Toward a theory of Iranian urban moieties: the Haydariyyah and Ni'matiyyah revisited

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Toward a Theory of Iranian Urban Moieties: The Haydariyyah and Niʿmatiyyah Revisited

1. Four Centuries of Brawls

The Haydariyyah and Niʿmatiyyah were widespread, mutually hostile urban factions of Safavid and post-Safavid Iran, sparsely documented and virtually unstudied. From at least the middle of the tenth/sixteenth century up until recent decades, a number of cities and towns of Iran were perceived as being divided into two groupings of adjacent wards (mahallah), one grouping known as the Haydari-khānah and the other as the Niʿmati-khānah, the respective (male) inhabitants of which would profess mutual contempt and antagonism, and would periodically clash in massive public fights. The origin of the terms and the cause of the antagonism were not generally known to the participants; the topography and composition of the Haydari-khānah and the Niʿmati-khānah (which in some places extended into the adjacent countryside) was apparently irrelevant; and membership in either of these factions corresponded to no other social, political, or sectarian affiliation.

The Niʿmatis (Niʿmatiyyah, Niʿmatullahiyyah) began as a cult that grew up around the well-known poet and mystic of Kerman, Sayyid or “Shah” Niʿmatullah Vali (d. 1430 or 1431). The Haydaris ([Mir] Haydariyyah) likewise are probably named for the followers of a less celebrated Sufi dervish, Sultan or “Mir” Qutb al-Din Haydar Tuni of Tabriz (d. ca. 1426). Shah Niʿmatullah himself was a Sunni, but his successors came to profess Shiʿism early in the Safavid period as a result of marriage alliances with that dynasty. Mir Haydar was an Imami Shiʿi. Though their respective mystical schools arose at opposite ends of...
Iran some two generations before the rise of the Safavids, it appears that the disciples of both shaykhs soon gained a following among the citizenry of Tabriz, the Safavids’ first capital. Their antagonism probably originated in a Sunni-Shii sectarian dispute. Then, with the conversion of Tabriz and other cities to Shi’ism under Safavid rule, the apparent demise of the Haydariyyah order even before the rise of the Safavids, and the withdrawal of the Ni’matullahiyyah to India during the reign of Shah ‘Abbas, the urban factions spawned by this doctrinal or cultic clash were left stranded. Mirabile dictu, they survived and even expanded, without motivation other than their eponymous labels.2 (The Ni’matullahiyyah dervish order was reintroduced into Iran late in the eighteenth century—by which time the Ni’mati urban moiety was an unrelated phenomenon.)

In 1571, during the reign of Tahmasb, the Venetian diplomat Vincenzo d’Alessandri reported that the nine wards of Tabriz (the Safavid capital up until 1555) were divided between the Ni’mati and Haydari factions, five belonging to one and four to the other, and had been in a state of enmity for more than thirty years.3 Sir John Chardin, a century later, confirms the situation in Tabriz and likewise asserts that the factions divided “all of Persia... The city of Isfahan is divided into two quarters, one called Jubarah-yi Ni’matullahi, facing east, and the other called Dar-i dasht-i Haydariyyah, facing west... These two quarters... are really two factions, which comprise the suburbs and the territory of the city.”4 The wrestlers and young toughs of each side regularly hurled challenges at each other, and on public holidays one party would attack the other to secure precedence. Sometimes there ensued pitched battles on the maydán, with hundreds fighting on either side. The participants were always of the lower classes, and although they fought only with sticks and stones there were always a few killed and many injured.5 This division survived until at least the 1950s among the villages of Julgah-yi ru-dasht, the region east of Isfahan, where the landowners used these animosities to provoke fights in order to improve their access to water or otherwise extend their authority.6

Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, during the seventeenth century, adds that on festive occasions in Isfahan the two factions would bet heavily on bull- and bear-baiting, cock-fighting, and other popular sports.7 In Qazvin, which served as the Safavid capital from about 1555 until 1588, Shah ‘Abbas’s astrologer records

3. Guglielmo Berchet, La Repubblica di Venezia e la Persia (Turin, 1865), 178–79; “Narrative of the Most Noble Vincentio d’Alessandri,” trans. Charles Grey, in A Narrative of Italian Travels in Persia, Hakluyt Society Series 1, Vol. 49 (London, 1873), 224. The names of the factions (and other data) are variously garbled: “Kamitai” and “Ermi-cai” in Berchet’s Italian recension, “Nausitai” and “Himicaivartu” in Grey’s translation; hindsight would suggest something like “Namitia” and “Emir-Caidaria.” Berchet’s “trecento anni” (300 years) is “thirty years” in Grey.
5. Ibid., vol. 8, 11–13.
under the year 1003/1594 a fight between the Haydari and Ni'matullahi factions that took place “by royal decree” on the Maydan-i sa'adat, victory going to the “Mir Haydari” faction, and a second fight that was ordered at a local shrine. Other occasions on which Shah 9Abbas instigated such clashes for his personal amusement are reported by Pietro Della Valle in 1617. In other cases, observers noted bloody—and sometimes futile—attempts by the shah’s troops or local authorities to quell spontaneous Haydari-Ni'mati clashes that got out of hand: at Isfahan in 1714,10 and in Ardakan of Fars (Sapidan) as recently as 1975.11 The combatants, according to Krusinski, were distinguished by different-colored neckbands on their shirts.

