

Borders

Itineraries on the Edges of Iran

edited by Stefano Pellò

Perceptions and Treatments of the Close Other in Northern Iran

Christian Bromberger
(Université d'Aix-Marseille, France)

Abstract Two different types of treatment of the Other in Northern Iran are briefly discussed here: the inhabitants of Gilān as an object of mockery by the people of the Iranian plateau, and the frequent interfaith marriages between Sunnis and Shias in Talesh. These two types of relationship reflect an interesting and different treatment of the Other, who, even if seen as negative, is still perceived as harmless. The data are grounded on fieldwork done in Northern Iran from the 1970s onwards.

Keywords Northern Iran. Gilan. Talesh. Other. Mockery. Interfaith.

The question of the Near Other¹ is a complex one. We wish to differentiate ourselves out of fear of being mistaken for him. Saussure, Freud, and Lévi-Strauss have, each in their own way, conceptualized this process of differentiation; for Saussure, it is 'particularism or parochialism' which opposes the unifying «force of 'intercourse'» (Saussure 1986, p. 204); for Freud, it is the *shibboleth* effect² and the 'narcissism of small differences'.³

1 The Near Other is the spatial and social neighbour with whom one interacts. This nearness can be close (the neighbouring village), or more distended (the neighbouring region), but it always involves mutual and reciprocal relationships. Such is the case in northern Iran. The inhabitants of Teheran visit the shores of the Caspian Sea, those living in Gilān migrate to Tehran to find work, etc. This immediate relation is connected with the stereotypes of the Near Other; those of the Distant Other (Inuit, Japanese, etc.) have other meanings.

2 Referring to the altercation between the peoples of Gilead and Ephraim, such as recorded in the biblical book of Judges (12:5-6): after defeating the Ephraimites, «the Gileadites seized the fords of the Jordan before the Ephraimites arrived. And when any Ephraimite who escaped said, "Let me cross over," the men of Gilead would say to him, "Are you an Ephraimite?" If he said, "No," then they would say to him, "Then say, 'Shibboleth!'" And he would say, "Sibboleth", for he could not pronounce *it* right. Then they would take him and kill him at the fords of the Jordan».

3 Freud implements and define this concept in three of his works (1957, p. 199; 1955, p. 101 note 1; 1958, pp. 64-65); in the latter, he writes: «It is always possible to unite considerable numbers of men in love towards one another, so long as there are still some remaining as objects for aggressive manifestations. I once interested myself in the peculiar fact that peoples whose territories are adjacent, and are otherwise closely related, are always at

Eurasistica 5

DOI 10.14277/6969-100-3/EUR-5-13

ISBN [ebook] 978-88-6969-100-3 | ISBN [print] 978-88-6969-101-0 | © 2016

«One can now see,» he writes, «that it is a convenient and relatively harmless form of satisfaction for aggressive tendencies» – the word is probably too strong here – «through which cohesion amongst the members of a group is made easier» (Freud 1958, p. 65); in his comparative study of the traditions of the Mandan and Hidatsa Indians, Lévi-Strauss also deals with the functions played by minor differences: «neighborliness requires of the parties that they become alike to a certain extent, while remaining different,» he writes. Then he continues, in flowery language:

if customs of neighboring peoples reveal relations of symmetry, one does not have to look for a cause in a somewhat mysterious laws of nature or mind. This geometrical perfection also sums up in the present mode the innumerable efforts, more or less conscious, accumulated by history, all aiming in the same direction: to reach the threshold, undoubtedly the most profitable to human societies, of a just equilibrium between their unity and their diversity; and to maintain an equal balance between communication, favoring reciprocal illuminations – and absence of communication, also beneficial – since the fragile flowers of difference need half-light in order to exist». (Lévi-Strauss 1983a, pp. 254-255)

In Iran, these fragile flowers of difference abound between the two slopes of the Elburz, which forms a floating cultural boundary between people of different lifestyles. The narcissism of these populations is indeed one of *big* differences. In this respect, dietary habits, whether practical or performative, play an important demarcative role, offering an example of what noted by Todorov.⁴ The dietary habits of the populations of the Caspian lowlands, north of the Alborz, and of the Iranian plateau, to the south, show a variety of differences and contrasts, thus providing a fertile soil for mutual denigration. Caspian populations are rice lovers – just a few decades ago they were still eating it at each of the three daily meals (see Map 1); they also love fish, eggs, olives and, to a lesser extent, beef; the diet of the people of the plateau, by contrast, consists of bread, dairy products and, occasionally, mutton.⁵

feud with and ridiculing each other, as, for instance, the Spaniards and the Portuguese, the North and South Germans, the English and the Scotch, and so on. I gave it the name of ‘narcissism in respect of minor differences’».

