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Coexist with Uncertainty - The 'Persian Model' and the Western Vision of the Islamic World

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Abstract

The present epoch is characterized by a trait over others: the renewed perception of uncertainty. It is the main engine of the current climate where one relentlessly looks for scapegoats to take the blame of the inability to understand. The possibility of analyzing configurations that the current paradigm cannot explain or understand, and which therefore condemns, is a 'thinking differently' (Rella, 1987) that leaves anyone displaced. Perhaps it is time to recognize that many of our frameworks of understanding are too rigid, preventing comprehension. Accepting the fact that culture is perpetually *in fieri* and that it resolves itself in coexisting and conflicting versions that focus on different themes has interesting consequences: it involves the denial of the absolutist claims of the dominant paradigm and, consequently, implies the synchronic coexistence of different structures of meaning. Without this awareness we tend to generalize: for example, we tend to group all Middle East peoples into categories defined *a priori* as 'Arabs', 'Muslims' or, worse, 'Terrorists', ignoring their diversity and variety. This is a legacy of Orientalism that leads to the analysis of different structures and phenomena using consolidated paradigms of Western culture (Said, 1978). A new inclusive paradigm is needed which should stimulate the knowledge and understanding of a world seems so distant and has so many facets within it. It is a paradigm, moreover, that can take into account the simultaneous presence of contradictory elements and make a new sense out of them. Iranian society is actually trying to do this: its population is able to make different points of view empirically cohabit, even though they are victims of the stereotypes of Western common point of view, being a majority Muslim nation – albeit of a less known branch – and on the borders of the so-called Arab world. It has based its essence on cohabitation, which becomes the founder of the spirit with which over time the Persians have faced the cultural clashes (Huntington, 1996) and that, despite

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creating uncertainty and misunderstanding at times, is still an example of the union of opposites. Therefore, that Iranian society pushes towards overcoming dichotomies and towards a complex qualitative balance and, through the analysis of the wrong perception that the West has of the Islamic world, we could discover something unexpected: the existence of more dominant paradigms and even more others to be reconstructed.

Keywords: uncertainty, *Et/et*, Persian model.

1. The uncertainty of understanding

Our cultural baggage is determined by the set of rules, values, ideologies, symbols and myths that participate in the identity of an individual or an entire society. Therefore, culture is unavoidably linked to identity and life experiences and needs to be handed down and continually updated to avoid extinction in the void. However, beyond the individual pole of this transmission, concerning the relationship between neighbors, nowadays a planetary pole has developed: the one of understanding between distant peoples.

As a result of the process of globalization, encounters and ties between people of different cultures have multiplied and they often bring with them fear derived from misunderstanding. When we critically analyze the basis of our actual knowledge of different cultures, a series of doubts emerge: we realize that we 'know' only what we think, what we mean and we want to say; and it is from this 'inner' experience that the frame where other people are locked up is built (Bauman, 1978). When we pretend to know what others think and mean, we don't refer to what we actually see or hear, but to the way we interpret what we see and hear. The other is imprisoned in a 'Procrustean bed' where is continually reduced to only one way of thinking and acting, to a single model (Taleb, 2007). One assigns to the other what is known about oneself and reduces it to an already known framework, without trying to understand it effectively, while the process of understanding should involve the carrying out of a process of empathy and, consequently, openness and mental flexibility.

This ignorance and misunderstanding between different mental structures concerns with what Edgar Morin calls *self-deception*, that is, deceiving oneself in order to project onto others the causes of a possible failure. Self-conviction, generated through self-justification, to convince oneself of being better than one actually is, therefore, leads to the research for someone to blame for the root of all evil, like a scapegoat – in the case analyzed by this essay – a distant culture.

Self-deception leads to a complicated vicious circle composed of sincerity, lies, conviction and duplicity that leads to perceiving the words and actions of others as actions aimed at worsening one's own society, making the self-

understanding of one become the main source of misunderstanding of others (Morin, 2015). This pursuit of a scapegoat leads to ethnocentrism and sociocentrism, main sources of nourishment for xenophobia and racism, which in turn lead to mixophobia that in nowadays society is especially strong towards the countries of Islamic religion that – more or less intentionally – are lumped together (Bauman, 2016).

