

## Iranian Studies: Exploring the Iranian ‘Otherness’

**Evangelos Venetis**

**Evangelos Venetis**, a Greek national, holds PhD in Islamic and Iranian Studies from the Department of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies, University of Edinburgh, UK (2006). He is the founder and director of the *Society for Hellenic-Iranian Studies* and is currently a Senior Research Associate in Islamic and Iranian Studies at the School of Asian, African and Amerindian Studies, University of Leiden, the Netherlands. Dr. Venetis has published various articles in scientific journals and he is the co-author of the *Bibliographika Sasanika*, vol. 1 (Costa Mesa – CA, 2007). His book entitled *The Iskandarnama (Book of Alexander): An analysis of an anonymous Persian prose romance* will be published soon. His research interests cover classical Persian literature, history and Sassanid Iran while his special research area is focused on Greco-Iranian Studies. This research has been carried out in the context of the Persian Epic Cycle Project funded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO).





### Abstract

The field of Iranian Studies was developed in the West as a means of exploring the unknown civilization of Iran in the aftermath of the Renaissance and during the political expansion of some Western countries towards East, starting from the 16th century. The establishment of Iranian Studies as a sub-field of Middle Eastern and Asian Studies resulted from practical necessities which Western nations faced in their efforts to understand the Iranian world and civilization at a time of their political advancement in the region. Throughout the twentieth century the field of Iranian Studies has advanced academically. While geopolitical balance in the region has remained essentially unaltered, and Iran has retained and even increased its geopolitical importance in the region. Thus Western interest in Iranian affairs, culture and mentality similarly increased.

This paper analyses the status and focus of Iranian Studies in the West after the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1979), the role of diasporic Iranians and the significance of the field in the effort of the West to understand the Iranian Otherness and its geopolitical importance.

**Keywords:** Western Origin of Iranian Studies, 20th Century Developments, Post-1979 Era, Diasporic Iranianists

## Introduction

Intercultural understanding is a natural process and has been always the case in history. The same is the case for the efforts of peoples to understand their own culture relying on their own literary and oral traditions. Most of the times throughout this process political antagonism between various countries coexists with their cultural awareness of the *Self* and the *Other*.<sup>(1)</sup> In this process, due to her historical, cultural and geopolitical significance, the case of Iran is of exceptional importance. This analysis focuses on Western endeavours to understand Iranian culture and mentality through the well-established research field of Iranian Studies. In particular it analyses the status and focus of Iranian Studies in the West after the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1979) and the significance of the field in the efforts of the West to understand the Iranian otherness and its geopolitical importance. Yet before examining the efforts of Westerners to understand Iran, it is interesting to see what Iranians did in the same regard.

Although it is not attested when this process was initiated, it is certain that Iranian peoples decided at a certain point of their past to study their own culture in order to systematize knowledge, aiming to achieve their cultural and ethnic self-

awareness. Even though the academic term *Iranian Studies* originated in the Western world, the first efforts of Iranian peoples to work in this field are attested in the 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> c. AD Samanid court and other principalities of the eastern Iranian world. There might have been some similar efforts during the Sasanian period or even earlier but no proof or evidence seems to exist in this regard. In the Samanid court and then in the Ghaznavid sultanate some Iranian historiographers (e.g. Tabari) and poets made attempts to compile accounts related to the history of Iranian kings. It was actually Abu 'l-Qasim Firdawsi from Tus (Khurasan) who created the well-known *Shahnama* (Book of Kings), which must be considered as the first attested effort of Iranians to explore their past and achieve cultural awareness in a literary, albeit semi-academic, fashion. Since then Iranians have relied on Firdawsi's work to explore their ancestral cultural past and systematize some of the principles of their culture in both their pre-Islamic and Islamic contexts. Yet the efforts of non-Iranians to understand Iranian culture predated the aforementioned endeavour of Iranians.

Highlighting the significance of Hellenic (Greek)-Iranian Studies in this regard, the first systematic effort by non-Iranians to explore Iranian civilization was the Greek Herodotus's *Histories*. Herodotus established a long literary tradition about the knowledge of Greeks and other Westerners for Iran. Later on this tradition was transmitted to Latin literature, establishing thus the well-known Greco-Roman stereotypical view about ancient Iran which resulted from the Greco-Iranian political antagonism of the 5<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> c. B.C. and was extended to the



Roman-Early Byzantine periods. Throughout antiquity the Greeks and the Romans formed an antithesis between the *Self* and the *Other*, the West (Greeks-Romans) and the East (Iranians) respectively. Expectedly enough in this model the image of the West was positive and that of the East negative. Hence the literary accounts which were produced in the West about Iran at the time reflect this contrast.

