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Remembering the Past in Iranian Societies

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Introduction: Remembering the Past in the Iranian Cultural space

Christine Allison

This book has its origins in an academic workshop held in early 2006 in Paris. At the time the organisers felt that within the world of ‘Iranian studies’ there had been relatively little focus on memory as an object of study, by contrast with the veritable explosions of scholarship on memory in Turkey and in the former Soviet Union, and the steady outputs on the Middle East, in which studies of Palestine and Lebanon feature strongly. We called the workshop ‘Discourses of Memory in Iranian cultures’ to allow for the inclusion of Armenians, Kurds in Turkey, Ottoman Turks and others who might not, strictly speaking, be deemed to fit the criterion of ‘Iranian society’ or ‘speakers of Iranian languages’ but whose culture is closely linked to that of the ‘Iranian world’ in certain important respects. This deliberately fuzzy approach worked rather well and led to a great deal of fruitful discussion. With some welcome additions from scholars who were unable to attend the workshop, we have maintained it for this book.

The contributions to this book deal with many ways of recollecting the past – through folklore, music, monuments, spatial organisation and city planning, through the constructions of the nation-state (including not only organised ceremonies of remembrance but also resources such as archives) and through personal narratives of trauma. They are linked not by a nation-state or political system within which the cultures of remembering are made to fit (or not), but by ‘Iranian culture’ – that nebulous, ill-defined collection of shifting practices, habits and codes which loosely links communities and networks of people from Istanbul to Kabul, from Dushanbe to Shiraz. Although the various hegemonic relations between State and society are highlighted in each instance, the framework of ‘Iranian-ness’ taken by the book as a whole enables us to step outside the issue of national and State discourses and to situate the political within the cultural. We can set State discourses of memory and their repercussions within wider cultural practices of remembering found across this vast geographical area.

Such a wide ‘area studies’ approach calls into question Pierre Nora’s classic view of history and memory, which by its very nature assigns a paramount role to the dominant nation-state. Nora followed Halbwachs in making the distinction between the two, but took it much further; for him, memory is spontaneous and popular, an absolute, an environment within which traditional societies lived and on which their members could draw at any time, whereas history is not only antithetical

to memory, but even hostile – ‘its true mission is to destroy it.’¹ History is imposed from above by a monolithic State. And indeed, this seems to accord with common sense if one reflects on the importance of regional and village memories for many citizens of the Iranian cultural space as contrasted with the rigidity of State views of the past. Popular memory in such a context is an act of resistance, ‘counter-memory’ to use Foucault’s term. It is true that Nora, like Foucault, is writing from a European perspective, questioning the situation in France of the 1980s and articulating peculiarly European anxieties about loss of roots. Nevertheless as with Foucault, much of what he says is highly pertinent for other centralized states such as Turkey and indeed Russia,² though other forces can be discerned which drive discourses in the former Soviet Republics of the Caucasus and Central Asia. The importance of the ideological State in the manipulation of public discourse is undeniable throughout the Iranian cultural zone. Many of the governments practise what Paul Connerton calls ‘organised forgetting’ as well as organised remembering;³ in such places it may be dangerous to publish the narratives of counter-memory, which by necessity tend to remain oral.

However, it has long been noted that Nora’s oppositional distinction does not stand up to close scrutiny. Memory is neither an inner archive of information to be drawn on, nor a constant. As Davis and Starn note, memory is not only polymorphic but also historically situated;⁴ and history and memory are not necessarily different in their nature so much as in their dynamics. Cihan Tuğal, speaking of Turkey, refers again to memory and history as ‘different vectors within the same discursive-strategic plane’ that is ‘two modes of remembering’ which he situates within national discourse (2007: 159). Clearly, the two are far from mutually exclusive; during the process of nation-building collective memory of a dominant group may gain recognition and become official ‘history.’ This process and its pitfalls have been well demonstrated by Andrew Shryock, who shows that narratives of tribal history can be ‘officialised,’ albeit with some difficulty, to fit into national discourses, using the example of Bedouin histories in Jordan.⁵ Similarly, after the end of the Soviet Union, events which had been foregrounded (such as the Great Patriotic War) diminished in importance and remembering them became associated with certain minorities such as veterans. This book will examine various modes of remembering, some of them formally adopted as history (or on their way there), others remaining subaltern.

Despite Pierre Nora’s eurocentric perspective, his awareness of the phenomenon he calls an ‘upsurge in memory’ is of great relevance to those interested in memory

1 Nora 1989:9.

2 In 2007 the French Russian scholar, Georges Nivat, published a book inspired by Nora’s work and entitled *Les sites de la mémoire russe*.

