Performing the Iranian State
Anthem Middle East Studies

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Performing the Iranian State

Visual Culture and Representations of Iranian Identity

Edited by Staci Gem Scheiwiller
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A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

For the transliteration of Persian words in this volume, I have decided to Romanize them as closely to the spoken Western Persian in Iran as possible. I did consider the guidelines according to the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, as well as the Bahai system of transliteration developed by Shoghi Effendi, but opted for the simplest forms that match the vernacular.
INTRODUCTION: SETTING THE STAGE

Staci Gem Scheiwiller

What does it mean to “perform the State,” and in particular, what does this action mean in relation to the country of Iran? The concept of the “State” as a modern phenomenon has had a powerful impact on the formation of the individual and the collective, as well as on determining how political entities are perceived in their interactions with one another in the current global arena. In a time of mass globalization and hypercapitalism, State identities have become strengthened, as they demonstrate formidable presences in the globalized media, including satellite transmissions, the Internet and cellular phone communications. There has always been some sort of global contact, such as the silk roads that connected Asia, Africa and Europe, or the intricate infrastructure that led most of the ancient world back to Rome. Yet, increased daily contact between all geographic locations since the height of European imperialism during the nineteenth century has created a situation in which average persons are perpetually performing State identities for the world to see. The democratization of media has made us all international ambassadors, so to speak. Investigations of how these particular State identities may be formed, represented, disseminated, comprehended and maintained are crucial to discovering how structures of knowledge are constructed in relation to the world and to us individually.

In response to these continual rapid changes in defining and representing oneself and one’s relationship to others through the dynamic mediation of State apparatuses and global media, this collection of essays is an attempt to understand the individual’s and group’s relationships to the State and how this bidirectional interaction is performed and depicted, particularly in relation to the State of Iran. Furthermore, this collection of essays features a variety of case studies focusing on persons or groups who perform the Iranian State or a State of Iran as outlined, manifested and confronted by Iranian society, those in exile and the world at large.

“Performing the State” refers to an individual or a group of persons reenacting rituals, ceremonies, customs, traditions and laws, or donning certain guises that either accomplish the State’s goals or rebel against them as forms of critique. Performativity may occur through a process of citationality, in which persons are transformed and molded into perceived constructions of identity (i.e., through propaganda, modeled behavior, societal pressure or a religious norm), or through materialization, in which persons engage in material discursive practices (i.e., walking through the city) and apparatuses (i.e., contact with institutions). This anthology examines various approaches to determining the
Performing the Iranian State via the performativity of persons with the intention of illuminating how social practices, ideologies and identities are shaped, visualized, circulated and repeated—not only nationally, but also worldwide.

Two cartoons, produced by Iranians and published in Iran, comment on how the modern perception of Iran is performed and depicted at both home and abroad, presenting early examples of Iranian performativity. Both cartoons show “Iran” from the Constitutional Revolution (1906–11) and how the concept of world exhibitions in the colonial theater are mocked and later reconfigured (Figures 1.1, 1.2). In the first cartoon, a typical exposition depicting life in the capital city of Tehran, as it would have been shown in a European or American world fair, illustrates an underdeveloped country in comparison to those in Europe and North America. Three booths, aligned from right to left, are entitled kāleh-pażī (literally, head-cooking shop), dizi-pażī (meat stew shop) and haleem-pażī (meat porridge shop) and are shown selling these inexpensive cooked dishes, usually to poorer segments of society. Peddlers, dogs, cats and one donkey traverse the dirty unpaved streets. The scene seems rather dismal and undeveloped, considering that it takes place in the nation’s capital.

In another cartoon, the State of Iran is depicted differently by showing a State celebration. The portrait of the king, Mozaffar al-Din Shah Qajar (r. 1896–1906), rises above the architectural scene, centered with arms folded. His presence splits the composition into two parts. Flanking him are two flags that show the insignia of monarchial Iran, the lion and the sun. The slogan on the upper left-hand corner proclaims, “Became a constitutional monarchy; despotism was destroyed.” This cartoon was published in the newspaper Kashkul (1907–1908) after the shah’s death, as he had instated a constitutional monarchy on his deathbed in 1906. The then current shah Mohammad ‘Ali (r. 1907–1909) is absent from the cartoon, perhaps because of his oppressive measures resulting in the Minor Tyranny of 1908. The words jashn-e melli (national celebration) flank Mozaffar al-Din Shah, indicating it is a gregarious event for the country. Historian Shiva Balaghi also confirms that the presence of lamps, mirrors and trays of sweets and flowers suggest that a festival is taking place.