The attribute of a human being is denied to the bearer of another culture, considered distant and different from ours – the so-called ‘other’ – due to preconceptions, prejudices and rationalizations. The complexity of human beings, instead, comes to light when we talk about understanding other cultures, or better about an anthropological comprehension.

A kind of comprehension hard to develop and to teach, as a passage from the 2010 movie ‘My name is Khan’ effectively shows. In this scene, set in the period of the riots in India between Hindus and Muslims, Rizvan, a child afflicted by Asperger’s syndrome, imitates his neighbors while they praise the death of Hindus. His mother, of Islamic religion, tries to explain to him the substantial difference between the two categories of people around them:

Mother: [Drawing two little men on a sheet of paper] ‘This one is you, Rizvan, and this one, holding a big stick in his hand, beats you.’

Rizvan: ‘He is evil!’

Mother: [Drawing two other little men] ‘This is always you, Rizvan, and this other person has a candy in his hand and gives it to you.’

Rizvan: ‘He is good. Who gives candies is good!’

Mother: ‘Now tell me, which one is Hindu and which one is Muslim?’

Rizvan: [Looking closely at the drawn men] ‘They look the same to me...’

Mother: ‘Remember one thing, son. There are only two kinds of people in this world. Good people who do good deeds. And bad people who do bad. That’s the only difference in human beings. There’s no other difference.’¹

Rizvan’s mother, ‘simply’, teaches his son how to understand. Anthropological comprehension goes beyond the differences that are reputed to be such. It concerns the acceptance of the fact that among human beings there is the possibility of the best, as well as the worst, and that there are different personalities, different cultures, different points of view and that everything depends on the events. To paraphrase Hegel, qualifying someone as a criminal because he has committed a felony, this qualification will erase all other aspects of his individuality and his person. He is reduced to nothing more than a criminal, excluding all that he did of non-criminal in his life. The

¹ *My name is Khan*, directed by Karan Johar, India-U.S.A., 2010, Mumbai, Dharma Productions.

reduction process cannot be applied to what is human because life is made up of many facets and one cannot concentrate only on one of them, however immoral it may seem. A criminal is not only a criminal and a foreigner is not solely a foreigner. Focusing on a single negative factor of an individual's personality, reducing it to a single characteristic accentuates a single flaw and presents the whole, which is the person, as a monstrosity (Hegel, 1937).

Therefore, in order to humanly understand, we must avoid subjecting the other to a Kafkaesque process, from the outcome already decided *a priori*. The work of understanding requires first of all the comprehension of misunderstanding. To overcome misunderstanding, is indispensable the transition to a new complex thinking structure – a new model – that allows an open dialogue, without preconceptions or prejudices, between one and the other. The act of understanding should recognize one's own shortcomings and inadequacies and therefore highlight the need to understand oneself thoroughly before feeling able to judge the other. The ideological differences should be argued and disproved, rather than rejecting and stigmatizing them, since there is a need to overcome the hatred and contempt deriving from prejudices: by doing so, one can successfully resist inner and outer barbarism in moments of collective hysteria (Curti, Moroni, 2011). In fact, we can say that the worsening of human relationships in the last years is due to the lack of rooting of these concepts in human minds.

