

Borders

Itineraries on the Edges of Iran

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Marginalia on the Idea of Boundary and the Discourse on Identity in Iran

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Abstract The paper focuses on the theme of Iran and the frontier through five interconnected conceptual lenses, namely the broad notions of identity and identifications, the dyad Muslim/Persian and its relation with the third key denomination of 'Arab', the acculturative space of language, the meaningful role of the Ahl al-bayt and the Sayyids, and, finally, the meaningful polysemic place of *waṭan*, whose Western translation as 'homeland' notoriously posits several problems. More in general, a critical treatment of the all-seasons contrast between 'centre' and 'periphery' marks the whole discussion.

Summary 1 Identifications. – 2 Islam. – 3 Language. – 4 Elite. – 5 Homeland.

Keywords Frontier. Sayyids. Diaspora.

1 Identifications

The boldness of choosing such a monograph theme as the notion of 'boundary' becomes so much more apparent the more one wants to work, as is the case here, on a context – Iran – that is seemingly so acknowledged, as to seem to be a paradigmatic case. The fact is, this isn't actually true, except that the Iranian context is extremely difficult to define and, as such, it offers a composite spectrum of markers whose definition could provide a significant basis of comparison for other less problematic situations. In other words, Iran could be the best test case to try to define in a plausible and shared way a sort of persuasive inventory of the conceptual categories in which to place the question of the 'boundary' itself. My contribution here should be read in this light. The conceptual categories I will take into consideration here and illustrate by an example which might seem eccentric – how the sense of the presence of the descendants of the Prophet in Iran in the first centuries of Islamic rule relates to the notion of boundary – pertain to the definition of identity, with particular refer-

ence to the 'Islamic oecumene' (*dār al-islām*) and its meaning,¹ and to the different 'Islamic' contexts within it. Thus, they are different – albeit not necessarily in opposition – from those categories which seem to underline the descriptions of the Islamic oecumene and the different Islamic contexts given by the interested parties, for example the geographers.²

For a general view of the 'identity' question, I refer to the complex and articulate «Iranian Identity» entry of the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, entrusted to several authors and with a rich bibliography, whose chronological arrangement I would like to underscore: 1) Perspectives on Iranian identity; 2) Pre-Islamic period; 3) Medieval Islamic Period; 4) In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; 5) In the post-revolutionary (Ashraf et al. 2006).³

Methodologically, as far as my example goes, I refer to Jan Assman's theory, as it is summarized in the *Introductory Speech* by the former President of the Societas Iranologica Europaea Maria Macuch to a collective book devoted to the *Iranian Identity in the Course of History* (Cereti 2010). In his renowned work on 'cultural memory' Assmann «has suggested a theoretical division of 'identity' into three categories of (1) 'individual', (2) 'personal' and (3) 'collective' identity», where the first category «denotes the conscious image a person has built of himself»; the second one «denotes the sum of all the roles, characteristics and competences assigned to a person in the specific social context of the community he or she lives in, determining the status and social standing of the individual in the community»; and the third one «is the image a group of people has of itself» as the result «of the identification on the part of the involved individuals, since it does not exist *per se*, but only at the extent certain persons are willing to commit themselves to it» (p. 2). Regarding the second category, it seems to me even more necessary to quote some passages by Brauer (1995) that, on the one hand, best express what underlies my analysis and, on the other, are relevant to our discourse as they are «observations based on data from Arab-Iranian Societies» (p. 66).

While translating al-Idrīsī's *Book of Roger...* his great 'Opus geographicum', I failed to encounter any references to boundaries between various political or ethnographic units in either the text of this work or the maps accompanying it. In view of the importance of boundary concepts,

1 For an example of how this expression is fluid and not at all obvious, see Calasso 2010.

2 On the ambiguity of the various adjectives used to define what is 'Muslim' and what is 'Islamic', and on the advisability, at least among scholars, to agree on it, see the *Preface* by Babayan in Babayan, Najmabadi 2008, a relatively recent text that, among other things, deals also with the notion of 'boundaries' in the context of sexuality. Babayan (p. IX) refers there to the opinion and the proposal made in an epoch-making work by the well-known Islamist M.G.S. Hodgson (1974).

