

## ETHNIC IDENTITY IN IRAN

Richard N. Frye  
*Harvard University*

### 1. General Observations

At the outset we may follow a simple, general model of identification for all people from ancient times to the present. The earliest and most basic definition from childhood is with one's family. In prehistoric times, this identity was soon expanded to the extended family or the clan. In time the clan, together with other clans, became part of a larger unit — the tribe. For centuries, if not millennia, the tribe remained the ultimate marker of identity.

If the tribe settled in a certain area, then either the tribe would give its name to the land, or the name of the land could be adopted by the tribe. The latter usually happened when the tribe moved to a territory already occupied, which bore a name given by previous inhabitants. The earliest settlers would be absorbed, killed or driven away by the invaders, or the latter themselves would be assimilated. One may speculate that this was the situation which developed during the Neolithic age, when agriculture expanded among various tribes and at different times. Each group then occupied or settled in one area. Afterwards people could be identified by their tribal name and/or by the place where they had settled. Tribal names frequently would be maintained, or at times, changed to the name of a prominent leader. This can be observed even in the historic period. For example, a federation of Turkic tribes on the steppes of southern Russia and present Kazakstan, some time after the Mongol invasion, adopted the name of their chief Uzbek Khan, and became known as Uzbeks. This designation which was then applied to all who lived in the territory occupied by the invaders.

The key in the future development of identity was the formation of a state structure, either by confederation, as among the nomads of Central Asia, or in conquests and expansion of territory by sedentary populations. This latter development led to the creation of settled states, and to the identification of a people by tribe (or clan), or place, to which was added "subjects of king X." This third stage in the development of an identity model was that of the ancient Near Eastern kingdoms of the Fertile Crescent, and Egypt, as well as the various states of ancient China. The personality of a great leader usually began the process of state formation, which was then continued by his successors. Again, to

refer to the formation of the Uzbek state, the real founder of their state in the oases of Central Asia, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, was Shībānī Khan. In search of ancient roots and a prominent ancestor, the name Uzbek spread and became identified with the state created by Shībānī.

This process differed in various lands, and sometimes toponyms came to represent a state, especially when that state expanded to become an empire. This last step, however, was frequently a construct of foreigners, or even modern scholars. For example, the people of the Assyrian Empire did not call themselves subjects of Assyria, but rather subjects of the ruling monarch, Sennacherib, Essarhadon, or the like.<sup>1</sup> In the Near East, this identity of people lasted well into the Achaemenid Empire. At that time changes set in and reached their culmination in the period of the Hellenistic successors of Alexander. Some traditions, however, continued even after a radical change in government. In Iran, for example, dating of events by the years of the reigning monarch continued until to the coming of Islam.

It may be argued that this description neglects two factors: religion and language. I suggest that these two, although always present, did not assume an important place in the designation of identity until later. Polytheism was the general rule before the first millennium B.C., but by the time of the Achaemenids, in the middle of the millennium, henotheism or monolatry had become the fashion. This meant that when Cyrus entered Babylon and "seized the hands of Marduk," he paid homage to the local deity, in accordance with the beliefs of the place and time. Although the deity or deities of one people might "conquer" those of another people, when a victory of one kingdom over another was made, the deities were still considered to be specific to certain tribes, places or regions, for "conversion," in the modern sense, was not practiced. Consequently, as in the case of Cyrus, tolerance towards the faiths of other people seems to have been the norm. People usually did not specifically call themselves worshippers of Marduk, Bel, or other deities as a determining factor in their identity. Nor did they identify themselves by language since local dialects flourished. But this was to change with the spread of writing, as well as the imposition of "official" languages, both spoken and written, by the state.

---

<sup>1</sup> The great catalyst for change in ancient Western Asia came with the last Assyrian Empire, for the background of most of the developments in the Achaemenid Empire had their roots in the preceding one. The changes in the most important factor of identity in the Near East, as well as in Iran, could be briefly summarized as follows: to the 8th century B.C.E.- tribal identity, to the third century A.C.E. -religious identity, and after the 16th century- "national" identity, which combined state, religion and language. For most inhabitants of villages throughout the ages, however, identity stopped at the boundaries of the village.

