

History and the Production of the “Culture of Shiraz”

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Introduction

My research project at the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at MIT focused on the production of knowledge in contemporary Shiraz and in particular on some of the most visible products of this evolving concatenation: the buildings and public initiatives that mark the landscape of Shiraz today.¹ These diverse products are constructed, presented, and interpreted mainly through the modality of history, which constitutes the main frame of reference to imagine the city and its place within the Iranian nation.

Public history

The Islamic Republic, since its inception, has devoted many efforts to the control of public space. These efforts have been oriented toward mapping revolutionary discourse onto streets and squares through images, texts, and objects as well as toward conforming existing images, objects, and texts to what were perceived as the tenets of the new state.²

1 I spent January and February 2004 at AKPIA at MIT and found a lively intellectual community that helped me to sharpen my views. I wish to thank Nasser Rabbat, Heghnar Watenpaugh, and Susan Slyomovics for their insights.

2 For descriptions of revolutionary images, texts, and objects and their relevance in the construction of the revolutionary state see Michael M. J. Fischer and Mehdi Abedi, *Debating Muslims: Cultural Dialogues in Postmodernity and Tradition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990) and more specifically Peter Chelkowski and Hamid Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (London:

A dispersed set of operations projected a forceful regime of signs, structuring a prescriptive field that regulates what can be made public. The result of this projection, however, has not been a uniform space of conformity, nor a clear set of polarized oppositions between what can be made public and what cannot. The prescriptive field of public statements is highly contingent on a set of intersecting trajectories, from international politics to local moods. This field has undergone tremendous transformations in connection with changes in state structure and particular events. It has managed to retain, however, a certain degree of force even now that revolutionary zeal has become quite tame. The force of the field lies in the inscription of the mark of power on words, images, and objects, regardless of its homogeneity. It does not matter whether the ensemble of public statements has a strong coherence or adheres to a clear rule—what counts instead are performances of alignment. Making something public coincides with aligning it with what is perceived to be the field of public statements. The externality, indeed the superficiality, of this alignment is constitutive of its force.

History is particularly relevant in the prescriptive field of public statements. In Iran, history has been important in the construction of the national imagination. History plays a crucial role, even though—or because—it is a fractured field of diverging interpretations and causalities, where tensions toward truth intertwine with visions of undercurrents and conspiracies.

Making history public entails producing or modifying images, texts, and objects so that they can be exposed and available to everyone. This process implies fitting the past within the contingent configuration of the prescribed field. This conformity, however, does not mean that the resulting public history is a smooth, uniform, and coherent platform for the interpretation of the past.

Shiraz as an object of knowledge

In Iran there is a centuries-long tradition of discourses on the specificity of each city, mostly (though by no means solely) articulated in the writing of local histories and biographical dictionaries. These literary genres construct a relation between a certain group of people and a specific place: they territorialize knowledge, structuring specific geo-poetic identities, not unrelated to political restructurings.

Within this tradition, the city of Shiraz is mostly characterized by poetry and religious knowledge.³ The poets Sa'di and Hafiz have been the most revered figures from Shiraz, but numerous books recount the achievements of many other important poets, mystics, and scholars, to the extent that the city is often termed *dar al 'ilm*, the land of knowledge.

In the twentieth century this territorialized tradition was restructured in conjunction with the transformation of Shiraz into one of the provincial cities of the Pahlavi nation-state. Pahlavi cultural politics, in connection with certain Orientalist works⁴ and the role of Shiraz as a “colonial city,”⁵ reinterpreted in national terms this Shirazi “heritage” and paired it with the Achaemenid empire whose most relevant ruins are located in the region. The Achaemenid empire had begun to be an object of interest in Iran in the second half of the nineteenth century, with books like *Asar al-Ajam* by Fursat Shirazi,⁶ an historical geography of the region of Fars. By the 1930s the Pahlavis made the empire the central repertoire of historical and political identification and invested it with a discourse on the “origins” of the Iranian nation.

