

When History Accelerates

*Essays on Rapid Social Change,
Complexity and Creativity*

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CHAPTER 9

*Change, Cognition and Control:
The Reconstruction of Nomadism in Iran*
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PREAMBLE

Prominent among Paul Stirling's continuing concerns, to judge from his publications and his comments in public and academic gatherings, have been the themes of change, cognition and control. He has stressed the complexity of the causal processes – the multiple 'causal chains' – that link social and cultural change to rapidly accelerating demographic and economic change. He has highlighted the turbulent proliferation in 'social cognition' resultant on the explosion of knowledge and information in rural society. And he has drawn our attention to the ways individuals and organizations (notably the state) seek to control both material and cognitive changes (see e.g. Stirling, 1974, 1982, 1993).

Writing of central Anatolian villages, Stirling holds that 'most rapid and important changes in small-scale societies originate outside them' (1974: 202). In rural society, external material factors of change include new agricultural technologies and facilities, demand for produce and labour, supply of goods and services, including health, welfare and education, new transport and communications facilities (radio, television, press, telephones, computers), and also perhaps national-level demographic factors, notably rapid population growth. Stirling claims to be unable to work out sufficiently complex models for analysing the ways these factors affect and are in turn affected by rural social organization and cultural practices; but his own exploration of the complexity and variability of the issues involved has made a major contribution to such analysis (see frontispiece).

In particular, he has reminded us that in rural communities the impact not only of new material factors, but of new knowledge, skills and information, is very much a function of 'social cognition': the processes by which people perceive, interpret, understand and evaluate these elements in the light of pre-existing 'cognitive worlds'. These

processes will vary, and lead not only to increasingly varied choices by individuals, but in turn to an ever-wider 'spectrum of different constructions of reality and morality' (1993: 12–3).

Finally, and of most concern to me in this chapter, Stirling has stressed the importance of understanding processes of social control, and in particular the ever-increasing power of the rulers of the state over the lives of individual citizens. At the local, rural level, individuals, families and local communities have new ways in which they can at least attempt to control their destinies; but these are as nothing to the powers increasingly available to governments and other large institutions. In terms of my interests here, it is state-level institutions that both initiate major material changes in society and attempt to control these changes and the cognitive processes that govern their acceptance in society.

In most modern states, where governments are at least nominally responsible to the people, ministries initiate or approve social and economic development programmes: improvements in infrastructure (roads, power, services, communications, marketing, etc.), education, health, social security. Whether guided by basic modernization theory or by some other ideology (socialism, conservatism, Islamism), these programmes are intended to increase per capita gross domestic product (GDP), hence to improve people's material circumstances (standard of living) and quality of life (spiritual, cultural), and enable them to achieve their potential and realize their ambitions (whether material or spiritual), if not moral freedoms and opportunities.

Clearly, governments (or rather, the individuals in them) are interested in maintaining or improving their own positions; in order to do so, they must persuade the people that these goals meet their interests, that the costs (taxation, restrictions on personal freedom and property, etc.) are worth it, and that the goals are in fact being achieved. This involves control of social cognition, through various means: control over the availability of information and knowledge, the content of education, the press, radio and television. In slogans and manifestos, government promotes the benefits brought by its measures, disguises the disadvantages, possibly conceals the less savoury effects, and massages statistics. Through its propaganda machine, or whatever we like to call it, government controls not only the availability of information and knowledge, but also the language of communication: interpretations and the construction of reality are controlled through official manipulations of key symbols, values and metaphors, and official definitions of fuzzy concepts and categories; a typical strategy is to legislate a certain

institution or concept into (or out of) existence and to proceed as though it were an established reality.

We are all familiar with examples. In Britain in the 1980s, one member of government declared there was no such thing as 'society', and another that there was no such thing as 'social science'; others attempted to redefine ideals of 'family values' and 'Victorian values'; at the time of writing, another government has sought to direct the country 'back to basics'. In similar fashion, governments in Republican Turkey denied the linguistic-cultural identity of Kurds and declared them to be 'mountain Turks'; they also legislated that Islam was no longer relevant to political and social life. In 1960s Iran, the government declared that there were no longer any nomadic tribes. In each case, large elements at least of the educated urban middle classes came to believe what the governments asserted.

This chapter pursues these themes of material change and social cognition and state control, in the context of the recent experience of nomads in Iran. It focuses on two meanings in the 'reconstruction' of the subtitle: current Iranian Government attempts to develop pastoral nomadic economy and society; and associated redefinitions of Persian terms referring to the nomads and the consequent redefinition of who they are.

The chapter arises from my participation in the international conference on Nomadism and Development held near Isfahan in 1992, discussions with the Director and officials of the Organization for Nomadic Affairs (ONA) who organized the conference, and renewed contact with individuals whose lives as Shahsevan nomads I shared in 1965-6. During August and September 1993, I had further extensive discussions with ONA officials, and also with experts and authorities in the Ministry of Rural Reconstruction (*Jehad*). I also visited Moghan and Meshkinshahr in the new province of Ardabil (formerly part of East Azarbaijan), where I had done extended field research among Shahsevan nomads in the 1960s, as well as the Kermanshah region of southern Iranian Kurdistan. In both regions I had discussions with ONA officials and fieldworkers, and with nomads and settled nomads who had been on the receiving end of their services.¹

The chapter implicitly raises, but does not answer, questions which I hope to investigate in a projected future study of social change and development in rural Iran: how far are standard theories of 'peasant/rural paths of transformation', or world systems integration (which tend anyway to be monocausal) relevant to a situation like that of Iran,

where a major social, political and ideological revolution has completely transformed the conditions of existence of the rural areas? How does one study rural social change and talk of development in such a situation? Changes in rural Iran may prove as radical as those in Soviet Russia in the 1930s (or the 1990s), or China, or other socialist countries, and far greater in impact than so-called 'revolutions' in other third world countries. Social control through redefining and reconstructing basic categories to fit the new ideology is perhaps a familiar theme in the study of revolutions; but how often has it been studied in detail?