This consideration has the purpose of showing the short-circuit that this novelty, the globalized world, brings with it. The possibility of adding new traits and analyzing new features that the current paradigm fails to explain or understand and which, therefore, condemns, is a 'thinking otherwise' that represents an astonishing discovery (D'Andrea, 2010). We must face a harsh truth which shows how many of the frameworks of understanding often used to face reality are in fact too rigid, and discovering the existence of frames of dynamics that indeed we are missing. The incomprehensible requires to be faced with a different eye and a different ear, so, needs a different reading ability. Confronting and communicating with the stranger, or the different, 'the dirty being that is surrounding us', means swimming in the depths of one's mind, of one's perception, and thus discovering how simply a structure, that has so far been considered perfect, has been built. This experience will allow one to overcome abstraction, understanding how to face life using the 'sensible reason' – the knowledge and perception obtained through sensory capacities (Maffesoli, 2000). Therefore, returning to a life experience where sharing one's values and beliefs with others is not an 'invasion' of others' spaces, but something that generates ties and affection. Realizing and accepting that culture is a process in continuous evolution and that different versions, enhancing different themes, coexist within bring interesting consequences: results in a denial of the

absolutist claims of the dominant paradigm that presents itself as hegemonic and, consequently, implies the synchronic coexistence of different sense structures, therefore, objects and situations take on different meanings depending on the experience of the issuer and the experience of the receiver and, sometimes, they concern with the actual degree of knowledge of the other. This last trait can be analyzed using the first *a priori* of Georg Simmel: the other is only partially knowable, and society can exist as 'objective representation of several subjective consciousness' only through the formation of 'typical images' of the other (Simmel, 1908). The total unknowability of the other is remedied by integrating direct experience with elements drawn from one's own expectations, in this way, every slightest difference in the respective value sets can cause failures in the forecast, which are subsequently seen as betrayals from the other and not as discrepancies between its actual being and the personal representation that it has been given (Toscano, 2006). Taking into account the difference that exists between this type of misunderstanding and those that come from ideological prejudices is inevitable. In this case, all the cultural manifestations are conformed to the only admitted sense, which is the negative one, distorting the original sense and creating fears and panic. So, there is a need to build a new comprehensive model, an innovative communicative language capable of overcoming the obstacles brought to light by the complexity of the relationships within a culture, in order to succeed in the transmission of new contents. In today's globalized society there is a need to use reason in an inclusive way to favor the integration of the other that tends to get closer and closer, because today's hegemonic culture tends to represent those who are not part of it as outdated and attached to traditions and thought patterns that no longer find space in modernity because they are not conformed to its rigid definition criteria. Globalization is favoring the increase of anomalies and the paradigm on which our society is based is increasingly heading for a crisis, so that we find ourselves in a revolutionary phase that leaves room for the proliferation of alternatives that can culminate in the establishment of a new paradigm (Giorello, 2001).

The absolutist claims of the dominant paradigm are especially evident facing the problem of understanding the phenomena that occur in the Middle East. Procrustes is lurking whenever all the peoples of this area are grouped into categories defined *a priori* - as 'Arabs', 'Muslims' or, worse, 'terrorists' - ignoring the diversity and variety of existing ethnicities and cultures. This defect is a legacy of Orientalism which leads to analyzing different structures and phenomena using consolidated paradigms of Western culture; reducing the work of reason to a European tool which is used to construct the identity of a 'West' and, at the same time, to enclose the so-called eastern cultures in stereotypes and generalizations (Said, 1978). One should tend not to judge what

is considered difficult to understand as completely foreign, nor as completely habitual; there is a need to bring out a third possibility: to see things as new versions of something previously little known. This new possibility is a method to control what appears to be a threat to our usual view of the world (Mules, 1998). When, in the nineteenth century, an Orientalist visited the region of which he was a 'specialist', he always carried with him a small baggage of abstract notions on that given civilization and a great store of preconceptions and structures of European origin. He was not interested in anything else than confirming his own truths and theories, applying them, obviously without success, to everything he encountered, including perplexed and astonished natives.