Beneath the looming presence of the king are several groups of well-dressed men who are discussing the affairs of Iran. They seem to stand in a compressed, metaphorical State of Iran. On the far left, a mulla shows his displeasure with the constitutional monarchy to another: “All the chaos, yelling of this group and child’s play of constitutional monarchy are the conspiracy of these kids coming out of school [Dar al-Fanun, a State polytechnic].” The next European-garbed group, described by Balaghi as “educated technocrats,” praises the students: “Wonder, everything [here] is from the schools and its students.” The third pair is European, and one remarks with surprise, “To tell you the truth, Friend, never in Paris have I seen such a civilized, rational, impressive and splendid celebration! It appears that the Iranians are […] progressing.” Finally, a government official exclaims, “[T]hese people run around like a four-horse carriage. God willing they do not fall onto the ground.”

The first cartoon illustrates an Iranian cognizance of how Iran is portrayed abroad in the colonial theater as backward to justify European and American world dominance and superiority. This image was created when elaborate world fairs functioned as fabricated
spaces of national performances through stages, props, booths and architectural façades with prosceniums, and actors and indigenous persons were hired to perform so-called traditional dances. Iran, in this case, is portrayed as bereft of the modern advancements that the king, Nasir al-Din Shah Qajar (r. 1848–96), had actually undertaken, while the neighboring exhibits of European and North American countries had shown mostly their great technological innovations. The first cartoon seems to address two issues: the racist depictions of Iranians abroad and the failures of the Qajar dynasty (1786–1925) to make Iran more competitive and pioneering in an international setting. Moreover, Iran as a political entity exists in relation to other States, and thus the modern State is inherently global by nature. Identities are continuously played out against one another as a way to differentiate one State from others, so that “Iranianness” (or any other national marker) is usually contingent on other national identities, which have all become actors in world politics. Sociologist Anthony Giddens has even remarked that the enormous scope and organization of modern States has transformed them into “players” or “agents” that possess anthropomorphic qualities. They are all in a great chess game on the globe and negotiate relationships with one another.

The second cartoon, although not directly a response to the first one, shows a different Iran in front of another proscenium with persons who are all presumably powerful and educated (and not of the poorer segments of society). There is a conscious effort on the cartoonist’s part to create a positive image of Iran by highlighting the significant roles of particular players: mullas, technocrats, Europeans and government officials. Most of their conversations speak highly of the Iranian State, promoting its semblance of progress that is indebted to the efforts of the students. The only dissenters are the mullas who question the students’ abilities to know what constitutes a good government. Historically during the Constitutional Revolution, conservative religious elements were increasingly seen as hindrances to modernity and technological development, so it is fitting that the cartoonist would frame the mullas as the antagonists in this period cartoon.

A more contemporary example of performativity in Iran proper takes place during the ancient Zoroastrian holiday Chaharshanbeh Suri, which always creates anxiety for the Islamic Republic, so much so that the government did not formally recognize it until 2004 under President Khatami (elected 1997–2005), although it still strongly discourages the ritual as dangerous and un-Islamic. The occasion occurs on the evening of the last Tuesday of the Persian calendar year, and because chaharshanbeh means “Wednesday,” the ritual theoretically lasts until early Wednesday morning. The event is celebrated by burning bonfires and leaping over them, fire being a revered and purifying agent in the Zoroastrian religion. Because of its pre-Islamic origin, the ritual is often used as a tactic to defy the Islamic Republic, which is fashioned after the tenets of Twelver Shi‘i Islam. Considering that the Zoroastrian population in Iran is less than 2 percent, and most of the celebrants are not Zoroastrian, the ritual becomes a subtle way of questioning State policies without outright political protest. The State understands this covert action of dissent, and so the event also provides an opportunity for the police to make arrests. In 2010 this holiday marked a particularly tense political moment in light of the contested 2009 presidential election victory of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (elected 2005–present) over former prime minister Mir-Hossein Mousavi (b. 1942), thus demonstrating a highly charged potential for protest through this celebration.
This non-Islamic ceremony is also a conduit to reaffirm a sense of Iranian identity in *differance* to an Arab or Islamic one, because many aspects of Iranian life had become Islamicized/Arabicized after the Iranian Revolution (1978–79). Artist Shirin Neshat (b. 1957) has remarked that during her return to Iran in 1990 after an 11-year hiatus, Iranian identity in the public sphere had become more Islamicized and Arabicized: “Street names had changed from old Persian names to Arabic and Muslim names [...]. This whole shift of the Persian identity toward a more Islamic one created a kind of crisis.” The literal renaming of public space by the State was an effort to revolutionize even the physicality of the cityscape and to reinforce the State’s message on the most mundane level. After the revolution, the new Islamic Republic had reclaimed the streets. Yet a ritual such as Chaharshanbeh Suri recovers not only the streets in the name of the people, but also affirms a pre-Islamic Persian identity of the streets themselves, which may have been mitigated by their Arabicized renaming.