A state, and especially an empire, had to establish an official written language, as well as an official spoken language, to unite different tribes and peoples and to manage the affairs of government. In the Assyrian and the Achaemenid Empires, the importance of language came to the fore and language came to be a factor of distinction between peoples. All peoples in the Fertile Crescent were Assyrians in the eyes of the Greeks of the seventh century B.C.E., although, as was their wont, they dropped the initial a- and called them Syrians. It is uncertain whether it was their common spoken language, Aramaic, or because all were under the king of Assyria, that they received a common designation. Language as an identity marker, however, never attained the status of religion which came after the second century of our era. Why was this so?

Religions changed with the spread of monotheism, or rather the birth of world religions, which led to a change in the allegiances of peoples in Western Asia, who now began to identify themselves primarily as adherents of one religion as opposed to others. Intolerance replaced tolerance, since a world religion, such as Christianity, Manichaeism, and even Judaism and Zoroastrianism to a lesser extent, which claimed universal truth, could not countenance a rival. Conversions were in order if the religion were to be "universal." Before the spread of universal religions concepts such as orthodoxy or heresy hardly could have existed. Everyone was now defined mainly by one's religious community, rather than by tribal or even political allegiances. In the Roman Empire, pride in being a citizen changed to pride in being a Christian. In Iran, however, old beliefs persisted longer, although a few new concepts developed, which should be examined.

### Iranian Identity

When Cyrus II formed the Achaemenid Empire, did the Iranian tribes feel a common identity, as opposed to their views of the Babylonians, Greeks and others? Cyrus belonged to the extended family of the Achaemenids, of the clan of Pasargada, and of the Persian tribe or people. The clan was the first to lose importance in the new political structure, and by the time of Darius it is not mentioned in his inscriptions. In these he declared he was "an Achaemenid, a Persian and an Aryan." What was the significance of the last term?

It seems that the concept "Aryan" has a very ancient history, for the Vedic and the Avestan people both called themselves by that name. We may presume a certain solidarity feeling, what Ibn Khaldūn called *'aṣabiyya*, among the Indo-Iranian tribes which invaded the sub-continent and the plateau. Apparently this solidarity continued to exist in Iran when the Medes first united the Median tribes, and then extended

their hegemony over other Iranian tribes, including the Persians. It continued under the Achaemenids, when the Iranian tribes were considered units of peoples, nations and finally politically as satrapies of the empire. The Sogdians, Choresmians, Bactrians and Parthians and others were those Iranians who had settled in Eastern Iran and Central Asia and who worshipped Ahura Mazda, "the god of the Aryans", and not just of the Persians, according to the Elamite version of the Behistun inscription. Other deities were worshipped, but the Achaemenid rulers apparently had decreed an "official" faith for all Iranians, further evidence of a concept of united identity among the Iranians. Outsiders, such as the Greeks, seem to have considered Persians, Medes and others as related, just as Dorians, Ionians and other groups were all considered Hellenes. Even though the Spartan state was very different from the Athenian, the peoples of both were Hellenes, as were the inhabitants of the cities of the Anatolian coast. At least this was the case of outsiders viewing the Greek world.

Did Darius and his successors think of the Iranians as belonging to a single nation within the empire? In two centuries of rule we may suppose that the Persian dialect of the rulers spread over the entire Iranian part of the empire as an "official" spoken tongue. Thus a certain unity of language and religion existed among Iranians, and this was important for the later memory of a great Iranian empire. Politically, however, all Iranians were subjects of their ruler, in the prevailing fashion of political designation in western Asia. With the coming of Alexander, one might ask, did such an Iranian unity vanish because of political change?

In one part of the extensive Iranian region, what may be called "greater Iran," unity of language, religion and culture remained intact and that was in Persis or Fars, homeland of the Achaemenids. Records of the past vanished, as eventually did the memory of individual rulers of the past empire. Elsewhere religion and culture continued with changes, but most of all local languages began to develop, and knowledge of Persian faded among the elites. First with the Greeks, and then by nomadic invaders from east and north, old traditions were altered but vestiges remained. The memory of a great empire, with the title "king of kings," was still alive, as one may see on coins minted by some pretentious rulers in eastern Iran and Central Asia. In the second century of our era, however, even greater changes in identity came with the "world religions," as mentioned above.