Apparently nowadays a resurgence of this *modus operandi* can be found due to the climate of terror that oppresses today's society. Once it was believed to be safe in 'one's own home', it was believed that one's nation was a secure barricade where one would be defended and that there would be justice (Bauman, 2014). Things have changed since the very concepts of home and justice have changed: now both must be calculated with a global unit of measurement due two reasons: the first is that living in a world connected by virtual communication, one is no more excluded from nothing: no one can remain intellectually 'outside' of what happens thousands of miles away, there are no more unknown lands and civilizations and there are no events that will not affect our lives. Sufferings and problems of a distant country come forcefully into everyone's house, at first in the form of an image on TV or news on the internet, and then in the form of a desperate human being that we see along the streets: this is what Edgar is Morin calls 'mondialization' (Morin, 2017). The second reason is that, in a world so open to the free movement of people, goods and capital, nothing and nobody can be considered truly 'external'. Freedom of movement modifies the traditional concepts of national citizenship and culture specific to a defined place, concepts in which privileges are linked to spatial constraints. Nothing manages to remain indifferent to global events for a long time and the malaise of one place affects the well-being of another and vice versa: a chain of events can reach a point of crisis where the smallest changes are likely to grow out of proportion. Using the words of Milan Kundera, in the 'unity of humanity, there is no possibility of escape anywhere or for anyone' (Kundera, 1988: 26). The 'opening of society' thus acquires a new meaning: it is a society that fully admits its limits, its incompleteness and admits, as a consequence, that it has no control over what it has favored to create (Popper, 1945). It is exposed to the unexpected side effects of what can be called 'negative globalization' (Bauman, 2014): a globalization that brings the desired positive effects together with surveillance, violence, war, terrorism and crimes. In an 'open' society, full representative of

the community of destiny, we no longer live in a well-defined classist scheme, but in a new reality, defined as 'risk society' in which there is no feeling of security and, consequently, no trust in others and in ourselves. The *Risikogesellschaft* (Beck, 2000) has the sad task of coming to terms with the successes and failures of globalization, as well as with the speed of modernization. The insurance against the risks no longer allows a certain promise of security – as it should instead in the intent of modernity – against a totally open global future. The concept of risk society has as its basis in the principle according to which one should live in a world full of dangers never perceived before and currently, as already mentioned, the perception of danger nowadays comes from the 'unknown' Islamic world. Consequently, we can no longer ignore the need for a model that stimulates knowledge and understanding of that world which is considered distant and has many facets within it, and which, furthermore, refers to an inclusive logic capable of to consider the contemporary presence of contradictory elements not as an error, but as a new and innovative opportunity for mutual understanding and therefore for integration; a new obviously inclusive paradigm, where different manifestations of culture, value and subjective and collective choices find their place.

2. The struggle for recognition

A society that is constantly striving to deny the aforementioned prejudices is that of Iran, where the population manages to make different perspectives – religious, cultural, political and traditional – at least empirically coexist. Iranian society is a victim of stereotypes on the part of common Western opinion, due to the fact that it is a predominantly Muslim nation – albeit of a lesser-known branch, Shi'ism – and on the borders of the so-called Arab world, although not culturally part of it. A society that has based its essence on coexistence, which becomes the founder of the spirit with which the Persians have faced over time the cultural and civil clashes (Huntington, 1996; Annan, Matsuura, 2001) and which, despite sometimes creating uncertainty and misunderstanding, is an example of union of opposites; a spirit which pushes towards the overcoming of dichotomies and a complex qualitative balance. Iran is an extremely complex country, with a social, political, institutional, religious system at multiple levels and multipolar (Petrillo, 2008) and it is therefore possible to imagine the difficulties in describing a country characterized by such numerous and continuous transformations. Its millenary history, characterized by various conquests by different ethnic groups, revolutions and power grabs, inevitably leads to confusing the ideas of anyone who wishes to study the socio-political

