

Understanding Persians

From “Ancient Persian Empire” to “Modern Iran”

From “Ancient Persian Empire”

- *Persians (present day Iranians) are descendents of a long and glorious empire founded 2,500 years ago by Cyrus the Great and brilliantly governed by his successors Cambyses, Darius, Xerxes, Artaxerxes, and others. For more than 200 years, this ancient Persian Empire stretched across vast areas, carrying for the most part, a peaceful rule and developing the highest levels of civilization known at the time.*
- *The rule by King Cyrus began with the overthrow of the ruling Median (Kurdish) King Astyages in 549 BCE. After capturing the capital city of Hamadan, Cyrus moved south, and with a brilliant military maneuver, captured the seat of the Babylonian Empire in 539, thus establishing history’s then largest empire. Rather than destroying the civilizations of their captives, Cyrus and his successors came to embrace them, thus allowing them to draw from the learning of others. Another of the many remarkable decisions of Cyrus the Great was allowing the Jewish captives of the Babylonians to return to their homeland in Jerusalem.*
- *Zoroastrianism was the religion of this long Persian rule as it had been under the Medes. Many Jews, who had been brought to Babylon from Jerusalem by King Nebuchadnezzar, chose to remain in Persia rather than return to Jerusalem, and some came to hold high positions within the empire. Several Jewish writers left us a legacy of the times of this great Persian Empire as recorded in the Biblical books of Esther, Daniel, Joel, Ezekiel, Nehemiah, and Ezra.*
- *Cyrus’ son and successor, Cambyses (530-522 BCE) is mainly remembered for his conquest of Egypt in 525. Succeeded by the famous grandson of Cyrus the Great, Darius I set about to establish a lasting stable and peaceful rule for his vast empire. He established smaller regional political areas called “satrapies”, with hierarchical systems for governing, tax collecting, accountability, and military command. He then turned to creating systems of travel and communication throughout the empire, including 1677 miles of a “King’s Highway” with relay stations of fresh horses and riders. Herodotus described these riders:*

“Nothing stops these couriers from covering their allotted stops in the quickest possible time --- neither snow, rain, heat, nor darkness.”

- *Following the reign of Darius I, the era of King Xerxes began. Xerxes is thought by scholars to be the Biblical “Ahasuerus” who married the Jewish Queen Esther. Following Xerxes, the succession extended through Artaxerxes, Darius II, Artaxerxes II, and finally Artaxerxes III. These early Persian kings worked hard to keep their subjects happy, even using local titles such as “pharaoh” in Egypt to win popular support. They also built a fabulous capital, Persepolis ... right in the middle of the Persian desert, and adorned it with magnificent government buildings. Other capitals were established in Pasargadae, Susa, and Ecbatana.*
- *The ancient Persian Empire fell to the armies of Alexander, the Greek in 334 BCE, who trampled and burned their great capital in Persepolis. However, history has granted the Persians later victories and amazing accomplishments. These early centuries, however, have clearly defined the Persians in ways that truly make them the people and the unique culture they are today. Elaine Sciolino in Persian Mirrors says: “Iranians have a strong sense of a distinct Persian personality. Wherever they go, they want to speak Persian, read Persian poetry, eat Persian food, and debate Iranian politics.” They are indeed a people today who help bridge modern civilization with a very ancient one ... and they are extremely proud of that distinction!*

..... to “Modern Iran”

- *The “Islamic Republic of Iran” was declared the new name for Iran following the successful overthrow of the Persian monarch by the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1979. The Republic has 27 provinces and is about one-fifth the size of the continental United States. The capital is Teheran.*
- *Iranians speak “Farsi” (or “Persian”), so named for the “Fars” province which was the seat of the ancient Persian Empire. Farsi is not related to Arabic or any Afro-Asian (Semitic) language but rather comes from Sanskrit, an Indo-European origin. However, many Arabic words have been adopted into the Persian language over the years.*
- *Iran’s current population is around 80,000,000, with slightly more than half claiming to be descendants of the ancient Persians. Other relatively large groups include the Azeris; Kurds (former Medes); Baluchis; Qashqais; Turkmen; Armenians; Arabs; and a significant Jewish population. About 70% of all Iranians now live in cities, a huge shift*

from the small village majority populations of a few decades ago. Teheran, the capital, has grown from 3,000,000 in 1980 to more than 12,000,000 in 2010.