4 «Alimentary habits are an important element in everyone’s culture, and one of the most resistant there can be» (Todorov 2010, p. 32).

5 Rice consumption, previously a prerogative of the *élites*, has today spread to all classes of Iranian society. Nonetheless, the people from Gilân continue to consume more rice than the people of the plateau, and also cook it differently (see Bromberger 2013, pp. 90-91). A Gilak friend who had frequented Azerbaijani Turks, whose traditional diet is based around bread, said to me recently: «*Shokr-e khodā ke tork nashodim*» (Thank God we are not Turks!).

Among dietary habits, the inhabitants of the Caspian lowlands especially stigmatize their neighbours' predilection for bread, which they regard with alternating amusement and compassion, and sometimes even with repulsion. They give the inhabitants of Teheran the nickname of *dahāngoshād* (wide mouths), because – so they say – they spend their time chewing bread, thus revealing their big teeth. Just a few decades ago, bread was still almost unknown in the Caspian region, and the inhabitants of the plateau were thus called «sad eaters of barley bread», for whom the rice of the Gilān province was an enviable luxury. In the early twentieth century, Rabino and Lafont⁶ reported that the consumption of bread was described by Caspian peasants as a punishment which undeserving women and children were threatened with. «The Gilek», they wrote, «does not eat bread, but regards it as an unsuitable food for his constitution, to the extent that an angry husband says to his wife: “Go eat bread and die!”» (Rabino, Lafont 1910, p. 140). Captain Conolly noted around 1830 that Gilak parents, when scolding their children, threatened to send them beyond the mountains where – ultimate punishment – they would be forced to eat bread (cf. Rabino, Lafont 1910, p. 140).⁷ Conversely, in the communities of the plateau, numerous proverbs extol the excellence of bread, whose sight, taste and smell, far from causing people to flee, attract them to and keep them in the home. One of them goes: *Nān injā, āb injā, kojā ravam beh az injā?* (Here, there is bread, here there is water, where else would I go?).

Among the foods that delight Caspian peasants, most people of the plateau feel a deep distaste for olives, beef, and fish, to the point that a mere mention of these dishes causes among some a spasm of nausea. I remember that, a long time ago already, during one of my first stays in Gilān, the owner of a coffee shop approached me, looking embarrassed, and asked me if I might accept to eat beef. A strange question for a Frenchman, but not for an Iranian! However, it is the consumption of pond and small marine fish that is particularly stigmatized. All of the soft parts of these fish are eaten: not only the flesh, but also the eggs, whether raw or

Then, he continued: «You know, if I do not eat rice every day, I feel bad». Stereotypes die hard, and only change when new social interactions occur. These changes in stereotypes have been studied on an empirical basis by two social psychologists in an already old article (Prothro, Melikian 1955).

6 Hiacynthe-Louis Rabino di Borgomale was Vice Consul for the United Kingdom in Rasht during the early twentieth century; he wrote several interesting studies on Gilān at that time, as well as on the history of the province. D.F. Lafont was an agronomist who came to Gilān during the same period.

7 On this ancient aversion to bread, see also Fraser (1826, p. 88). This distaste for bread, even the ignorance of this food by peasants, was still felt in the 1980s, particularly in the valleys and plains of southern Tālesh. The map I prepared with the help of Mr. Bazin of rice consumption during the three daily meals in Gilān and its neighbouring regions, clearly shows the dietary boundary between bread and rice eaters.

cooked into a cake with garden herbs; the entrails, which are pan-fried and appreciated for their sweet taste; the heads, whose content is sucked out or which are stewed with herbs. Fish heads can also be eaten with broth, after having pan-fried them in oil in a mixture of garlic and curcuma. It is to this reputation as lovers of fish heads that the Caspian populations (who are called by the name of Rashti, from Rasht, the local capital) owe the nickname which they are called by the people of the plateau; for their neighbours, they are *kallemāhikhor*, 'fish-head eaters'.

'Wide mouths', 'barley bread eaters', 'fish-head eaters', – such disparaging nicknames are part of the vast apparatus of symbolic differentiation which societies use to bring out, through derision and a set of oppositions, their own excellence and superiority. The near Other, especially when it is particularly close,⁸ is assimilated to our dietary taboo. This 'gastrophobia' towards 'exocuisine' plays a part, to borrow an expression from Lévi-Strauss, in the «normal functioning of differences» (1983b, p. 15). In short, it is a trivial expression of ethnocentrism.

