Introduction

The "Iranian Area" is geographically cohesive, though its exact boundaries are rendered fuzzy by history and ethnohistory; conceptually, the term is vaguer, yet better merited. The highlands stretching across the Iranian plateau from the Zagros and the Caucasus to the Pamirs knot (spreading into the Hindu Kush, Karakorams, and Tien Shan), together with their alluvial plains (Mesopotamia, the Punjab, and especially the Oxus basin) have provided the grazing grounds of nomadic empires, the irrigated fields of city states, and above all the roads of merchants (traversed also by armies and refugees) linking Syria, India, Tibet, and China. The popular notion of the Silk Road is virtually synonymous with the Iranian area as a cultural vector. From ancient times the central third of this network of caravan routes was colonized by Iranian peoples (Medes, Persians, Bactrians, Sogdians, and others), whose descendants still populate the region. This traffic imported at least as many ethnic groups, myths, cults, customs, and stories as it exported, creating a sociocultural patchwork as variegated as the geography. In what sense, then, is this a cultural area?

Language is, as usual, one common denominator. From at least the thirteenth century into the nineteenth, Persian, the most successful of the Iranian languages, was not only the major native and contact vernacular of the area (though in growing competition with Turkic languages) but also the elite and interregional written language of choice. It replaced Arabic in the domain of Islam for all but scriptural and liturgical purposes; it provided a language of poetry and belles-lettres, as well as a universal administrative and diplomatic language, for Iran, Afghanistan, northern and central India, Central Asia, and (to varying extents) other Turcophone areas; and its literary
INTRODUCTION

A due to the workings of this fluid specification, provided by Newroz, the "new day" for the Persian celebration of the beginning of the annual cycle on the vernal equinox (21 March). This spring festival is a natural and widely spread phenomenon, marking the turn of the agricultural year with spring plowing and sowing by the farmers, which itself is a myth and metaphor. However, it retains a remarkable link to the Persian, Armenian, Kurdish, Azerbaijani, and Assyrian traditions and cultures. The Zoroastrian fire temples and the Azarbaijanian Zoroastrian fire temples of Iran are perhaps the most important places of Zoroastrianism. This connection is derived from the Persian language and the Persian alphabet, and the Zoroastrian fire temples are the most important places of Zoroastrianism. The Zoroastrian fire temples are the most important places of Zoroastrianism.

Historically, the Persians, Armenians, Kurds, and Assyrians have shared a common ancestry, and their cultures have been influenced by these groups. The Persians, Armenians, Kurds, and Assyrians have been influenced by these groups, and their cultures have been influenced by these groups.

When the Persians conquered the Kingdom of the Sasanian Persians, the Persians became the official language of the empire. The Persians, Armenians, Kurds, and Assyrians have been influenced by these groups, and their cultures have been influenced by these groups.

In the 6th century, the Sasanian Persians were defeated by the Islamic forces led by the Prophet Muhammad. This defeat led to the spread of Islam throughout the region, and the Persians, Armenians, Kurds, and Assyrians have been influenced by these groups, and their cultures have been influenced by these groups.

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In these "hill stations" it was adapted by the Britons, who popularized it in the rest of northern India early in the twentieth century, when it spread among the horse-riding classes of the world as far as Argentina and was re-introduced into Iran.

With the Arab Muslim invasions, the ghulams and jinn of Arabia migrated to the plateau and assimilated with the demons (dā'īwāt) and spirits (fāyūn) of the Sasanian era of Arsakids. In the later part of the seventh century, the Barmakids, an early Abbasid dynasty in Iraq, began to employ the ghulams and jinn as their personal guards and protectors. The ghulams were known for their strength and loyalty, while the jinn were believed to possess magical powers. This combination of human and magical elements became the basis for the later depiction of ghulams and jinn in Persian literature and art.

In the mid-seventeenth century, the ghulams and jinn were also depicted in the works of the Persian poet Sa'adi, who wrote the Khamsa, a collection of five poetic works. Sa'adi's portrayal of ghulams and jinn was influenced by the Sasanian era of Arsakids, and his works helped to popularize the concept among the Persian-speaking world.

The ghulams and jinn were also depicted in the works of the Persian poet Hafez, who wrote the Divan, a collection of love and nature poems. Hafez's portrayal of ghulams and jinn was influenced by the Sasanian era of Arsakids, and his works helped to popularize the concept among the Persian-speaking world.

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with potentially fatal challenges to unwanted suitors, remains alive in folk-tales told in the Iranian area today (Mills, second tale).