One must be careful, though, not to demarcate which political stance is more compelling or to assume that the only competing ideologies in Iran are those influenced by Twelver Shiʿi Islam or pre-Islamic history. The rhetoric of the Pahlavi dynasty (1925–79) constantly invoked a pre-Islamic identity, such as the 2,500-year celebration of the Iranian monarchy in 1971, an opulent occasion that incurred much ire, considering the vast divide between the wealthy and impoverished classes. In addition, one must not think that to protest the policies of the Islamic Republic one must proclaim a Persian, pre-Islamic identity. For example, in a photograph taken by Shirin Aliabadi (b. 1973), a woman assumed to be Iranian is called “Miss Hybrid IV” (2008), because she wears a *rošari* (headscarf), a denim jacket *manteau* (overcoat), blue eye contacts and a bandage on her nose, presumably from a plastic surgical procedure (Figure 1.3). She has dyed her hair blond and blows a bubblegum bubble defiantly into the viewer’s face. On one hand, one could argue that this photograph demonstrates the nature of globalization or a colonial mentality that privileges blond-haired, blue-eyed women with smaller noses as ideals of beauty, to which women of color must aspire. Yet, it is possible to understand this photograph as one of rebellion against the State. The woman depicted has chosen an alternative Iranian identity to perform and in doing so, she visually shows her displeasure with the State, as she does not fit the ideal Muslim woman who behaves modestly and covers most of her hair. One may dismiss “Miss Hybrid” as seduced by the “West,” but this condemnation is exactly what the ideology of the State wants one to think in order to devalue and denigrate this woman’s attempt to express herself. In addition, it is misleading to think that each ideology is a closed system of beliefs and agendas, because they are actually porous and in dialogue with other ideologies. “Miss Hybrid” may be a Shiʿa Muslim and celebrate Chaharshanbeh Suri, but she also adopts another veneer that communicates a different point of view from the other two, hence the name “Miss Hybrid.”

**What is Meant by the “State”?**

In this project, the word “State” is used to distinguish a governing set of relations that set arbitrary borders that have been created though modern conflicts such as war and nationalism, whereas a “nation” is a group of people that claims an exclusive ethnic,
cultural, linguistic, religious or blood relationship. Ultimately, all States and nations are constructed to accomplish political aims and are modern phenomena that enable surveillance, censorship, oppression and even ethnic cleansing. When discussing the materiality of bodies and matter (addressed below), States and nations themselves do not exist a priori, but are founded in reified objects or traces, such as in invented symbols and traditions, through various ideological apparatuses that replicate power relations, circulated printed matter in the vernacular that forms the consciousness of a nation, or in material bodies (both human and nonhuman) that engage in material discursive acts.

The State’s duty, in general, is to produce a sense of the nation that will unite its citizens, such as to create a common enemy for waging war, but all States, regardless of how liberal and democratic they may seem, are oppressive, because they usually come into existence through some sort of violence. The State’s social contract with its citizens is generally uneven, with people having to dispel most of their rights in order to obtain few liberties and protections. Frankfurt School intellectual Walter Benjamin describes in “Critique of Violence” (c. 1920–21) the inherently violent nature of this social contract, as the nature of a contract is inevitably brutal:

It is the threat of violence that compels parties to enter into agreements, and it is the threat of violence that holds the agreements together. Yet, the social contract can never be an equal relationship between the State and its people because of the State’s immensity and power (i.e., military, police and infrastructure). As Benjamin states, only when the State is weakened can the other party (i.e., the people) rise in revolution, which in itself is another tumultuous event.

With this characterization of a generally violent, repressive State in mind, I follow anthropologist Michael Taussig in capitalizing the word “State” to connote a modern notion of the State that has become an entity unto itself. He cites Shlomo Avineri’s Hegel’s Theory of the Modern State (1972), which explains that by capitalizing the word “State,” one implies that the State is a foreboding and oppressive entity, much like the one described by Thomas Hobbes in the political treatise Leviathan (1651). Capitalizing “State” also gives its signification a fictional character, because no “State” exists as a thing or machine except in material bodies (both human and nonhuman), interrelations and sign systems:

[I]f precisely put as the cultural constitution of the modern State – with a big S – the fetish quality of whose holism can be nicely brought to our self-awareness by pointing not only to the [...] way we [...] entify “the State” as a being unto itself, animated with a will and mind of its own, but also by pointing to the not infrequent signs of exasperation provoked by the aura of the big S [...] For what the notion