Classical poetry and the Achaemenid empire became during the Pahlavi period the two poles around which the Pahlavis’ “culture of Shiraz” was articulated and inscribed in different ways on space, books, and events (restoration of poets’ tombs, replicas of Achaemenid columns, tourist guides, scholarly publications, and conferences). Shiraz became the repository of “classical Persian culture,” in contrast with the modern bustling capital Tehran, and in the monarchy’s vision, a city deputed to pursue its tradition of knowledge. In the 1970s, this policy was made evident with the ceremony of coronation at the ruins of Persepolis, the establishment of the Pahlavi University, and the Festival of the Arts.

3 Religious knowledge in Shiraz had two main trajectories, one mystical and one philosophical (*hikmat*).

4 Arthur John Arberry, *Shiraz: Persian City of Saints and Poets* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960).

5 I owe the use of the term in reference to Shiraz to Narges Erami. This interpretation of Shiraz is not only connected to the work of Orientalists but has a colonial trajectory that I cannot discuss here at length. British presence in Shiraz, during World War I and II in particular, amounted in a certain period to a *de facto* occupation.

6 Muhammad Nâsir Fursat Shîrâzî, *Asâr-i 'Ajam*, edited by M. Rastigâr, 2 vols. (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1998; original 1377).

The revolution of 1979 marked a sharp break. History had to be rewritten from a different point of view. The inscription of the revolution on the city was carried out through the destruction of Pahlavi insignia, the construction of new monuments, the change of street names, and a series of more temporary decorations, billboards, and banners.

All these interventions in public space signaled the institution of a new order, a new image of the “people,” and a new interpretation of the past. They instituted a clear divide between “before the revolution” and “after the revolution,” reproducing a more general organizational framework structured around the reversal of the previous social order. Public history in the Islamic Republic has been articulated through this reversal.

Cultural activities: Restorations

Today in Shiraz there are different state and municipal institutions that produce public history. These institutions, while often collaborating with each other, have competing agendas and economic interests. While all their projects have what Adorno might have called an administrative character and strive for the production of a unified field of knowledge and perception about Shiraz, the outcome of their activities is far from being the homogeneous sweep that their projects envisage.

The Cultural Heritage Foundation (Saziman-i Miras-i Farhangi), the state institution that supervises monuments, has been involved since the early 1990s in a large restoration project of the Shiraz city center. This was the area that Karim Khan Zand, the eighteenth-century “pious” ruler whose reign is considered today an example of just rule, turned into the political and commercial center of the city. There he had a fort erected, the Arg, where he resided, as well as a bazaar, a public bath, several administrative buildings, and a mosque, all now named after him. In the Qajar epoch the area retained its function and was often used for public ceremonies and executions. In the 1930s, during Reza Shah’s time, several buildings for state administration (the municipality, the tribunal, the police, the post office, and the National Bank) were built. At the same time, avenues were drawn and the area was transformed. The new buildings were superimposed on the previous structure, which was disregarded. The Arg (which became a prison), for example, was obscured by the police building and became almost invisible from the street. A large avenue was built cutting through the Bazar-i vakil, which was divided in two as a result. These interventions gave a homogenized image to the area, which became the site for state and city administration.

In the 1970s, some of Karim Khan's buildings, such as the Kulah-i farangi pavilion, the mosque, and the bath, began to be used as tourist sites. There were projects to restore some of the caravanserais within the bazaar; at least one of them, the Caravanserai Mushir, was restored and filled with souvenir shops. Some of the performances of the Festival of the Arts were also held there.

The revolution put a halt to these projects but did not substantially alter the use and function of the area until the late 1980s. Since that time, an ambitious project has aimed at making the area more attractive by reconstructing it as it was at the time of Karim Khan Zand. The idea of the project is to turn this area of the city into a sort of history theme park. (*Fig. 1*) Restoration work began in the early 1990s when several Pahlavi buildings around the fort were demolished and the Arg restored. In 1997 a tunnel was dug beneath the avenue that divides the nearby Bazar-i Vakil. (*Fig. 2*) The present project, by moving traffic underground, aims at transforming the missing portion of the bazaar into a walkway. Work continued in 2002–03 with other demolitions. (*Fig. 3*) Only the building of the National Bank will apparently be spared.