Although essentially a plebeian phenomenon, the Haydari-Ni'mati fissure automatically applied to patricians who resided in one or other of the factionalized neighborhoods. When the Qajar prince Mas'ud Mirza Zill ul-Sultan, newly appointed governor of Isfahan in 1882, was apprised of the history of the moieties and of the fact that “in accordance with the division of the city, Your Highness is a Haydari,” he was delighted and exclaimed, “Since I’m to be a Haydari, let’s give the Ni'matis hell!” Some of the elite found it advantageous to take sides with one or the other faction. Shah Sulayman, according to Kaempfer,13 was a supporter of the Haydariyyah. Some of humbler origins rose by association with one or other faction: Hajji Ibrahim, before becoming kalantar (mayor) of Shiraz, and ultimately Agha Muhammad Shah Qajar’s chief minister, was alderman of the Haydari wards (kadkhudā-yi Haydari-khānah—a post inherited from his father) during the 1780s.14 The feud could also be used for more serious partisan or political purposes. In Dezful during the second half of the nineteenth century there were Haydari-Ni'mati riots between lutīs (tough punks) of opposing camps, instigated by rival regional powers outside the city itself—Shaykh Khaz'al, who supported the Ni'matis, and the Bakhtiyari khans, who favored the Haydaris.15 At Ardabil during the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, two rival regional revolutionary councils (anjuman) were set up because the leader appointed by the provincial revolutionary council in Tabriz belonged to the Ni'mati faction; the two sides finally brought in tribal allies from outside the city, erected barricades and shot at each other.16 Kasravi, averring that the

11. Mirjafari, 155.
eponymous Haydar and Ni̇mat have been long forgotten, uses this and other anecdotes, in addition to his personal experience of these moieties' exclusivity in Shushtar during 1923, to deplore the traditional prejudices of his backward countrymen.

2. Rules of Engagement

Noted by many observers of the Haydari-Ni̇mati conflicts is their regular, even cyclical, occurrence and other ritual, ceremonial, and ludic features. In Shiraz during the early nineteenth century, where five of the eleven wards were Haydari and five Ni̇mati (the Jewish and Armenian quarters were outside the scheme: see map, fig. 1), pitched battles would be held three or four times a year.¹⁷ According to an attaché of the British legation:¹⁸

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Once a week, on Friday, the inhabitants of the two divisions of the population called Hyderi and Neametali, repair to the open ground beyond the city walls, and engage in a skirmish with slings and stones; an exercise which is not infrequently followed by a close fight with swords and daggers.
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Violence was expected during the major religious holidays that involved processions and gatherings. In the elaborate ceremonials attending the annual Feast of Sacrifice ("id-i qurban") at Isfahan as observed during the middle of the last century (reputedly a tradition since Safavid times), the two factions played a conspicuous role. The six “ sharers in the camel” (mūcha-dār) belonged three to the Haydari and three to the Ni̇mati party. During the parade, each one was preceded by his entourage from the city and the outlying villages, numbering more than a thousand. The factions processed separately from their own quarters and all assembled in the main square, whence they would parade past the governor and across the river to the slaughtering ground. Despite extra guards and troops, there would always be clashes when the rival groups met at intersections and during the dividing of the sacrificial meat; thirty to forty men were injured and three or four killed every year.¹⁹

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On the principal Shi̇ci holiday, the tenth of Muharram (‘āshūrā), the emotions generated by the mourning rituals and the rivalry between wards in staging processions and plays have repeatedly been observed to ignite bloody Haydari-Ni̇mati clashes—particularly since many of the lātīs, apprentices and other young men of the rival mahallahs were members of the bands of flagellants or actors.²⁰ Despite intermittent bloodshed, the Haydari-Ni̇mati conflict character
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¹⁷. Hajji Mirza Hasan Husayni Fasa’i, Fārsnāmah-yi Nāṣiri II (Shiraz, 1313 Q./1895), 22.
Fig. 1 Haydari and Ni'mati Quarters in 18th-Century Shiraz
(adapted from K. Afsar, Tūrīkh-i bāb-i qud imā-yi Shīrāz (Tehran, 1353/1974))
istically did not exceed certain norms. Fasa’i notes explicitly that casualties on either side during their periodic battles in Shiraz were not subject to retaliation. This is confirmed by the Jesuit Krusinski, a twenty-year resident of Isfahan, who adds that during the Muharram clashes each casualty was considered a martyr.21 Descriptions of clashes in modern times reveal a generally low level of personal violence, actual bodily harm being replaced by ritual insult, hazing, or a symbolic “counting coup”: Malcolm observes of clashes during Muharram, “[i]f they force their opponents from their houses they do not enter or plunder them, but make a mark on each door with a hatchet, as a token of victory.”22

Encounters within the rival mahallahs (as distinct from set-piece battles or riots on holidays) emphasized territoriality. On the ninth of Muharram, a number of men from each of the rival neighborhoods at Ardakan of Yazd would “make the rounds” (parsa-zani) with a donkey and a saddlebag, clashing a pair of cymbals, to collect contributions of food and money for the next day’s mourning rituals; if the two parties met at the boundaries, a fight would likely ensue. Anyone visiting the other party’s husayniyya (cultic center) would have to demonstrate respect by kissing the kelak, a platform in the center of the courtyard.23 The moieties tended to be endogamous and mutually exclusive in ritual matters: some, at least, of the members of one moiety regarded the others as ritually impure (najis) and would not eat with them or use the bathhouse in their neighborhood. Scurrilous characterizations were circulated in order to demonize the opposition: the Ni‘mati claimed that if a Haydari boy were to be picked up while urinating and moved a few paces away, he would involuntarily return to the same spot and continue.24

Several European visitors attributed the origin of the factions to two secular rulers. Their misunderstanding of the eponyms may be due to the dervishes’ sobriquets (sultan, mir, shah); gnostics were frequently given titles of secular rulers by their followers in medieval Iran and India. Even Persian writers sometimes assert that the moieties owed their invention to a sovereign (usually identified as Shah ʻAbbas), who decreed that his cities should be arbitrarily so divided in order to diffuse the chance of a concerted popular revolt.25 Krusinski even adds that ʻAbbas tried to institute a pair of factions in the Afghan city of Qandahar when he conquered it, but the institution lapsed when Qandahar was recaptured by the Mughals.