- *The “Islamic Republic of Iran” is the first ever Shi’ite led government. For many Iranians, this is a distinction that reflects the unique character of the Iranian people. While several “splinter” groups of Muhammad Shah Pahlavi’s opposition united to bring about his downfall in 1979, many are now displeased with the 35-year old Shi’ite regime. Other conservatives strongly support it. About 60% of Iran’s population is under the age of 30 and have never lived under any other form of government.*
- *The Iranian government is currently headed by the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khameni, along with an 86-seat “Assembly of Experts” and a “Supreme National Security Council.” The newly-elected (2013) Iranian president is Hassan Rouhani.*
- *Prior to 1979, Iran had been ruled by a monarchy for most of the last 2,500 years. The last of ruling monarchs were Reza Shah Pahlavi and his son Muhammad Shah Pahlavi. During the early 20th century, Reza Shah set about establishing a strong secular and centralized state, implementing social reforms and attempting to reduce the strong influences of the Shi’ite clerics.*
- *Reza Shah changed the name from “Persia” to “Iran” in March, 1935 to reflect the distinct ethnic character and nature of the Iranian (“Aryan”) people. (Both names have been used interchangeably over the centuries.) Because of Iran’s neutrality in WWII between Germany and the Allies, Reza Shah was forced to abdicate his throne in 1941 in favor of his son Muhammad. Until Muhammad Shah’s overthrow in 1979, Iranians claimed to enjoy the oldest continuing monarchy on earth ... 2,500 years.*
- *A Constitutional Revolution in 1906 had resulted in the establishment of a parliament and a national electoral system. In 1951, Iranians voted to elect a nationalist prime minister, Mohammed Mossadegh, who set about to eliminate British control of Iran’s oil, declaring Mohammed Shah to be a puppet of Western powers. In 1953, with intense pressure from Great Britain, the U.S. conducted the overthrow of the democratically-elected Mohammed Mossadegh and the reinstatement of the Shah’s rule. These actions continue to impact the current negative perceptions of Iranians toward the United States today.*

- *Perceptions about Iranians toward the United States have also been impacted by support of the United States to Saddam Hussein during the long Iran-Iraq war of the 1980's. They also strongly opposed the U.S. invasions of their bordering neighbors, Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003). However, Iran has taken opportunities of the current instability in Iraq to re-establish Iran-Iraq relationships, particularly those related to Shi'ite interests in governance and religious traditions. They have provided Iraq with billions of dollars to support rebuilding of roads, schools, homes, and mosques and other infrastructures destroyed by the war.*

Johnnie Hicks - 03/24/14

Iranian Culture and Traditions

- *Iranians are a very proud people with a heritage going back 2,500 years to the Great Persian Empire. Like the Egyptians, Iranians have enjoyed a long cultural continuity, something that distinguishes them from other Middle Eastern neighbors.*
- *Iranians are of "Aryan" descent and fiercely proud of their non-Arab heritage. Though Islam arrived in Iran during the 7th century C.E., most Iranians at the time were Zoroastrian, Jewish, or Christian. Islam grew slowly, but adoption of "Shi'a Islam" as a state religion did not occur until the Safavid dynasty of the 16th century ... thought mainly to re-enforce Persian identity and resistance to the Arab and Sunni worlds.*
- *The language of Iranians is "Farsi," so called because the province of "Fars" was the seat of the Great Persian kings. Farsi is of Indo-European (Sanskrit) origin, not from the Asia-African (Semitic) origins of Arabic and Hebrew. Forms of "Farsi" are also spoken in Afghanistan (called "Dari"), as well as in other parts of Central Asia. It is estimated that there are about 110 million "Farsi" speakers worldwide today.*
- *There are varying lifestyles in Iran today ranging from conservative traditionalism to liberal modernity. For many, the Islamic Revolution of 1979 has not fulfilled dreams of a free and independent Iran. While Iran holds "democratic" elections, real power lies with the reigning Ayatollahs who hold rigid and defining control over society.*
- *Though Iran has had a continuous history of foreign invasions and internal turmoil, the culture has absorbed many social and political changes without losing its unique sense of Persian identity. A popular current joke in Iran shows their ability to "bend" in order*

to survive: "We used to drink in public and pray in private; now we pray in public and drink in private!" (Elaine Sciolino: Persian Mirrors)

- *Iranians are nostalgically linked to their heritage with its defining great kings, artists, and passionate poets. Among the best known of the poets are Abu'l Qasem Mansur, also known as "Ferdowsi" (940–1025 CE); Omar Khayyam (1048–1131 CE); Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi (1207-1273 CE); and Hafiz (1325–1389 CE);*
 - *Ferdowsi's epic poem, "Shahnameh" ("Book of Kings") is a masterpiece both in content and narrative. Its 50,000 couplets make it perhaps the world's longest narrative and a towering achievement of recorded history reaching back to the beginning of time. Ferdowsi's "Shahnameh" is said to be the "wellspring of Persian culture:" the pre-eminent compendium of legend and knowledge about Iran's epic past; the handbook for good kingship and heroic valour; and above all, the encapsulation in both language and content of what is authentically "Persian." The writing of this epic narrative is in "Farsi," thus confirming this as the official language of the distinguished "Persians."*