3 For the post-revolutionary period, the entry refers to the online Supplement.

this observation seemed worthy of further enquiry to determine whether it may represent an idiosyncrasy of this one author or prove to be a reflection of a more general characteristic of the geography concepts current in the Arab-Islamic civilization.

Al-Idrīsī's work was written in 1154. In subsequent passages, Bauer proposes a comparison with the older *Kitāb ṣūrat al-'arḍ* by al-Khwārizmī (vixit ninth century), which also «did not include information on boundaries» (p. 1 ff.). According to Bauer, that influenced cartography to such an extent that «examination of maps by twenty-three Arabic-islamic geographers working between 820 and 1350 AD shows that boundaries are completely omitted for much of the cartography of the period, and are represented only by simple geometric lines having symbolic rather than geographic significance... The data suggest that each country was conceived of as being divide into a core including its centre of power and a periphery separating that core from the nearest adjacent country» (pp. 6-7). Leaving aside the many technical remarks one finds in Brauer's work, despite their relevance (as, for example, the unresolved question of the *amān* as a safe-conduct), it must be pointed out that the existence of a conflict in progress between two adjacent Muslim countries could involve some emphasis on boundaries - which instead are clearly drawn between the peripheral regions of the empire and the countries outside the *umma* (pp. 8, 11, 16). In conclusion, Brauer's work confirms two points considered to be particularly indicative of the medieval Islamic world: the urban framework, which values greatly the centre(s) as an aggregating element of the *dār al-islām* («Muslim geography of the Middle Ages is a linear geography, conceived in terms of a network of lines of communication between cities», p. 13); and a *dār al-islām* which in turn is understood as an expression of an *umma* without inner boundaries, as it is logical if, as the same Brauer reminds us (p. 40), one can regard as truthful the following words of al-Māwardī (died 1058): «only where the Islamic lands are divided by a sea, the territory of *dār al-islām* [...] can be conceived of as divided in two or more political communities, the rulers of which are independent of each other, though they owe ultimately subservience to the Imām».⁴

In the face of their apparent irrelevance, the congruence with the

4 Note that the Moslems, in the Ottoman period, adopted the traditional categories that were used in their Empire to define the *millet*s - communities identified on the basis of their religion as a primary identity factor, without being necessarily linked to a specific territory - also in relation to the Christian world. It is worthwhile to recall how the Sultans began their letters to Elizabeth I of England: «Glory of the virtuous ladies of the Christian Community, Elder of the reverend matrons of the Sect of Jesus, Moderator of the peoples of the Nazarene Faith, who draws the trains of majesty and reverence, Mistress of the token of grandeur and glory, Queen of the *vilāyet* of England, may her end be happy» (quoted in Lewis 1988, p. 39).

themes underlying the concept of ‘boundary’ of the example chosen as a ‘marker’ is more than plausible. The *Ahl al-Bayt*, the People of the House, the Family par excellence, lends itself especially well to illustrating the paradigm of the three diverse *and* convergent identities postulated by Assmann. The expression *Ahl al-Bayt* can be interpreted in a more or less inclusive manner. The descendants of Alī, cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad – since he is the husband of Fāṭima, the daughter of the prophet – are *Ahl al-Bayt*; still, the category can also include all the descendants of Abū Ṭalib, uncle of Muḥammad and father of ‘Alī, and in some cases even the ‘Abbasids. Though for my discourse the implications of one or the other meaning are not contradictory (cf. Bernheimer 2012), here the reference concerns in particular the descendants of ‘Alī and of Fāṭima, the Ḥasanid and Ḥusaynid branches of Alids. These two branches are significant for their political and religious visibility.