In historical reality, the age of most direct and continuous contact between Iran and China was the century or more of the Mongol empire (ca. 1260-1380). At least one Iranian general served the Mongols as far away as Korea, and Chinese (or at least Uighur) officials attended the Il-khanid court at Tabriz. The Il-khans of Iran and the khans of the Golden Horde in Russia owed allegiance to the Great Khan at Khanbalig only up until their conversion to Islam in 1295 and 1341 respectively, but cultural and economic ties continued for some generations. Under the Timurid and other Chingizid rulers of Inner Asia until at least the sixteenth century, Turco-Perso-Islamic culture infiltrated Tibet and struck deep roots in northern India.

A striking index of the extent of the Turco-Mongol legacy is the universality of the *tug* in name and function. Formerly as a military standard, and up until today as a religious standard in Shi'i and Buddhist processions, this pole and cross-piece hung with tassels of yak's hair, horse hair, or silk can be found everywhere from Korea and Mongolia to *gompas* in Ladakh, *hosayniyas* (centers of Shi'i ritual) in Iran and India, and museums in Germany (as war booty taken from the Ottomans).

One micro-folkloric curiosity stemming probably from this period is the sudden appearance in Indo-Persian dictionaries from ca. 1600 (Farhang-e Jahangiri and Borhan-e qâse', various editions) of the *joftâk* "pair-bird." The male of this legendary species has a wing on one side of his body and a bony hook on the other; the female has a wing on the corresponding side and a bony ring on her other flank. While on the ground they forage separately, but in order to fly must literally couple up. This fantastic fowl is known in Chinese lore under various names, e.g., the *bi-yi niao*, "conjoined bird," (比翼鳥) mentioned in the Chinese classic, the *Shan Hai Jing* (see Mathieu 1983, 1078). The creature's pictorial, symbolic and moral potential is not developed further, at least in Iran; it remains, in the appropriate terminology of evolutionary biology, an isolated "hopeful monster" without issue.

More lasting Far Eastern influences on the culture of the Iranian area are evident in the foodways. This is the zone where bread and rice (and, from a later age, potatoes and noodles) are equally at home. Roasted meats (constrained by Islamic dietary laws) attest to the tastes of the steppe nomads, even linguistically: noun phrases for such dishes in Persian tend to follow left-branching Turkish syntactic rules, even where the constituents are lexically Persian. Such are *joo xeab"* "barbecued chicken" (modifier + head), vs. *zelau-(e)morg* "[boiled] chicken with rice" (head + modifier), which obeys right-branching Persian rules (Peray 1990). Pasta and stuffed dumplings (*manous*), and pilaw (rice cooked together with meat and vegeta-

bles, traditionally a *man*’s *task* are more typical of the north and Central Asia, while stews (dîk) and dishes on rice (*zelau*) characterize the south (see further details in Fragner 1987).

The political history of the past five centuries has ensured that the country of Iran (so called under the Mongol Il-khans, and definitively a state in modern terms from the establishment of the Safavid dynasty exactly five hundred years ago) is in most respects the cultural center of gravity of the Iranian area, or at least of its Persophone sector. Of the national characteristics that have evolved in recent centuries, the most visible and durable is adherence to the Imami Shi'i sect of Islam (institutionalized since 1501). A simultaneous revival of the imperial cult of the *Ishânshah*, "king of kings," came increasingly into conflict with the cult of the Shi'a, and was decisively defeated by the latter in the revolution of 1979. The religious background is hence the most salient aspect of most folklore in present-day Iran, except for basic traditional tales.

Elsewhere in the Iranian area other religious traditions hold sway: Isma'ili Islam in the Pamirs and Karakorams; Sunni Islam among the Kurds, Baluch, Turkmen, and most Afghans; and Christianity among the Armenians and "Assyrians" (i.e., neo-Aramaic-speakers). Most large cities of Iran once had important Jewish communities (Cyrus the Great is credited with having freed the Judeans from their Babylonian captivity in 539 BCE), and Bukhara was a famous Jewish center. In modern times, however, emigration has virtually wiped out these populations. The few indigenous Zoroastrian communities, preservers of much pre-Islamic lore (collected notably by Mary Boyce), are concentrated in the east of Iran, around Yazd. Most of their ancestors emigrated to India soon after the Arab invasion of Iran; as Gujarati-speaking "Parsees" they preserve their ancient faith (and publish a good deal of philology and exegesis) in and around Bombay.

