The Heritage 'NGO': a Case Study on the Role of Grass-Roots Heritage Societies in Iran and their Perception of Cultural Heritage

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Introduction

This paper examines the general terrain of heritage activism in contemporary Iran. It presents the preliminary findings of recent fieldwork involving travel to three provinces and discussions with 12 activists.[1] Heritage activism appears either in the form of individual activists or in the form of NGOs within which activists network, organize their activities and pursue their interests. In Iran, such NGOs or societies were provisioned for initially in the form of Scientific, Literary and Artistic Societies in the early-1990s[2] and became active in the late-1990s.[3] For the purposes of this paper, I subscribe to a legal definition of NGO as stipulated in Article 1 of the *Executive Regulations Governing Establishment and Activities of Non-Governmental Organisations* (27 October 2005) in Iran. Accordingly, NGOs are 'organisations established voluntarily by a group of individuals or legal entities not related to the state following relevant legal requirements and in pursuit of goals are neither for profit nor political'(Executive Regulations).

The proscription of political activities (emphasised in Article 3) differentiates NGOs from political parties, whose programs and goals relate to the state's political system and its strategic goals. Nevertheless, there are provisions for NGOs to provide consultation and propose solutions to various levels of state bureaucracy as relevant to their work (Article 4) or even 'organise meetings and protests in pursuit of their goals' (Article 5). In practice there is an ambivalent relationship between NGOs and the state: they can be related to and somewhat participate in state machinations provided that their activities are not deemed to be politically motivated (anti-systemic). However, the latter characteristic may be subject to interpretation in the context of changing circumstances. NGOs may have a number of focus areas but cultural heritage NGOs are distinguished by their concentration on matters related to cultural heritage.[4] The NGOs and activists examined here have maintained a broad scope for their activities rather than limiting their focus to specialised topics.

Although individual activism or informal groups and organisations preceded the above legislation, at present they operate within this legally and politically ambivalent framework. While their activities can and often do contain counter-hegemonic characteristics, they neither categorically reject a national heritage discourse nor are they purely concerned with their own local traditions. This distinguishes their activism and their conception of heritage from those which have been described as 'heritage from below'. The latter has a similar oppositional possibility and engages with monuments and their contingent structures of feeling but is about the individual, the 'uncelebrated', the 'quotidian' and 'operates most … successfully at a sub-national scale' (Robertson 2012, 17-18). A characteristic of the activism examined in this paper is its concern with linking various scales and maintaining and strengthening social (or national) cohesion (for further reading on this function of heritage see Ashworth, Graham & Tunbridge

2007).The anecdotes examined here suggest that activists dynamically and critically engage with the definition, values and designations of heritage as well as its relationship to the state and Iranian identity. They are also inspired by ideas outside the sanctioned ideology of the state. Thus activism has inevitable political implications for activists, their definitions of heritage and modes of political engagement are in part shaped by the state. This type of activism, therefore, cannot be meaningfully framed or theorised under dichotomies such as dominant/subaltern which may contain essentialising tendencies.

In the following, I draw on concepts from new social movements theories in order to provisionally understand the commonalities among various independent individuals and NGOs who are dispersed within different localities but appear to pursue similar goals. There have been suggestions about the potentials of social movements theories for heritage studies (for example Robertson 2012), nevertheless, those potentials remain unexplored.[5] My observations suggest common themes and motivations among these activists in relation to cultural heritage, indicating a nascent heritage movement. As a working definition, a heritage movement comprises collective challenges by people with a common purpose and solidarity to protect and conserve heritage as a conveyor and basis for collective identity, through sustained interactions with elites, opponents and authorities.[6] Such a movement critically operates within the frames of the nation-state and Iranian identity; frames that are primarily articulated and shaped by the state. Here, 'frame' connotes what Snow (2007, 80) identifies as social 'action frames' and designates ongoing processes for the assignment of meaning and interpretation of 'events and conditions' in order to attract 'support, and demobilize antagonists'. These processes are in a dynamic mutual relationship with the activities of the activists.

I first provide a brief overview of the recent historical and political context within which activism has emerged. Then, I elaborate on and analyse a number of common themes in activists' construction and perception of heritage with reference to interview data. This is indicative of the framing process within current heritage activism. I argue that activism has formed a terrain of heritage movements whose general characteristics are provisionally identified along with issues for future research and theorisation in the field.

The Emergence of Heritage Activism

The appearance of heritage activism is indexical of shifts on the part of the state (and mutually within society) in the limits of the public sphere. It must be considered in a broader context of evolving discourses of cultural and national identity, cultural policies of the state and political opportunities it provides for the active participation of citizens. The latter is particularly important as it influences 'the choice of protest strategies and the impact of social movements on their environment' (Kitschelt 1986, quoted in Kriesi 2008, 69). Additionally, the appearance of activism is related to the state's internal transformations (exemplified in factionalism) as well as its take on the significance, scope, meaning and framing of cultural heritage. This broader context which has influenced ideas of, emphases and nuances in heritage and, through that, recent NGO engagement and activism, may be summarised under three headings: 1) transformations of state-sanctioned identity involving a shift towards Islamization of history; 2) internal factionalism within the state; and 3) financial resources and institutional rivalries.

