own generation did have the luck to hear this loud voice from Bakhtiar’s mouth. It means that at a moment when the nation had mobilized, at a moment when Khomeini began to bash Shah’s regime, at a moment when the people driven by hatred for this monarchical regime, corrupt and obedient to foreigners—we must not forget why the people revolted; they hadn’t gone crazy, [rather] they had their backs to the wall [and] were exhausted by that regime— poured into the streets and followed Khomeini because of anxiety, [Bakhtiar] had this sense of reason, this calmness, and above all this courage to raise this expressive voice and appeal to the nation not on its emotions but on its sense of reason and tell them what a dark future awaits them if they follow Khomeini and [that they should] instead of this lean on the constitution and try to reform it in order to have a liberal, democratic and laic, as he stressed on numerous occasions, country. To me Bakhtiar, prior to anything else, means this loud and clear voice of liberalism, which still rings in my ears”.

⁶⁰ The political demands of the protestors surpass so vastly and fundamentally those of the original leaders, Mousavi and Karoubi, that these leaders have been overtook in speed and direction. Consequently they are reduced to followers of the movement: the protestors’ political demands, which I touched upon in the previous paragraphs, radically break off with the entire system, while Mousavi and Karoubi have repeatedly declared their desire to operate within the system and ‘reform’ it. This is an illusion, and a very manipulative one at that, as will become clear in the sub-chapter on institutions.

⁶¹ This will be explained in Chapter 2.

⁶² This thesis doesn’t provide the room to discuss why democracy is the only possible way of governance that accommodates equality and liberty.

⁶³ *Khamenei haya kon, saltanata raha kon!* This is an often heard chant during demonstrations and means “Khamenei have shame, let go of the throne”. The reference to throne, of course, is filled with sarcasm since the Islamic Republic always takes pride in having ousted the Shah.

⁶⁴ One of the main causes of this war were ulama who convinced Fath Ali Shah to initiate a Jihad against Russia, who had occupied Iranian territory since 1812. During this war Iran lost enormous proportions of ground which it tried to re-conquer, only leading to more losses. In the end, after the infamous Treaty of Turkamanchi, Iran conceded on Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia and more lands.

⁶⁵ Crown Prince Abbas Mirza was the first to attempt the modernization of the Iranian troops in order to bring them up par with modern standards, equipment and techniques. After his death, Prime Minister Mirza Taqi Khan “Amir Kabir” worked to take modernization further than the military area and implement it on industry and agriculture too. But his attempts were discouraged by Nasser ad-Din Shah, ulama, tribes, landlords and courtiers, who all had stakes to lose. In the end, Amir Kabir was expelled and assassinated a year later on the orders of the king (Keddie, 2003: 49-50).

⁶⁶ This development touches on the very core of religious authority: before the rise of modernization it was the narrative of Islam that mainly provided these kinds of explanations and equipped the religion with its legitimacy. Morality, values and rules were deduced from this legitimacy.

⁶⁷ This defect and flawed mastery of modern ideologies proves to be of enormous impact on Iranian society, as I'll discuss in the next chapter.

⁶⁸ Above all, there are three important differences between the Iranian and Islamic narratives and their positions vis-à-vis modernization. First, the King's place is not as central to the narrative of an Iranian identity in comparison to the position of Allah in Islam. Second, placing humanity on top of everything is consumed more easily by the Iranian narrative than the Islamic one, for the transfer of sovereignty from man to men is not as dramatic as its transfer from God to mankind. The king-subject relation, when stripped off all layers, involves a relation between man and men, while the God-mankind relation is inherently imbalanced: it is between the creator and its creation. Thirdly, the *idealist* Iranian narrative is less strict and less central in its narration than is the Koran which forms the very core of Islamic *ideology*.

⁶⁹ In the Persian language a difference is made between high and low cultures as societies are essentially put in a comparative perspective. The term "high culture" is often abbreviated as "culture", like in this instance.

⁷⁰ This is my own free and 'rhymeless' translation of Ferdowsi's four most infamous rhyming verses which *all* present respondents knew by heart.