3. Clearing the Arena

How are we to interpret this rivalry, which seems arbitrarily to cut across all other invidious affiliations, such as class, religion, ethnicity, kinship, and profession? The foregoing survey provides a vivid picture of the salient oddities of the situation as they struck foreign (and a few Iranian) outside observers through the centuries. We have no equivalent report from the point of view of a Haydari or

25. Krusinski, 91, 94–95; Fasa’i, loc. cit.
Nicmati participant, and hence lack essential information on the perceived etiology (if one survived) and internal rationale of the dichotomy. What little we know of its genesis, evolution, and dynamics may perhaps be judiciously supplemented by a wealth of analogy from other times and places.

Social moieties and other manifestations of dyadic structure are so widespread and pervasive as to be "clearly a kind of system that human beings keep inventing and living by." All these moiety systems, however, differ in important ways. The temptation to generalize broadly on the basis of a few salient characteristics, given the universality of human nature, must be resisted. The problem is thus one of elimination and selection: having described anecdotally and imperfectly what the Haydari-Nicmati split was, we should now decide what it was not, by reference to the better-documented candidates for analogues on five continents, and in respect of several conflicting theories of human nature and behavior.

We may begin by summarizing, from the above survey, what appears primarily to distinguish the Haydari-Nicmati system (at least, as demonstrated in the cities):

(1) The existence of moiety-pairs by the same names in many different localities;
(2) Non-correspondence with any established scheme of social affiliation (lineage, class, religion ...);
(3) An absence of real or ostensible motivation for hostility other than the labels;
(4) Stable territoriality;
(5) Ritual or ceremonial, rather than economic or political, occasions of conflict;
(6) Symbolic and ludic modes of conflict.

To these intrinsic features one might add two secondary, extrinsic ways in which the factionalism has evidently been used by the religious, economic, and political establishment, viz, as a safety-valve to divert the course of popular discontent, and as a spectacle to entertain the elite.

In the following two sections I will examine, first, the nature of the antagonism and its expression in the Haydari-Nicmati and arguably analogous conflicts, and, second, the etiology and structure of this type of moiety system. The first will provide some clues to the second, and bring to bear a psychological perspective on a phenomenon recent analysis of which has been overwhelmingly anthropological. Certainly there are moiety systems (such as a democratic two-party government) that do not normally require periodic eruptions of violence, and there are situations requiring violent conflict between two groups which cannot be described as moieties (such as war and rebellion). But in the case of the Haydaris and Nicmatis, and some other pairs, the two conditions are necessarily intertwined.

It is also true that human societies, and their theorists, have been attracted to triadic and unitary interpretations of their cosmos and community, as well as dyadic or binary systems. This may be illustrated in the case of Iran by the supposed reflex of a Dumézilian tripartite structure in the three basic social classes (priests, warriors, and cultivators), or in the Islamic emphasis on *tawhīd*, the indivisible oneness of God (and, by extension, his chosen community). Iranian culture, however, is celebrated for its promotion of dualistic theories (Mani and Zarathustra come immediately to mind) in which the cosmic moieties—light and darkness, spirit and matter, good and evil—and their respective partisans among humankind are locked in conflict throughout the regular span of existence. It is only natural, too, that in the human body itself, not only the hierarchical progression from head to foot, but also the organic lateral division extending from head (and brain) to feet, should be a microcosmic model for human society.

4. Psychology and Sociology of Bipolar Violence

We may discount three or four categories of conflict from the outset. Since casualties on either side were not subject to retaliation, the periodic conflicts did not involve a blood feud or vendetta, the mechanism of which depends on cyclical vengeance for insults of both the near and the remoter past. Each clash between Haydaris and Nīcīmatīs appears to have been viewed as a discrete synchronic event, without appeal to atavistic insult or an "eye for an eye." Since most (on some occasions, all) participants were Imāmi Shīʿīs, there is no question of religious sectarian antipathy. And since Mir Haydar and Shah Nīcīmatullah were long deceased, and the Sufi orders that they founded were no longer active in Iran during most of the period of so-called Haydari-Nīcīmatī antagonism (nor, apparently, were their doctrines appealed to by faction members), the factions cannot be regarded as supporters of a religious cult or political party. For similar reasons, they are not structurally analogous to the fans of an ancient or modern sports team, however similar in behavior. Ethnicity was most likely not a factor; in the early Safavid period the populace of most cities in Iran consisted overwhelmingly of Persians (with admixtures of other Iranian peoples, especially in the Zagros regions); cities such as Tabriz and Ardabil, especially in the later period, would have had a significant plurality or majority of Turks, but there is no evidence that the arbitrary territoriality of the Haydari-khanah and Nīcīmatī-khanah corresponded at all to this ethnolinguistic division. Finally, since each moiety embraced in theory all members of every social stratum, the conflicts (though highly disruptive and often provoking police intervention) did not constitute a class conflict or a rebellion against authority in the usual sense.