Transformations of the State-Sanctioned Identity

Borrowing from Holliday's (2013) periodization of cultural and national identity within post-revolutionary Iran[7] we can identify three periods from 1979, when shifts in defining components of national identity and cultural policies have influenced the official attitude to heritage.

1) From the Islamic Revolution to the End of the Iran-Iraq War (1979-1988)

This period was dominated by a certain pan-Islamic rhetoric that emphasized Islam as the major source of collective identity. Khomeini famously said 'those who wish to revive nationhood are standing against Islam … the meaning of this nationhood is that we want the nation and we want nationhood and don't want Islam' (A Sociologist (pseudonym) 2010, translated by author). This was a rhetorical rejection of anything pre-Islamic or pertaining to that period of history and identity. As Mehdi Hodjat, the former head of Cultural Heritage organization of Iran points out (1995), the political establishment found it difficult to reconcile with pre-Islamic historic relics and thus their protection was in itself a challenge. This period also coincided with the Iran-Iraq war, which until its last few months was canvassed by the political establishment mainly in terms of a religious effort.[8] During the war, factions within the establishment may have recognised the political potential of patriotic sentiments and versions of nationalist ideology, but this did not appear to have broad establishment support.[9] Given the circumstances, cultural heritage was not considered a priority by the administration (Hodjat 1995). Additionally, the public sphere was firmly controlled, allowing little opportunity for unsanctioned public participation in anything including heritage.

2) Post-War Reconstruction 1988-1997

This period, known as a 'reconstruction' or 'constructivity' period, coincided with Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's terms as president (3 August 1988 – 2 August 1997). Some factions within the political establishment, represented by Rafsanjani himself, embraced a kind of controlled economic liberalism, and towards the mid-1990s introduced limited and cautious openings in the cultural and social sphere. As economic growth encouraged further participation of private (or quasi-private) citizens, there were small, limited opportunities for participation in other spheres including culture. Social participation in cultural matters was legislated in both the High Council for Cultural Revolution (Principles of the Country's Cultural Policy, Articles 1 & 19), and *The First Plan for Economic, Social, Cultural Development of the Islamic Republic of Iran Act 1990* (Article 3-15), also known as Iran's first Five-Year Plan (1989-1994) continuing into the second Five-Year Plan (1994-1999). Iran's pre-Islamic past was also gradually being accepted into the sanctioned identity narrative as officials including Rafsanjani visited pre-Islamic sites (Abdi 2001, 72).

3) Reconfiguring National Identity (1997 Onward)

The third period began with Mohammad Khatami's term in office from 1997. In this period a synthetic Islamic-Iranian identity was officially promoted as dominant discourse. The highest administrative levels of the country embraced ideas of cultural continuity between pre-Islamic and Islamic periods of history, openly expressing interest in pre-Islamic culture, cultural heritage and monuments as important, but secondary, to Islamic culture. This official attention seemed to validate and legitimise the position of those wishing to articulate ideas of a continuous Iranian identity and pay attention to pre-Islamic heritage and history.[10]

Internal Factionalism

Throughout this time, there has been a steady rise in state factionalism which may be traced back to the dawn of the revolution, but was intensified after the Iran-Iraq war (for example see Behrooz 1991). These factions are known under different terminologies, including reformist, conservative and extremist, and made cross-alliances whilst still subscribing to differing policies in almost all aspects of the state and society. Perhaps the best known faction has been

the reformist faction which enjoyed popular support among the majority of voters evident in the 1997 landslide election win of Khatami.

As an ongoing feature of the state, internal factionalism has contributed to opportunities for occasional activism by citizens who have at times made strategic alliances with factions to advance their own interests. Activists and NGOs have done the same and, in some instances, helped with setting up and running the provincial campaign headquarters of their preferred candidate – invariably coming from the reformist faction. From the establishment perspective, this has been a case of 'bargaining from the top (meaning state political agents) and pressure from below (meaning people)'.[11] As a new phenomenon, heritage activism appeared in the late-1990s initially under the scientific and literary NGOs and societies (as mentioned above). Activists/NGOs continued their activities throughout Khatami's terms in office but were met with considerable resistance and suppression during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's terms in office and once again gained space for expression after the election of Hassan Rouhani.

