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ROUND TABLE

The Nation-State and the (Re)Construction of Religious, Ethnic and Gender Relations

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Nationalism, nationhood, and ethnicity, as Eric Hobsbawm argued, are social processes constructed essentially from above, yet cannot be understood unless also analyzed from below.[1] Inspired by European Orientalism, the intellectual advocates of Western-oriented nationalism attempted to establish a new Iranian identity based on Persian language and Iran's pre-Islamic past.[2] This made Iranian nationalism an attractive ideology for some political elites, and was later endorsed by the Pahlavi dynasty (1925–79) when nationalist ideology replaced Iranianness with Persianity. In this conception, there was no room for the ethnic diversity of a nation-state that is the heir of an ancient empire. The elites' aspirations to uniformity put pressure on members of ethnic groups to conform their way of life to a new model of Iranianness, Persianized and pro-Western. Every nonconforming element was regarded as a sign of backwardness and possible threat to the modern nation and its territorial integrity.

National cultures, as Stuart Hall stated, seek to unify different members into one cultural identity, presenting them as belonging to the same great national family. In Iran, Persian language has had this function. A national language is a crucial component of the modern nation-state.[3] As a representational system, language uses signs and symbols to construct meanings. These representations produce culture, which help people communicate and make sense of the world.

Processes of Ethnicization: From Persianity to Shi'ism

Mahmoud Afshar, a prominent nationalist secular intellectual, who developed the Pan-Iranist ideology in the early 1920s, argued: "Achieving national unity means that Persian language must be established throughout the country, that regional differences in clothing, customs and the likes must disappear, and that local chieftains must be

[1] Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 10.

[2] Mostafa Vaziri, *Iran as Imagined Nation: The Construction of National Identity* (New York: Paragon House, 1993); Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, "Self-Orientalization and Dislocation: The Uses and Abuses of the 'Aryan' Discourse in Iran," *Iranian Studies* 44, no. 4 (2011): 448.

[3] Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage in association with the Open University, 1997).

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eliminated."[4] Attempts at cultural uniformization under the Pahlavis have often been used to mark an essentialized hierarchy, leading to cultural racialization of non-Persians. Following the 1979 revolution and establishment of the Islamic regime and government of a jurisconsult (*velayat-i faqih*), Shi'ism, not Islam, became the official religion. Both Sunnis and non-Muslims became culturally/religiously racialized. Despite these uniformization policies, Iran as a modern nation-state is in the condition of cultural hybridity.

Contrary to the essentialist approach to ethnicity, according to which ethnic groups are natural and unchanging, ethnic relations are above all social relations that regroup people in categories. Ethnic relations structure people's life opportunities, influence their social class standing, condition their practice, and shape their identities. Ethnic/religious minorities have been denied legitimate access to the state's resources. Such economic and political inequalities in turn produce ethnicity, ethnic groups, and ethnic claims. In fact, ethnicity often is the space from which marginalized people speak. Ethnicity thus becomes a resource in the hands of actors who appropriate and mobilize a category built from the outside. For this very reason, "we need to rethink the notion of ethnicity from the margins, from the dominated."[5]

As illustrated in our research, and contrary to ethnic/religious minorities,[6] Persian and Shi'i Iranians do not perceive themselves as belonging to an ethnicity. Instead, they identify with the dominant group even when critical of their social and economic conditions.[7] In Baluchistan and Golestan, two poverty-ridden provinces where I conducted fieldwork, the ethnicization of Sunni Islam in the everyday life is paramount, and both local and central authorities contribute tremendously to enforcing religious divisions in order to divide the have-nots and rule. This process of othering reinforces the ethnicized social order already set in place. Therefore, social class is often overshadowed by religious and ethnic affiliations.

Shi'itization, Discrimination, Securitization, Marginalization

Under the Islamic regime, Shi'ism as the state's political ideology and official religion has made other religions, including Sunni Islam, a key signifier of difference, subject to discrimination and authoritarian forms of control. Indeed, political Shi'ism has tended to regulate the lives of ethnic/religious minorities through two technologies of power, discipline and population management, or what Michel Foucault called bio-power.[8] The rule of political Islam strengthened the process of racialization of non-Shi'i populations in Iran. This also activated forms of resistance and individual and collective resilience. The street demonstrations with slogans against the regime that take place in Zahedan every Friday following the Friday prayer led by Mowlavi Abdolhamid, the highest Sunni authority in Iran, who advocates the separation of religion and state, are an example of this.

[4] Touraj Atabaki and Erik J. Zürcher, ed., *Men of Order: Authoritarian Modernization under Atatürk and Reza Shah* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 8. In his youth, Afshar had been active in the "Young Iran Society" (Anjoman-i Iran-i Javan), a group of nationalist Iranians, most of whom were educated in European universities. Reza Khan was then one of the influential members of the group.