Having eliminated the usual suspects, let us examine more exotic possibilities. Among the closest analogues of the Haydari-Nīcīmatī moieties in their role as ritual rioters are the Roman and Byzantine circus factions (the Blues and Greens) and modern British and European soccer hooligans. (The Iranian factions even wore distinctive colors, though the observer neglects to specify which ones.) Ostensibly supporters of two rival teams of charioteers or football clubs,

the former groups were essentially bands of plebeian adolescents (with a stiffening of older men and, at least in the case of the Roman factions, some noble and even imperial patrons) who regularly translated the highly regulated and somewhat sanitized competition of the sports arena into the bloody, occasionally deadly, chaos of street riots. Membership in these moieties was not universal and obligatory; territoriality was of secondary importance, if any—as was sectarian affiliation (though these two factors might correspond and reinforce mutual hostility, in the case of football clubs identified respectively with Catholic and Protestant populations, as in Glasgow). The clashes between the Roman (subsequently, Byzantine) circus factions known as Blues and Greens, despite the lively doctrinal and sectarian differences of the time, were innocent of religious motives or alignments. The conversion of the empire to Christianity simply intensified the existing religious symbolism and ceremonial for both parties.29 In Iranian urban riots, as on the terraces of rival British football clubs, religious slogans and symbols from the same source may be used indiscriminately by either side to exhort their comrades.30 The righteous enthusiasm of ritual combat may be equated with, even replace, conventional religious fervor. “We look forward to Saturdays . . . all week long,” one of Buford’s soccer hooligans confesses—speaking for the rival supporters as much as his own crowd. “It’s the most meaningful thing in our lives. It’s a religion, really . . . Saturday is our day of worship.”31

Why moieties? Granted it takes only two to quarrel, but the typical Iranian city consisted of up to a dozen residential wards (mahallah), any two of which might have vented their rivalry on a rotating basis. There is, however, a tendency for multiple factions to collapse into the basic binary opposition. The Roman circus factions were originally four in number, but soon polarized: the Whites and Reds disappeared, leaving the augmented Greens and Blues to fight on.32

A glance at the formative days of association football (soccer) in England suggests a pertinent analogy with the Haydari-Ni’mati situation. From late medieval times, matches were traditionally played at Christmas, Easter, and especially Shrovetide, the pre-Lenten carnival holiday. The pitch was the village streets and adjacent lands, and teams were the men of whole parishes or villages, frequently called “Uppies” and “Downies,” “Up-streeters” and “Down-streeters,” “Up’ards” and “Down’ards,” in accordance with territorial topography. Rules were few and erratically enforced, and the match was often, in the words of a Puritan of 1583, a “bloody and murthering practice,” with broken bones and bloodshed. Sometimes two or three rival parishes would agree to play two or three others; two gentlemen’s houses several miles apart would be the goals, and the gentry would act as patrons, though not participants. The resulting

32. Cameron, 60–61.
mêlée "resembled a struggle for territory between rival groups."\textsuperscript{33} Except for the absence of cudgels and the presence—somewhere—of a ball, it must also have resembled a Haydari-Ni\'mati affair on the royal square at Isfahan (which otherwise served the nobles for a polo field), with the multi-parish (multi-mahallah) teams arbitrarily polarizing their surplus energy and multiple frustrations in a mass duel, for the incidental entertainment of the ruling elite. Given a cluster of mutually antagonistic communities (or potentially so), and particularly where government vigilance blocks an effective vertical polarization, it appears to be more satisfying to combine them (artificially, even arbitrarily) into two alliances and polarize the various antagonisms, the better to let off steam all at once.

The common factor in all of these bodies is, of course, the bonding of young males in common warlike activities. The Männerbund is the substance of each hostile moiety, everything else—the ostensible totems and targets, the pagentry and piety—are adventitious, and to varying degrees borrowed from or shared with adjacent sociocultural structures. Thus mobs of soccer fans include gangs of youths operating as a unit;\textsuperscript{34} Rome and Byzantium had their gangs of hard-core hooligans among the majority of conservative sports fans, and their voluntary young men's athletic associations (iuvenses) which, while not identical with the sports factions, provided their essential manpower. Particular circus factions modeled themselves on guilds (populii, a synonym for demos as a faction, referred also to the membership of a guild).\textsuperscript{35} All this is highly evocative of the situation in the Iranian city and its bazaar from Safavid to Qajar times. The nucleus of the Haydari-Ni\'mati warriors undoubtedly came from a similar Männerbund fraternity, the same young workers and apprentices who frequented the zurkhanah (the traditional gymnasium) as either athletes or fans, and who staffed the husayniyyah and formed the core of each city ward's dastah for religious processions. The prevalence of lūtis and craft apprentices among both Haydari and Ni\'mati factions makes it likely that they would import elements of their existing gang solidarity and perhaps corporate structure from the guilds ( asnāf) into their moiety and its confrontations.

Though athletic clubs were not apparently a feature of medieval Italian cities, it is pertinent that the population of Florence in 1427 was heavily weighted in favor of the young, with an average age of twenty-six; that late marriage of males tended to produce a distinct generation gap and a pool of discontented bachelors; and that these young men (anywhere from puberty to the early thirties), whom popular wisdom expected to be ruled by their passions, were noted as the prime movers in factional strife.\textsuperscript{36} We do not have the same wealth of statistics for Safavid Tabriz or Isfahan, but problems such as unemployment, completing one's apprenticeship, saving up for marriage and bowing to parental de-


\textsuperscript{34} Buford, 117.

\textsuperscript{35} Cameron, 40, 42, 75-77.

mands must have contributed (as they still do in much of the Middle East) to the pool of frustrated youths.

The popular perception that young men must run wild one way or another is probably a universal one. Two other popular theories of factional violence are encountered in our sources, often in the words of participants or observers. One of these is the conviction that the authorities were tolerating or deliberately fomenting such discord to their own advantage—which in the case of the Haydaris and Ni'matis was magnified into the legend that the system had been instituted by a king as insurance against insurrection. Chardin states (without elaboration) that when the shah was absent from Isfahan, the mayor (kalāntar) made no real effort to prevent Haydari-Ni'mati affrays because of the profit that his office derived from them.37 Cameron compares Roman acceptance of the circus factions to modern soccer violence in Latin America, where “military juntas know that soccer hooligans are the least of their worries, and tolerate them as a harmless distraction.”38 An English soccer hooligan voices a similar conviction:39

The government had the power to stop the violence if it wanted to, Phil believed, but it hadn't because it was in its interest to turn working people against each other. It deflected working people from having to address the real problems of their lives.

