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Culture, Power and Poetry in Shiraz

SETRAG MANOUKIAN

Recent months have witnessed a surge of discussions and analyses of the current political situation in Iran and its uncertain outcomes. When newspapers, magazines, radio, and TV in Europe and United States take a wider social view of things, they often note the relevance of intellectual engagement among Iranians. They describe the ways in which they respond to the present political and social situation by avidly reading and discussing social theorists and analysts of different persuasions and positions: Iranian such as Abdul Karim Soroush or Mohsen Kadivar; as well as foreign: Habermas, Popper and lately, Foucault. Even these more expanded accounts, however, are confined to immediate political concerns and focused almost solely on the city of Tehran, the megalopolis that seems to contain all of Iran into itself. If one, instead, takes an ethnographic and thus slower look at transformations and travels to other cities, other dynamics emerge.

What receives less attention is the degree to which debates and confrontations are caught up in questions about the limits and possibilities of "culture," a word that began to be used in Iran early in the twentieth century with an anthropological meaning and a prescriptive bend. Nowadays, the concept is particularly resilient in official discussions as well as in informal settings. *Farhang* (culture) encompasses a broad spectrum of practices, intersects with religious and political trajectories, and is crucial in reflections about identity and the nation. Culture is today the defining articulation of social needs and desires.

I study these dynamics in a specific city, Shiraz, which has been since its foundation in the eighth century an important cultural centre, so much so that it is often called the "City of Knowledge". In the twentieth century the city became more and more identified as the site of "classical Persian culture" in opposition to the modern and bustling Tehran. During the Pahlavi monarchy, in conjunction with orientalist trajectories, the discourse of Shiraz as repository of Persian culture connected the main ruins of the Achaemenid Empire (which are in large part in the region surrounding Shiraz) with two of the major poets from Shiraz, Sa'di and Hafez. The pre-Islamic imperial past and poetry were mobilized to celebrate a racial and nationalized vision of culture. The revolution of 1979 reversed this discourse by rejecting the monarchy's interpretation of the past, substituting it with a religious paradigm. As several scholars have noted, however, national trajectories loomed large in the emergent state and nowadays, twenty-five years after the revolution, several of the elements of "Persian classical culture" are emerging anew, though in a transformed constellation. The municipality and other institutions in Shiraz are promoting a vision of the city as the "cradle of Islamic-Iranian civilization" while reinterpreting the Achaemenid Empire according to the limits of acceptability of public state discourse. These initiatives are in conjunction with a growing attention to the amelioration of public space and the production of a public through spectacles of enter-

Culture is a key word in contemporary Iran, especially in relation to power. Developing a practice begun in the early nineties, several national and local institutions are investing in "cultural activities" as a neutralized ground for the construction of citizens. This process intersects with poetry, which has a great power of recognition and is hegemonic well beyond the state: while on one hand poetry seems to offer expressive possibilities otherwise unavailable, on the other it is in fact an effective modality of power.

tainment like pop concerts, which are regularly organized by the local Office of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Recent ambitious plans envisage the construction of a host of cultural theme parks: the Park of Culture, the Historical Museum of the Literature of Iran, the Cultural House of the Tribes of Fars, the Museum of Philosophy, the Museum of Contemporary Art, and the City of Civilizations (a clear homage to the "dialogue of civilizations" of President Khatami). All of these "administrative"

activities, with far reaching political and economic entailments concur in producing a "culture" for consumption that offers a neutralized ground beyond the political constituencies of the day. This public culture appears superficial to many inhabitants, but provides a powerful trajectory for the articulation of the politically sceptical and culturally satisfied citizen.

Power and the selective production of culture

For an ethnographer as I am, however, studying the production of culture does not stop at tracing the genealogy of certain discourses; it implies foremost spending time with people who are engaged in this production. During my many stays in Shiraz, I became more and more interested in the ways in which the discourses mentioned above were articulated in people's lives. Over the years, in my conversations, I came to realize how history and poetry functioned as different modalities in the reproduction of what people called the "culture of Shiraz." Fragments of national and local history combine with poetry to produce a less uniform and more conflicted version of "culture" in which comments about the dire economic situation and the price of books mix with a vague nostalgia or a particularly evocative verse.

History, especially the history of the twentieth century, is a matter of contention. History is a crucial element of the articulation of the "culture of Shiraz", which is deemed essential to its understanding and celebration. The nation is mostly envisaged in historical terms, but history itself is also considered relevant at the local level, as an important tool to understand the present and be aware of the past. People in Iran mention singular historical events or figures to articulate their sense of belonging. Both among professional historians and among those who read them however, there is a widespread uneasiness about available historical narratives. They consider them incomplete, inapt to account fully for "things as they were." Historians point to the lack of sources, to the impossibility of writing without being caught up in political entanglements, or to the difficulties of engaging in *kâr-e jeddi* (serious research), while cultural institutions pursue superficial projects. Readers, who often engage in conversations at bookstores around the city, complain about the "emptiness" of narratives, which contain mistakes, silence regarding certain figures while exaggeration for others, and in the overall, are unable to celebrate the greatness of Shiraz both for itself and for the nation.