"I shall not die, these seeds I've sown will save

My name and reputation from the grave;

And men of sense and wisdom will proclaim

When I have gone, my praises and my fame." Ferdowsi, c.1010

- *Omar Khayyam is the beloved and brilliant Persian poet, mathematician, and astronomer, famous in many fields but best remembered for his two-line stanzas with two parts poems called a "Rubaiyat." A critical thinker and person deeply concerned with the impermanence of life, he wrote about the importance of life's fleeting sensual pleasures such as wine, women, and song.*

"A book of verses here beneath the bough,

A jug of wine, a loaf of bread, and thou

Beside me, singing in the wilderness

Ah, wilderness were Paradise, enow!"

- *Rumi* was a Sufi mystic and poet known to Iranians as "Mowlana." He was born in what is now Balkh, Afghanistan (then part of Persia). A scholar of the *Qur'an*, Mowlana founded the Sufi order which later produced the "Order of the Whirling Dervishes." His works profoundly impacted the world around him with their passionate, spiritual, and philosophical messages.

On September 20, 2007, the 800th anniversary of his birth, there were huge Rumi celebrations across Iran, Turkey, and around the world, many of them hosted by UNESCO. Iran hosted a national "Rumi Week" in October, during which scholars from 29 countries presented 450 new articles about Rumi, and musicians performed new compositions to accompany his poetry. His burial shrine in Konya, Turkey is one of the most visited pilgrimages in the Middle East. Though Muslim, his poetry speaks of intoxication and being "drunk with ecstasy" in union with the Divine. ..

*"When love lifts my soul from the body to the sky
And you lift me up out of the two worlds,
I want your sun to reach my raindrops*

So your heat can raise my soul upward like a cloud."

- *Hafiz* was born in Shiraz, Iran and is affectionately called the "Tongue of the Invisible," partly due to the fact that little is known about his early life. His poetry carries a musical quality and is woven together in a playful and enchanting Sufi characteristic. Like Rumi, Hafiz uses secular images such as wine, drunkenness, and human passion as symbols of experiences with the Divine. He combines spirituality with earthly love to write of seekers longing for passionate union. Ralph Waldo Emerson remarked that "Hafiz is a poet for the poets." Gertrude Bell of Iraq translated many of his works into English and published them in 1897.

"I have enough of loss, enough of gain;

I have my Love, what more can I obtain?"

“That Beloved has gone completely wild

He has poured Himself into me

I am Blissful and Drunk and Overflowing!”

- *Iranians tend to be highly emotional, passionate, persuasive, and somewhat boastful; yet, for the most part, they are also very courteous, generous, intelligent, clever, and exceptionally hospitable. Important cultural traditions which exemplify this:*
 - *Persian bazaars and tea houses. Every Persian city and town has its own unique and local bazaar. There are more than 10,000 shops and stalls in Teheran’s main bazaar, most of which are underground, Bargaining is the way of dealing here ... but the profuse verbalism one hears is not just about price. Persians gather in bazaars to hear, argue, and learn about what is going on around them and the world. Tea houses are everywhere (thousands in Teheran alone!) and always buzzing with the same verbal intensity. To drink tea in Persian style, one does not sweeten the tea directly but rather places a sugar cube in the mouth and slowly sips the hot tea through the sugar cube. It is customary to have “3 cups of tea,” served in very small glasses, which encourages time spent together and deeper conversations.*
 - *Persian food. The association of “food” to any culture raises memories of tastes and preference and such ... but the sensual and emotional nature of Persian food is something else: it reflects the very nature of life itself. Beyond its memorable aromas, tastes, and textures, Persian food has long reinforced metaphors of Persian histories and traditions. For example, from the ancient Zoroastrian myth of the Twin Sons, the concept of “duality” in foods is represented by combining sweet and sour, light and dark, hot and cold, etc. Fundamentals include, meats, mixtures of herbs and vegetables, and delicate sprinklings of rose petals, dried limes, cardamom, cumin, saffron, and such. Since only fresh products are used, different regions feature their own favorite dishes. According to Najmieh Batmanglij, the results are “... healthy and uniquely Persian ... as colorful as a miniature, exotic yet simple, like a poem by Omar Khayyam.”*
 - *Persian gardens. The notion of gardens in the Middle East begins with the “Garden of Eden” and extends through the “Hanging Gardens of Babylon” and beyond. It is in Iran, however, that gardens have been elevated to an*