BACKGROUND: THE NOMADS OF IRAN

For many centuries up to the present one, major cultural and political cleavages in Iranian society have been between 'Turk' and 'Tajik', between nomad and settled. Pastoral nomads sometimes numbered up to half the population of the country; as late as the nineteenth century the nomadic tribes numbered 2-3 million of the total of 6-8 million. Ruling dynasties were of nomadic tribal origins, or came to power with tribal support, and until the end of the Qajar era (1789-1925) tribal militias formed an important element in the state forces, and simultaneously had the potential, which they sometimes exercised, to overthrow the government (Tapper, 1983).

Reza Shah Pahlavi (1925-1941) saw the nomadic tribes as a threat to the national integration of the state and as a cultural anachronism in the modern world. He attempted to create a culturally integrated, Persian-speaking nation-state in a country where only half the population (some say less) had Persian as their mother tongue, and where most of the nomadic tribes belonged to the rich variety of cultural and linguistic minorities. In a successful military campaign of pacification in the 1920s he undermined the tribal structures, subduing most of the chiefs, killing many of them and disarming their followers. In the 1930s he thought to remove the tribal problem for good by abolishing nomadism through comprehensive enforced settlement. Migration routes were blocked and tents destroyed, yet little or no provision was made to help nomads settle and start farming. The result was economic and social disaster: no increase in agricultural production, huge losses of livestock and the impoverishment, misery and resentment of the former nomads.

After Reza Shah's abdication in 1941, there was a return to nomadic pastoralism; but the attack on the nomadic tribes and other minorities was resumed in the 1950s-70s. There were tribal revolts after the 1940s, but none, in the age of aircraft and tanks, could seriously threaten the

government. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi pursued a modified version of his father's policies towards the nomad tribes: pastoralism was to continue, but on new terms, with a long-term development policy of planned settlement of nomads, mainly through neglect. Tribal leaders were removed, pastures were nationalized, commercial stock-breeders were allowed to invade – and overgraze – tribal rangelands, while traditional pastoralism was neglected and massive agro-industrial schemes were launched in tribal territories. The government wilfully ignored the contribution pastoral nomads had made to the national economy, notably in exploiting otherwise inaccessible rangelands and supplying meat for the increasingly voracious domestic market.

By the mid-1970s, following the oil boom, the livestock economy generally had been undermined by subsidized imports of meat and dairy products. Though this was partly offset by the fact that grain prices were also subsidized, large numbers of former nomads were impoverished and settled, many joining the mass migration to the cities. At the same time, tribes were considered to have ceased to exist as a political element in society, while pastoral nomads were marginalized to the extent that they could be regarded as colourful, folkloric relics from the past, a tourist attraction. As Beck reports (1991: 186–7; cf. 1982), the government facilitated the access of foreign researchers to tribal areas, and urban Iranians were officially encouraged to drive out to the mountains and spend a day as uninvited guests of the nomads, whose banditry and unrest had so recently been a source of government anxiety.

The Pahlavi regime's defeat of the nomads and other minorities was celebrated in the Festival of Popular Traditions held in 1977 in Isfahan, in which nomadic cultures were taken out of their social and especially political contexts and displayed in public as museum pieces – a 'culture bazaar', as one Iranian anthropologist has described it (Shahshahani, 1986: 75–6). A major role in this was played out in the famous Meydan-e Shah in central Isfahan by groups of tribesmen, and some of tribeswomen, who performed for public entertainment dances normally confined to specific social and cultural contexts such as wedding celebrations. For this occasion, the dancers introduced inappropriate new movements, and the women wore make-up. In the electric revolutionary atmosphere of the time, all this was intensely inflammatory for the Isfahanis present, many of tribal origins; several men attempted to mount the platform where the women were dancing, and police had to intervene to quell the resulting disturbance.

There was apparently a growing focus on tribal values among urban revolutionary elements. Sometimes this was explicit, as when some Tehran youth identified with the Bakhtiari as portrayed in the classic film *Grass*: their struggle against the elements symbolized the contemporary struggle against the oppressive regime.²

THE RECONSTRUCTION OF NOMAD ECONOMY AND SOCIETY UNDER THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC

Nomads themselves played little part in the events surrounding the Islamic Revolution of 1978–9, which was largely an urban phenomenon, although settled tribespeople did participate in events in the cities – and in some parts of the countryside such as Kurdistan (Beck, 1980). At the beginning of the Revolution, some educated young people of nomadic background mobilized forces within their own tribes against the chiefs, especially among the Bakhtiari and the Qashqa'i. Islamic-oriented nomadic youth associated themselves with the Islamic revolutionaries in the cities and argued for some kind of planning and organization for nomadic peoples, and for representation at the highest levels in the new regime. These enthusiastic young men initiated major development plans in some nomadic areas, under the auspices of the Campaign for Reconstruction (*Jihad-e saزندegi*), though these plans were postponed after the onset of war with Iraq in 1980.