[5] Danielle Juteau, *L'ethnicité et ses frontières* (Montréal: Les presses de l'université de Montréal, 1999), 175.

[6] I define minority as a category in terms of access to political, economic, and military power, not in statistical terms.

[7] Our quantitative survey was conducted in 2002 with a sample of 6,960 urban and rural households in all twenty-eight provinces (later the number of provinces increased to thirty-one). The research sample was composed of 30,714 individuals: 7,633 women fifteen years and older, married at least once, and 6,154 single youths fifteen to twenty-nine years old who lived with their parents—3,437 boys and 2,717 girls.

My qualitative surveys composed of over 300 open-ended interviews with a wide range of women from different social categories in both rural and urban areas were taken between 1994 and 2008. Approximately one hundred of them belonged to ethnic minorities. Azadeh Kian, *Rethinking Gender, Ethnicity and Identity in Iran: An Intersectional Approach to National Identity* (London and New York: I.B.Tauris, Bloomsburg Publishing, 2023).

[8] Michel Foucault, *Sécurité, territoire, population, Cours au Collège de France, année 1977–78* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 2004).

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In post-revolutionary Iran, the expansion of education has contributed to the hegemony of the Persian language. Therefore, ethnicization and cultural racialization are today deployed through religious difference, rather than linguistic. However, the hegemony of the Persian language has not led to the erasure of non-Persian languages. The demand that these languages be taught in universities, especially in non-Persian majority provinces such as Kurdistan, Baluchistan, and Azerbaijan, has regularly been voiced by the local communities. However, as my research shows, the revival of ethnic, linguistic, and regional particularisms does not necessarily translate into a challenge to national unity or the cultural homogenization brought about by the modern state through mass schooling and urbanization. Instead, this demand reflects ethnic and religious minorities' fear of being relegated to second-class citizenship.

However, young Baluch and Turkmen's access to higher education has not diminished ethnic discrimination.

> In the early 1960s nearly all teachers in the Sistan-Baluchistan province were from the neighboring provinces of Khorasan and Kerman. Despite the current availability of thousands of university-educated Baluch, more or less the same situation persists in many areas such as Chahbahar, where in 2014 non-locals constituted 80% of the educational staff.[9]

Likewise, and as a Baluch member of the Zahedan city council declared in 2008: "When administrators are nominated, Baluch are either absent or rarely represented. However, when they come to office through elections, they constitute the overwhelming majority."[10]

Marginalization has been the regime's response to those who refuse to subordinate to the gender, class, ethnic, or religious discrimination that structures state policy. Baluch, as Sunnis and non-Persian, are stigmatized and discriminated against by the majority. Indeed, negative popular stereotypes are strong (prior to the Woman, Life, Freedom movement) and the Islamic state's public policies have contributed tremendously to reinforcing them. Widespread drug trafficking in the region has spawned stereotypes of Baluchistan as a lawless land, rendering the word "Baluch" synonymous with "drug dealer." The sociopolitical impact of trafficking has been dire, too, and led to the further securitization of Baluchistan.

Gender, Nationhood, Ethnicity

Orientalism influenced Iranian nationalism, which also made use of male-dominant discourse to stabilize a hierarchal social order along with the "natural" stability of gender categories. In addition to ethnicity, nation-state building reformulated social relations in terms of gender.

Women's role in the national community is first and foremost that of a mother; they are sacralized and understood as a "genetic resource" for the national community. As mothers, women ensure the future of the nation through their reproductive capacity. Since they give birth to future members of the nation, women also symbolize the honor of the nation and community. Mothers are then associated with notions of purity, chastity, authenticity, and morality. Maternal female bodies are also used as an allegory of the nation. Therefore, control over women and their sexuality is crucial to the process of national and ethnic construction, as women are supposed to reproduce the boundaries of national (and ethnic) groups.[11]

[9] Afshin Shahi and Ehsan Abdoh-Tabrizi, "The Shi'ite State and the Socioeconomic Challenges of the Sunni Communities in Iran. Historical and Contemporary perspectives," in *Sites of Pluralism. Community Politics in the Middle East*, ed. Firat Oruc (London: Hurst & Company, 2019), 87–113.

[10] Interview with Sadigheh Sheikhzadeh, Zahedan, December 4, 2008.

[11] Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias, *Woman-Nation-State* (London: Macmillan, 1989), 1–15.

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The womb becomes the predominant biopolitical space[12] where states (and leaders of ethnic communities) practice sovereignty.