evolution of this nation. The differences in the way the Persian people face the problems treated so far, compared to the rest of the world, start from the creation of the so-called 'Cyrus' Cylinder', dating back to the 6th century BC, where the Persian emperor Cyrus the Great had engraved the first decalogue of human rights in history, but immediately after the bloody conquest of Babylon (Kuhrt, 2007). The dualism of the Iranian people, torn between Persian traditions and Islamic customs, can be seen from their refusal to celebrate their own rituals and festivities according to the Islamic tradition 'imposed' after the VII century Islamic conquest, and accentuated after the 1979 Revolution, but following their ancestral tradition of Zoroastrian derivation (Zaehner, 2003). Furthermore, the system of government of the Islamic Republic itself presents an innovative structure for a Muslim state and it can be very easily noticed by comparing the Constitution of Iran with constitutional papers of other Islamic countries. This Constitutional Charter takes up the division of powers promoted by the French philosopher Montesquieu, according to which, to guarantee freedom, the powers of the state must be divided between different organs (Rahiminia, 2016). And because of the way in which a kind of absolute power is in the hands of the *Rahbar*² Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran remembers more the Fifth Republic of Charles De Gaulle than the classic Islamic model of the caliphate (Sabahi, 2006). This difference was underlined even by the then President of the Republic, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who in 1991 during a speech to the *Majles* – the Iranian parliament – said: 'When has the history of Islam ever seen a parliament, a president, a prime minister and a government? 80% of what we do is unprecedented in the history of Islam'³.

The main difference however, not so obvious in the common imaginary, is that the inhabitants of Iran are not of Arab ethnicity, but Persian. The expression 'Arab world' is conventionally used to refer to the twenty-two member states of the League of Arab States and saying 'Arab countries' means referring to countries whose majority official language is Arabic and the predominant religion is Sunni Islam. Arab countries should not be confused with the whole of the Muslim world because only about 25% of Muslims are Arabs, while many Islamic countries – such as Iran, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia or Indonesia – are not Arabs (Guazzone, 2007). Another difference is obviously the language: *Farsi* is spoken in Iran instead of Arabic – a language derived from the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European family of languages that is written using the Persian alphabet, a modified variant of the Arabic script (Meneghini, Orsatti, 2002). Crucial difference: both the Arab countries and Iran practice Islam as a religion

² 'Supreme Guide' in *farsi*.

³ Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, speech to the *Majles*, 1991.

but, as already mentioned, while the Arab countries follow the Sunni branch of the Mohammedan faith, Iran is the biggest state in the world with a Shi'ite majority – followed by Azerbaijan and Bahrain. A significant manifestation of the Iranian will to emancipate itself from the association with the Arab world is the symbolism used for the International Red Cross forces. Originally the movement was born with a single symbol, precisely that of the Red Cross, although it was not the bearer of religious references, since it was intended as an inverted color version of the Swiss flag and wanted to recall neutrality; however in 1876 the Ottoman Empire raised objections to the symbol of the cross, considering it offensive to Muslims. To preserve the unity of the movement, the Committee took note of the objections and allowed the adoption of the symbol of the Red Crescent, in the early 1920s, on the side of the majority of Islamic countries. Persia, not recognizing itself in any of the two emblems – now symbols of the Western world and the Arab world – asked for the inclusion of a new emblem: the Red Lion and Sun – from the symbols of the Persian imperial flag. Following the Islamic Revolution, due to the association of the emblem with the monarchy, the Islamic Republic of Iran replaced the Lion and the Sun with the Red Crescent but, to underline however that the Persian identity is different from the Arab one, the right to re-establish the old symbol at any time is reserved. The Geneva Convention still recognizes it as an official symbol and its status was confirmed again in the 2005 protocols (Ghassemlou, 2016).

Iranian people have always had to deal with the problem of not having an identity recognized by the vast majority of world public opinion, but not well established within the country itself (Abrahamian, 1982). In Iran there have been – due to the various dominations over the centuries – different cultures that have learned to coexist, which can be categorized according to two criteria: ethnic and religious. Following the first categorization, we can divide the population of Iran into Persians – the majority – Azeris, Turks, Kurds, Arabs and other minor ethnic groups; following the religious categorization, we can divide them into Muslims and non-Muslims; the former can in turn be divided into Shi'ites – the majority – Sunnis and minor branches; the latter can be divided into Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians – practitioners of the ancient Persian religion which we will soon address. Therefore, after the Arab invasion of Persia, a feeling of bewilderment arose in the Iranians because they had to choose between accepting a new culture, language and religion imposed or resisting and holding tight around the attributes that made Persian identity dominant (Meskoob, 1992). Persian pride chose the second path, and, although Islam replaced the native Zoroastrian religion, the Persians held their identity tight through language, literature, arts, rituals, and traditions. Persian literature and poetry are recognized as two of the most ancient and elegant traditions in