Dietary habits are not the only register which the inhabitants of the Iranian plateau draw from to disparage their neighbours in the Caspian lowlands. Countless jokes denigrate the behaviour of Rashtis. The reverse is not true: jokes about Tehranis do not exist in Gilān. This asymmetry reflects the inequality of the two peoples' influence in the national space. In Rashti jokes (about Rashtis), the Caspian region seems first and foremost to be a land of morons. But most of these jokes concern the sexual indolence of the men and the frivolity of the women of the province. It is to this reputation that Rashtis owe the second nickname that the people of the plateau give them: *kamarsost* 'the impotent'. A priori these two nicknames relate to two different situations: food and sexuality. However, things are not so simple. Both nicknames (*kallemāhikhor* and *kamarsost*) actually involve the same system of representation wherein various foods and temperaments meet and match. Let us take a closer look.

For many inhabitants of the plateau, the indolence of Rashtis is due to the humidity of the Caspian lowlands. According to the canons of popular customary geography, the physical and sexual abilities of men are, in fact, directly ascribed to the heat and dryness of the climate. Arid areas correspond to manly men and sensual but hard to get women (who, like their climate, are warm and dry); conversely, indolent men and easy women live in cold and wet countries. This popular belief echoes scholarly traditions in Arabo-Persian geography – and, long before that, in Hippocratic geography – which attributed to climate an instrumental role on the virtue of people. The world

8 Consider, for example, the case of France, where mocking dietary-related nicknames abound and inhabitants of neighbouring villages are scoffingly called 'snail-eaters', 'potato beetle-eater' and other disgusting names (for southern France, see Achard 1982).

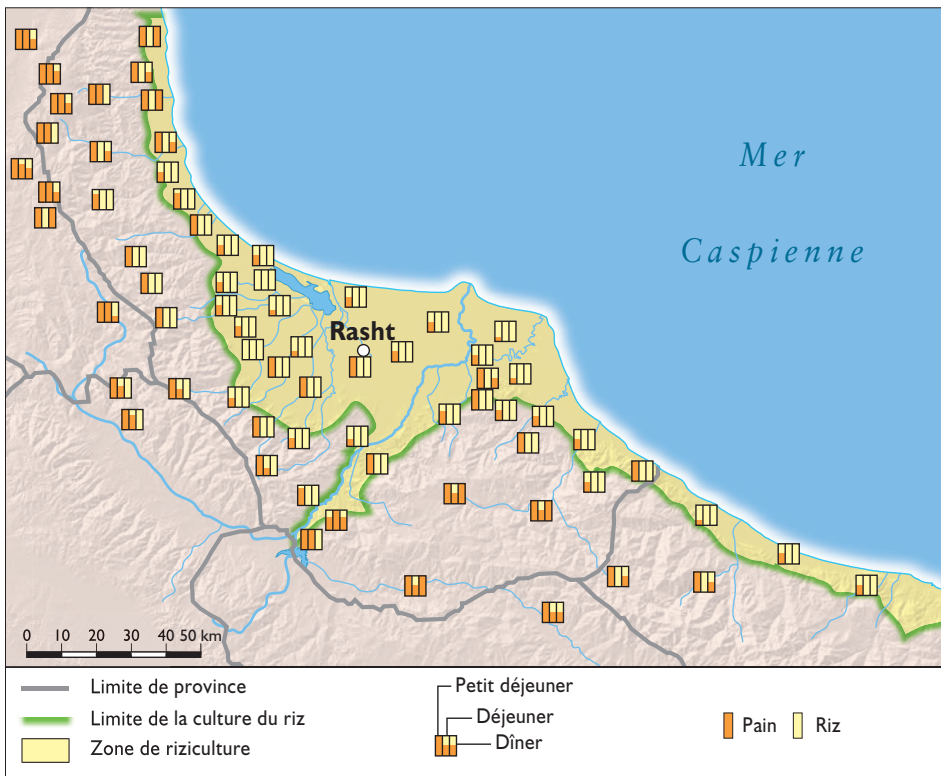


Figure 1. Consumption of bread and rice in the three main meals in the early 1980s (Bromberger 2013)

is divided, according to a tradition that combines Greek and Zoroastrian concepts, into seven regions (*keshvar*) or climates (*iqlim*), organized according to a «starry distribution» (Miquel 1973, p. 70) around a centre formed by the lands extending from Babylon to Khorasan. In this scheme, Gilan belongs to the sixth climate and, according to Mas'udi in his *Prairies d'or* (Meadows of Gold), men from these northern regions have a «cold temperament», «wet principles» and show «little sexual desires» (Mas'udi 1979, p. 518).