The naturalist ideology reduces gender to biological sex and limits social practices to gendered social roles. However, like ethnicity, gender and gendered performance are social constructions, themselves the result of social relations. Working on articulations of gender, class, ethnicity, and religion allows us to better measure mechanisms of domination. Intersectional analysis accounts for the everyday discrimination experienced by ethnic and religious minority women (and men), and is a fertile approach when dealing with the question of social inequalities in a class-based, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious country like Iran.[13]

The model of an ideal woman under the Pahlavi state was a modern woman, a Persian speaker, Westernized, unveiled, educated, and belonging to the urban middle class. However, despite her credentials, she remained modest and accepted the superiority of her male relatives (father, husband, etc.). The goal of Pahlavi rulers was to facilitate and regulate educated and modern urban women's access to the public space. Sustaining patriarchal authority within the family proved indispensable to the political order, personified by the monarch.

The model of an ideal woman under the Islamic regime is an urban middle-class, Shi'i, veiled, educated but modest woman: a good mother and wife. In both monarchical and Islamist models, women belonging to religious and ethnic minorities, especially Sunni, are excluded from the state-sponsored construction of modern women. My open-ended interviews with women belonging to ethnic (Baluch and Turkmen) and religious (Sunni) minorities revealed the complexity and specificity of their experiences, daily problems, and demands. The frequency of polygamy and existence of *zan talagh* in Baluchistan, or the hesitation of Turkmen women to demand their inheritance, are some of the peculiar issues these women share. If a man makes a bet on accomplishing something and swears in front of four male witnesses to divorce his wife if he does not succeed, the wife is considered as a divorcee should he fail, even if not legally divorced. She thus must quit her husband's home, leaving her children behind, and cannot remarry. According to some of my interviewees, this humiliating tradition has recently been questioned by educated Baluch people, and some *mowlavi*s (Sunni clergy) are interevening to prevent *zan talagh* divorces. According to Turkmen practices, when a daughter of a deceased man refuses to yield her share of the father's estate to her brothers, her complete isolation and the rupture of her social relations follow. It is rare for a woman to insist on taking her inheritance, and when a woman does, it usually is the result of strong pressure from her husband.

Nonetheless, structural transformations (modernization, urbanization, education, etc.), especially in post-revolutionary Iran, have had a crucial impact on how social relations are gendered and women's social and cultural behaviors, including those belonging to ethnic/religious minorities. An increase in the number of schools and improvement in education rates, modern communication networks, NGOs, and the establishment of civil institutions such as city and village councils since 1999 have led to a rise in social and political awareness.[14] All these factors have changed traditional perceptions. One of the outcomes of these transformations is that the patriarchal family established on male power and domination is questioned and undergoing change.

[12] Ruth Miller, *The Limits of Bodily Integrity: Abortion, Adultery, and Rape Legislation in Comparative Perspective* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 149.

[13] On intersectional analysis, see Patricia Hill Collins, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2019); bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: South End Press, 1989); Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (July 1991): 1241–1299.

[14] In 2016, women's literacy rate in Baluchistan was 80% in urban areas and 62% in rural areas. *Iran Statistical Yearbook* (Tehran: Statistical Center of Iran, 2020), 651.

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New values have emerged and some women, mainly those belonging to the middle classes, have gradually begun leaving their father's home to receive an education. They reject arranged and early marriages and aspire to professionalization. They continue their studies at university (sometimes far from home); some are teachers, university professors, doctors, social activists, NGO founders and members, and some have been elected to village and city councils. In 2017, during the fifth local council elections, the number of Baluch women elected to city and village councils increased sharply to 415.

Conclusion

The model of gender, religious, and ethnic power relations founded on either Persian or Shi'i identity is increasingly being challenged by both marginalized men and women's aspirations to full citizenship rights brought about by social, economic, and cultural change. The Islamic regime is being challenged by an overwhelming majority of the population, as evidenced by street protests and strikes in universities, schools, businesses, factories, and the oil, petrochemical and steel industries despite the state's fierce repression, including against children. Women from various social groups, ethnicities, and religions are at the forefront of such protests; their rejection of the Islamic regime explained by the distance between these demands and the persistence of an ideological power with institutions and laws that reinforce social inequalities and have led the country into a deep and all-encompassing economic, political, social, cultural and environmental crisis.

It is urgent to acknowledge the diversity and plurality of experiences of oppression and injustice in order to achieve an inclusive and non-hegemonic definition of Iranian national identity. The claims of minority groups are relevant to inequalities in the distribution of economic, political, and cultural power, and represent real social issues. Ethnic identity should not be securitized, for it is compatible with national belonging, as our research clearly shows. Iranian national identity is composed of a multiplicity of belongings: genders, religions, ethnicities, social classes. The nationalistic discourse that glorifies the Pahlavi era and the discourse that conceives a separate political future for ethnic minorities, outside the national space, need to be scrutinized and criticized. Social movements are more likely to succeed if they are intersectional and support alliances with groups suffering from discrimination, connecting different demands for secularization, social justice, freedom, and gender, ethnic, religious and class equality. Building alliances between various categories of women and men against the power of the state will bring about the conditions to step out of subalternity.

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