3 Connerton 1989: 47.

4 Davis and Starn 1989: 2.

5 Shryock 1997.

elsewhere. Are the very lively discourses on memory in the Iranian cultural area driven by global forces or do they arise due to local factors? The obsession with memory as a global phenomenon is discussed by many scholars. Andreas Huyssen has diagnosed a general fear of amnesia and a loss of confidence in the future which has led people to place their faith in archiving and cyber-technology. Although this view may not be applicable to the Iranian cultural area, his remarks on global versus local tendencies are extremely relevant. He observes that although contestations over memory and commemoration in different parts of the world arise from local factors, the overarching themes in which they are cast, such as genocide, ethnic cleansing or human rights violations, are constructed under the influence of global media.⁶ He is surely right in stressing the importance of both the local and wider dimensions. However, there are certainly broad similarities which apply across the region of our focus but not particularly in the global arena, in the ways in which narratives about the past are constructed and the key concepts articulated (for example, exile, martyrdom, homeland). We hope as editors that bringing together a collection of chapters concentrating on specific instances within this wider cultural area will make a contribution to comparative studies and will help in the process of identifying what is place-specific, regional and global.

The upsurge in memory, or as some have called it, the ‘crisis of memory’ is in full swing in the Iranian cultural space. This tumultuous period of the end of the twentieth century has seen regime change, civil unrest and outright war across much of the region; with conflict comes trauma and with changes in ideology come changes in the discourses of memory. Both time and space, intertwined in complex ways in discourses of memory,⁷ have been reconfigured differently in many places. In Iran itself, where memories of the ancient empires have been a fundamental part of identity at least since Ferdowsi’s time, the revolution of 1979 brought a reassessment of the role of ancient history and of traditional folklore. Mythical as much of their contents might have been, it did not prove possible for the Islamic republic to wipe them from public memory and a process of negotiation ensued which is still in progress. In Afghanistan, whilst the world protested at the loss of the Bamiyan Buddhas, much intangible heritage, in the form of communal memories transmitted orally, was lost – not only through prohibitions by the Taleban, but also more simply, due to casualties and population movements of their bearers. Since the 1980s, Turkey has seen massive initiatives to reclaim popular memories, on the part of both minorities and ethnic Turks. The Kurds of Turkey began to gather in their thousands in the 1990s to celebrate Newroz specifically as an act of liberation from tyranny by the worker-hero Kawa. Turkish and Armenian intellectuals and writers have carved out a space for public discussion of the genocide; distinguished academics such as Leyla Neyzi and Arzu Öztürkmen have worked on popular memory; high-profile writers, such as Orhan Pamuk, have made prominent statements on sensitive subjects. In Eastern

6 Huyssen 2000: 26–27.

7 Huyssen 2000:21.

Anatolia, all groups are represented in numerous initiatives and projects focusing on diversity. Meanwhile in Northern Iraq, the *de facto* Kurdish governments in power since 1991 have set about memorialising a specifically Kurdish history as part of their state-building initiative. The former Soviet Republics of the Caucasus and Central Asia, accustomed to a system which instrumentalised public memory in the service of the State, have seen new discourses of memory evolve alongside the new postSoviet identities. The cultures of these newly sovereign nationalities are being celebrated and used to commemorate national heroes and defining events rather than the Soviet ones. Wherever regime change happens, calendars, rather than maps, are apt to be re-drawn with new festivals of celebration and mourning. Time is reconfigured, with new key dates. Old heroes may be rejected and old enemies rehabilitated. In the early twenty-first century, both Stalin and the SAVAK, the feared secret police of the Pahlavi regime, are being reevaluated by the new generation.

However the momentum is not always top-down. The dialogue between the newly 'liberated' peoples and their rulers is not always harmonious and in matters of memorialisation in particular, strong reactions can come from the grass-roots. In 2006, the survivors of Halabja in Iraqi Kurdistan demolished the monument to their own genocide in a protest against their Kurdish rulers, accusing them of using the atrocity for their own political ends without paying attention to the people's needs.⁸ In cases where an authoritarian government forbids certain types of narrative, counter-memory can respond by using various strategies, such as music and dance (see Kanakis in this volume) or genres such as the lullaby, which circulate only in the private domain (see Bilal and Bretèque in this volume).

Although the Middle East is the cradle of writing and of the religions of the Book, literacy has for the most part been available only to élites and until the modern period; most popular memory has been transmitted orally. Within 'popular memory' we should include not only narratives about historical events but also mythologised versions of history. Folktales, proverbs and even fables have their place; whilst not historical, they bear a variety of meanings and emotions linked to views of the past. Their narration and performance play an important role in engendering feelings of belonging. Folklore in general (a wider term, of course, than oral tradition) is a highly politicised matter and has been much used by governments in nation-building. This applies throughout our region, from the former Soviet Union, where folklore study constituted part of the development of the nationalities, to Pahlavi Iran, whose promotion offolklore was dismissed as cultivation of superstitions under the Islamic Republic,⁹ and Kemalist Turkey, where Pertev Naili Boğratav's attempts to remove folklore from the political sphere and make it an academic enterprise were deliberately thwarted.¹⁰

⁸ For a contemporary report on the incident from the BBC, see http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4816018.stm, consulted 31 December 2010.