the world, unchanged from the pre-Islamic era, cultivating four different styles of writing: the epic, the *ghasideh* – panegyric –, the *masnavi* – poetry in quatrains –, and the *ghazal* – poetic composition. Among the major Persian poets we can mention Saadi, Omar Khayyam, Hafez and Rumi, which, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, perfected the style of the *ghazal*. Among the writers, Ferdowsi, author of the *Shahnameh*, the Book of Kings – important to the Iranians as the Divine Comedy for Italians –, took thirty-five years to finish his epic poem about the heroes of ancient Persia (Yarshater, 1988). If there is one thing for which Iran is well known around the world, it is undoubtedly the art of Persian carpets, which represent one of the most distinctive manifestations of Iranian culture and art. Strictly handmade, Persian rugs are among the objects of interior design considered luxury in the Western imagination and cover the floors of houses, offices, palaces and museums. Thanks to their high market value, these masterpieces are treated as a sort of investment, a value that rises and falls depending on the time. If in Europe is used the expression ‘the more wine ages, the better it is’, to indicate the increase in the value of an object over time, in Iran it is used to say ‘it’s like a carpet: the more you walk on it, the more is worthy’ (Mahdi - Daniel, 2006). Many traditional patterns, patterns and colors that we find in Persian carpets derive from nature – flowers, animal trees –, history – court or war scenes –, Zoroastrian religion – representation of the clash between good and evil in the figures of the gods Ahura Mazda and Ahriman – and ancient myths drawn from the *Shahnameh*. This highlights an identity that demonstrates the pride of the glorious pre-Islamic past, transforming carpets from objects of furniture into masterpieces with a strong symbolic burden (Edwards, 1975).

The analysis of traditions and festivities is particularly relevant to note the desire of Iranians to maintain their identity divided by the Arab/Islamic world as it is understood in the West. Spending few words about the Persian calendar currently in use is mandatory: the Gregorian calendar used in the West is perfectly known and used for convenience by the Iranians, but is not officially recognized; same story for the Islamic lunar calendar, called *Qamari*. The latter was imposed in Iran following the Islamic conquest of 633 AD, replacing the ancient and sophisticated solar calendar linked to Zoroastrian beliefs and traditions. Mindful of the enforced imposition of the lunar calendar and aware of its imprecision compared to the ancient solar counterpart, in 1911, following the Persian Constitutional Revolution, the *Majles* voted to return to the original calendar, which was named *Jalali* since recalculated by a commission of scientists led by the aforementioned Omar Khayyam – mathematician and astrologer as well as poet – during the reign of Emperor Jalal ad-Din Malik Shah Seljuqi (De Blois, 1996). Initially the names of the signs of the zodiac were used to name the months, but in 1925, following a new manifestation of patriotism,

it was decided to rename the months with the names of the minor deities of the Zoroastrian pantheon: *Farvardin*, *Ordibehesht*, *Khordad*, *Tir*, *Mordad*, *Shahrivar*, *Mehr*, *Aban*, *Azar*, *Dey*, *Bahman*, and *Esfand* (Mahdi, Daniel, 2006).