For example, Shiite Imams – both the Twelvers and the Ismā‘īlites – are Ḥusaynid starting with the third one; the dynasties which ruled in the Ṭabaristān region between the ninth and tenth century were Ḥasanid. In any case, the awareness (*individual identity*) of each individual belonging to the Family is generalizable, especially if he can prove to ‘be part’ of the Family with a credible family tree, and can demand special treatment (cf. Morimoto 2003). The fact that the presence of a member of the Family in a particular place ennobles the place itself, involves a *personal identity* (bearing witness to the persistence over time of such awareness and the related prestige [cf. Elaouani Cherif 1999]). Finally, the belief on the part of the Family that they constitute a distinct social group despite it being distributed throughout the entire Islamic oecumene, establishes a *collective identity* upon which the claim of exceptionality referred to above can be based.⁵

This last information becomes particularly relevant in the face of a diaspora of exceptional breadth, which practically begins with Islam itself and does not stop: a diaspora which marks its territory in identity terms and, in a broader sense, becomes the essential foundation of the sense of belonging to the community of the believers – the *ummat al-islām* – in each Muslim, regardless of the place where he lives, the language he speaks and its social class. In other words, one of the many possible examples of the lack of interest in marking boundaries in a ‘geographic’ sense (as highlighted in the passage by Brauer mentioned before), favouring instead, as a defining criterion of *dār al-islām*, a boundary which is conceptually

5 In this regard, an important telling example is the *cultuality* which has the Family as its object. In fact, a specific devotion towards its members is transversal over time and spread in the entire Islamic oecumene, as demonstrated in Feener, Formichi (2016); the book includes a sort of *summary* of the question by the writer (*Shī‘a Devotion to the Ahl al-Bayt in Historical Perspective*).

dependent on the presence of Islam, not only as a religion but as a 'global system' that has as its strength, beyond just visibility, in the application of the Islamic law to which all the members of the community are subject, non-Moslems included. This helps to understand, in its primary acceptance, the meaning of the «ultimately subservience to the Imām» postulated by al-Māwardī as a basic criterion to establish where and how an Islamic instance of an institutional nature could mark, as *umma/dār al-islām*, the territory where it lives. Hence the importance that the presence of the Family assumes as a hold on which a peculiar idea of boundary can be developed – an elastic boundary, since it also depends, though not exclusively, on the mobility of the members of the Family. In fact, insofar as it is considered an 'institution' on the basis of the authority which comes from the blood tie with the Prophet, each of its members is invested with a representativeness that marks in an Islamic sense the place where he lives. This is a first, fundamental aspect of a possible manner in which to face the question of 'boundaries' in the Islamic oecumene, as long as it is considered to be a coherent cultural and institutional unit based in and from time to time represented by a given territory, whose boundaries are not based on an objective, unmodifiable fact, as a large river, the sea or a mountain range could be.

The diaspora of the Family, at least in my understanding, is not equivalent to a *hijra*. Despite what has been just said, such a diaspora does not have direct missionary goals in itself, even when the qualitative leap – in religious terms – of a certain group depends on one of its members. Besides, it is important to note that the Family is not internally homogeneous on a socio-economic level. On the contrary, hagiographic narratives on the economic difficulties of this or that member are quite widespread. Nonetheless, the presence or absence of a Family member in a given place affects its foundation, creating or highlighting an identity element that distinguishes that place from one which is 'adjacent'; and all this, as has been said before, in the name of diverse categories which are cultural rather than 'geographical', even if necessarily working in and on a given territory. Taking into account what has so far been said, we can attempt to see how the case of Iran in the first centuries of Islamic rule is an example of a process which to a large degree still persists.⁶

6 It is not by chance that today the Family, especially the Ḥusaynid branch, is creating a significant cultural presence outside the Islamic countries where there are important Muslim communities – as for example is the case with London – as well as in world hegemonic centres such as New York, as to demonstrate that it has the necessary requirements to co-manage such a hegemony (Mauriello 2011).