These interventions into the area of the bazaar are indirectly related to the unprecedented urban explosion of the city. Since the early twentieth century the city has been expanding beyond its walls, which are now completely destroyed. Administrative buildings and residences began to be constructed along a series of avenues, some of which incorporated older roads leading to villages and beyond.⁷ After the revolution, with the growth in population and the migration of refugees from West Iran during the war with Iraq (1980–1988), the city continued to expand in several directions, slowly coming to fill the plain where it is located, reaching the hills and mountains to the north and south and the salt lake to the east. Major expansion now continues westward. Since 2000, condominiums of ten stories or more have been built.

In conjunction with this expansion, middle and upper classes have moved out of the perimeter of the walled city and continue to relocate further west. The “old neighborhoods” (*baft-i qadim*), as the area once within the city walls is now called, are inhabited today mostly by Afghans and by people who recently migrated from rural villages; these neighborhoods are referred as *payin-i shahr*, the low city, a term that denotes both a social and a spatial location.

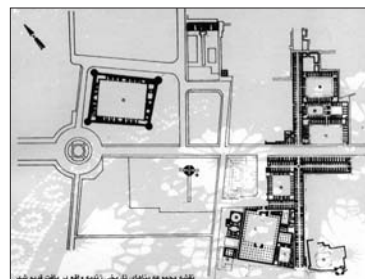


Fig. 1 Plan for the restoration of the “Karim Khan complex” from Masur Fatavhijiyam, *Majmu'a-yi Zandiyya* (Shiraz, Saziman-i Miras-i Farhangi, n.d.), p.5.



Fig. 2 Entrance to the tunnel that passes beneath the Bazar-i Vakil.



Fig. 3 Ruins of the central post office built in the 1930s; in the background, a wall of one of the administrative buildings of the Karim Khan epoch.

⁷ John Clarke, *The Iranian City of Shiraz* (Durham: University of Durham, 1960).



Fig. 4 A demolished house in one of the old neighborhoods.

The restoration project aims to “clean up” the area around the bazaar and construct it as a tourist site, attracting national and international tourists as well as drawing the middle and upper classes back for visits. The project is itself a very selective interpretation of the city’s past. While aiming at the valorization of several historical buildings that had been neglected or destroyed during the Pahlavi era, the project intends at the same time to wipe out all that was built in that period. The project also envisages a substantial reconfiguration of the commercial activities in the area.

In many ways this project, while opposite to the Pahlavi urban plan and apparently aimed at restoring the area to its condition prior to the Pahlavis’ interventions, in fact involves a similar trajectory: While the Pahlavis intervened on city space to institute the state’s presence through large avenues and administrative buildings, the new project produces a public historical space at the center of Shiraz as the interpretative pole of the city, thus reinforcing its specific location within the national imagination.

These plans of the Cultural Heritage Foundation clash with different interpretations of the city’s space and the presence of the past within it. While the Heritage Foundation is restoring buildings, the municipality of Shiraz is demolishing large portions of the old neighborhoods. (*Fig. 4*) The municipality argues that there is need for new avenues to ease congested traffic and that the neighborhoods lack a proper sewage system. The demolition of the old neighborhoods is carried out in the name of functionality but also aims at evicting the population living there. A large avenue that resulted from demolitions of homes was built between the shrines of Shah Chirag and Astana, two important sites of pilgrimage, in an effort to ease traffic in the area, but consequently created a sort of no man’s land in a central location. In 2004 the municipality launched a bid for investors to present projects to redesign the area.