As stated, the manifestation of the desire to maintain the pre-Islamic identity is evident from traditions and celebrations. There are numerous feast days in Iran, both civilians derived from the celebrations of the Islamic Revolution of 1979 or from the life of its leader the Ayatollah Khomeini, both festivities linked to the Islamic Shiite tradition such as Fridays and *Eid-e Ghorban* – the feast of sacrifice. However, the category of feasts interesting for this research is the one of the so-called ‘national holidays’. They can be defined as such because they are deeply rooted in the history and tradition of the country, in contrast to civil holidays linked to socio-political events and religious festivals. They are linked to the cult of the sun and were – and still are – part of the Zoroastrian tradition, but now so secularized that they have become disconnected from religious significance, becoming a symbol of recognition for Persian communities around the globe (Zaehner, 2003). These festivals are five and they are: *Chaharshanbeh Suri* – the last Wednesday of the year; *Nowruz* – the New Year’s first day; *Sizdah Bedar* – the thirteenth day of the year; *Yalda* – the night of the winter solstice and *Sadeh* – the fire festival.

On the evening of *Chaharshanbeh Suri*, Iranians organize convivial dinners with family and friends and they light three small bonfires in the gardens or on the street. Whoever desires it, jump over the flames singing ‘*Zardi-e man az to, sorkebi-e to az man*’ – my yellow to you, your red to me – nursery rhyme with a strong symbolic charge since it represents a purification rite where you want to draw energy, determination and heat from the fire – red –, abandoning weaknesses, envy and problems – yellow (Kasheff, 1990). A sort of celebration of the victory of light over darkness, once again in memory of the eternal challenge between Ahura Mazda and its counterpart Ahriman (Rahiminia, 2017). The origins of the ritual date back to 1700 BC when the ancient Iranians celebrated the festival called *Hamaspahmaedayā*⁴, the last five days of the year dedicated to the spirits of the dead. The Zoroastrians believed – and still believe – that the spirits would return, led by the Amesha Spentas⁵, and that through

⁴ Today’s Zoroastrians call it *Farvardigan*.

⁵ Literally ‘immortal spirits’. They are seven – counting their creator Ahura Mazda – e, respectively in Avestan and in Farsi, their names are as follows: Vohu manah/Bahman (the well thinking), Asha Vahishta/Ardawahisht (the excellent law), Kshatra Vairya/Shahriwar (desirable domain), Spenta Armaiti/Spendarmad (the holy devotion), Haurvatāt/Hordad (integrity), and Ameretāt/Amordad (immortality). More than concrete entities, however, they are represented as abstract concepts that help the divinity Ahura Mazda/Ohrmazd in the good governance of the universe.

the sacred flames, they would fulfill the request for strength made by believers. During the *Chaharshanbeh Suri* a custom is practiced, which reminds the Western observer of Halloween even though it was born several centuries before, where children go from door to door knocking spoons against pots or dishes, receiving sweets and candies. This custom is called *Ghashogh zani* – literally ‘beating with a spoon’ (Moin, 1972).

The most important event is the Persian New Year, the *Nowruz*. Celebrated not only in Iran, but also in Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, Georgia, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan and the Kurdish communities; it occurs mainly on March 21st, but, actually coming to coincide with the spring equinox, it sometimes happens that is celebrated on the 20th. However, the time is variable and can be celebrated at midnight only if the time of the equinox is correct. According to Iranian mythology, the *Nowruz* is even traced back to about 15,000 years ago, at the time of the legendary Persian king Jamshid, a mythical figure of Zoroastrianism, who it is indicated by tradition as the creator of this celebration of the arrival of spring. Later Zoroaster, prophet of the homonymous religion, reorganized the festival in honor of Ahura Mazda (Zamani-Farahani, 2013). *Nowruz*'s main event is the preparation of the *Haft Sin*⁶, a table prepared with seven elements that begin with the letter S – whose reason, however, is the subject of discussion by scholars (Shahbazi, 2012b) –; a composition with a strong symbolic meaning since because, as in Western culture, even in Zoroastrianism the number seven is of crucial importance: it represents the seven Amesha Spenta mentioned above (Rahiminia, 2017). In classical Zoroastrianism, the table was called *Haft Chin* – composition of the seven – and the seven elements directly represented the Amesha Spenta. Nowadays the seven elements have been added to the original composition with the initial S, for a greater good omen for the course of human daily life. The elements of Haft Chin are:

- A mirror, representing the sky
- Apples representing the earth
- Two candles, representing the sacred fire
- Rose water, representing water
- Blooming lentils, representing nature and rebirth
- Goldfish, representatives of the animal world
- Painted eggs, representing human fertility

The elements added with the letter S are:

- *Sombol* – hyacinths – representing beauty
- *Samanu* – a sweet made of wheat – representing conviviality
- *Senjed* – fruit of the oleander – representing love

⁶ In Persian *haft* means ‘seven’ and *sin* is the name of the letter S.