2 Islam

The Iranian plateau enters very quickly into the 'Islamic system'. It is a land of Arabic settlements (according to some evidence, the city of Qum was founded anew on Sasanian ruins, and in any case revived both by the Banū Ash'arī Shiite Arabs who came from Kūfa around 712 [cf. Calmard 1980] and by the Arab presence which will play a determining role in the success of the 'Abbasid *da'wa* in Khorāsān [cf. Shaban 1970]), and a passageway to the regions of Central Asia and India as well (Scarcia Amoretti 2006). There are two markers to refer to here: language⁷ and confessional belonging, the latter with particular regard to the weight to be assigned to the idea of belonging or not belonging to a minority form of Islam. The reference here is to Shia Islam which, as mentioned above, gives a specific centrality to Alid ancestry both in political and religious terms.

In the history of Islamic conquests, Iran is peculiar for two reasons: first of all, the failed mass Arabisation as compared to what would have happened over the course of a few decades in the Near Eastern area after the Arab conquest and, most notably, in North Africa, which had remained untouched by the trade nomadism of the Arab tribes of the Peninsula; secondly, the seemingly contradictory and similarly macroscopic phenomenon that sees the Persians as protagonists in the beginning of that extraordinary cultural blossoming which characterizes the first century of Abbasid rule in particular - a blossoming that expresses itself in Arabic. Here are two emblematic examples. One of the first and most famous grammarians of the Arabic language, Sībawayhi, was born in the surroundings of Shīrāz and, after a long stay in Baṣra, returned to Fārs, where he died in 796. The choice of Baṣra is indicative in itself, since it was there, and not in Kūfa, that «the Arab and non-Arab population formed a common social structure..., drawing together the conquerors and the conquered», as the result of a «common experience under Sassanid rule» (Wilkinson 1982, p. 129). The second example is represented by the most authoritative Ab-

7 It is not news that one of the most explicit identity factors, at least in the modern world, also connoting a territory, is the *language* as a special marker. Think of the paradigmatic case of the 'Arab world' where, between nineteenth and twentieth century, when - both in the Maghreb and in the Mashreq - there was a desire to embody the concept of 'Arab Nation' and language was pleaded as a founding element: only the one who speaks Arabic is Arab. In fact, all the intelligentsias cultivated the learned Arabic - not the spoken language, the so-called dialects -, and it is this Arabic that the theoreticians of nationalism refer to. In any case, the elites internalized this idea to the extent that in relatively short times this learned Arabic became the so-called 'standard Arabic' which has effectively succeeded in its identifying function. Today, the convention that establishes the definition of the 'Arab World' (or, if one prefers, its boundaries) as the Arab-speaking countries of the Near East and of the southern shore of the Mediterranean, is a given.

basid historian, al-Ṭabarī (839-923), who was born at Āmul, in Ṭabaristān, and at only seventeen years of age began his cultural adventure between Baghdad, Baṣra and Kūfa.