There is also a compelling popular explanation for these regular outbreaks of what appears to be senseless violence: that they are indeed arbitrary, but inevitable, because such is human nature—hooliganism arises spontaneously from a pool of potential violence that demands to be tapped. An Italian merchant of the 1360s “has seen more things done by Guelphs among themselves than against Ghibellines, and vice versa. And if these two parties were not there, two worse ones would come into being.”40 An English soccer hooligan of the 1980s tells a journalist:41

...the violence. We've all got it in us. It just needs a cause. It needs an acceptable way of coming out. And it doesn't matter what it is. But something. It's almost an excuse. But it's got to come out. Everybody's got it in them.

As we know intuitively, and from a century of studies of the crowd in action, the immersion of the individual in one faction of the mass can sanctify, and even create, a cause, which in turn constitutes a higher authority capable of absolving the individual of responsibility and guilt, of suspending inhibitions and sanctioning conduct normally considered criminal and inhumane. Frustra-

38. Circus Factions, 294.
tion leads, via a directed displacement, to catharsis. The first recorded incident of a modern football crowd riot, at Glasgow in April 1909, perhaps helps to explain why the vicarious conflict of sports and games, and even more the non-agonistic tension of civic or religious spectacles, is not enough of a catharsis for the crowd. The reason for the eruption, argues Buford, was that "for the second Saturday in succession, the match between [the two home teams] Rangers and Celtic had... ended in a draw. The crowd could not endure another match ending without victory or defeat—without release." The respective supporters were already polarized not only between their teams but between Protestants and Catholics, and needed little excuse to turn the unresolved ritual contest into a real one. The walkers in the ‘āshīrā procession or spectators at a shabīh-khwānī (the dramatic representation of the tragedy of Karbala), weeping and beating themselves in an excess of mourning for the martyrs of a thousand years ago, are similarly frustrated. To release the tension fully, they must ideally vent their grief and rage at a target, beat others than themselves. The arbitrary division of the whole community into Haydari and Niʿmati factions provides the pretext to convert unconsummated agony into cathartic antagonism.

The wonder is, however, that once routinized this antagonism was marked by the relative restraint characteristic of the chivalry and sportsmanship of Männerbund warfare, even at its bloodiest. Haydari and Niʿmati mobs apparently did not seek to expand their territory, sack one another’s quarters, houses, or cultic centers, endanger one another’s women and children, or even mount sneak attacks. The whole ethos was that of a regular bid for temporary glory within quite strict rules of engagement—in short, a sport.

5. Cultural-Historical and Functionalist Views

Some European visitors to Safavid Iran were struck by the similarity of the Haydari-Niʿmati brawls to those involving the urban factions of medieval and contemporary Italy, such as the Guelphs and Ghibellines of Florence and the Castellani and Nicolotti of Venice. There, too, the dichotomy was arbitrary and the continuation of the conflict divorced from any ostensible origin, even where this was remembered. No contemporary linked the origins of Guelph-Ghibelline factionalism with the past rivalry of Philip of Swabia, a Welf, and Otto of Brunswick, a Waiblingen, after it had spread from Florence to the rest of Tuscany and then to Lombardy. The annual ritual fistfights between the Venetian moieties called Castellani and Nicolotti from the fifteenth to the eighteenth

42. Buford, 172.
44. Hyde, 293.
century have been recounted in detail. Apart from the nature of the arena, which in Venice comprised bridges and canal banks rather than maydans, the institution does bear an uncanny resemblance to the Haydari-Ni'mati antagonism. The factional split had lost all certain knowledge of its origins, though it remained territorially delineated (centering on adjacent confederations of parishes); it involved all classes of the populace (though the working men made up the bulk of the combatants); bull- and bear-baiting and other games and gambling were featured on the public squares adjacent to the arenas; and the spectacle was staged by the authorities as a treat for visiting dignitaries, including at least one Turkish embassy. The police, who belonged to one or other of the factions by birth, were hardly neutral; and the official reasons given for allowing this citywide brawl to continue were that it gave the plebs a chance to let off steam and to develop martial skills, and impressed foreign ambassadors.

Intriguingly, Venice and Iran have a long history of cordial diplomatic relations, beginning even before the Safavid era. Six or seven embassies were sent from Safavid Iran to Venice, notably in 1600 and 1603, under Shah 'Abbas; but there seems to be no record of whether the Iranian envoys watched a Castellani-Nicolotti affray. Most of these dignitaries were in any case Armenians, whose communities in Iran did not participate in the Haydari-Ni'mati factionalism. In 1667, the men of one Venetian parish dressed up "in Persian costumes" when carrying an elaborate victory crown to the mainland, though it is certain they had no inkling of their close counterparts in Isfahan or Shiraz.

Unlike the Castellani-Nicolotti moieties, but like some of the Tuscan factions, the Haydari-Ni'mati system was established under the same name in various urban localities. The following cities and towns in Iran are named as being divided between Haydari-Ni'mati moieties (or factions plausibly identical with them) at some time: Ardabil, Tabriz, Qazvin, Rasht, Isfahan, Ardakan (later renamed Sapidan, in Fars), Shiraz, Dezful, Shushtar, Behbehian, Ardakan (Yazd), Birjand. Most of these were prominent Safavid centers; Tehran, which did not attain prominence until the early nineteenth century, is absent, as are cities in the east (Mashhad, Kerman—Birjand is a notable exception). Though the dichotomy arose in the pre-Safavid period, it seems to have become identified with, and to have been spread by, the Safavid ethos. Contributing factors were perhaps an enthusiastic (at times, fanatical) Shi'i fervor imposed rapidly on a variegated population; selective urban expansion and consolidation through commerce; increased mobilization of apprentices and other urban youths for public pageantry; and encouragement of factionalism by the authorities as a safety valve.