⁷¹ This claim can't be defended in a side note but I find it necessary to point out a few things, because it touches on the very cultural and identity confusion that I'm trying to demonstrate. It is intriguing how people of various levels of expertise, including linguists, think of him to have been a Muslim, but a more constructive study of his book points to the very contrary case: he set out to battle the Arabic colonization of his country, he exclusively made use of the pre-Islamic identity in this battle, hardly used Arabic words and in all 60 thousand verses he mentioned Ali just once in circumstances that one can imagine to be obligatory, and he employed 'non-Abrahamic' concepts, especially Zarathustra, when touching on the spiritual world or when pointing to traditions, all pre-Islamic, which he finds that should be maintained. His history of Iran ends with the Arab Muslim conquest of the nation, glorifies the defeated Iranian army for trying to stop the invasion of Muslim Arabs and despises the idea how future generation will have Arabic names.

⁷² The Islamic Republic's continuous hostility towards the pre-Islamic past and its totalitarian rule based on its Islamic theocracy naturally evokes such responses.

⁷³ As I've argued in sub-chapter 1.4 on the narrative of democracy, the opposition inside Iran that works within the framework of the Islamic Republic is only a false pretence as the system is non-reformative by nature.

⁷⁴ See this sub-chapter and the sub-chapters 2.2, 2.3 and 2.4.

⁷⁵ Expressions of religious protest in reality express one thing: it still hasn't become clear that what is withholding their liberal demands from being realized isn't only corruption or sheer military dictatorship, but rather a theocracy. The Islamic Republic does more than solely exclude the people from the exercise of power. It uses that power to impose religiosity on the society.

⁷⁶ See sub-chapter 1.4.4

⁷⁷ Such as sidelining the constitution, authorizing political prisoners and executions, violating the freedom of speech and his *coup d'état* against Mossadeq, to name a few examples.

⁷⁸ See sub-chapter 1.5.

⁷⁹ In exaggerating the individual's independence, some constructivist theorists seem to have forgotten that we are born with our ability to reason, not with reason itself. That is acquired, as Taylor will explain later, through our social interactions with the webs we 'are thrown in'. While it is true that we choose our own position, this positioning is nonetheless enabled with, and restricted to, the tools of reasoning that we have picked up upon that moment. For example, the position that an Iranian (individual X) takes in relation to communism before he has read the works of Marx and Lenin and the history of communism altogether will vary from his position when he has done so. Therefore, while he does have the ability to change his position, his thinking is in the same time limited and expanded by the amount of information he possesses. Reflecting this back on acculturation, it means that individual X's standing, no matter how unique, towards cultural aspect Y is heavily influenced by the situational factors he has experienced and the social interactions he has had upon that moment.

⁸⁰ Also, when alternative competing narratives aren't at disposal, it doesn't take much for one to merge into the existent social dispositions, since other concepts of reasoning aren't available for questioning the very narrative at hand. It is only the distinctly creative mind that can invent a new narrative on his own, either with the help of previous narratives or not. For the less creative individuals, the vast majority that is, it takes not only the presence of an alternative narrative to question, or distance oneself from, the narrative in hand, but also curiosity, courage and sincerity; virtues that usually are picked up or not during childhood. If not, the alternative narrative will never be considered seriously enough for it to make a chance to replace the one in operation. Even more importantly, the internalization of such dispositions takes place during the upbringing and when persons close to the individual act and think in a similar way, it not only becomes natural for that individual to think like in that direction as well, but it creates an obstacle to distance oneself from the habit, since it would automatically mean distancing oneself in one way or another from those persons as well. It would mean alienating oneself from family and/or society. This is not to contradict my statement [three paragraphs above] that the autonomy of the individual shouldn't be forgotten, but only to highlight how much pressure the individual undergoes when he is thrown into a web of narratives of which the threads' glue consists of habit. To tear loose from them is a multi-dimensional process of distancing from the environment and from oneself.

⁸¹ She refers to Mohammed's miraculous hiding from enemies.

⁸² Of course, the evolution of the self is everything but an easy and fluid process. As Bourdieu showed us, the 'situationality' of when one is 'thrown' into the web of narratives is of decisive influence. The dialogue in which the self enters with others in his direct environment together with the habits that come to existence through the behavioural codes and traditions that are anchored in the narrative, along with the analytical tools provided by it, besides other psychological factors, all go hand in hand to strengthen the gravity of the narrative's force field: the threads of the web become real sticky. If one wants to distance himself from a certain narrative it requires a hard and bitter struggle with his self as well as the availability of a competing narrative.

⁸³ With a different composition I mean a variety of narratives that are in that mix and a different balance and interaction between them in comparison to other compositions

⁸⁴ However, larger and more continuous trends of narratives evolving from previous ones can be traced over large periods of times, even over centuries.