State Budget Priorities, Financial Resourcing and Institutional Rivalries

It is reasonable to assume that financial considerations play a major part in the promotion of culture and heritage.[12] Since Rafsanjani's administration, there has been an emphasis on revenue-raising through the promotion of heritage tourism by certain factions within the establishment. Tourism took precedence over preservation of heritage and according to one opinion, shared among some heritage activists, mismanaged commodification has resulted in the destruction of heritage.[13] This reflected a shift in state policies toward its cultural resources which continues to date. In this exchange, heritage organisation was the poorer cousin of all other organisations and needed the assistance given by NGOs to further its interests.[14] On the other hand, activists utilised the opening in the public sphere and the media: many of the NGOs originated within Iran's Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization (ICHTO) as did the now prestigious and well respected Cultural Heritage News Agency (http://www.chn.ir/).

In summary, a number of factors led to the transformation of a sanctioned collective identity. Similarly, certain systemic factors such as factionalism and the desire to enlist public support for factional power politics provided the conditions for, and the possibility of, public participation in heritage.

The Symbolic Birth of Heritage Activism: Pre-Islamic Heritage and Patriotism

Although, the appearance of activism and heritage NGOs was a relatively slow and complex process, their symbolic moment of birth may be ascribed to one event: the creation of the Sivand Dam in 2008. This dam is located approximately 17 km south of the World Heritage site of Pasargadae. The news of its construction created controversy and upset various individuals including academics, professionals and heritage enthusiasts (for example see Vidal 2004). The controversy over the dam was quickly politicised as a result of a communication breakdown by the state and those in charge of construction and this resulted in escalating public protests (Shamoradi & Abdollahzadeh 2014). The common rhetorical thread was the issue of heritage and protection of pre-Islamic history and its monuments, with Iranian identity defined as inclusive of pre-Islamic identity. These events highlighted the social and political potency of pre-Islamic heritage matters in contemporary Iran. The government couched and reacted to most protests and objections related to the dam in terms of national security. This constituted the open engagement of the state by heritage activists who staged various protests in several locations and cities. As one prominent activist points out:

> this may be the most controversial dam in Iranian history … concurrent with the recommencement of its construction activities [in 2007], the protests that took place in winter and then spring 2008 … was the first protest movement in defence of cultural heritage that brought together patriots [of all ranks and colours]. (Afshari 2013, 11–12)

From this point on, heritage activism and NGOs were firmly planted within the public sphere. Their activities fluctuated depending on the attitude of the state toward the public sphere and, as mentioned, were thus severely hampered during the Ahmadinejad period.

Some Common Themes in Heritage: Mapping the Terrain of Activism

What seems to have emerged throughout the past decade is a network of well-connected heritage activists and NGOs. Observations suggest that the terrain of activism comprises some common characteristics regarding heritage and bigger concerns such as national identity, territorial integrity and the notion of a cultural Iran. They are not solely focussed on pre-Islamic history and identity, but the period forms a solid basis for their conceptions of an inclusive Iranian homeland and the nation-state.

Definition and Scope of Heritage

Central to the activities of heritage NGOs is their understanding of heritage. Activists I interviewed subscribe to a very broad and thus vague definition of heritage such as 'heritage is whatever we have received from our forebears' (Reza, heritage activist. Interview by author. Various locations, October 2013 and March 2014) or 'everything is heritage, literature, traditions, historic monuments and even the natural landscape within which we exist' (Abbas, freelance journalist and heritage activist. Interview by author. Various locations, April 2014). In principle, activists perceive heritage as the cornerstone and expression of Iranian identity and some consider heritage and identity as conterminous in relation to history: 'Iranian identity is all those patrimonies from the past upon which we rely (*eteka*) in today's world' (Farshid, cultural heritage activist. Interview by author. April 2014). Their conception of heritage is intertwined with a sense of nationhood or nationalism:

> [cultural heritage] … may include nature or intangible patrimony (*asar*) … a wedding ceremony, a simple ritual or game or food. Once you put all of these next to one another, a resource is created … [that] … defines a nation and its place in the world. [A] nation is recognised with those resources. (Farshid 2014)

This understanding of heritage more or less corresponds with the evolution of the concept internationally (for example see Blake 2000; Daly & Winter 2012; Ahmad 2006; Harrison 2013; Ashworth, Graham & Tunbridge 2007). It is also strategically beneficial as it allows activists to maximise their scope of engagement in cultural, social, environmental and perhaps political issues. This is not to suggest that activists do not have a genuine concern for heritage; their concern for heritage results from first-hand experience, encountering it in-situ as place; an experience that is co-constructed with their identity and supports their perceptions of homeland. As in many other cases of activism and protest (Jasper 2008), they see it as both a personal moral duty and a social responsibility – heritage is a genuine means for self and collective identification, often with inevitable political ramifications. For example, when I asked Abbas about the meaning and implications of heritage he pulled out a dossier of photographs including posters of buildings and natural landscapes on his wall:

> cultural heritage is this [as he showed local costumes], part of my cultural heritage is my natural heritage… [it] is this, a contemporary work… it is the river that runs here because of which civilization and peripheral cities form, people understand this water as a means for existence and consumption and they worship with this water [and]