The Islamic Republic has seen a revival in the fortunes of the nomadic tribes. Ayatollah Khomeyni declared them to be one of two sectors of the population (the other being the mullahs) particularly oppressed by the previous regime. He termed them Treasures of the Revolution (*Zakhayer-e enqelab*), and the fourth armed force; officially they are considered to have had a vital historical role in protecting the independence and territorial integrity of the country. Special efforts have been made to foster their social, economic and cultural life and to make sure that they have the same facilities as the rest of the population. ~~Reza~~ Khamene'i has continued this, describing the nomads as 'a paralysed limb of the people of our country', who have experienced double oppression, as both tribal and rural.

Since the 1970s, Iran has seen widespread economic and social development and massive population growth. There have been improvements in communications, education and other services, but also expansion of cultivation at the expense of pasture lands. Pastoralism continues to be a valuable mode of exploiting the national rangelands, producing meat and other important commodities for the market, and nomadism

continues to be a rational mode of pastoralism in certain conditions, though it requires the support of a government willing to provide infrastructural and marketing facilities as well as controls, for example on overgrazing.

Before the Revolution there was an Organization for Mobile Pastoralists (*Sazman-e damdaran-e motaharrek*), but its brief is evident from the fact that it was part of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development. After the Revolution this organization was reformed and transferred to the Ministry of Agriculture, then in 1983 to the Campaign for Rural Reconstruction (*Jehad-e sazanegi*), which had now become a Ministry. Renamed the Organization for Nomadic Affairs (*Sazman-e omur-e 'ashayer*), it was from 1986 to 1992 directed by an economist of Bakhtiari origins, with the status of Deputy Minister, who also sat on the High Council of Nomads (*Shura-ye 'ali-ye 'ashayer*), of which the Prime Minister, and later the President, was the head.

At the provincial level, where it is staffed partly by members of the tribes, the Organization for Nomadic Affairs (ONA) provides infrastructural services and organizes local and regional representation of the nomads. Other services for nomads, such as health, education, security and the control of pasturelands, are organized through other Ministries, though the basic groundwork is done by ONA. ONA also conducts research, which it publishes in books and reports, and in the interesting quarterly journal *Zakhayer-e enqelab* (*Treasures of the Revolution*), started in 1987.

Nomads initially had no great expectations of any improvement resulting from the Revolution. In practice, life has improved in several respects, largely thanks to the work of the Reconstruction Ministry and ONA. In most nomad areas there are now roads, water and power supply, schools, bath-houses, veterinary services, health-care, shops, and cooperatives for selling pastoral produce and buying basic supplies. Nomads have greater control over their land, and are allowed both to farm and to build on it, which they were not before. The fact that the provision of services, and relations with government, are now in the hands of educated young men from their own tribes appears to have made a considerable difference to nomad attitudes to government.

Although in several quarters old ideas persist about the backwardness of the nomads and the need to settle them, the general improvement in their status means that many of the new generation in Iran, including people of nomad origins, value the nomads' way of life and their political and economic contribution to the country. ONA, taking the

perspective of the nomads and not that of the state, promotes an image of the nomads which is the opposite of that purveyed by the Pahlavi regime. Indeed, the murky histories of many nomad tribes as raiders, as threats to state security, and as agents of imperial powers, have been transformed into a glorious past as freedom-fighters against the oppressive Shahs, and as frontier guards, not least in the war with Iraq.

Nomad settlement is no longer directly enforced, though government encourages it with some vigour. The growth in population means a continuing, indeed increasing, flow of spontaneous settlement. Wealthier nomads who have land, as well as the poorest who have nothing, are the most likely to settle, the former as farmers, the latter as migrant workers in the cities. The remaining nomad camps have as neighbours the herdsmen of wealthy village-based ex-nomads; but many large extended nomad families have diversified, with some members farming, others in trade or transport, and others continuing to migrate with the animals. The new roads have eased the seasonal migrations, which are increasingly conducted by truck and trailer – few camels are left.

Many former chiefs, deposed officially in the 1950s and 1960s, retained their role as patrons until the 1970s, and several returned to power briefly after the Revolution. But they and their families are now gone, many of them abroad, a few remaining only as private citizens, with some wealth but little or no influence. Authority in the tribes is now in the hands of elected councils of young enthusiasts loyal to the regime. Privileges that used to go to chiefly families now go to families of martyrs, mullahs and government officials. In a final reversal of Pahlavi policy, armed tribal militias are now charged with security in the nomad areas, and once again young nomads proudly carry arms along with their tribal clothes.

A major problem for the nomads continues to be access to pasture. Under the Pahlavis, the pastures were nationalized and traditional systems of grazing rights were abolished. Access is now regulated by a system of permits, which has not yet proved satisfactory. Schemes are under consideration for assuring pastoralists access to particular pastures on a basis regular enough to motivate them to conservation. Other, older, problems continue to be reported: the invasion and seizure of tribal territories, both by village cultivators and by city-based, non-nomadic commercial stock-raisers, and the consequent overgrazing and need for supplemental fodder supplies; extortion by some government representatives; escalating prices, for example for transport; and continuing usury from money-lending merchants. Generally, however, the nomads,

at least in the major tribes, with their ability to produce at least some of their own food, appear to enjoy a rather better standard of living than many middle-class city dwellers.³

In September 1992, ONA convened an international conference on Nomadism and Development at Shahr-e Kord near Isfahan, with co-sponsorship from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and other international bodies. In the discussions, many government officials expressed views on the future of the nomads that were positive, enlightened and ambitious, compared with those of other modern states with nomadic populations. There was heated debate between modernists (from ONA and the Reconstruction Ministry) who wish to encourage and facilitate either nomadic pastoralism (and economic diversification) or guided settlement, according to the nomads' wishes; and traditionalists (mainly from the Plan and Budget Organization and the Ministry of Agriculture) for whom settlement is the only 'solution' to what they see as the 'problem' of nomadism. But modernists and traditionalists were agreed on the undesirability of forced settlement, which would lead to further urban migration that the overcrowded cities cannot absorb. The modernists were building a high level of nomad participation (by men at least) into both the planning and the implementation of their development policies.