Concerns for history and the projection of its inability to represent the past focus both on broad themes, as well as on specific fragments. The events of the 1950s, for example, elicit a great deal of discussion, and the position of the different religious leaders and their followers is still a matter of contention, especially since several of their descendants still play significant political roles today. Heated debates take place around a charismatic ayatullah who opposed Musaddiq's National Front and was said to have "British leanings" but is celebrated today as an "anti-colonialist" leader and a precursor of the Islamic Republic. Historians are afraid to write about him and have a hard time finding materials because support-

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ers of the aforementioned leader refuse to give them newspapers, documents, and other relevant sources. Readers complain that available biographies or standard accounts found in local histories, often published by state cultural institutions, distort the activities of this leader and fail to reveal his political strategies. Different trajectories intertwine in such opinions that touch on questions of social constituency as well as religious interpretation and social imagination. The aforementioned leader, for example, heralded a populist approach geared at gaining consensus and power through turning ritual practices such as *ashura* (day commemorating the death of Imam Husayn) into political occasions, while staunchly opposing mystical brotherhoods. However, discussions around this episode, and others, also point to the ways in which causality and agency are interpreted in history and how they are linked to considerations that are more general about the state of the nation. All these tensions underline how history is a crucial site for the production of the "culture of Shiraz." Related to the institutional investment in culture and in part articulated on the same discourse, history plays out many of the conflicting views that make up the Shiraz of today while partaking in the reproduction of its "culture." At the same time as a specific modality, history, at least in the present, is considered inapt to fully articulate this "culture" and is therefore supplemented or often substituted by poetry.

Poetry speaking the unspeakable

Poetry affords the recognition that history cannot deliver. While history with its embedded quest for truth remains controversial and is seen as mostly untrustworthy, poetry constitutes a more secure ground. Poetry is not subject to the same rules of interpretation of history. Lapses, silences, or ambiguities in poetry are not seen as making it incomplete, but rather as a characteristic of poetic discourse itself. Poetry is considered as something that always requires interpretation and its layering are seen as adding to its aesthetic appreciation, thus making poetry more effective. For example, when the topic comes up in conversations, listeners substitute the "absent" historical account of the practices and political position of the aforementioned religious leader by referring to and sometimes quoting verses from *Al-Tafasil* (The Commentary), a satirical book that the Shirazi poet Fereidun Tavallali composed in the early fifties using the famed Sa'di as a model. In the book, without mentioning him by name, Tavallali depicts a certain ayatullah as a *kásib al-khutabá* (merchant of sermons) and attacks him vehemently: "He who called people towards God/when the veil was lifted, Satan he was // Look! The *rahbar-i khalq* (guide of the people) was the very one who/robbed mind, faith and religion."¹ This portrait, while elusive, is for Shirazi readers, who are interested in history, an explicit reference to the character in question. It is a depiction whose allusions are not considered as an inaccurate or incomplete account, but rather as more effective through the aesthetic dimension; a dimension that the translation cannot convey. Moreover, the verses, because of their intended vagueness, open up parallels between the past and present. For those who are not familiar with the specific historical context, the verses are still an indication of the power of poetry.

Poetry's relevance is not limited to its satirical efficacy in relation to the past or the present, nor should it be reduced to a counter discourse through which is expressed what could not have been otherwise. Certainly, there are these dynamics at play, as the success of magazines like *Golagha* and others attest. However, there is much more at stake. As mentioned above, Shiraz can claim a special poetic relevance within the national literary constellation, and even if poetry in itself is not something specific to the city, people in Iran in general and in Shiraz in particular grant a special place to Shiraz in poetic practice and imagination. The extent to which the place of poetry relates to its social practice requires careful ethnographic consideration, since it might lend itself to certain naturalizations about poetic knowledge and capabilities. These attributions while celebrating certain skills do not consider how socially differentiated and selective was, and is, the access to a learned tradition that might be, or have been, widespread but was not, and is not, general. This being said, I have rarely met Iranians who dislike or distance themselves from poetry and those who do, have a specific critical agenda, such as that of the nationalist and modernist Ahmad Kasravi. Poetry is sometimes language, sometimes articulation of common sense, and sometimes just the names of a few poets, or a visit to their tombs.

The widely different approaches to poetry reinforce its pervasiveness. Often it is said that the poet Hafiz embodies and expresses "Iranian-ness" at its fullest. Poetry, even when used as an empty signifier, is



an articulation of the self. In my encounters, women and men, university professors, shopkeepers, students and local intellectuals rely on poetry as a stable imaginary, as something that could dispense answers not only to the large and small questions of social and personal life but also grant a location and an identity in the world. It is this poetic power of recognition that makes poetry the dominant discourse of culture: a discourse that crosscuts differences of religion and politics. While it might offer a venue for the expression of discontent, poetry is a hegemonic articulation that goes well beyond the administrative initiatives of the state, and whose aesthetic effects heighten its emotional grip. Poetry's inclusiveness makes it appear almost as a natural quality of the "culture of Shiraz," and thus a particularly effective modality of power.

**Poem from
Diwan, Hafez,
edited by
Hussein Elahi,
p. 33**

Note

1. Tavallali, Fereidun. 1952 (AH 1331). *Al-Tafasil*. 2 ed. Shiraz.

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