> perform rituals with it. Cultural heritage is this, a natural heritage which is considered a natural attraction and as a result of the efforts of the likes of us it has been registered nationally ... A cultural heritage may be this these faces, these people with their colourful costumes and with this texture of makeup they have. Or this historic monument which as the engineering system over the river which we [are] proud of; Shushtar, is part of our cultural heritage … so I want to say whatever we believe in as our patrimony, as our … identity, that is considered our cultural heritage. (Abbas 2014)

As this definition suggests, for many activists there is no temporal distinction between pre-Islamic and Islamic heritage. However, a minority have a preference for the pre-Islamic. In one instance, I asked Reza to enumerate his top five or ten examples of cultural heritage that exemplify Iranian culture. He clarified that even his top ten does not include any Islamic artefacts but the top 20 does:

> There are five monuments that if one … does not see, they cannot consider themselves as Iranian and they are part of world masterpieces that even foreigners agree. One is Parsa, Naqsh-e Rostam and Pasargadae. I consider the three of them as one ... one is Choghazanbil, one is Azargoshasb, one is Firdawsi's mausoleum in Tus and one is Izeh … where there is the cave of Salman and three Elamite rock carvings … [and] Hafeziyeh. (Reza March 2014)

Reza's statement, which may reflect a more 'extreme' perspective among heritage activists, contains interesting points. First, his list includes objects and sites as well as individuals (albeit through their tombs). Second, he was emphatic that his top list does not include anything from the Islamic period. However, paradoxically, Firdawsi and Hafiz both belong to the Islamic period. Firdawsi's mausoleum was established in the twentieth century and the mausoleum of Hafiz (known as Hafeziyeh) was remodelled and developed into its current form in the twentieth century. This is indicative of the idea that these two characters are transmitters of Persian philosophy and culture dating back to pre-Islamic times. Reza, for example, rejects the more common understanding that the poetry of Hafiz was inspired by Quranic knowledge, a theory advanced by eminent scholar Darioush Ashuri (2014). Third, Reza was clear that Islamic monuments such as the Shah Mosque of Isfahan, although valuable, were in his mind no match for pre-Islamic structures and art.

Despite the diversity of outlook, in the quotes above, Abbas articulated a shared activist perspective when he asserted that 'cultural heritage and identity, because it is shared between various ethnicities, it creates a unity and convergence' (Abbas 2014). Heritage is thus the key to their understanding of national identity and, since they mostly subscribe to a notion of historical continuity (which deserves a paper in its own right) [15], they generally tend to see Iranian heritage from various periods of history related to pre-Islamic heritage. This appears to be in reaction to ideological discourses (still existing) within the state that politically divide history and give preference to the Islamic period of history.

Defining National Identity (and the Place of Religion within it)

Most activists subscribe to an inclusive outlook toward collective and national identity. They understand the idea of the nation in terms of a unified collection of diverse linguistic and cultural subsets: 'since in Iran various ethnicities have been present, when we say Iran it is not a singular ethnicity or language or cultural wave, it includes all the above and [our definition of Iran] is therefore less strict [exclusive]' (Ahmad. Interview by author. Various locations, September 2013, March and April 2014). Furthermore, there are diverse views regarding national identity: 'attitude toward national identity varies, as you'll get to know people, we

have had little classical education to inculcate us with a uniform conception of national identity and thus each person has constructed their own take on it'. (Ahmad 2013 and 2014)

They define Iranian identity in terms of a relationship between self-identity, historical continuity, environment and geographical intimacy, all of which are represented through heritage. For those in the provinces, there is an added layer of ethnicity and settlement within the area. In this formulation, they define their individual identity as part of a larger collective. As Abbas put it:

> as an Iranian, when I want to introduce myself, I name a country and a province in which I live and I am responsible for this identity … it means my past and the history that I have behind me and as a result of that history, my family has come in possession of an identity … a family that has been born in this province and been formed here and raised me and I am raising the next generations. (Abbas 2014)

There is a common emphasis on responsibility in the sense of custodianship and the agency of the activists in protecting and disseminating their presumed values of heritage, that appear in the environment and monuments as means for collective unity. Their version of collective identity also synthesises what they deem to be an Iranian idea of Islam which for many activists is exemplified in Shiism and mysticism in conjunction with pre-Islamic traditional patterns such as celebrations, some of which are still practiced. Here too there are variations. For some, the place of Islam in the formation of collective identity is accepted as a kind of de-facto reality. As one activist described:

> we can't do anything about it [Islam], it is a reality on the ground and something people subscribe to so we need not to and cannot eradicate it … we shouldn't worry about Islamic identity and sensibilities being weakened by the promotion of pre-Islamic heritage, rather it is the latter that is disappearing and is completely under siege. (Reza 2014)

The vast majority of activists are from Muslim and Shiite background which is not surprising given that Iran is a Muslim society. The paucity of non-Muslim activists may be ascribed to their relative minority status which can engender a well-founded desire for 'staying out of trouble'.