Now, what answer would our two authors have given to the question: How do you define yourself? Persian? Muslim? Or what else? If the answer had been 'Persian', that would have meant that the author gave his 'mother tongue' a primary identifying value, while if he had chosen 'Muslim', the religion intended as *dīn wa dawla* would have prevailed. But the latter answer probably would not have been considered as an alternative to the former. The extraordinary element is that the question of the status to be attributed to the language – Arabic and Persian, in this case – was very much popular in the intelligentsia of the period, in a sort of literary dispute which goes under the name of *shu'ūbīya*. We are between the ninth and the tenth century and the *querelle* that has its centre in the Iraqi cities of Baṣra and Baghdad will continue, with decreasing intensity, until the twelfth century. Between the ninth and the tenth century the great Persian literary production is still making its first steps. The crux of the problem lies here in the status of the Arabs and non-Arabs (*a'jamī*), the latter being in fact Persians. The starting point is the following Koran verse (49:18): «People, We created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into races (*shu'ūb*) and tribes (*qabā'il*) so that you should recognize one another. In God's eyes, the most honoured of you are the ones most mindful of Him: God is all knowing, all aware» (Haleem 2004, p. 339). Depending on the interpretation of the verse, a hierarchy between *shu'ūb* and *qabā'il* could be implied: a hierarchy that, at least in the beginning, does not concern geographical but rather in cultural terms, and more precisely the status to be attributed to Arabic and Persian. Referring to an encyclopaedia entry for a comprehensive close examination of the question and how it evolved over time (see, as a starting point, Enderwitz 1997), it should be noted that the problem of territoriality of Persian claims is given when there are no more political or hegemonic implications, namely when, «as the Iranian and Arab worlds drew apart, and the Arab and non-Arab ruling classes in Iran became one, the *shu'ūbīya* controversy no longer had any reason to exist» (Mottahedeh 1976, p. 181). The author of this observation comes full circle with a reference to an ambiguous concept which is anything but taken for granted (as is easy to verify by reading section I and II of the already mentioned entry in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* [Ashraf et al. 2006, pp. 501-507]): that of *Irān-zamīn* as an identity marker territorially understood, to which the sovereigns in this or that region of Iran may have referred to assert their actual independence even despite their formal submission to the caliph, who resided in Baghdad. Nonetheless, if it is true that, as Mottahedeh maintains, no possible comparison can be made between the concept in question and the national idea developed in Europe starting in the sixteenth century, we cannot exclude that «Iranians

of the early Islamic period had a dynastic and territorial understanding of the relation of political power to group feeling», nor that «the power of the government was mediated through an elite of local administrators and men of influence whose group identification was territorial and cultural» (p. 182). We will resume the question of the relationship between 'territorial' and 'cultural' in relation to the *Ahl al-Bayt* in Iran further on.

3 Language

The importance of the 'language' as an identity factor, as it relates to the impact of the Alid diaspora in Iran (and elsewhere), requires some clarification. In a work devoted to the linguistic factor, Alessandro Bausani maintained that, unlike Christianity (a difference which is by the way debatable, at least in some cases), Islam spread – and keeps spreading – starting from the top, in a process that envisioned the acculturation of the elites which then became a model for the lower classes to follow (Bausani 1981). The first element of such an acculturation was – and still is today – the learning and the resulting mastery of Arabic, whose hegemony over other languages, as is known, is first of all based on the fact that it is the 'language of God' and as such 'exceptional' in itself, besides its use by the powers in charge as the 'language of the state'.⁸ Based on these premises, the imperial, cosmopolitan and multilingual vocation of Islamised societies finds space and meaning and, at the same time, the role of Arabic as a primary element in the common feeling of belonging to the 'Islamic system' which has been mentioned. In other words, Arabic as a marker of a boundary between an 'inside' and an 'outside'; and an 'inside' which, in its turn, is

8 In any case, one should not forget that in Central Asia (Turkestan) and in the 'modern' Ottoman, Moghul and Safavid empires, born starting in the late fifteenth century, there was a real trilingualism: the local language(s), Persian as the literary and publishing language (as today is the case with English), and Arabic as the language of religion and of law. Only much later local languages would have been attributed any identity value of a national nature. To be more precise: the privileged role and position of Persian in the *belles-lettres* of the entire non-Arab Muslim world is indisputable and undisputed (the same could be said for the influence of Iranism on the Turkicised Arab world, unmistakable as far as figurative arts go, but still to be explored in literary aesthetics). Having said that, Persian played a very particular cultural role in that world. In Central Asia, already a great sounding board and background for Iranism in itself, it functioned as a constant and indispensable – and gradually Turkicised – mediator between popular and dominant culture (which obviously was Arabo-Islamic). This is not substantially different from what happened between Persian speakers, who use this language as a vehicle of antiquarian popularization; one must only think of the revised and Iranised translation of the *Ta'rikh* by al-Tabari attributed to Bal'ami around 963. In India, in a more complex and problematic context, Persian became a true cultural 'deuteragonist'. Conversely, as for what happens in areas in which Arabic does not confront rival languages of similar weight, one can think of the paradigmatic case of Sub-Saharan Africa (see Zappa 2004).