It would seem that, in government quarters, until 1992, the modernists were in the ascendant, enjoying the support of the leadership of the regime, to whom they had special access. Belonging to the post-revolutionary generation and enthusiastic followers of Khomeyni, many modernists have a somewhat Rousseauian idea of the nomads. During 1992–3, however, the regime has tilted towards a modified form of the traditionalist line, whose proponents include a number of older ex-nomads, who have left their background behind and been educated into a Hobbesian view of nomadism as dirty, ignorant, backward and anti-social. Although government is committed to continuing services to those who continue as nomads, orderly settlement is now seen as inevitable, necessary and a priority, and nomad settlement is being integrated into larger government plans.⁴

As we shall see, however, 'settlement', like 'nomad', has been subject to some subtle redefinitions in recent years.

WHO ARE – AND WERE – THE 'NOMADS'? DEFINITION AND REDEFINITION

In summer 1987 the first ever comprehensive and reliable census of pastoral nomads in Iran was carried out. The total number of nomads,

in a population of about 55 million, was nearly 1.2 million, which is perhaps surprisingly close to the figure of 2–3 million nomads usually estimated for much of the nineteenth century, even if the proportion of nomads in the population has drastically declined since then.

For the purpose of the census, nomads ('*ashayer-e kuchandeh*, 'migrating tribes') were defined by a combination of three criteria:

- (a) tribal (*qabileh'i*) social organization, 'in which individuals feel themselves and their families (*khanavadeh*) to belong to a larger social group, usually based on kinship, and usually called a *tayfeh*';
- (b) reliance for livelihood mainly on animal husbandry (*damdari*);
- (c) a pastoral (*shabani*) or nomadic (*kuch*) way of life, moving anything from a few to 500 kilometres between natural, seasonal pastures (Islamic Republic of Iran, 1991: i).

This official definition of nomads is clear; it was precise enough for the purposes of the 1987 census, the organizers of which were well aware of past problems of counting the nomads: what constitutes the 'mobile population', what time of the year to count them, and the omission of pastoral nomads who happened to be in houses at the time of the census (cf. Towfiq, 1987). Nevertheless, strictly applied, it excludes non-tribal nomads and non-pastoral nomads, as well as settled tribespeople. In practice, application of the criteria, whether by government officials or by 'nomads' themselves, has been flexible: it depends on what is at stake, what is being demanded of nomads, or offered to them, in terms of taxation, government budgets, services and facilities.

Under the Qajar and earlier dynasties in Iran, the Turkish-speaking nomads at least could claim ethno-linguistic identity with the ruling élite. But under the Pahlavis the languages and cultures of minorities, notably Turks, Kurds, Lors, Baluches, Turkmens, Arabs, including almost all the tribal and pastoral nomadic peoples, were systematically suppressed. Many nomads (Kurds, Baluches, Turkmens, some Arabs) are Sunni Muslims, some Kurdish nomads belong to an extremist Shi'a sect, the Ahl-e Haqq, and many of the Sangsari are Baha'i; these minority religious identities further complicated relations with the Shi'a central authorities, particularly after the Islamic Revolution.

As a result, urban Iranian officials and intellectuals, at least from the 1950s to the 1970s, tended to assume that nomad tribes belonged to cultural and linguistic, if not religious minorities, and regarded tribes,

nomads and pastoralists as the same: 'proper' tribes, it was thought, must be pastoral nomads.⁵ In Persian, until very recently the terms *ilat* (Perso-Arabic plural of the Turkish *il*, 'people', 'tribe') and *'ashayer* (plural of the Arabic *'ashireh*, 'tribe', 'clan') were used more or less interchangeably, often indeed as a pair, *ilat va 'ashayer*, meaning 'nomadic tribes', with strong connotations of powerful leaders who at points in the past rivalled and on occasion overthrew and replaced the rulers of the state.⁶

As plurals, *ilat* and *'ashayer* are shifting, ambiguous terms. What is implied by these terms – pastoralists, nomads, tribes – to the average Iranian today, compared with fifty or a hundred years ago? How indeed should the terms be translated into English? It is not just a question of definition, but also of thorny political/ideological issues – the notion of 'tribe' perhaps smacks more of anachronism, of powerful chiefs, of difficult times in Iranian history, than do either 'nomad' or 'pastoralist'; but terms that can mean all of these carry all their connotations. It seems that the prime reference of the terms has been political, to 'tribes', so that there is sometimes, where necessary, the added precision of *damdar* (pastoralist), *kuchandeh* or *kuch-neshin* (nomadic, migrating), or *chador-neshin* (tent-dwelling). But increasingly the terms have become differentiated, *ilat* being reserved for 'tribes', and *'ashayer* for 'nomads'.⁷

Thus, around 1990, the name of the government department (*Sazman-e omur-e 'ashayer-e Iran*) that was concerned with providing services to nomads, and indeed had helped to organize the census, was translated into English as 'Iran's Tribal Affairs Organization'. In 1992 the translation was changed to 'Organization for the Nomadic Peoples of Iran', at least for the purposes of the international conference convened by the department, and the title of the conference (*'ashayer va touse'eh*) was translated as 'Nomadism and Development'. Nomadism implied pastoralism, and clearly – and usefully – steered conference discussion in the direction of 'the future of nomadic pastoralism', a topical issue in development studies; one cannot conceive of a similarly useful conference being convened to discuss the development or future of 'tribes'. Significantly, the conference brochures avoided any use of the term 'tribe' in the English text, or of *ilat* in the Persian, where only *'ashayer* was used.