The primarily political antithesis went on between East and West after the emergence of monotheism in the form of Christianity and Islam. Similarly westerners retained their interest about political developments and Iranian cultural. In 1295-6 AD the Byzantine monk and astronomer Gregory Chioniades was sent from the Byzantine Emperor from Constantinople to Tabriz to study Astronomy, Persian and Arabic under the Iranian astronomer Shams al-Din Bukhari.<sup>(2)</sup> Chioniades's disciples followed his path producing various astronomic treatises at the time. In 1304, combining science and politics, Chioniades became the Christian bishop of Tabriz. Western scholars, bishops and merchants from Italy, Spain etc. were also found in Iran at the time and so was the western interest about the exploration of Iranian civilization and culture.

### 1. The emergence of Iranian Studies in the Modern World

The aforementioned examples cite some of the first attempts of Westerners in history to write down systematically their knowledge about Iran, share it with their fellow compatriots and, broadly speaking, establish a literary tradition in the West.



As long as political and economic rivalry between East and West went on unaffected, Westerners continued to display particular interest about Iranian culture. The establishment of Iranian Studies in the modern academic sense and framework goes back to the 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries, an era which followed the end of the Middle-Ages, the emergence of the Renaissance, and later of the French Revolution, and marking the colonial period and the beginning of Western globalization.

This era in the West highlighted the systematic return of sciences to the Greco-Roman past on a dialectical basis. In political terms it was the time of unprecedented economic and political growth for European empires, an expansion of the West at the expense of the East. This geopolitical expansion led the Europeans to rediscover Iran on their way to the Indian Ocean and the Far East. Desiring to acquire scientific knowledge in lands they viewed for the first time, Western scholars employed successfully their scientific principles in various academic fields (literature, history, archaeology, biology, medicine and the like). Some of the fruits of their research were invaluable to the Western political elites in their attempt to master political and economic developments in the Safavid Iran. It was during that time that the field of Iranian Studies was developed in Western universities as a sub-field of Oriental Studies. Essentially this tradition has continued unaltered to this day.

A key component of the Western methodology in Iranian studies was and still is the use of *ratio* in the process of finding, collecting, analyzing and compiling the research material they



deal with. This *ratio*, an influence of the Greco-Roman tradition, counterbalances up to a point the cultural gap between the non-Iranian researcher-Iranianist and his/her cultural work-field, i.e. the culture of the Iranian peoples. In other words, a researcher who does not come from the society he examines may be subjective and judge the *Other* based on cultural habits and principles of his own society, the *Self*. This difference has always been the main point for dispute between Western Iranianists and Iranian scholars. The latter came to prominence in the 20<sup>th</sup> c. during the nation-making of Iran under the Pahlavis. It was at that time that Iranian interest in Iranian Studies emerged and was based on the same academic principles that had led to the formation of the field in the West.

## 2. Twentieth Century Iranian Studies

Iranian nationalism gave Iranian Studies a cultural and political framework which was different from the Western model. Although both Iranian and Western types of scholarship in the field relied on the same academic principles, the aesthetics of culture and politics were quite different. Iranian Iranianists saw in Iranian Studies the cultural continuity of the aforementioned pre-modern Iranian scholarship. The national Iranian state was in the process of centralizing its modernizing power in the interior and flexing its muscles abroad. In mastering the principles of modern scholarship indigenous Iranianists had the advantage of being the *Self* studying the *Self*, and not the *Other* as in the case of Westerners. In both cases political implications

were involved. It was obvious that the field of Iranian Studies underwent a major change during the Pahlavi period. Yet more changes were about to come after the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1979) with everlasting consequences.

Amongst other things, the Islamic Revolution marked the beginning of the Islamization and the end of the secularization of the Iranian society including the Iranian academic elite. This had a major impact on the *Self* of Iranian Iranianists and society as a whole. Since 1979 political and cultural developments in Iran have led to the birth of a new Islamized academic elite, including Iranianists, similar in political terms to the one that had developed in the early years of the Pahlavis. This new elite coexists with the preexisting national elite and there is a third, Islamic-nationalistic, category of scholars. Despite their differences, all of these types of Iranian scholars continue to represent the *Self* vis-à-vis the *Other* in terms of scholarship.

Yet the major consequence of the Islamic Revolution with regard to the universal developments in Iranian Studies was the expatriation of secular Iranian scholars from Iran right soon after the victory of the Revolution. Many of the emigrating Iranianists settled themselves in major academic centres of the West. In the last three decades a significant Iranian academic diaspora has been formed in Western universities. This diaspora consists of aged scholars who had been born and raised in pre-revolutionary Iran, scholars who were born in Iran and migrated at a young age to the West and Iranian diasporic scholars who were born and raised in the West and who have never lived in Iran.