A general analysis is fundamentally a problem for the anthropologist. And indeed, the earlier descriptive and functionalist literature sees moieties all over the Middle East at every level of society. Raphael Patai invokes the Arabian

45. Robert Davis, The War of the Fists: Popular Culture and Public Violence in Late Renaissance Venice (Oxford, 1994). I am indebted to Nabil al-Tikriti for bringing this work to my attention, and to the author for further valuable discussion.


47. Davis, 124.

split between Qays and Yaman (a.k.a. 'Adnan and Qahtan), which for some generations spread in a politicized manner over much of the early Islamic empire, and several examples of antagonistic urban moieties (notably in Egypt) whose characteristic behavior would match five out of our six distinguishing points. Pastoral nomads in Iran frequently evince true dual organization (i.e. superordinate to tribal affiliation): such are the Chahar Lang and Haft Lang of the Bakhtiyari, the Lurs of Pish-i Kuh and Push-t-i Kuh, the Liravi-yi Kuh and Liravi-yi Dasht. Settled rural societies, too, such as the population of Chal (official name, Shal) near Qazvin, “like most of the villages of Iran,” are divided into hostile moieties—designated, like early English village football teams, “up” (bālā) and “down” (pā‘īn). In past centuries the inhabitants of Behbehān were divided between Qanavātīān (dwellers among, or diggers of, irrigation tunnels) and Shahr-nishīnān (townspeople).

Most of these groups, however, show an explicit and plausible genealogical, geographical, or ecological affiliation in name and/or territory. The traditional Develu-Qavanlu dichotomy of the Qajars (adduced by Patai as a moiety system) was interpreted by the Qajars and others as a tribal subdivision and organized by lineage, quite unlike the kind of moiety under discussion here. This is not to say that an original moiety system may not have been restructured and reinterpreted in course of time; but in synchronic terms, to classify arbitrarily all examples of apparent dual organization, whatever their ostensible contrastive criteria, as moieties strictu sensu is to ignore some important distinctions.

A description of an apparently more fluid moiety system among the Swat Pathans is also notable for the first attempt to apply Game Theory to the explanation of factional strife of this kind. Barth’s two blocs of village wards bear the familiar “upper” and “lower” labels, but are (or are described as) political parties having emerged through the rational self-interest of the constituent individuals and wards, which would otherwise be comparatively powerless in competition for land and water rights. According to the Game Theory models used, a community divided into five or more interest groups is more likely to devolve into a two-party, rather than a multi-party, system (confirming our intuitions stemming from a consideration of early football).

Barth’s analysis suggests some intriguing possibilities for our problem. On the one hand, Haydari-Nīmati interaction as observed in the cities is characterized by ritual, ludic, and ceremonial acts that do not appear to result in permanent economic or political advantage for either faction. On the other, clashes in rural Qazvin between “upper” and “lower” moieties and in the rural periphery of Isfahan between modern Haydari and Nīmati factions have involved disputes over land and water rights. We might postulate that the same moieties may con-

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stitute both a symbolic, structural artifact (in a comparatively hierarchical society, such as the Iranian city) and a pair of politico-economic pressure groups (in an acephalous community, such as a conglomeration of villages). But which came first, the structuralist's symbolic system or the functionalist's mini-Mafias?

6. Structuralist Perspectives

Lévi-Strauss's revolutionary structuralism of the 1950s offered an analytical alternative to the functionalist scattershot approach to moieties. However, his emphasis of deep structure and highlighting of the symbolic sphere rather than institutional needs and problems appears potentially less sympathetic to a sophisticated urban structure such as that of Renaissance Italy or Safavid Iran. One quite recent structuralist collection includes no Iranian or Islamic societies among its fourteen papers, and very few references to hostilities between moieties: one exception, the moieties of the Moluccas, regard themselves as eternal enemies, relating to each other only via war. A remarkably close analogy to the Haydari-Ni'mati split is the contemporaneous Inca system, whereby (according to Spanish reports from 1532 onward) the population of every town and province, including the capital Cuzco, was divided into the familiar "upper" (hanan) and "lower" (fiurin) halves. The moieties were endogamous, and territorially localized, at least within the city. The origin of the division was attributed to marriage alliances and settlement patterns established under a legendary ruler; each party had its assigned rituals in relation to the calendar, though apparently these did not include hostilities.

Building on such studies and on recent fieldwork in the Andes and the Amazon basin, Chicago anthropologist Terence Turner has produced an analysis of social moieties that looks more promising than any previous approach as a tool for understanding the genesis and persistence of the Haydariyyah and Ni'matiyah. I paraphrase and expand his explanation as follows.

Moieties divide a homogeneous field of social structures (e.g. all men; all members of the bachelors' age set) into two opposing but structurally symmetrical pairs. Moiety structures constitute devices for institutionalizing a relation of domination or asymmetrical distribution of social value, so that it applies uniformly over the social field, and simultaneously stabilizing that relationship by turning its internal centrifugal dynamic (oppression by the dominant party of the relationship, and resistance by the subordinate party) against itself in a way that transforms it into a centripetal dynamic which encompasses and neutralizes dis-

ruptive pressures. The social field may be the whole society (all the male population of major cities in Iran) or just a sub-section of it (all males of the village of Chal; all football fans in Glasgow). The centrifugal dynamic of oppression and resistance is to be seen in the politics of the constituent institutions of the society, such as the court (shah and courtiers), the administration (military officer and mīrzā, Turk and Tajik, etc.) the bazaar and its component guilds (master craftsmen, apprentices, and journeymen), the extended family (father and his brothers, their sons).