the expression of different level of citizenship, depending on the mastery of the Arabic itself – a citizenship, however, that, at least in the first centuries of Muslim history, is always and reasonably ascribed to the members of the Family. That is to say that all the members of the *Ahl al-Bayt*, not only but *also* because they were Arab speakers, could aspire to be automatically considered elite, at least at the beginnings of the diaspora movement. What is certain on the one hand is the fact that, in the land of Iran, Arabic remained over time the language of the written production of theological, philosophical, scientific, and genealogical works – the latter especially when the Alids are in question –, despite the fact that there are influential authors such as Avicenna (d. 1037) and al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), who, though in some of their minor works, make some concessions to Persian.

4 Elite

Some remarks should be added on the definition of elite when we are dealing with the *Ahl al-Bayt*. Social background and, to a lesser degree, religious belonging (Shiites versus Sunni, where it occurs),⁹ are presented as secondary compared to the genealogical element. Not by chance, where there is an acknowledged, continuous presence of Alids, the local community is so to speak under their protection and, in case of emergency or danger, it will be them who will represent its needs to the governing power or to an ‘external’ enemy, and demand that these needs be satisfied. Otherwise, they would be regarded as evading a religious duty.

In this respect, the case analysed by Aubin (1956) regarding fifteenth-century Bam is exemplary. The protagonists are two Shiite *Sayyids* who intervene on behalf of the mostly Sunni population against the abuses of Timurid rule. The reigning prince gives in before the authority of the descendant of the Prophet in terms both of concessions of fiscal control over the territory and of the rules concerning the interpretation of the rights to spoils of war by the winner. In fact, thanks to their authority, the two *Sayyids* are able to obtain what was lost on the field. But their prestige goes beyond both the material benefits which they can obtain and their actual exercise of power in terms of the already mentioned territorial control.¹⁰

9 On the modes of ‘cataloguing’ between ethnic groups, languages, religious faiths and the like, see Scarcia Amoretti 2005 and the literature there cited. It is also to be noted that the gap between an often disappointing reality and the *topoi* that idealize the members of the Family continue to mark its history in a contradictory manner. For example, the fact of the existence of inappropriate behaviours is not denied, though their congenital ‘superiority’ is unlikely to be questioned (cf. Knys 1999).

10 Note that Aubin’s work, based on primary sources, also offers an interesting overview of the *topoi* mentioned in the previous footnote.

Generally speaking, the function of the religious factor appears to be more linear than that of the linguistic factor, especially in the case of Iran. What is interesting here are the places and manners of spreading of Shia Islam throughout the country, where – it must be underscored – it would have been a minority until the late sixteenth century, though always with constant visibility. The incorrect idea that Iran has always been a ‘Shiite country’ and consequently distinct from the adjacent Arab-speaking countries, depends on such a visibility. As is well known, though, the epicentre of the spread of Shia Islam is in lower Iraq, a region which in any case has been linked with Iran since antiquity regardless of the religious factor.