This shift was a decision by a few individuals, concerned perhaps with the international image of Iran.⁸ At any rate, the English notion of 'the tribes', and the Persian-Turkish plural term *ilat*, have been eased

out, and replaced by the Arabic *'ashayer* in its new sense of 'pastoral nomads' and *qabileh* (as in the census definition) as an analytical term for 'tribal', with social, and no longer political connotations.

But the singular *il* continues to be used for specific tribal groups, and rather more subtle refinements and redefinitions have been produced within official circles. In official publications associated with the census and since, *il* is defined in more detail:

An *il* is composed of several *tayfeh* united on the basis of kinship, or social, political or other ties; usually located in a defined geographic area, known as the tribal territory (*qalamrou*). *Tayfeh* of an *il* usually have distant kinship links with each other by blood (*nasabi*) or marriage (*sababi*); but some have no kinship links but form an *il* through social or political necessity (*zarurat*). The speech, customs and manners and way of life of the different *tayfeh* of an *il* are by and large the same.

The most well-defined and important pastoral nomad (*'ashayeri*) social level is the *tayfeh*, a community (*jama'at*) usually united by near and distant kinship, linked through a number of generations, by blood or marriage, to a common origin (*mabna*); a pastoral nomad (*'ashayeri*) individual is usually identified primarily by his *tayfeh* name.

Independent *tayfeh* are those which have no *il* membership.

Below this level (the definition continues) the various subdivisions in the tribal structure are peculiar to each tribal group. At the minimal level, however, there is invariably a small group of households linked by close blood relationship or affinity. Other groups, formed for example for migratory or herding purposes, are not counted in the census (Islamic Republic of Iran, 1989: vi).⁹

Despite the qualifications, this definition is quite precise and comprehensive. However, although it includes the political notions of territory and unity, there is no mention anywhere of the element of leadership, once the *sine qua non* connotation of 'tribe'. Apart from this omission, the definition has two major differences from its predecessors: on the one hand, it is both more explicit and more flexible than any previous one; on the other, for the first time individuals whose own background is that of ordinary nomadic tribespeople have, through the ONA, had a hand in its formulation.

TRIBES AND NOMADS

As we have seen, the notion of 'tribes' (*ilat va 'ashayer*) as the political and social dimension of pastoral nomadism was strongly entrenched in academic and administrative thinking about Iranian society, such that the category of 'the tribes' was conventionally synonymous with 'the nomads'. Further, 'tribes' were strongly associated with powerful leaders. Since the Islamic Revolution, however, official definitions of 'tribes' have played down this political dimension. They now omit all reference to chiefs, and focus instead on the social: tribes in Iran, or at least the major components, the *tayfeh*, are now defined in terms of a sentiment of kinship. To be sure, the redefinition of the terminology recognizes changing political realities – the chiefs no longer exist; but it is also an attempt to fix current reality in a way that facilitates control. This is also evident in the implication in the official definition that there is, and always has been, a more or less uniform pattern of political and social structure among the nomadic tribes, which is far from the case. Even the upper level of the structure – *il* divided into *tayfeh* – is idealized. It is not an exact representation of any one tribal group, but somehow the average of all of them, a model of uniformity, and it is a fiction for the purposes of administration and control, in a grand tradition of many centuries during which governments have defined, created and classified 'the tribes'.

The tribal groups of Iran differ in many ways. Some scholars have sought to categorize them according to their economic and ecological situations as pastoralists and migrants. But they have been classified in a variety of other ways, for different purposes. Official classifications, for example, have used three types of criteria, alone or in combination: by ethno-linguistic affiliations, by province, or by state-defined 'tribes' and 'clans'.

A further mode of classification of the nomad tribes focuses on socio-political structures and relations to the state. Tribal political structures have nothing much to do with either pastoralism or nomadism *per se*. It has indeed long been recognized that the powerful chiefs and tribal groups in Iran were, in large part, moulded if not created by the state and by government policies. Tribes in Iran have formed and derived their character from their relation to particular states at particular times – and there has been much theorizing as to the complex processes involved (e.g. Digard, 1973, 1987; Garthwaite, 1983; Beck, 1991; Kiavand, 1989; R. Tapper, 1983, 1991).

No simple model of 'the tribes/nomads of Iran' is adequate, unless

perhaps for very specific and drastic purposes of control. Many academic and official studies of the tribes, however, have based their analyses on the apparent assumption of a uniformity of structure, often based on a reading of Barth's study of the Basseri nomads of Fars (1961).¹⁰ Typical formal schemes tend to include the following common elements:

- (a) A regular segmentary structure of territorial/political units, with terminologies to match (*il, tayfeh, tireh, obeh* and their equivalents), usually depicted graphically as a star or tree;
- (b) A matching segmentary framework of descent groups, with a genealogical charter of pedigrees of descent from a common ancestor; again, a tree is the common model;
- (c) A matching hierarchical structure of political leadership roles (*ilkhani, khan, kalantar, kadhoda, rish-sefid* and so forth), accompanied by pyramid-shaped diagrams;
- (d) A matching pyramid model of class structure, for example: chiefly families, independent commoners, employees, dependants and servants.