In figure 2A, starting with the oppositional relationship in (1), we proceed to b’s establishment of a dominant relation over a (2). In this situation, dominant b may tend to exploit its dominant position to intensify its advantage over subordinate a, thus intensifying a’s tendency to revolt or otherwise disrupt the relationship. If, however, the relationship is replicated through the institutionalization of an identical relationship between c and d, such that a:b::c:d, and these two relationships are collectively opposed to each other in a symmetrical way, as in (3), then the internal asymmetrical tension within each relationship tends to become neutralized, to the extent that it is contained, through symmetrical opposition to the other. Note that the dominant groups (b and d) of the two relationships are still in the roles, vis-à-vis each other, of representatives and leaders of their respective groupings as wholes; they are thus in a position to legitimate their dominance over their respective subordinate groups, and the allegiance of the subordinates to their leadership, as being necessary to the collective opposition to the opposite grouping. To put this in psychological terms, in a single community or institution in no immediate state of opposition to an adjacent community or institution, the junior members (secretaries, apprentices, sons) might question their need to be “represented” by their traditional seniors; once the group is split down the middle into rival moieties, and thus placed artificially on a war footing, the “need” for representation or leadership is automatically demonstrated, and the latent cleavages in the hierarchical strata close.

From the perspective of both dominants and subordinates, the resulting structure may come to serve as a means of channeling and abreacting the internal tensions of the hierarchical relation between them into their mutual opposition to the opposing moiety. In other words, vertically directed class animosities are redirected through ninety degrees into horizontal animus toward the opposing moiety (cf. figure 2B). This channeling and abreacting of the tensions arising from a relation of domination can also occur when the opposed groups embody only one part (e.g., the subordinate part) of the relation in question. This is the situation of modern (and ancient) sports “hooliganism,” in which the opposing teams of the sporting match symbolically represent whole neighborhoods, cities, regions, or countries. The fans of each side, drawn primarily from the subordinate strata of those social totalities, project themselves into the opposition to the other side as a way of vicariously identifying themselves with the whole social group from which they come, including its top strata. (Conversely, where the opposed groups embody the dominant strata, they form respectively a governing party and its shadow administration, competing for ruling power while claiming...
Fig. 2 Haydari-Ne’mati moieties: speculative genesis

A (Turner)

(1) \[ \text{-----} \Rightarrow \Leftarrow \text{-----} \]
\[ a \quad b \]

(2) \[ \text{-----} \Rightarrow \ll \text{-----} \]
\[ \text{sub.} \quad \text{dom.} \]
\[ a \quad b \]

(3) \[ \text{-----} \Rightarrow \ll \text{-----} \Rightarrow \text{-----} \ll \text{-----} \]
\[ \text{sub.} / \text{dom.} \quad \text{dom.} / \text{sub.} \]
\[ a : b \quad :: \quad d : c \]

B (Perry)

(1)

(2)
to represent the social totality, especially its bottom strata.) They thus externalize their internal opposition to the adjacent strata of the social group to which they belong in the form of opposition to the symmetrically opposed team and its supporters. We might think of the Haydari and Nićmatis as supporters of phantom “teams” long vanished (the eponymous dervishes and their immediate disciples)—fans who nevertheless intuited that the real motive of their opposition was more important than the ostensible totems, and carried on regardless.

In view of Turner’s reference to the “abreaction” of social tensions, let me emphasize again the cathartic effect—or at least, intent—of the Muharram rituals, so intimately linked with brawls between the Haydari and Nićmatis. The catharsis attained through attending even such a moving spectacle as the commemoration of Karbala may not bring sufficient release from the tension created in the nine-day buildup of emotion. Total release comes not from a reenactment of collective disaster but with actual collective triumph, and the personal effort to contribute to this. Add to this frustration the lack of a religious or sectarian enemy in town, and the absence of competitive sports on an organized scale beyond the individual city quarters, and what is the result? There is a demand for a legitimate outlet for aggression, which in a single stratified society might be answered by revolt against the ruling class. More pragmatically, it is met by the creation of a bipolar, citywide “sport” in which all active males of all classes can participate. Urban conflict on such a scale has the extra advantage of causing trouble for the authorities and damage, or at least anxiety, for the ruling class; though not directed overtly at them, it is still a covert expression of vertical polarization, a symbolic revolt.

My more functionalist “social pyramid” diagram (figure 2B), which attempts a simplified version (literally, a “turning”) of Turner’s transformation while focusing on the traditional hierarchical class relationship as the starting point (1), posits a ninety-degree shift from ruler-ruled opposition to egalitarian moiety-opposition as the goal of moiety formation of the Haydari-Nićmati type. The resulting symmetrical semicircles (2) still exclude the very topmost strata (the shah and the military elite) and the “lowest”—the Armenian and Jewish communities (cf. fig. 1). Individual Christians and Jews might, of course, enjoy relatively high status as merchants and financiers; however, as non-Muslims, they were all ideologically outside society as conceived by the majority of Shi‘ī citizens. (In Venice, Jews did sometimes participate in the factional fights or celebrations, which underscores the religious element in the Haydari-Nićmati system and its associations.)