indispensable place in Persian culture. "Garden" comes from the Zoroastrian "Parad-aeza Baghs," meaning "paradise." While the criteria is that it be "cool and shaded," the Persians have brought beauty, elegance, and practicality to the idea. The rose was first cultivated and named here, as were the lilac, jasmine, narcissus, hyacinth, daffodil, and more ... all of which fill Persian gardens with life and fragrance. Persian gardens are the setting for important social occasions in Iran. Gardens are set in enclosed spaces which contribute to the sense of intimacy and closeness. Fountains are built to nourish the natural settings and create sound and movement, which enhances calmness and suggests "flow" for social discourse. Persians often refer to gardens as their "earthly paradise" and tend them with like manner and respect. In the movie, Not Without My Daughter, a gentleman says during the revolution: "When I think of what is happening to my country, I try to remember its gardens."

- *Persian carpets. Persians may well be best known around the world today for their exquisite skills in designing and creating magnificent Persian carpets. No two carpets are alike; this is because each is hand knotted, not just woven, in a very ancient and tedious tradition. Each strand of yarn is wrapped around the backing of a carpet and then tied in a special individual knot that is then cut to a desired pile. Along with the design and materials used, a carpet's value is determined by the number of knots per square inch. A well-made hand-knotted Persian carpet may have up to 800 square knots and take years to complete!*

Design, color, and type of knot all determine where the carpet was made and generally by whom. Different tribal groups, family clans, and regions of Iran all have their particular signature embedded in the carpet. Natural flowers that grow in an area determine the color, as no artificial dyes are used. Also, the patterns of flowers, shapes of trees, animal motifs, etc. tell mythical stories or tribal legends in the design. Because of garden features in many designs, some refer to the carpets as the "indoor gardens" of paradise of their homes.

- *The celebration of "Nowruz". "Nowruz" (meaning "new day") is the non-religious Persian New Year which is celebrated annually at the Spring Equinox, around March 21. It is the most important holiday in Iran, Afghanistan, most of Central Asia and indeed now, worldwide. Persians everywhere keep this Zoroastrian tradition with its symbolism of nature's re-birth of all living things and a 13-day celebration. A traditional outdoor picnic on the 13th day requires leaving the house and surrounding themselves with nature's re-birth of Spring!*

Shi'a Religious Beliefs and Traditions

- *Iranians never embraced Islam as it was presented to them by the Sunni Arabs in the 7th century CE. They are "Shi'a" and hold to the belief that "Ali ibn Abu Talib," cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), was the first legitimate leader (Imam) of the Muslim community following the death of the Prophet.*
- *"Ali" was succeeded by eleven other Imams, the twelfth and last of which is known as the "Mahdi." According to Shi'a beliefs, the "Mahdi" has been living in the "Occultation" since 872 CE, and will reveal himself in the "last days." Shi'as believe that the "Mahdi" provides inspiration and guidance to religious leaders such as "Ayatollahs," ("interpreters for Allah"). Sunni Muslims do not have "Ayatollahs" in their traditions.*
- *An elevation of the idea of "martyrdom" in Shi'a Islam occurred when the third Imam, "Husayn ibn Ali" was brutally slain and beheaded in Karbala, Iraq in 640 CE by the armies of the Umayyad (Sunni) Caliph. The martyrdom of Husayn is an event that in Shi'a Islam might be comparable to the crucifixion of Christ in Christianity.*
- *The most important religious Holy Day in Shi'a Islam is Ashura ... a day in which stories of "Husayn's" martyrdom are told and retold with great emotion and pageantry. Huge parades of men, beating themselves with chains, march through the streets, while women stand alongside to mourn and assist those overcome by emotion and pain.*
- *The Behesht-e Zahra ("Paradise of Zahra") in Teheran holds more than a million graves of "martyrs," who are thought to have a special place in paradise. Many buried here, some of which are very young teens, died during the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980's*
- *Most Shi'a Muslims live in or near the regions in Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia where the eleven Imams are buried (the Mahdi has not died but was last seen on the spot of the Shi'a Mosque in Samarra, Iraq). All of these burial sites are sacred to the Shi'a, with large pilgrimages occurring to visit them each year. The Karbala Mosque and burial site of "Husayn ibn Ali" is perhaps the most visited.*

- *Along with Sunni and all other Muslims, Shi'a Muslims share in the "Five Tenants of Belief" and the "Five Pillars of Practice" as presented in The Qur'an.*
- *As in all religions, there are ranges of faith, belief, and practice among Shi'a Muslims. Many hold to the beliefs but do not practice the traditions; others are very conservative; while the majority are somewhere in between. Also, many Iranians are not Muslim at all but follow the traditions of Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, the Baha'i Faith ... and others are of other faiths ... or of no faith at all!*

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