⁹ See Marzolph 1998.

¹⁰ See Öztürkmen 2005.

The collection of chapters in this book pays attention to all the major issues highlighted above – to hegemonic attempts to control memory and popular attempts to resist this control; to the reconfiguration of space and time in the wake of political change; to issues of orality and ways of speaking; to the politicisation of folklore. We also touch on the issue of trauma and memory, though we believe that this is a specialised area which would merit a publication of its own. We have divided the book into thematic rather than geopolitical subsections: Memory and Orality, Memory and the State, Memory and Counter-Memory and New Forms of Memorialisation.

Among those who have written for this book are young scholars pursuing innovative projects and more established academics who have been working on popular cultures, including memory, for a number of years. Contrary to the expectations of some, perhaps, there is relatively little on Iran itself and more on the ‘other Iranian peoples’. The Kurds are well represented, no doubt due to the current expansion of Kurdish studies as an academic focus, but we are also delighted to include work on Tajiks, Afghans and Armenians. The expertise of contributors to this book covers a range of disciplines, including history, religious studies, anthropology, ethnomusicology and psychology. Some have chosen a deliberately ‘theory-light’ presentation, the better to convey immediacy with the subject under discussion; others have chosen to enter into dialogue with a specific theoretician or position. All have produced contributions which, we believe, are readable and informative for non-specialists, an important aim of this book.

The first three chapters of the book focus on memory within contexts of orality; the first, that of Philip Kreyenbroek, is unusual in that it deals with the Achaemenid period. Most studies of memory confine themselves, for obvious reasons, to representations of the past within the present day or the recent past. Studies of the discourses of memory in the ancient world are especially challenging due to issues of inter-textuality; we only have access to those sources which have survived, and our knowledge of what was transmitted orally, and how it was transmitted, has to be built up painstakingly. This enterprise is well under way in the field of Classical studies, but still in its infancy in Iranian studies. Since chains of transmission are usually impossible to demonstrate where oral traditions are concerned, scholars have often successfully used modern folkloric genres as models for the ancient. Studies of orality in Classics may be said to originate with Parry and Lord’s work on the ‘composition in performance’ of the Yugoslav bardic traditions, which they used as a model when analysing the structures of the Homeric epics. Such studies for Iran are hampered by the relative lack of flourishing folkloric performance genres in Persian by comparison with other Iranian languages. Kreyenbroek’s essay here is a contribution to filling this gap in Iranian studies, and at the same time a suggestion as to how the ancient State may have moulded historical discourses to suit its own political purposes. He uses the extant Iranian tradition of *naqqali* as a model for how

ancient storytelling practice may have functioned. Although this approach has been used by Yamamoto in connection with the *Shah-name*,¹¹ this is the first time that *naqqali* has been used as a starting-point to reflect on the practice of ancient storytellers and their role in upholding State discourses of history.

Reflection on the ancient world is also an important part of Eszter Spät's chapter, which discusses the construction of origin-myths with reference to the Yezidi myth of Adam and its links with Sethian traditions of late antiquity and earlier. Her study of the Gnostic elements in religions such as Yezidism and their parallels in Mandaeanism gives a rare insight into the processes of syncretism at work in the formation of the many minority religions of the region, and also of the great distances which these religious mythologies could travel, as believers were displaced by war, persecution and economic factors in the periods before and after the arrival of Islam.

In Luqman Turgut's chapter, like the two preceding chapters, the focus remains on orality. The context shifts from ancient to modern, to a tribal environment in Eastern Turkey where all knowledge of the past is transmitted orally, and the connections between oral traditions and social structures are examined. As Fentress and Wickham pointed out,¹² using the example of the folktale and of the Song of Roland in European memory, social memory includes the telling of much material that is legendary but still felt to be an intimate part of group identity. The example Turgut chooses for discussion is a folktale; unlike the traditions analysed in the preceding chapters, it was probably not literally believed to be true by its target audience.