The Shiite presence in a Muslim Iran – which, as I said, was mostly Sunni until the sixteenth century – is interesting here because it exemplifies the formation of a type of an inner boundary within homogeneous entities that subsume it. There are two manifest cases: Qum and Ṭūs, two different islands both belonging to the minority Shia Islam. Their exceptionality is connected to an important marker: Muslim Qum was founded by a Shiite Arab tribe, but the marker comes from the fact that the city hosts the sanctuary of Fāṭima, one of the sisters of the eighth Imām, died in Qum in 816 while she was travelling to meet her brother, called by the governing caliph, the Abbasid al-Ma’mūn, at the time stationed in Marv, who wanted to officialise his designation as supposed heir to the throne. The Imām would follow the caliph, forced to leave Iran in 818; he would die in Iran too, at Ṭūs, poisoned by the caliph himself, according to Shiite tradition. Ṭūs would host the sanctuary of the Imām, the *mashhad*, the ‘place of his martyrdom’, and Mashhad is the current name of the city where his burial place is. Qum is firmly Shiite, as is the Iraqi Karbalā’, also a Shiite island in a context that sees a significant Sunni presence. Karbalā’ is the site of the tomb of the third Imām, al-Ḥusayn, killed in 680 in an uneven battle wanted by the Umayyad caliph Yazīd. This killing – where the caliph purposely spilled the blood of the Prophet that flew in the veins of his grandchild – represented a trauma for the entire *umma*. Qum and Mashhad followed the model of Karbalā’ and, as happened in Karbalā’, they were given a special status, thanks to an extraordinary event that left an apparent, material trace in a defined place – a trace which is constantly revisited. All these three locations were to become, and continue to be, pilgrimage destinations, miracle sites, burials of the faithful; in other words: ‘special places’. How do the discourse on boundaries and that on the Alid diaspora intersect in similar contexts, at least in Iran?

Let’s take Qum as a point of reference. The *Ta’rīkh Qum* by al-Ḥasan ibn Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Qummī is a chronicle of the city composed in 988-989, that is in the Seljuk period (cf. Calmard 1971). Its text, lost in the original Arabic, is preserved in the partial Persian version made by Ḥasan ibn ‘Alī ibn Ḥasan ibn ‘Abd al-Malik Qummī in 1403-1404 (*Tārīkh-i Qum* 2006), where a lengthy chapter is devoted to Alid presences – both

Ḥasanid (pp. 541-555) and Ḥusaynid (pp. 555-652) - in the city. Qum appears there to be the primary reference point for the Alid who want to leave Medina and/or Baghdad: the city is a friendly territory and, more important of all, is controlled and controllable as well. The presence of the sanctuary of Fāṭima is also essential in economic terms. The Imami Ḥusaynids, in particular, choose it as their permanent seat or as the base for a sort of colonization of nearby minor localities. In fact, in the Timurid era the entire region around Qum is firmly Imami Shiite. The Ḥasanids, on the other hand, consider it rather a stop along the way to the Caspian lands and, more generally, the oriental regions, especially as long as an Alid power is still alive that professes Zaydism, a form of Shia Islam which is different from Imami Shia.¹¹ In a broad sense, then, the existence of 'something', be it a sanctuary or a religion-bonded political presence, is discriminative in its choice of territory.¹² That is tantamount to say that the boundaries of a territory are marked in fact by the prevalent religious confession acknowledged on individual and collective terms as the sign of a specific identity. Such a phenomenon, which is typical of the whole Islamic oecumene, is paradigmatic when dealing with the Alids - at least from my perspective -, but only because there the marker defined by their presence is unquestionably apparent.

5 Homeland

I resume here what I have already said elsewhere (Scarcia Amoretti 2010): the idea of 'homeland' of the *homo islamicus* does not coincide with the Western one. The homeland (*waṭan*) is the 'place where one was born or lives', a 'space that a nomad tribe claims as its own', the *chez soi* that for the *ṣūfī* can even mean the state reached in his spiritual journey. One is not necessarily tied to that place by birth. Furthermore, 'homeland' can also be the point of arrival of a family or individual diaspora, in particular when one - as is often the case with the Alids - can boast any element of prestige. The house (*bayt* or *dār*), a more circumscribed place - refuge, tent, camp, or house in the real sense - is located within this 'homeland'. It is an individual and collective perception at the same time. In fact, the

11 For a survey of the distribution of Alid presences in Iran in the period under consideration here, see Scarcia Amoretti 2012.