For others, Shiism is an indispensable cultural aspect of today's collective identity. The activists I met tend to consider Shiism as the Iranian version of Islam rooted in pre-Islamic mystical ideas and thus an aspect of the historical continuation of Iranian identity. Indeed, many of the monuments that corroborate the historical rootedness of the nation are pre-Islamic, in some cases carrying Zoroastrian associations. Some (but not all) activists work with the Zoroastrian periodical *Fravahr* and seem to have a taste or preference for pre-Islamic symbols. Islam, they think, 'had much in common with the pre-Islamic religion of Iran and that [pre-Islamic] heritage was almost intact [after the Islamic conquest]. For example … administrative structure remained roughly in place' (Ahmad 2013 and 2014). In their mind this distinguishes Iran from other places such as Egypt, which went through a complete cultural (and linguistic) break after the advent of Islam. The connection was also maintained through literature (especially, the *Shahnameh*) [16] and mysticism, and therefore 'a type of Islam came out that was particular to Iran' (Ahmad 2013 and 2014).

Territorial Integrity, Nation-State and Cultural Heritage

Activists operate on a multitude of scales by positioning themselves, their identity and heritage within a hierarchical structure that relates the individual to the nation. Particularly in the

provinces, their main focus is on local heritage but, explicitly or otherwise, always as part of a larger national repository. The local is validated in relation to the national and therefore many activists espouse strong patriotic sentiments. Although they come from diverse ethno-linguistic backgrounds, the preservation of the nation-state and Iran's territorial integrity is of prime concern. It is possible to speculate that, personal preferences aside, the common patriotic sentiment may be the consequence of three other interrelated reasons. First, what they perceive as the state's selective attitude toward Iranian history and identity which has limited the protection and promotion of common Iranian culture and heritage. Second, the state's mismanagement and politicization of ethnic and religious relations within the country and; third, the evident rise in separatist ideologies and activities in the border regions such as Kurdistan (various modes of Kurdish separatism), Azarbaijan (pan-Turkism), and Khuzestan (pan-Arab separatism).

Their sentiments, however, are generally distinguishable from early-twentieth century conceptions of nationalism which tended to subsume difference into a singular, all-encompassing nationalist narrative. Then this was exemplified in uniform language at the expense of other languages and a singular narrative of history. Some activists may still subscribe to this but the majority acknowledge cultural and linguistic diversity within Iran and some openly and officially encourage the state to:

> collect and preserve [all] aspects [including language] of the subcultures that constitute Iran such their arts, crafts, intangible heritage and folklore even in the smallest geographical unit and this great cultural treasure be kept alive and dynamic in order to strengthen our great national culture. (Afshari n.d.)

Although the author of the above is in no way associated with the state, his suggestions are not in fundamental contradiction with the state's strategic approach to cultural and ethnic multiplicity under the auspices of an integrated and unified nation-state (Elling 2008). However, it is possible to speculate that activists' interest in diversity may be inspired by their perception of Iran's pre-Islamic past where the Achaemenid Empire was composed of multiple ethno-linguistic groups (Briant 2002). According to Ahmad, the inclusive model for diversity has historically worked in the past and there is no reason why it should not function today (Ahmad 2013).

Within the frame of national unity and territorial integrity, heritage activists often engage with local concerns including separatist claims and contested heritage. A useful example is Khuzestan, a major oil province in southern Iran on the Persian Gulf. Its population comprises different ethnicities including *Lurs* and Arabs, which have been within this region (and within Iran) since pre-Islamic times. The region witnessed ethnic tensions in the twentieth century and in recent times tensions have been growing. Recently, some militant ethnic activist groups have formed with the moral, and allegedly financial, support of neighbouring countries and beyond.[17] In their narrative non-Arabs, whom they refer to as *Fars* (or *Ajam*), have occupied their lands and are responsible for all their miseries. Accordingly, the 'Persianization' of this otherwise historically 'more or less independent' Arab area only began during the Pahlavi Dynasty (Elling 2013, 71; Munier 2006). Such groups (for example Ahwaz News Agency (http://www.ahwaziarabs.info/) and National Liberation Movement of Ahwaz (http://al-ahwaz.net/english/2013/index.html)) thus seem to espouse an occupied-occupier scenario (rather than coexistence) focussed on the 'liberation' of the city of Ahwaz, the capital of Khuzestan. Until recently, much of the tangible historical remains in the city dated back to the Pahlavi and Qajar periods – less than two centuries old – which in the separatists' minds corroborated their historical narrative. However, in the last decade, this was refuted by the

emergence of archaeological evidence within metropolitan Ahwaz: first, the old Sassanid city of *Hormuzd-Ardeshir*, and second the discovery of the location of a pre-Islamic royal burial ground – to which Dieulafoy had referred over a century ago – during the construction of the Kouhsaran Park which showed Ahwaz:

> has an ancient history and the names ascribed to Ahwaz such as *Ewaja*, *Tariana* [*Tareiana*], *Hormuzd-Ardeshir* [*Hormoz-Ardeshir*] or *Oxin* [from Greek *Ouxioi*] are not fictitious names but historical titles of this place [it is also important] because there were ethnocentric arguments advanced that Ahwaz has been a city with no [non-Arab] identity and history, such ancient sites can [refute] … these arguments. (Abbas 2014)

It is perceived that the appearance of these monuments in the city transforms its physical fabric; it amounts to a spatial transformation which creates a new imagination of Ahwaz as a place and the monuments anchor in place non-Arab narratives of settlement and identity.[18] In this way, cultural heritage functions as a political as well as cultural resource (Ashworth, Graham & Tunbridge 2007, 36) that legitimates their claim to a shared citizenship and the preservation of territorial integrity under the auspices of the nation-state. However, compared to their separatist opponents most of them seem to have a more inclusive attitude: the logical implication of the city's contestation would be the acknowledgement of the 'other' while dismissing its claims to exclusive sovereignty. In Abbas's words: 'Cultural heritage … [like music] is (can be) the silent [non-verbal] language of the past of a nation which has remained and introduces to others the culture and background of our past' (Abbas 2014). Referring to the water management and engineering system on the rivers in Shushtar, Abbas remarks:

> I am part of this province and here my mother was born and my father was raised … If I am interested in cultural heritage, it is because in the past my ancestors showed this initiative (on water management and) engineering in this way. If I say that I am a *Bakhtyari* who is in love with nature it is because I and my father and family were born in such a space and raised in such a place and this is why we love this nature, it is my identity and identification, it causes me to be proud of my past and want to introduce my identity to others so that others don't attack me. Because if I happen to be without identity, they will attack me. I don't want to construct history, I just want to understand and learn my own history (as it happened). (Abbas 2014)

Thus heritage authenticates individual activist identities and allays their anxieties about belonging by proving a history of shared settlement. Another activist asserts that there are common civilizational roots among different ethnicities apparent in both the use of language and archaeological evidence and that 'only very few people who don't accept this and as we see them in the bigger picture they are insignificant [in numbers]' (Farshid 2014).

Travelling as Means for Identity Construction and Dissemination

As mentioned, activists form a first-hand experience of heritage by frequenting heritage sites and gaining in-situ knowledge and memory. Most NGOs have private, by invitation tours to various sites of heritage for their members. The reports of their visits are often published in newsletters or on websites. These tours often carry an educational value as they involve expert discussions about the monuments, the rituals and folkloric customs of the areas they visit. This seems to assist with the construction of intimacy and tangible knowledge of various forms of heritage (monuments, nature and events).

Other activists also operate as tour guides providing small side-incomes, expanding their popular and professional networks and creating a means of public education and advocacy, as well as being an activity that is considered less problematic by the state, therefore posing

smaller safety concerns for activists. Abbas leads tours: 'first in order to be able to introduce Khuzestan to tourists and my friends' and second, 'being a tour guide is a new field in Iran and Khuzestan and it is unknown and due to the shortage of people with good knowledge of the history of Khuzestan, it becomes necessary for people such as myself and others to enter this field'. The third is economical which is:

> the income as an aside next to other works. We don't consider this a job because tourism is seasonal but nevertheless we consider the financial aspects as well … For me, introduction of Khuzestan to my fellow compatriots gives me extreme joy and fulfilment and I am not prepared to swap that with financial and material gain. (Abbas 2014)

To a certain extent travel and tour leading may be seen to operate as de Certeau's (2011) spatial tactics. Heritage sites are governed by state laws which endeavour to control or suppress 'subversive' expressions. Although transient, these tactics appear to aim at cultivating a broader knowledge and familiarity of history and place, and a redefinition of memory and identity among various people which may end up being subversive.

The sites that activists frequent are not exclusively pre-Islamic although some have a preference for pre-Islamic sites. Additionally, frequenting these sites confirms their ideas of a continuous Iranian history and identity, one that has survived from pre-Islamic times and has informed and transformed Islamic culture, and in the process integrated the latter into local cultural practices.

The Idea of Iran as a Cultural Entity

Activists interviewed subscribe to an idea of a cultural Iran which expands beyond the geopolitical borders of the country, encompassing cultural and historical links with areas that have been separated over the centuries. The extent of cultural Iran is defined with reference to common language (Persian) or rituals and celebrations, as Ahmad remarks, in 'the locations where they are either Shiites, or speak in Persian or celebrate *Nowruz* [19] [the Persian New Year]' (Ahmad 2013 and 2014).