The fourth, fifth and sixth chapters deal with State discourses on history, from very different standpoints. Katja Föllmer's essay gives a diachronic view of the use made by successive Iranian régimes of the pre-Islamic past in constructing national Iranian identity. In addition to the more obvious forms of propaganda disseminated through texts and the media, she considers the role of ritual and popular performance. Yavuz Aykan focuses on the practice of history itself – on historiography and the use of archives, showing how historical representation evolved in the Republic of Turkey, and in particular how concepts such as ‘tribal’ and ‘backward’ were constructed to delineate the peoples on the periphery of the country, such as the Kurds. He argues for a strong pattern of continuation between the discourses of the Ottoman Empire and the Republic. Setrag Manoukian's chapter, on the other hand, takes a very different focus, the organisation of space. It is the only chapter in this volume to focus on the complex relationship between time and space in memory, on the historicisation (or in some cases lack of it) of the urban environment of Shiraz, at the moment of its choice as City of Culture in 2006. He comments on how State discourses of history affected these urban spaces under the Pahlavis and later, after the Islamic Revolution. He also touches on the commemoration of famous individu-

11 Yamamoto 2000.

12 Fentress and Wickham 1992.

als in public and private space, and finally, on a personal interpretation of space by a longtime resident.

Chapters Seven, Eight and Nine also consider State discourse, but in the contexts of their conflictual interaction with counter-memory. As Andrew Shryock noted, it is normal for discourses of memory to be multi-voiced and in conflict with each other, especially when they are in the oral domain.¹³ Different villages, different clans, may present opposing views of the same event or personality, each claiming that the truth lies exclusively with themselves. When the State imposes a view of the past and local counter-memories assert themselves, the situation of conflict is heightened, and the situation may become very complex indeed, with State views, quasi-official views sanctioned by resistance movements and sometimes also family or small community views. Kanakis' essay on the bewildering choices facing a nine-year old girl in Hakkari, Eastern Turkey, in 2005, makes this clear. Young Ayfer wants to excel at her Turkish school, to be a 'good Kurd' and learn the lore of the Kurdish parties, and to please her parents, who grew up in a time before modern national identities were important in Hakkari and find both ideologies difficult to comprehend. Amid all this conflict she craves guidance in order to find the truth.

The Kurdish movement in Turkey has created many institutions and narratives which mirror State discourses, as part of their nation-building initiatives. Chapter Eight describes other, less confrontational strategies taken by those whose memories are unacceptable for inclusion in official narratives. Melissa Bilal and Estelle Amy de la Bretèque show that women from both the Armenian and Kurdish communities in Turkey articulate their sufferings and memories of oppression (including family memories of the genocide) in lullabies, which articulate a similar range of emotions to lamentations. These forms of discourse are gendered and are not performed in wider public contexts, though extended families and friends attending funerals may hear them.

Thomas Loy's chapter gives yet another paradigm concerning memory and the State – again, a discourse of memory of events 'forgotten' at official levels, but this time narrated 30 years later by those who had experienced them. In 1970–71 the population of the Yaghnob valley in Tajikistan was cleared and evacuated to the town of Zafarobod. In his study the generational differences in the views expressed are particularly interesting in terms of the wish to return and also, who is blamed – whether local government, or wider, Soviet government – for the forced migrations. Narrations of the migration are not always harmonious with the general tone of description of the Soviet period.

The final section of the book deals with narratives of memory which are recorded in newer generic forms, such as the work of oral history, which is after all a new genre, and the novel. In her chapter, which makes many responses to the work of Alessandro Portelli, Margaret Mills, like Kanakis, raises the question of 'the truth'. Where does it lie in a narrative, and how can an outsider render it to a wider, foreign

13 Shryock 1997.

audience? This is a meditation on one of the most pressing difficulties facing scholars who do fieldwork, which is especially heightened when, as in her own case, one has known one's fieldwork partners for a long time. The chapter also touches on another common area of discussion in memory studies, the divide between personal and collective memory. Like Manoukian, Mills is interested in the issue of the space in which memories are recalled and comments on Portelli's identification of a 'third space' between the private and the public. In Mills' context this is that of the family, considering the power dynamics and conflicts within it. She comments on the relationship between gender and narration, like Bilal and Amy de la Bretèque, and also on the family's long experience of the war.

A consideration of oral history from a very different disciplinary perspective is provided by Ilhan Kizilhan, who as a psychologist has specialised in the treatment of disorders caused by traumatic memories amongst the Yezidi community in Germany, most of whom come from the East of Turkey and whose memory of the homeland is characterised by recollections of persecution and violence. He describes a qualitative study of older, male Yezidis, their characterisation of violence suffered, and their association of this violence with different State and non-State actors.

Finally, Christine Allison's chapter focuses on how personal and communal memories become enshrined in the novel, a literary genre of modernity and prestige. Using Karin Barber's idea of instaurational,¹⁴ she considers how and why memory plays a key role in the early development of the Kurmanji (Northern Kurdish) novel in the very different socio-political contexts of the Republic of Turkey and the Soviet Republic of Armenia.

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14 Barber 2007: 4.

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