Careful reading of Barth's account of the Basseri shows them to diverge at many points from this model of 'tribal structure', but his account has been frequently misread, by both Iranian and outside academics, as confirming the elements of the model (Street, 1990; cf. Barth, 1992). Indeed, all the major Zagros confederacies (Bakhtiari, Qashqa'i, Khamseh), despite radical differences between them, are sometimes represented as the archetypes of 'tribal structure' and of pastoral economies and societies in Iran, while other tribal groups are held to be more or less imperfect approximations to them, with fewer levels of organization, less centralization, less powerful chiefs and so forth.

However, the idea that there was a uniform or archetypal 'tribal structure' of Iran, a fixed pattern of hierarchical political and social organization among nomads, was wishful thinking on the part of tidy-minded academics and government officials intent on control.

Even if certain nomadic societies have similar social and political structures on paper, this says nothing about the functions of groups at any level, the power and role of any particular leader, or the political behaviour of particular individuals. Indigenous terms for political and descent groups, according to which nomads and tribespeople identify

themselves and act, are not as systematically related or consistent as standard hierarchical models of tribal structures suggest. The terms used tend to denote facets or functions, rather than levels in a hierarchy of groups. Ethnographers often report that individual nomads could not specify whether a given named group of people was a *tayfeh* or a *tireh* or an *il*; this is not evidence of confusion or imprecision on the part of informants, but rather of the contextual nature of the terms. Many such terms are used interchangeably or apparently inconsistently, partly because – like the English terms ‘section’, ‘department’, ‘division’, ‘family’, ‘group’, ‘lineage’, ‘tribe’, ‘clan’, ‘community’ – they are ambiguous, partly because different terms are appropriate descriptions of the same ‘group’ in different contexts of action. The same Shahsevan social group may be called a *tireh* in the political context of tribal sections, a *göbak* as a descent group, or a *jamahat* as a ritual and moral community (R. Tapper, 1979; cf. Tapper and Tapper (1982) on *qoum* in Afghanistan; and the discussion of Kurdish terms by van Bruinessen, 1992: 60f.). The same term may have different connotations in different tribal cultures, signifying, for example: community, grazing-group, tribal section, followers of a leader, descent group. Further, *il*, now officially used for major tribal groups throughout Iran, in the language and culture of the Turkmen nomads of north-eastern Iran means ‘peace’, ‘obedience’.

Much the same is true of the terminology of leadership positions. Terms such as *khan*, *beg*, *katkhoda*, *rish-safid/iaq-saqal*, which may be neatly listed in a hierarchical – quasi-military – model of tribal political structure, in practical usage in different tribal contexts may rather have differentiated between leaders who were self-promoted, government appointees, or popularly elected or approved.

As for the assumption that nomads conceive their tribal identity in terms of a nesting set of descent groups, this is true in only a very limited sense. The Bakhtiari, and one or two other groups, are reported to have a unifying tribal genealogy, but other major groups, with histories and traditions of heterogeneous origins, make no pretence at such agnatic unity, and invoke frameworks of common descent only at low levels of organization (van Bruinessen, 1983; R. Tapper, 1979). Commonly, indeed, pedigrees and descent claims are only invoked where, as in the case of the Basseri *oulad*, they bring rights of access to an important resource such as pastureland. At the level of the local community, such as the Basseri camp, common descent is often no more important than other kinds of inter-personal ties as a basis for

day-to-day relationships and loyalties. Local-level groupings tend to be of very mixed composition, like the major confederacies themselves; most commonly, it is ties between women that structure the composition of the smallest groups of households.

Unilineal segmentary-hierarchical models of nomadic tribal society, reproduced in academic and official analyses, appear to create rather than depict or discover structures. They were convenient as administrative blueprints for control, models for use by central government or by tribal chiefs. But they seldom represent tribal structure as it was seen and lived by ordinary nomads, whose stories of the origins of different tribal sections and the connections between them often differ radically from the official, chiefly version (cf. R. Tapper (1988) on different versions of Shahsevan origins; Wright (1992) on Doshmanziari and others). And they certainly do not explain the political behaviour of nomadic individuals: the networks of personal ties of loyalty and friendship, modes of negotiation and accommodation, the formation and maintenance of alliances and rivalries, and the emergence of leaders, including women (whether as wives or mothers of male leaders, or in their own right). These informal processes occur at all levels of nomadic society. At the level of tribe and confederacy their operation tends to be obscured if not suppressed by processes emanating from the state, following the official hierarchical political model. At the local level, on the other hand, these processes reflect real economic and social forces in nomadic society.

Tribal organization in the old political sense no longer exists in Iran. The centralized chiefdoms and confederacies, condemned as socially unjust and politically unnecessary and incompatible with a modern state structure, have finally been abolished, and the state, through ONA, has taken over the political and economic functions of the former tribal leaders. Government has redefined ‘*ashayer*, *il* and *tayfeh*’ to include no reference to tribal political organization or chiefship, but specifically to imply both pastoral nomadism and the moral ties of kinship, or shared economic interest. It has in effect recognized the basic social and economic reality of nomad ‘tribes’.

NOMADS’ SELF-DEFINITIONS

How do nomads define their own identities? Do people classified by governments, historians, anthropologists or other outsiders as ‘nomads’ or ‘tribes’, actually identify themselves as such, or by some other category? The answers, as in other questions of identity, depend on

context: indeed, on who is asking the question, in what situation, and for what purpose. What are the elements of their identity?

First, for many nomads, the most conscious element of their identity has always been their religion; whether in the case of those adhering to the majority Shi'a faith of Iran, or the Sunni or Ahl-e Haqq minorities. Barth's account of the Basseri supports a conventional Middle Eastern stereotype of nomads as lax Muslims, uninterested in the religion of the mullahs; but there are other, contrary stereotypes, such as that derived from Ibn Khaldun, according to which nomads have a simple, desert religion which brings them close to God, and are liable to respond quickly to the call to reform; and more recent accounts of Iranian nomads such as the Shahsevan and the Komachi show them to be sincere, committed Muslims (R. Tapper, 1979, Bradburd, 1990).