12 When the Safavids took power in Iran (1501) and opted for Imami Shia Islam as the established religion, the country was literally marked by the *imāmzādah*, namely more or less magnificent shrines containing the tombs, real or supposed, of male or female descendants of Shiite Imāms. The power intended thereby to demonstrate that Iran was a Shiite country, that Shia Islam was synonymous with loyalty to the power in question and therefore that a loyal subject must be Shiite - a preview, if not a model, of the present-day situation.

individual recognizes himself in the place or, to put it better, has an awareness of his *individual identity* as a member of a group that, in its turn, is aware of being a cell (*personal identity*) of an all-inclusive entity, be it a tribe, a *ṭarīqa*, a sect, or a corporation (*collective identity*). Belonging to that place, understood as 'homeland', has a certain territorial value, the only one ever to be questioned, even when one does not belong physically to that place anymore, be it because one has emigrated elsewhere, or even because the place where everything started does not exist anymore as such. Such framework, which is at the same time ideological and rooted in a specific place that remains the primary point of reference, reveals itself in traditional onomastics, that is, referring to the ancestors and to the elements – the job or a physical quality or indeed a place – that connote the subject at hand in its relation with the outer world. Today, the necessity or the opportunity to conform with the West almost obliterated what was the norm at the end of the nineteenth century: to know a name implied knowing everything, or almost everything, of the history of that particular individual, including the place which for that person represented the territorial reference point of his identity, and the associated implications.

Our Alids, exactly for their exceptionality, are undoubtedly more conservative, if for no other reason than visibility with regard to the less learned classes. A quick glance at the *Kitāb-i Inqilāb va Shahādat*,¹³ a work devoted to the onomastics of the most well-know Alid personalities in the recent history of Iran and Iraq, gives us a last opportunity to reflect on the question of 'boundaries' in the land of Iran. The three Alids who made Shiite history in the past century, the last three *marja'-i taqlīds* (a title that is reserved for the highest Imami religious authorities) are all known by a *nisba*, namely a qualifier that indicates their place of birth (but which could have been the same assigned to their entire family) in the terms mentioned here. In chronological order they are Gulpāyigānī, born in Gulpāyigān (a place south of Iṣfahān); Khū'ī, born in Khū'ī (in Azerbaijan); Khumaynī, born in Khumayn (a place south of Qum). Note that these are Iranic locations: a further evidence, if there were need for any, of the never diminished importance and spread of the Alid presence in the land of Iran.

Here, in any case, the point to be highlighted is the path of the careers of the three above-mentioned characters. This path, if transcribed onto a map, would give the most persuasive demonstration of the validity of the observation of Brauer quoted above – «Muslim geography of the Middle Ages is a linear geography, conceived in terms of a network of lines of communication between cities» –, where the term 'city' designates the

13 The book is the eight volume of the series *Ganjīna-yi Dānishmandān*, edited by Shaykh Muḥammad Sharīf Rāzī and published in Qum (s.d.).

centre of attraction, clearly mutable, toward which one converges from the periphery and the term 'network' implies the existence of a logic underlying that specific tangle of lines in a space which is not geographically connoted and variable over time.

In our example, that centre is obviously Najaf (cf. Luizard 1991). But this isn't the point to highlight. The example here shows that in the land of Islam, there persists, albeit between the lines, a complex and articulated concept of the 'boundary' entrusted to the 'person' and to his reference group more than to objective factors, be they natural or ethnic: a boundary, thus, that relies on subjective parameters (which does not mean arbitrary), which, if considered in their significance, would lead to a drastic revision of the reasons behind many conflicts, including the continuously underlying tension between Iran and the Arab world.

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