This interpretation of ethnic behaviours based on the climate is only a part of a much larger system which represents the world, the beings, and their qualities, and which is organized around two basic categories, namely cold (*sard*) and warm (*garm*), and two sub-categories, namely dry (*khoshk*) and wet (*martub*). Not only climates, foods, sicknesses, seasons, and ages are classified according to these four categories, but also people themselves. According to these qualities, inherited from the humoral medicine of Hippocrates and Galen, individual and collective behaviours are largely dependent on the type of food consumed. Warm foods regenerate that

fundamental humour that is blood, generate an expansive temperament, and maintain strength, power, and virility. Cold foods instead correspond to a phlegmatic temperament, weakness and sexual indolence. According to the classification of foods in Iran, then, the people of the plateau regard those of Gilān as 'eaters of cold'. As mentioned earlier, they consume an abundance of rice, eggs, fish, vegetables and fresh fruits, and like acidic tastes, all of which are considered to be cold.

This feeling of strangeness is strengthened by looking at the extensive differences in lifestyles between people living on different sides of the mountains. For the people of the plateau, Gilān is kind of a topsy-turvy world. I will not give a long list of oppositions. Instead, I will just note, as examples, that Gilān is like a house open to outside gazes and not hidden away inside a walled courtyard; it is a society with a sense of honour and in which violence among individuals and groups occur less than in central Iran; it is, in a sense, feminine and not masculine (male-female relations are far more relaxed than in central Iran but have nothing in common – should it be stressed? – with the content of the jokes). In the representations of the people of the plateau, Gilān appears to be the paradigm of otherness, a situation that often leads to smiles.

Does this vision of the Other have any actual consequences (what might be called stereotypical effects)? There have been some, at some period, but only in a limited way and, after all, perhaps to the benefit of Gilānis. Thus, in the nineteenth and the early twentieth century, the army never recruited much among the peasants of Gilān lowlands, preferring to draw into its ranks mountain dwellers from the highlands, who were reputed to be more robust (Rabino 1915-1916, p. 29). Gilānis have internalized, at least in part, this stereotype, and recognize that some tasks – those involving strength and a spirit of adventure – should be performed by other ethnic groups, who are usually poorer than them (and here is the real difference).

But, to return to the mocking attitudes of the people of the plateau towards the Caspian peasants, they seem to me to reveal, to quote Lévi-Strauss, «inevitable [...] attitudes [...], the price to be paid to preserve a collective self». «We cannot», Lévi-Strauss continues, «blend into an enjoyment of the other, identify ourselves with him, while at the same time remaining different» (1983, p. 47). Here, we are still in the domain of acceptability, where the perception of differences is confined to jokes and, ultimately, offset by a sense of common 'Iranianness'. These frictions are not likely to trigger «cascades» (Rosenau 1990, p. 299) such as might be the case with the Arabs (the invaders of old, perceived by Iranians as savages) or the Afghans (the poor immigrant wretches).

The second example of treatment of the Other that I would like to address is that of 'mixed' marriages in the Tālesh, what I call the 'Tālesh solution'. Tāleshis are an ethnic group based in the north of the Gilān prov-

ince. They are divided more or less equally between Shiites and Sunnis. This religious opposition, when it overlaps with ethnic differences, leads to frictions that can degenerate into confrontations (such as is the case in Baluchistan and Kurdistan). The tension between Shiites and Sunnis is apparent both at the national and governmental level: the education system favours Shiism, there are no Sunni mosques in Tehran and no Sunni ministers in the government. However, the same tension is not visible among Tāleshis. While most villages have two mosques (one Shiite, one Sunni), it is not uncommon for the faithful of both confessions to pray, for reasons of convenience (such as proximity), in the same building and the Shiites with their arms along their bodies, the Sunnis with their arms crossed. Mixed cemeteries are the norm, where Shiite graves are next to Sunni ones. In Tāleshi villages, Shiites avoid celebrating the parodic ritual of the *Omar kushun* «Omar's murder», which is offensive to their Sunni neighbours. Some Sunnis follow the *'āshurā* processions, which are Shiite-specific, but without beating their chests as sign of mourning. Sometimes they also contribute towards the expenses of the meals provided to the penitent. In some cases, places of pilgrimage (*ziyaratgāh*) are common too. Most of all, however, mixed marriages are not uncommon. We know that, in those cases, the main concern of clerics and families is the religious status of the unborn children. Tāleshis have found a unique solution to the problem: the transmission of religious affiliation differs from that of properties and social status; in case of mixed marriages, the boys take up the confession of their father, the girls that of their mother. In other words, the transmission of religious affiliation is governed by a «complementary filiation», (see Meyer Fortes 1953, p. 33), functioning in a bilateral manner. This complementary filiation, which deviates from the dominant patrilineal cultural context, may cause some amusing situations, such as when, for example, a little six-year-old girl said, pouting, to her Sunni father: «*Man, shi'a hastam*» (Me, I am a Shiite). However, there are exceptions to the general rule, which are sometimes linked to a specific context, sometimes to personal 'choices', and sometimes to negotiations, one might say, using a term very much loved by contemporary social sciences.