The municipality is causing a de facto destruction of what remains of the older structure of the city. A number of “historic homes” will be kept, sometimes to be placed in the middle of roundabouts, thus achieving complete decontextualization. Questions of attribution of “historic” or “artistic” value on the one hand, and criteria of functionality on the other, define this dynamic of conservation and demolition.

Both the Cultural Heritage Foundation and the municipality, though in apparent discord, pursue visions of harmonious urban spaces, with clearly allocated functions. Built into these visions is the streamlining of a composite and layered urban landscape. History in this vision is a quality of certain buildings that should be preserved, thematized as “heritage,” and marketed for tourist consumption.

Other forces in the city have different and opposing visions that are less concerned about the thematization of the past. The use of historical buildings for communal prayers and other religious events contrasts with their transformation into monuments—for many years the Vakil Mosque built by Karim Khan Zand was used for the Friday prayer and thus closed to visitors, the pressures of the Heritage Foundation notwithstanding. Now Friday prayer is held at the ninth century Masjid-i Nou, and cement pillars have been built in its courtyard to support a tin roof.

The election of Khatami in 1997 did not substantially alter this configuration of the administration of the culture of Shiraz. There were, however, significant changes, especially in the Office of the Ministry of Culture, which has since then promoted many more cultural events, most of them new in scope and theme: film festivals, art shows and competitions, photo exhibits, and music concerts. There has been a widening in scope and scale in the general implementation of activities.

In 2001, a Committee for the Development of Culture was created, which gathers representatives from the main institutions involved. The aim of the committee is to coordinate the different initiatives by speeding up the realization of projects that have already begun (such as the Karim Khan complex), while implementing new ones. The committee plans to build the following: a park of the “City of Civilizations,” a park of “Culture,” an historical museum of the literature of Iran, a cultural house of the tribes of Fars, a museum of theosophy and philosophy, a museum of contemporary arts, thematic museums linked with cultural heritage, a museum of the Achaemenids (at Persepolis), a museum of the Zand dynasty, a museum of the Qajar dynasty, and an anthropology museum.

These initiatives further push the idea of a “culture of Shiraz” for general consumption, quite close to the articulation of what can be called “cultural entertainment.”⁸ It is unclear how these spaces would be organized. Their conceptualization pays homage both to certain contingent political views—“dialogue of civilizations” is a key Khatami term, here envisaged as a citadel with different pavilions—and to certain specificities of Shiraz that are turned into tokens of a fragmented and delocalized public history: tribes, philosophy, the Achaemenids, and dynasties of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁹

8 Parks have been for years the single most developed area of state and municipal investment for the leisure time of the people. In Shiraz in particular, this meets with the long established practice of family picnics.

9 In this regard, the insertion of the Qajar dynasty should be noted: their revival, on the political, historiographical, and nostalgic level, has been going on for ten years or so. Noteworthy also is the absence of any mention of the Safavid dynasty, equally important in



Fig. 5 Advertisement for a “traditional” kebab restaurant, with an Achaemenid soldier

Conclusion

These coordinated and conflicting administrative initiatives are structuring public history in Shiraz. They operate through what I have described as a dynamic of reversal that dates from the revolution and now takes place in transformed ways. It is a dynamic that works through a process of erasure and reconstruction, in search perhaps of a more homogeneous vision of public history for the nation. The trope of culture provides the ground for such projects, streamlining fragments into a unified frame, naturalizing political interests and transforming the traces of the past into objects for consumption. Culture makes possible the combination of seemingly divergent interpretations of the past and renders the Achaemenids public again. (Fig. 5)

This process, however, does not produce the uniformity it strives to achieve: The Shiraz city center appears more as the battleground of power than the concrete vision of a redeemed past. It suggests a contradictory but also livelier articulation of the past in the present, where conflicting visions are juxtaposed one next to the other, where an aesthetic of cut-ups and editing prevails over broad strokes. This does not imply that power is not at work, nor that these represent alternative trajectories. Rather, as I have tried to show, this fragmented landscape is one of the effects of the modality of power now prevalent in Iran.