Unfortunately, we do not have sufficient documentation of the particular social dynamics of pre-modern Iranian cities to appreciate in detail the mechanisms of this rotation. There is the (universally alleged) recognition by the ruling classes that it is in their interest to foment and patronize such an opposition, as evidenced in anecdotes above about Shah ābāb and Zill ul-Sultan. There is, outside the Iranian case, ample illustration of the way in which a foreign war substitutes for internal factional strife (an unprecedented degree of camaraderie between upper and lower classes is manifested on the home front during the “Blitz” in 1940s England; the traditional Kayapō moieties disappear once the

56. Davis, 26.
village as a whole is involved in war with Brazilian settlers\(^{57}\)). There is, finally, the reverse process of this: a disintegration of the enforced national solidarity of warfare consequent on the sudden polarization of a class struggle at home (as in the imperial Russian army on the Austro-German front in 1917). What is lacking (as much among other dichotomous societies as in Iran) is observational data on the way in which the large and heterogeneous subordinate group negotiates this realignment, both the split in its own ranks and the alliance with the dominant group.

7. **From ra‘iyat to Imagined Community?**

These missing links are partially supplied in the cases of Venice and of the Iranian cities. The Venetian district of San Niccolò dei Mendigoli (or—Mendicanti, both meaning “beggars”), the conglomeration of working-class parishes whose fishermen and poor artisans supplied the Nicolotti manpower for the “wars of the fists,” used to elect the best fisherman as their official representative, the *doge dei Nicolotti*. He was a personage of some importance in the Venetian civic hierarchy, who would meet with (and whose election was ratified by?) the Doge of the republic in the Palazzo Ducale.\(^{58}\) Presumably the Castellani had their own parochial *doge*. So, too, the Ni‘mati and Haydari districts of Iranian cities each had their elected super-alderman (*kadkhudā*), subordinate to the city *kalāntar* but in principle elected by, and responsible to, his own moiety of the citizens. In sixteenth-century Tabriz, the aldermen of the city wards, and the more so those of them who rose to the position of *kadkhudā-yi Haydārī-Ni‘mat-i khanah*, were described as being more in control of the metropolis than the king himself, starting and steering riots (occasioned by a rise in the price of meat, in d’Alessandri’s account) against the state officials and even the royal palace;\(^{59}\) in eighteenth-century Shiraz, one of them rose to be *kalāntar* of the city and was instrumental in handing over the rulership of Iran to the Qajars.\(^{60}\)

Such figures, half elected and half appointed, were the acknowledged nodal points of interaction between citizenry and rulers. I have suggested elsewhere\(^ {61}\) that, for all the relative class mobility of pre-modern Iranian society, solid vestiges remained of the older traditional, theoretically impermeable, class division of priests, warriors, and cultivators, in the form of three complementary but potentially conflicting interest groups—the clergy and bureaucrats (*ahl-i qalam*), the ruling military elite (*ahl-i sayf*), and the peasantry and urban proletariat (*ra‘iyat*). The *vakīl al-ra‘āyā*, the appointed representative of the lowest class—responsible to the shah for protecting its members against oppression by the other two (whose functions, significantly, were exercised by the *kalantar* of

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59. d’Alessandri, loc. cit.
60. Nadir Mirza Qajar, 192.
Isfahan under the Safavid shahs)—was another one of these nodal points. Prominent mujtahids from the clerical class—linked by marriage and money to the bazaar, courted by the shah yet financially independent of, and doctrinally antipathetic, to the throne—were yet another. On these hinges, a tough and potentially violent proletariat could swing—pushed by the guild elders, the merchants and manufacturers, and the lesser ulama—for or against the ruling classes, or away from a politico-economic, vertical opposition into a symbolic, horizontal competition.

I will conclude with a bolder speculation. There is little doubt that the Safavids’ territorialization of a state cult, Imami Shi‘ism, and active promotion of vernacular urban celebrations of this, fostered a sense of broader community—an “imagined nation” in embryo. Bert Fragner has argued that this process, at least in the form of distinguishing an Iranian ethos from the general Islamic ecumene and the Arab lands, had its inception as early as the Ilkhanid period, more than two centuries before the Safavids. I would claim further that while the Ilkhanid and Safavid initiatives, whatever their extent, amounted to a “top-down” revolution, the Haydari-Ni‘mati factionalism is evidence of a vernacular reciprocation and reinforcement of the process. Having spread pari passu with the Safavids’ political and cultural colonization of the plateau, rooted in working-class piety and recreation, and expressed in identical terms in all the major urban centers, it became for a time a kind of national sporting league, a “bottom-up” conversion of the vertical imposition of patriotism into a celebration of solidarity not only through the cults of shah and Shi‘a but through voluntary horizontal competition. The turbid maelstrom where the two forces meet—elite and masses, administration and institution—vectors them (as in fig. 2B) into a new alignment of reciprocal mass antagonism which emphasizes the invigorating, voluntary contests of the new “national” community over the destructive, imposed conflicts of the old stratified society. The symbolic split into moieties, paradoxically, tends to unify society as a whole.

 Appropriately, this process is recapitulated in the argumentation of the present essay. By this I mean that the locus of explanation is to be found where the scholarly meets the vernacular, sociological theory meets popular wisdom, and structuralism meets functionalism. For despite all the elegantly presented history of Robert Davis’s monograph on the Venetian moieties, it was a casual remark in a book on foodways that brought into focus the role of the doge dei Nicolotti (and hence of the kalantar); and for all Terence Turner’s highly-structured analysis of recursive hierarchy, it was a newspaper interviewer’s paraphrase of one of his incidental observations that suggested a pertinent analogy with the Haydaris and Ni‘mati. It may well be premature, if not quixotic, to attempt to combine functionalist and structuralist perspectives in a holistic view of such a complex system. It seems obvious, nevertheless, that the Haydari-Ni‘mati phenomenon was a living dynamic at many levels, from the economic concerns of the individual peasant to the symbolism of cosmos and society that permeates Iranian culture; any attempt to recover its full meaning must take into account both surface behavior and underlying symbolic structure.