The widespread syncretism in religious and spiritual life of the area is best represented by the personage known as Khezar or Khezr-Elias (*xeer-el'as*, Arab. *al-xadîr, *al-xidr* "the green [man]"). A wandering prophet without a country, a saint with hundreds of shrines, this abistorical patron of wanderers, seafarers, and young women is venerated in a variety of rituals and anecdotes within the Iranian area and its penumbra, from Anatolia and Iraq to Tajikistan and India. He is the guardian of, and guide to, the fountain of life; he appears to those lost in the desert or in the wasteland of the mind, to lead them back to health. Though patently an old fertility figure,
the god of plants and waters, known also to Christians and Jews of the
region, he has been Islamized by the Koranic commentators, who identify
him arbitrarily as Moses’ unnamed mentor in the mystical parable told in
Sura 18: 65-82 (AARNE-THOMPSON Tale Type 759, Divine Justice). Inevitably, he has also been politicized. According to an Intourist guide in
1980s Tashkent, Khezer one night found the beheaded victims of brigands
who had massacred a caravan and, taking pity on them, replaced the heads
on the bodies and sprinkled on each a few drops from the flask of the Water
of Life that he carried with him. At once they were revived. Unfortunately,
in the dark he had placed the women’s heads on the men’s bodies and vice
versa, which explains the occasional anomaly of garrulous men and taciturn
women—their descendants. When I ran this by the turbaned guardian of a
derelict mosque that was Khezer’s unofficial local shrine, he snorted that it
was nonsense, implying that the tale was a Soviet concoction to ridicule the
saint.

The collection and study of folklore in this area has a respectable though
uneven history. Native antiquarians and amateurs of vernacular culture appear as early as about 1000 CE with the polymath Abū’l-Rayhān Biruni (a
contemporary of Ferdowsi), who clinically described the religions and folk-
lore of both Iran and India from personal observation. In the Safavid period,
the versatile Hosayn Wā’ez-e Kāšefī (d. ca. 1504) furnished in his Fotovvat-
nāma-ye solṭānī an account of the folk propagandists of Shi‘ism and their
opponents, and Āqā Jamāl Xānsāri produced in Koilsīm nāne (late 1600s)
a treatise on women’s customs, beliefs, and games. These works (prime
sources for later folklorists) are the more remarkable for being products of a
classically-oriented literary intelligentsia that generally disdained vernacular
culture. The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries brought European
amateurs, mainly diplomat-scholars such as Aleksandr Chodzko (see Wilks),
Basil Nikitin, Arthur Christensen, and David Lorimer, for whom folklore
was an offshoot of linguistic, religious or historical studies. Their pioneering
work was extended by dedicated fieldwork beginning with Bess Donaldson
(The Wild Rue, on popular magic) and Henri Massé (Croyances et coutumes
personnelles), both published in 1938.

By this time Iran, under the centralizing and modernizing dictatorship
of Reza Shah, was treading the path of competitive national self-identification
as already well-worn in central Europe: not only linguistics and historiogra-
phy, but the study of popular culture, too, was grist to the nationalist and
nativist mills. Iranian scholars and writers such as ‘Ali-akbar Dехzōdā and
Sadēq Hedżāyat (both more celebrated in other fields) laid the foundations
of a vigorous native tradition of modern folklore studies in Iran that con-
tinued under Reza Shah’s son and successor. An international conference on
popular culture was held under royal patronage at Isfahan in 1977. Thanks
chiefly to the systematic collection and publication of folktales and proverbs
by Abū’l-Qāsim Enjavī-Šīrāzī between the 1960s and 1980s, Iran amassed
an archive of regional folklore unparalleled in the Middle East. Since the
Islamic Revolution of 1979, work has continued, though the shift of ideology
privileges different kinds of lore and research is more centralized and bureau-
cratized (see MARZOLPH 2001).

Afghanistan’s similar efforts at nation-building produced a parallel
interest in folklore from the 1930s on, which was skewed toward the politi-
cally dominant Pashtun ethos. The country is considerably more varied
ethnically and culturally than Iran, with two official languages and a dozen
other tongues. Successive experiments in political centralization and uni-
versal education have proved illusory. Literacy remains low, and “in a pre-
dominantly oral environment...the domain of ‘folklore’ becomes nearly
coextensive with ‘culture’ or ‘knowledge’ itself” (MILLS and AHRARY 2001,
76). The Pashtun cultural domain (and that of other minor languages)
extends into Pakistan, where a variety of material is also published.