In the third century, the Sasanians established a new empire, which included most of the old Iranian lands except those in Central Asia. Since religion had become so important in the self identity of individuals, it was necessary for the state and religion to become united. Thus Zoroastrianism became the religion of Sasanian Iran as Christianity did for the Roman Empire. Intolerance became the hallmark of the state

religion, and suspicion of minorities, followed by persecutions, spread. Because of the writings of Christians in the Sasanian Empire, mostly in Syriac but also in Greek, we learn about the persecutions of Christians in Sasanian Iran. The lot of Zoroastrians in the Roman Empire is a *terra incognita*, but it is safe to assume they were persecuted and rooted out even more efficiently than minorities in the neighboring state. The ancient political tradition of identity as subjects of the ruling monarch, did continue in both empires, but religion and culture continued to be the more important markers for identity in Iran, and even in Central Asia.

The spread of the Persian language, as the "official" spoken and written language of the Sasanian Empire, went beyond the borders of the state, for merchants and travellers from the Sasanian empire spread knowledge of this tongue. Bactria, which at times was under Sasanian rule, experienced Persian as an official language, and as a second language beside local tongues. This is the reason why Bactria was the first region in Central Asia to adopt Persian in place of native Bactrian. This process began before the Arab conquests, and explains why al-Bīrūnī in the eleventh century, in his book entitled *al-Āthār al-bāqīya* 'an *al-qurūn al-khāliya* ("Chronology of Ancient Nations"), could describe the calendars and customs of the Sogdians and Choresmians but not of the Bactrians. The memories of the Bactrians previously had been replaced by those of the Persians, which in turn had absorbed many outside elements.

During the half-millennium of Seleucid and Parthian rule, the folklore and culture of Parthians, Kushans, Hephtalites, and others, mixed with the traditions of Fars to form the amalgam which came to fruition in the *Shāhnāma* of Firdawsī.

So what can one recapitulate about the ethnic identity of Iranians in ancient times? Always the extended family remained the most important and basic factor of identity throughout history. Tribal allegiance declined after the formation of the Achaemenid Empire, although the decline began earlier. With the Achaemenids political identity was added, together with religion and language as parts of this self identification, and earlier in Iran than elsewhere. But religion and language were associated with the political allegiance as subjects to the reigning monarch, and not significant in their own right. The conquests of Alexander and the Parthians disrupted the political unity of the Iranians but not the cultural identity. In time, however, even this became fragmented with only parts remaining. The formation of the Sasanian Empire brought about an enhancement of the religious and linguistic aspects of identity to the fore, as well as a reinforcement of cultural identification. Some scholars have claimed that only under the Sasanians did Iranian identity come into existence with the creation of the empire of Iranshahr. Among

the people of Iran, however, in varying degrees a conscious realization of being an Iranian with Iranian culture, or inter-related Iranian cultures, never died. In my opinion, in Iran of the Sasanians the emphasis on church-state identity was important, but not as much as culture. On the other hand the idea of a theocratic state, like the Arab caliphates, did not exist in Iran, for religion and state were considered as sisters in cooperation but not the same organization. It is perhaps paradoxical that the Arab conquests brought all Iranians together for the first time since the Achaemenids, and enabled a unified new Persian language and literature, art and culture, under the aegis of Islam, to spread far beyond the borders of Iran. One wonders if this always were not the case throughout history in varying degrees, for the glory of greater Iran eternally has been its culture, especially poetry.

As I have frequently mentioned, in my capacity as an official (*ra'īs*) of a governmental institution in Iran for many years, I learned more about Darius and Xerxes than from all of my reading of books. Furthermore, as I have told the Tajiks, who live in fear that they will be absorbed by their Uzbek neighbors and lose their language, not to fear, because the language of Rūdakī, Firdawsī, Rūmī, Ḥāfiz, Sa'dī and countless others, will not vanish from the face of the earth any more than that of Shakespeare and his kind. Some beliefs, customs and cultures are recognized as part of the whole human race, and the future will balance unity with diversity, after power hungry leaders everywhere finally realize that they cannot turn back the clock. They may obtain a short breathing space in promoting ethnic violence and pernicious nationalism but eventually they will not prevail. The future belongs to the idealistic young people all over the world who will create the new civilization to come.