In the traditional context of political relations with the state, with non-tribal peasants or with members of other tribes, nomads would often identify themselves generically as 'tribespeople' (*ilati*, *'ashayer*), or specifically by the name of a tribal group to which they belonged, depending on the situation. In this context, markers of identity were commonly martial symbols such as firearms and stories of past exploits. In the larger tribal groups, as we have seen, members of the chiefly classes served as the warriors and did little herding work; they would be more likely than ordinary nomads or hired shepherds to maintain this tribal identity.

In economic and social contexts, where ordinary nomads share the distinctive experiences and problems of tent-dwellers, camp-dwellers, migrants and stock-keepers, as opposed to settled cultivators, traders, city-dwellers, a number of relevant identities (in different languages) are available. The tents themselves, the hearths around which families gather, sometimes the herding skills and practices and aspects of the migration, tend to carry important symbolic meanings associated with this kind of identity.

The richest area of symbolic potential for distinctive markers of identity is that of culture and ethnicity: language, history and tradition, religion, custom, and material culture. Cultural differences among the nomads of Iran have been much reported on, and the more visual and tangible aspects such as dwellings, textiles, clothing, food and domestic paraphernalia have been displayed in museums and described in the more popular ethnographic literature. Material items such as tents and clothing are sometimes used as cultural markers by the nomads themselves, but linguistic differences appear to embody more

important elements of cultural identity. Recently there has been a boom in publication of the poetry and other oral literature of nomads.

But there is one area of culture that holds for nomads (as for other people) deeply rooted, and usually unarticulated, meanings: the realm of ceremonies and rituals, in particular those associated with marriage. In basic outline, weddings and other ceremonies are very similar among the different nomad groups; but their richness, and much of the implicit importance for the participants, lies in the details which distinguish the customs and symbolism of each group: often of each clan and sometimes each local community. Nomadic identity seems to be encapsulated in the forms of music and dance practised at weddings – hence the reaction to the dance displays in the 1977 Isfahan Festival referred to earlier.

These various identities are not exclusive, but are alternatives, and individuals can and do claim more than one, shifting between them according to circumstances. Much daily interaction between individuals can be interpreted as the continuing negotiation of identities.

What determines nomads' changing self-perceptions? Much hinges on relations between neighbouring groups at different levels, which can be manipulated by local leaders or governments. Where groups of different backgrounds are allied (for presumably practical reasons) they can adopt a common identity as pastoral nomads and play down their ethnic-cultural differences, which may over time disappear. This ethnic convergence is more likely perhaps in the case of small groups or minorities adapting to majority or dominant groups, as has frequently occurred in Iranian tribal history, for example between Kurdish and Turkish groups at a local level. In other cases, there is a long history of ethnic rivalry, for example between Qashqa'i 'Turks' and Bakhtiari 'Lors' on the one hand and Khamseh 'Arabs' on the other. This 'ethnic' rivalry often focuses on cultural differences such as wedding customs; it may also affect each group's perceptions of their religious identity, for example (between two Shi'a groups) of their comparative piety (R. Tapper, 1984).

Much also depends on how far nomads share cultural, linguistic and religious traditions with the rulers of the state, and on the changing political and economic realities of privilege and discrimination, in terms of social status, and these days access to jobs and contracts and government funding. Before the Pahlavis, rulers were of tribal origins, and tribal identities carried some status in society. The Pahlavis attempted to abolish the tribes, and encouraged an urban contempt for rural and tribal peoples as dirty and ignorant savages, beneath attention.

Those who were once proud to be 'tribespeople', led by chiefs and a threat to the state, either attempted to merge into the rural landscape as ordinary citizens, or became 'pastoral nomads', which at least carried the connotation of harmless, specialized, even valued producers.

This identity and that of Shi'a Muslims have become more respectable in the Islamic Republic, but dominant religious and nationalist values mean that the state is ambivalent in its attitude towards distinctive tribal (even in the redefined sense) and minority identities and cultural practices, for example where these involve music and dancing and women's dress. At the Isfahan conference, however, there was evidence of shifts in the political culture of the Islamic regime: the earlier ban on music and dancing was relaxed, and nomadic women were conceded the right to dress in styles not conforming closely to urban 'Islamic' conventions.

Once more, pastoral nomadic cultural practices and products are being promoted for their inherent interest and value as part of a rich national tradition, but this time there is greater respect for their living role in both past, present and future society. It remains to be investigated how far these changes in the external environment will affect nomadic self-definitions and cognition. Preliminary indications are that, just as 'pastoral nomadism' has become more respectable a concept in government, and to the society at large, so also 'settlement' has become increasingly acceptable to nomads who once would have rejected it as threatening the very foundations of their identity. But this change too is at least in part due to subtle reconstructions of the concept in the ways that government promotes it and those concerned perceive it.

REDEFINING 'SETTLEMENT'

Since the nineteenth century, governments have accepted unquestioningly that the best, if not the only way to control the nomadic tribes is to settle them. This dogma found its most ardent exponent in Reza Shah, but it has persisted under later governments, including the present regime. As with both 'nomadism' and 'tribalism', however, the government appears to be pursuing its policy of 'settlement' at least in part by allowing or encouraging redefinitions of the term.