The idea of a cultural Iran or an Iranic World (*Jahan-e Irani*) may be traced back in part to the political tendency of Pan-Iranism. As a political school of thought and subsequently a political party, Pan-Iranism resulted as a reaction to the emotional turmoil of the Second World War and the Allied invasion of Iran in 1941. Pan-Iranism was a nationalist ideology (at time verging on fascism) that emphasised land (territory) and blood (ethnicity or race). It endeavoured to defend the Iranian nation and homeland against foreign incursions, geographical or cultural. It considered culture as the product of a nation's creative force and the spiritual cause for national greatness (*azemat*) asserting that the power of the nation is the result of its cultural dominance, therefore national traditions and customs had to be protected and observed. The ideology also advocated a reunion of all territories that constituted part of the older Iranian culture. The Pan-Iranist party went through a few internal mutations, transformations and internal divisions until it was made illegal after the Islamic Revolution (see Bakhtyari 2006).[20]

Aside from the political aspect, the idea of a cultural Iran that expands beyond the nation-state's current geopolitical boundaries was discussed as early as the 1920s and underwent a number of transformations. It is even present in today's discourses and has appeared in the thought of a number of prominent intellectuals including Changiz Pahlavan and Darius Shayegan. For example Pahlavan thought 'national unity will become more consolidated [only] if it is based on self-awareness *(khod-agahi)* of cultural heritage' (Pahlavan 1974 quoted in Nabavi 2003,

95). Between the late 1970s and 1980s, Pahlavan also developed the civilizational zones thesis, according to which the world could be divided into a number of civilizational zones of cultural influence, one of them being an Iranian zone which transcends geopolitical boundaries. Accordingly, diplomatic, economic and other kinds of exchanges have to be based upon the common cultural constellation in each zone and there has to be a kind of democratic and tolerant exchange between different zones. The thesis rejected pan ideologies that sought cultural and political domination over others. This thesis seems to be present in some current Iranian intellectual exchanges (for examples see Ghezelsofla et al 2010; Mansouri et al 2010; and Anvari 2013).

Some heritage activists interviewed appear to be inspired by such perspectives. While some may be influenced directly by Pan-Iranist ideas due to personal political sympathies, others seem to have stumbled upon and adapted some of the ideas accidentally:

> I read the idea in a few of the pre-revolution journals … I was just flicking through them (in the archive) and there was one of the Iranologists and Pan-Iranists etc. who had spoken about the cultural Iran that the political Iran is different to the cultural Iran, that we should be after cultural Iran for various reasons if we some way wished to reunite … [because] political geographies change … we have to have a civilizational outlook for two reasons: first because of political reasons (to protect ourselves) and second, since they have a shared cultural background economic cooperation and exchange is much easier. (Farshid 2014)

Abbas (2014) ascribes the growing attention to the idea of a cultural Iran to the secession of various parts of the country in recent history (the latest being Bahrain), the Iran-Iraq war, and the agitations of neighbouring countries who encourage ethnic strife and separatism.

Regardless of their sources of inspiration, activists may not categorically subscribe to a classic Pan-Iranism. They do not believe in territorial expansionism, they acknowledge cultural and linguistic diversity within the country, generally do not subscribe to racial mythologies such as Aryanism (Marcinkowski 2010) and pursue the ideal of a cultural union somewhat similar to the EU. It is in this spirit that some like Ahmad advocate the preservation of common cultural heritage beyond Iranian borders:

> the heritage outside Iran has to be preserved. The field outside Iran consists of two parts, one part is within the Iranian civilization such as Iraq and Afghanistan … and other parts are outside the Iranian civilization such as Egypt. … so if we can once again revitalise [existing or historical?] links and ... [collectively recognise that we have a] common heritage and if we make a federation or union with these countries, then all can be shared [and presumably conflicts be managed and reduced] ... Once the cultural contact takes place, economic relations can take place and then finally political unions will take place as well. During these years that they have disrupted the cultural connections, they have also done a lot of cleansing of Iran from culture by suppressing voices and rewriting histories. (Ahmad 2013)

A Reflective Summary in Place of Conclusion

At present, there is insufficient scholarship in the area of Iranian cultural heritage in general and nothing on heritage movements and activism. This paper has begun to address this gap, but requires further fieldwork to develop a better understanding of the work of heritage groups and activists and their relationship with various apparatuses of power, especially the ICHHTO. This includes enquiries into other traits present in Iranian heritage activism including historical continuity, linguistic heritage, the revitalisation of Iranian and pre-Islamic celebrations and cultural occasions, the politics of heritage and the use of media by heritage activists.

On the basis of the findings so far, it may be argued that there is a heritage movement forming throughout Iran which is framed in terms of maintaining the territorial integrity of the country and revitalising and popularizing some of its cultural traits. Concurrently, activities are framed through a critical engagement with the state, but one that is acutely aware of the state-imposed limitations on the public sphere while taking advantage of the political opportunities it may provide.

Activists are not limited to a socio-economic class. Their movement is not elitist while many are educating themselves in related fields (tourism sustainability, Iranian history etc.). Further examination is required to understand the implications of its class composition and the relationship between that and contemporary Iranian society. Their movement is not uniform and there is a dynamic self-critical element within it that requires further examination.