This Iranian diaspora of scholars has gradually increased their influence in Western universities. Whilst initially a minority amongst their Western colleagues, they have now become the dominant populace in Western universities. Indeed non-Iranian, Western, Iranianists have decreased in terms of numbers in the last three decades and Iranian diasporic scholars have taken the lead. It would not be unrealistic to claim that today there are more Iranian than non-Iranian experts on Iran in Western universities.

The main reason for the decreasing numbers of non-Iranian experts in the West could perhaps be explained in terms of the still continuing political antagonism between Iran and the West after the Islamic Revolution. An isolation of Iran and her culture is attested in the media worldwide and this has a major impact on the interest of the Westerners to indulge academically in Iranian Studies. Arabic and Turkish studies have increased their role in the Western academia at the expense of Iranian Studies.

Hence a decline of Iranian Studies is attested in Western universities. This decline is associated with the lack of funds in the field of Iranian Studies. During the Pahlavi period the Iranian secular state, an ally of the West at the time, financed Iranian Studies in the West. After the Islamic Revolution and as a result of the aforementioned deterioration of relations between Iran and certain Western governments, the previous Iranian supportive state policy was not continued and financing of Iranian studies abroad came to a halt and also some Western governments stopped having financial dealings with the new Iranian state.



Thus a huge financial vacuum was created regarding the promotion of Iranian Studies in the West. This vacuum has been partially filled with funds coming from certain sponsoring Iranian foundations based in the West, such as the Soudavar Memorial Foundation, the Iran Heritage Foundation, the Houtan Scholarship Foundation and others. These foundations constitute nowadays the pillars of supporting Iranian Studies in the West.

The increasing influence of the Iranian diaspora in Western universities has major and considerable scholarly effects. For the first time in the history of Iranian Studies in the West the relationship between the *Self* and the *Other* as well as that of *Inside* and *Outside* has altered. Whilst Iranian Studies in the past were identified with the Western outlook to Iran, now this outlook is growingly feasible through Iranian eyes (diaspora). Interestingly enough the majority of Iranian scholars in this particular do not reside in Iran, although some of them travel to Iran occasionally. Moreover the Iranian diasporic scholars, who are generally secular in their lifestyle and mentality,<sup>(3)</sup> analyze political and cultural developments taking place in the Iranian society under a non-secular state.

Modern day diasporic Iranians, mostly secular in outlook and residing in the West, seem to be replacing the Western Iranianists of the past. Thus the 'outsiders' (non-Iranian scholars) seem to be diminishing in terms of numbers and the 'insiders' (Iranian diaspora) are multiplying, holding the majority of academic positions in Western universities. Yet notable is the fact that there are even less Iranian Iranianists from modern day



Iran teaching in Western universities. Given that nowadays there is only an extremely limited number of Western Iranianists traveling and residing in Iran, and that there are almost no Western Iranianists teaching on a permanent basis in Iranian universities, the Western tradition of Iranian Studies seems to decline rapidly.

### Conclusion

With above in mind, it is obvious that in the years to come the academic information that Western societies will receive about Iranian culture and society will come primarily from the Iranian diaspora. This is a major development regarding the future of Iranian Studies in the West. Yet, the main question which rises in this case is who the *Insider* and the *Outsider* regarding Iranian culture is.<sup>(4)</sup> Has an Iranian residing in the West the same *Inside* as an Iranian residing in Iran? Or is the diasporic Iranian both an *Insider* and *Outsider*? And if so, is he less *Outsider* than a non-Iranian scholar with whom they live in the same country and share many values whilst he shares some of the values with some of his fellow compatriots in Iran? Given that this is a formative period for Iranian Studies and Iran, the answer to these questions may yet have to wait the test of time.

## Notes

1. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London, 1977).
2. David Pingree, *The Astronomical Works of Gregory Chionides*. Vol. I, *The Zīj al-Alāī* (Amsterdam: J. C. Gieben, 1985).
3. Haleh Ghorashi, "How dual is transnational identity? A debate on dual positioning of diaspora organizations," *Culture and Organization*, 10/4, (2004): 329 – 340; Cameron McAuliffe, "A home far away? Religious identity and transnational relations in the Iranian diaspora," *Global Networks*, 7/3 (2007): 307-327; and Lie, John, "From International Migration to Transnational Diaspora," *Contemporary Sociology*, 24/4 (1995): 303-306.
4. Mark Graham and Shahram Khosravi, "Home is Where You Make It: Repatriation and Diaspora Culture among Iranians in Sweden," *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 10/2 (1997):115-133; Cameron McAuliffe, "Transnationalism Within: internal diversity in the Iranian diaspora," *Australian Geographer*, 39/1 (2008): 63 – 80.