'Settlement of the tribes' (*eskan-e 'ashayer*) once had strong political connotations of bringing the unruly under control. It meant that the nomads should cease migrating and become farmers or factory workers, living in villages or towns under the direct administration of

government; the economic role of pastoralism was deliberately left out of account.

Although settlement has now lost its political rationale, for some it remains a dogma justified by social, economic and ecological arguments. Those I defined earlier as traditionalists, some of them educated under the old regime, continue to urge that nomadism is backward and that the nomads must be settled, for their own economic and social good. They produce reports demonstrating that nomadic pastoralism is economically wasteful (animals suffer unacceptable weight-loss on migration), and ecologically harmful (destruction of pastures). They are supported by some of the new mullahs, perhaps ignorant of nomads and shocked by their first sight of them. They are able to point further to the frequent approaches by nomads to the Ministry of Reconstruction, asking for settled bases and access to facilities such as schools; they gloss over the nomads' requests that, even with the settled bases, they should be allowed continued freedom to move if appropriate.

However, like 'nomads' (*ilat*, '*ashayer*'), 'settlement' (*eskan*) is a fuzzy concept. In effect, government can take various actions to sponsor and encourage settlement. At the radical end, it can ban migrations, or it can confiscate nomadic pasturelands, either by ploughing and irrigating them, or giving grazing permits to commercial (settled) stockmen, so that nomads have nowhere to graze their animals and are forced to settle. Or government can control the prices of pastoral produce, for example by massive imports of foreign meat and cheese, so that the nomads' economy is ruined. Or it can give incentives to nomads to plough up their own pastures. Or it can build settled stations in the pastures as bases for supplying facilities, and attract nomads to use these bases or even to settle there. Or, finally, it can abolish nomadism at a stroke by declaring the nomads 'settled'.

All these strategies, as we have seen, have been pursued at various points in recent Iranian history, and all beg the question, at what point do nomads become 'settled'? Settlement of people, animals or bases? In 1993, in some parts of the country at least, it appeared that, if nomads can be shown to have settlements (buildings, bases, stations) – something all nomads are apparently happy to have – then, even though they may still migrate (by truck or by transport animal), they can be said to have 'settled' and to be pursuing a modern way of life.

CONCLUSION

Despite the improved social status that nomads are now accorded, the

overall process in the twentieth century – with the radical expansion of the world economic-political system, the revolution in communications and the military power available to the state – has been a decisive and irreversible turn to the ascendancy of settled society. The long-term future of pastoral nomadism in Iran, as elsewhere, must remain in doubt.

In the short term, processes of social change must be studied, as Paul Stirling has argued, not only in terms of material and demographic change, but also in terms of knowledge and cognition. In this chapter I have suggested that an important part of these changes will be the contestation and negotiations of the concepts used to control people from above, and also to express identities from below.

NOTES

- 1 Earlier versions were presented in seminars at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) (November 1992) and at the annual meetings of the Middle East Studies Association in North Carolina (November 1993); I am grateful for comments received on both occasions. Travel to Iran in September 1992 and August–September 1993 was made possible by grants from the British Institute for Persian Studies (1992 and 1993) and the Nuffield Foundation (1993), and my visit to Research Triangle Park was assisted by a grant from the SOAS Research Committee. Some of the material is also being used in the 'Introduction' to J. Thompson and R. Tapper, forthcoming. I am grateful to numerous officials and private individuals in Iran who were willing to discuss the present and future of the nomads. I am particularly indebted to Ziba Mir-Hosseini for sharing her knowledge of the nomads with me, and for long discussions during which the main argument of the paper was developed. Jon Thompson has helped clarify both my ideas and the language of the text. I should stress that the chapter is very much a report on work in progress.
- 2 See Naficy, 1979: 223; *Grass* is a 16mm film by Merian C. Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack made in 1924.
- 3 See Beck, 1992. Studies in English of nomadic life under the Islamic Republic are still few. The above account derives from Beck, from reading a variety of reports in Persian, and from personal information, mainly second-hand, on other major groups such as Bakhtiari, Shahsevan, and Lor.
- 4 Under the Second Five-Year Plan (due to start in March 1994), 80,000 families of nomads are due to be settled.
- 5 Fredrik Barth writes of 'the pervasive conviction among urban Iranians to whom I spoke [in 1958] that all tribesmen in Iran – the land of Kurds and Lurs and Baluchis – should be nomads' (1992: 177).
- 6 Other terms have in the past been used synonymously with them: *qabayel*,

- tavayef*, *oymaqat*, *ulusat* (Lambton, 1971: 1095-6; Towfiq, 1987: 707). All these too are plural forms, of the singulars *qabileh* (Arabic), *tayfeh* (Arabic), *oymaq* (Turko-Mongol), *ulus* (Turkish). The singulars have specific references in contemporary Iranian tribal societies.
- 7 A leading Iranian anthropologist, the late Nader Afshar-Naderi, suggested the reverse in the 1970s (1983: 331).
 - 8 In 1993, when one of the officials of the organization saw that I used 'Organization for the Nomadic Peoples of Iran' as a translation, he corrected me again: the proper English was 'Organization for Nomadic Affairs'. Nomads themselves call the organization '*Jehad-e 'ashayeri*', identifying it with its parent Ministry and its ideology.
 - 9 This definition has also been published elsewhere, e.g. *Zakhayer-e Enqelab*, 11 (summer 1990), pp. 77–81, and 19 (summer 1992), pp. 17ff.
 - 10 See numerous recent monographs, and Wright (1992). It should also be noted that historians and ethnographers have, through their writings, been among the 'creators' of tribal ethnic identities; the Shahsevan are just one among many well-documented cases in the Middle East (R. Tapper, 1988).

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