Heritage activists share a common concern for cultural heritage and through that for an inclusive and cosmopolitan Iranian identity – exploring this trait would be illuminating. Their definition of heritage has a productive ambiguity which allows them multiple avenues for engagement and activism. Examining their avenues and strategies as well as differences would be informative.

The basis for their activities is an implicit understanding of the zone of influence of pre-Islamic Iran beginning in the successive Persian Empires, which also forms the basis for the idea of a cultural Iran. This idea is strengthened by a belief in continuity in history and persistence of a certain Iranian outlook. However, it neither seeks to return to the ancient times nor to subsume other nation-states, despite emphasising a cultural Iran and the possibility of forming a union within that cultural zone. The movement is also secular and while it does not dismiss Islam, it acknowledges mysticism as one aspect of historical continuity in Iranian culture.

Notes

1. I conducted multiple semi-structured interviews with most activists. With some, I spent one or more days in the field as they guided me through their favourite monuments and discussed their work and interests on-site and in each monument. The work was carried out in three seasons in 2013-14. I have used pseudonyms for all interviewees. The research for this project was conducted under the auspices of ethics approval # HURGS-02-13.
2. Initially these NGOs were provisioned for on 30 September 1991 by The Supreme Council for Cultural Revolution and overseen by the Ministry of Interior. See: http://bit.ly/1vG3zd0.
3. This date coincides with the appearance of the reformist faction within the state whose figurehead was President Khatami.
4. For a classification of NGOs refer to the website of the Iranian Consultative Assembly (*Majlis*) at: http://irngo.org/about.
5. As Robertson (2012, 23) points out ‘expressions of heritage from without and below can act as tools and resources for counter-hegemonic social movements’ although he does not expand on the possibilities beyond highlighting the links to emotions.
6. This definition was developed in 2014 in collaboration with my colleague Dr Tod Jones of Curtin University in the context of our ongoing project on heritage movements in Asia.
7. Others including Bayat (1996), Ehteshami (2002), Hunter (1989), and Menashri (2001) have referred to periodizations of post—revolutionary Iran in relation to the official acceptance or construction of Iranian identity.
8. State propaganda suggested that the war’s ultimate goal was freedom of *Qods* (Jerusalem) the road to which passed through Karbala (Iraq) and its holy Shi’ite cities.
9. It was only in 1988, for example, that under the immense pressure of war, the state media began to broadcast patriotic marches. An Islamic or Islamist nationalism was gradually becoming apparent.
10. Other officials such as Khatami and his ministers including Zangeneh made comments in the

Visitors' Books of heritage sites such as Persepolis.

11. This was the general strategy outlined by the reformist camp in speeches and media. It has become a catchphrase that has dominated and characterised the identity and modus operandi of this faction within the state. For further see Khiabany and Sreberny (2001) and on the machinations of the reformist camp see Sadri (2001).
12. One of the first instances of legislation for attracting private investment in tourism after the revolution is in the First Five-Year Plan 1991(Article 15-3, Part 1, Section B (be): Strategies). The following Article (15-4) in the *Plan* points to the need to protect cultural heritage and thus the tension between economic benefit (tourism) and protection of heritage (conservation) is already implied.
13. Some, including Dr Mehdi Hodjat, the former deputy Director of Iran's Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization (ICHHTO) rejected this position and many NGOs do not subscribe to the instrumentalization of heritage in terms of pure financial assets.
14. Hodjat (1995, 221) notes how in the squabbles between various revolutionary institutions Mousavi, the Prime Minister of the time, had 'clearly stated the necessity of reviving the original Islamic-Iranian culture'.
15. The advent of Islam marked an abrupt transformation in Iranian outlook in the seventh century CE. Nevertheless, as Savant (2013) points out, the memory of past practices began to emerge and wove into an Islamic discourse sometime between the ninth and eleventh centuries CE. Subsequently, many Persian cultural practices were merged with Islamic practices, outlook and justification such that Islam in all its diversity of manifestations is now an integral part of the culture.
16. The *Book of Kings* which contained pre-Islamic legends in epic poetry by Firdawsi in the 10th century.
17. Peckarsky (2013) lists a number of militant groups listed. Here I am mainly concerned with exclusionist and separatist demands that utilise ethnicity and language as cultural resources to support violent actions. This is not to be conflated with legitimate concerns for socio-economic and cultural improvement for various ethnicities. The members of such groups often proclaim themselves as 'cultural' activists and, as suggested in the text, their activities contain a certain cultural slant as well. While there are various disenfranchised sectors within the Iranian population, the claims of historical and systemic discrimination purely on the basis of ethnicity may be difficult to support.
18. The appearance and discovery of new monuments leads to the construction of a new place. Elsewhere I have elaborated on the conception of place as a dynamic process which involves a fourfold imagination comprising citations, performative actions, spatial transformations and political colligations. See Mozaffari (2014a; 2014b).
19. For a definition see: http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/nowruz-index.
20. For their manifesto see: http://www.paniranist-party.org/pages-2.html.

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