In Tajikistan, as in Afghanistan, a tradition evolved of vernacular genres
parallel to Persian or Turco-Persian literary genres (verse epigrams,
games and riddles, ballads, sagas, and romances). Again, fieldwork came in
the wake of empire: Russian scholars were trekking the Pamirs in quest of
Tajik dialects and folktales by 1898, thirty years after the occupation of
Bukhara (SEMINOV 1900). The nationalistic impetus toward the glorifica-
tion of popular culture was thrust on the region abruptly andselectively, after
the Bolshevik revolution, by the creation of ethnolinguistic Soviet republics
in 1925. Under the initial policy of korenizatsiia (the fostering of a native
Communist intelligentsia and bureaucracy) stories, riddles (čiston “what-is-
it”), and other literary arts, artifacts, and craft terms were collected by
Sciences. When Stalin’s policy switched to integration and Russianization,
folklore research continued sporadically and covertly, under the guise of root-
ing out superstition and relics of religion—or was sanitizied and Sovietized,
just as the traditional stringed instruments of each Central Asian republic
were mass-produced in the appropriate range of sizes and corralled into copies
of the balalaika band. Since perestroika and independence, Tajik folklore stud-
ies are once again unabashedly in the ascendant as one factor in building a
separate Iranian identity vis-à-vis Russia and Uzbekistan (cf. Rahmoni).
Theoretical and analytical studies of folklore (in particular of the folktale, having its roots in the comparative mythology of the nineteenth century) are no recent development in respect of our area; *The Arabian Nights*, after all, was available as a literary corpus in Europe a century before the tales of the Brothers Grimm. The classic taxonomies of Aarne and Thompson are widely applied (Ulrich Marzolph’s *Typologie des persischen Volksmärchens* of 1984 appeared in a Persian translation in 1992). As fieldwork has progressed in range and rigor, questioning its own techniques and preconceptions as much as its target material, scholars in recent years have applied new analytical tools, such as gender theory (cf. Mills) to bear on newly discovered versions of the same old stories.

Iranians, like most peoples with a memory of empire and a continuing tradition of high literature, can be good-natured snobs. Outside academia, educated city-dwellers tend to disparage provincial dialects (many of which are the Persianized remnants of distinct Iranian languages, not varieties of Persian as they are supposed), and tell demeaning “ethnic” jokes about Iranians of other cities and regions. Yet they revel in their differences as much as in their national identity, and continue to live their folklore in the face of national leveling and global homogenization. They will readily absorb, but are reluctant to be absorbed. Though adopting “Western” technology with alacrity, and priding themselves on their hospitality and adaptability, they have been (and continue to be) unwilling to sacrifice their cultural privileges and markers of identity to any excessive alien influence. This trait has been expressed politically in popular uprisings of the past century under three regimes (in each of Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan), in the face of varieties of enforced Westernization and Islamization.

What they are defending cannot readily be pinned down, but is always recognizable. Somewhere on the outskirts of Shiraz, Yerevan, Dushanbe or Srinagar one may happen upon a secluded valley fringed with cottonwoods, deodars or cypress trees, and on the banks of a rushing stream a family or a gathering of friends with a certain shape of face (a woman perhaps with heavy, arched eyebrows that meet each other), lounging on rugs of a familiar pattern, picnicking on a sofe, a napkin spread with a characteristic array of delicacies. The scene (in reality, or in a Persian miniature whether classic or kitsch) will be framed with mountains of a certain shape and suffused with a particular light that are somehow, indefinably, Iranian. The participant observer will find his attempts at scientific detachment hindered, if not by wine or vodka, certainly by poetry of well-loved forms and themes, recited from memory or even extemporized; or by humorous parables attributed to that wise fool Molla Nasr-ed-din. If he or she perseveres, however, a definition of part of this complex syndrome may emerge, as in the essays that follow.

A note on transcription and transliteration is in order. We have agreed upon a common and self-evident system of representing standard and Classical Persian—and Arabic—with as little recourse to diacritics or digraphs as possible. However, these are not the only languages from which names, terms, and occasional phrases will need to be cited; and with original alphabets ranging through adaptations of Aramaic, Arabic, Latin, and Cyrillic, it will be appreciated that any attempt to impose universal consistency could create more problems than it would solve. Turkish is represented in the modern orthography, and will be recognized by the incidence of ğ, ğ, and ş instead of ğ, ğ, and ś. In Persian, there is some leeway as between final -â and -e, with sociolinguistic connotations for those familiar with the language. The few transcriptions from less familiar languages will be noted *ad hoc*.

I extend my thanks for the opportunity to host this *tante* to AFS and its editor, and to the contributors, several of whom rendered assistance above and beyond that of penning their articles and adhering to deadlines. A special acknowledgement is due Kinga Markus-Takeshita, who initiated the idea of this special issue. To our readers—*nūά-e jān* “bon appétit”!

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