Ultimately, Tāleshi society gives an example of confessional exogamy (albeit within the same religion) which Western Christians – for whom interfaith marriages between Catholics and Protestants destroyed families until the recent past – as well as Jews and Muslims – for whom marriage with an Other is prohibited if it challenges the transmission of religious affiliation to the children – should take in consideration as a viable solution. Concerned by these prohibitions which, both in the East and in the West, hinder the advent of open societies, in 2008 I saw in Tehran the director of the Institute for Interreligious Dialogue and former Head of the Cabinet to President Mohammad Khatami Mohammad Ali Abtahi, a champion of dialogue among civilizations. This wonderful man was imprisoned after

the protests following the elections of June 2009.⁹ As we discussed serious issues such interfaith marriages, Abtahi raised his arms to the sky and told me: «We are dealing here with aspects that bring religions together, not with what divides them». Isn't Tāleshis' pragmatic response to the problems that they face preferable to such general considerations on what might bring religions together? Northern Iran thus shows harmless forms of treatment of the Other which are worthy of reflection in the present-day Middle Eastern context.

Bibliography

- Achard, Claude (1982). *Les uns et les autres: dictionnaire satirique des sobriquets collectifs de l'Hérault*. Béziers: CIDO.
- Bromberger, Christian (2013). *Un autre Iran: Un ethnologue au Gilân*. Paris: Armand Colin.
- Chodzko, Alexandre (1850). «Le Ghilan ou les marais caspiens». *Nouvelles annales des voyages et des sciences géographiques*, 1, pp. 193-215.
- Fortes, Meyer (1953). «The Structure of Unilineal Descent Groups». *American Anthropologist*, 55 (1), pp. 17-41.
- Fraser, James Baillie (1826). *Travels and Adventures in the Persian Provinces on the Southern Banks of the Caspian Sea*. London: Longman, Rees, Orme and Brown.
- Freud, Sigmund (1955). *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. In: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 18, pp. 65-144.
- Freud, Sigmund (1957). *The Taboo of Virginity*. In: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 11, pp. 191-208.
- Freud, Sigmund (1958). *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Garden City (NY): Doubleday.
- Guilliny, M.-E. (1866). «Essai sur le Ghilan». *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie*, février-mars, pp. 81-104.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude (1983a). *Structural Anthropology*, vol. 2. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude (1983b). *Le regard éloigné*. Paris: Plon.
- Mas'udi (1979). *Les prairies d'or*, tome 2. Trad. franç. de Barbier de Meynard et Favet de Courteille. Première éd. 1864, rev. et corr. par C. Pellat. Paris: Société asiatique.

⁹ Abtahi was given a six-year sentence (after confession!) and was released on bail in November 2009.

- Miquel, André (1973). *La géographie humaine du monde musulman jusqu'au milieu du 11e siècle*, tome 1, *Géographie et géographie humaine dans la littérature arabe des origines à 1050*. Paris-La Haye: Mouton.
- Prothro, E. Terry; Melikian, Levon H. (1955). «Studies in Stereotypes: V. Familiarity and the Kernel of Truth Hypothesis». *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 41, pp. 3-10.
- Rabino, Hiacynthe-Louis (1915-1916). «Les provinces caspiennes de l'Iran: Le Gilân». *Revue du Monde Musulman*, 32.
- Rabino, Hiacynthe-Louis; Lafont, D.-F., (1910). «La culture du riz au Guilân (Perse) et dans les autres provinces du sud de la Caspienne». *Annales de l'École nationale d'agriculture de Montpellier*, 10, pp. 130-164.
- Rosenau James (1990). *Turbulence in World Politics: A Theory of Change and Community*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- de Saussure, Ferdinand (1986). *Course in General Linguistics*. Ed. by Charles Balley and Albert Sechehaye with the collaboration of Albert Riedlinger; translated and annotated by Roy Harris. La Salle (IL): Open Court.
- Todorov, Tzvetan (2010). *The Fear of Barbarians: Beyond the Clash of Civilizations*. Cambridge (UK); Malden (MA): Polity Press.