- *Sir* – garlic – representative of medicine and health
- *Sekkeh* – coins – representing economic well-being
- *Somagb* – a traditional persian spice – representing the dawn
- *Serkeh* – vinegar – representative of patience and wisdom derived from age.

In addition to these elements, a holy book – the Koran, the Avesta or even the Bible or Torah, in the case of Christian or Jewish Iranians – is usually inserted, while the most patriotic Persians exhibit the *Shahnameh* or Hafez's *Divan* and a patriotic touch small flag or symbol of the nation where they live (Shahbazi, 2012a).

*Sizdeh Bedar*⁷, on the other hand, is the thirteenth day of the year. Given that in the Persian tradition thirteen is an unlucky number – as in so many other nations – it is believed that bringing problems and anxieties on that day brings bad luck throughout the year. Therefore, families tend to make trips out of town trying to enjoy themselves as much as possible, in a way not very different from our Easter Monday (Mosaheb, 1966).

Another special holiday is the celebration of the *Yalda* night, which is equivalent to the winter solstice. In the Zoroastrian tradition, the longest and darkest night of the year is a particularly inauspicious occasion, the time when it is believed that the forces of Ahriman – the god of destruction, counterpart of Ahura Mazda – are at their peak. Believers are advised to meet and stay alert against the forces of evil, fighting them with joy and happiness. Therefore, during the longest night of the year, Iranians gather with their family to eat, drink, play and sing late into the night (Mahdi-Daniel, 2006).

Last but not least, the most characteristic of today's national holidays in Iran: the *Sadeh* night. It is an ancient Iranian festival dating back to the first Persian kingdom, the Achaemenid Empire – 540 BC - 330 BC – and it has been celebrated since then. The term means 'hundred' in *Farsi* and, in fact, it is celebrated fifty days before *Nowruz*, referring to the 50 days and 50 nights since the end of the summer. So, the *Sadeh* is a winter festival where a huge pile of wood is set on fire, dancing around to celebrate the grandeur of ancient Persia, and to honor the fire – the sacred and principal symbol of Zoroastrianism – and defeat the cold forces of evil (Krasnowolska, 2009). Despite the fact that for the majority of the population, which is of Islamic religion, this feast has no religious significance, Iranians of every creed and faith come together on that day, without prejudice, to maintain and respect their ancestral traditions.

We have, therefore, seen how much the Iranian society is proud of its millennial roots and its pressing for them to be recognized and considered by the international community, by creating its own style of behavior that can be

⁷ In Persian means literally 'outside on the thirteenth'.

defined as a 'Persian model': in order to consolidate its Persian identity despite the Islamic customs and traditions imposed by the Arab invasion and the Islamic Revolution of 1979. This pride pushes every single Iranian to follow and pass on the teachings of Zoroaster, enclosed in the triumvirate *Goftare Nik*, *Pendare Nik*, *Kerdare Nik*, which in *Farsi* mean 'good words, good thoughts, good deeds', mantra handed down from father to son for about three thousand years. This model leads the average Iranian to an understanding of himself and his culture that leads to an openness towards diversity that he finds in his own land and, consequently, towards an innate respect for foreign cultures and a morbid desire of understanding and knowledge of the same. May this paradigm be the perfect example for future world generations that will allow overcoming the fears derived from the misunderstanding of the considered distant cultures? This model, which we can define as exclusively Persian, seems a first step towards this target that currently seem so distant and difficult to reach.

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