This paper first outlines the linguistic development and cultural context of the Persian language, before explaining how the use of the word 'Farsi' instead of Persian undermines all the positive cultural connotations of the word 'Persian' and so both adds to the recent media portrayal of Iran as a strange and distant society and also amounts to an insult to the Iranian peoples and their culture.
INTRODUCTION

The term Persian has been used in the English language for over five hundred years: to describe both a nation with 7000 years of archaeological history, and also the language that nation has used since the rise of the first Persian Empire, the Achaemenids.

Unfortunately however, the word ‘Farsi’ is increasingly and incorrectly being used to describe the Persian language. This paper outlines the linguistic and cultural context of Persian, as well as exploring the potential motivations of those promoting the incorrect usage of the word ‘Farsi’.

It explains clearly how the use of the word ‘Farsi’ instead of Persian voids important historical and cultural associations for the Iranian nation, with its long history of civilisation, and how it can therefore be seen as an insult to the heritage of Iran.

LINGUISTICS

Persian is described linguistically as an Indo-European language. It is a member of the Western Iranian branch of the Iranian languages, which are themselves a subgroup of the Indo-Iranian (or Indo-Aryan) family of languages. As such, Persian is distantly related to the vast majority of European languages, including English.

Over the past three millennia, it has developed through three distinct stages: Old, Middle and New Persian.

Old Persian

Old Persian and Avestan are the two most prominent members of the Old Iranian languages.

Avestan is categorised as an Eastern Iranian language, and was spoken in northeastern and eastern Iran from the second half of the second millennium BCE (Old Avestan) down to about the beginning of the Achaemenid period (Younger Avestan)\(^1\). It is also the language of the sacred texts of the Zoroastrian religion. The Gathas or metrical sermons of the prophet Zarathushtra were composed some time in the second millennium BCE in Older or Gathic Avestan. Later texts are recorded in Later or Younger Avestan, which constitutes a subsequent and distinct linguistic phase\(^2\), which is more similar to the language of the oldest Old Persian inscriptions than to Old Avestan\(^3\). Old Avestan is very close to Old Indic Rigveda and as such is a very archaic Indo-European linguistic type\(^4\).

Old Persian was the vernacular tongue of the Achaemenid monarchs\(^5\), but had already been spoken for a few centuries prior to the rise of the Achaemenid dynasty\(^6\).

Old Persian script was called Aryan (OP. ariyā) by the Achaemenids. It is largely known from an extensive body of cuneiform inscriptions – especially from the time of Darius the Great (r. 522-486 BCE) and his son Xerxes (r. 486-465BCE)\(^7\). However, some scholars believe that Aryan was invented by the first Iranian dynasty, the Medes (728-550BCE), and then adopted by the Achaemenids as the imperial script\(^8\).

\(^4\) Ibid.
Middle Persian
Middle Persian is one of the Middle Iranian languages. The two major languages in this group are Arsacid Pahlavi (also called Parthian and Northwest Pahlavi) and Sasanid Pahlavi (or Southwest Pahlavi and, more commonly, Middle Persian). The term Pahlavi is a noun derived from the adjective Pahlav[10], which is the equivalent of the Old Persian word Parthava meaning ‘Parthian’[11].

Arsacid Pahlavi (Parthian) was the official language of the Arsacid dynastic empire (248BCE-224CE)[12]. It is also preserved in a large body of Manichean texts, which provide evidence for its continuation in Central Asia right up until the 10th century[13].

While Arsacid Pahlavi is categorised as a dialect within the Northwestern subgroup of Iranian languages, it retains many archaic Eastern Iranian features – probably because the founders of the Arsacid dynasty, the Parthi tribe, were originally speakers of a Northeastern Iranian language similar to Scythian[14]. Parthian has no known direct linguistic ancestor[15], but is closely related to the other major Middle Iranian language, Sasanid Pahlavi / Middle Persian.

Middle Persian was a successor to, and derived directly from, Old Persian. It has a multiplicity of Southwestern Iranian features. Gradually developing into a distinct idiom after the reign of Emperor Xerxes[16], it became the official language of the Sasanid Empire (224-651CE) and as such was utilised in a noteworthy literature of Zoroastrian and also Manichean texts. Following the Arab invasions of Iran in the seventh century it developed into New Persian.

New Persian
New Persian, or Persian for short, is categorised as one of the Modern Iranian languages, along with Kurdish, Baluchi, Pashto, Ossetic and number of other languages. It can be considered as having two phases: classical and modern – although both variants are mutually intelligible[17].

The period after the Islamic conquest is described by Iranian scholars as the ‘Two Centuries of Silence’. There is no inscriptive or textual evidence for New Persian and only very scanty indications for the continuing use of Middle Persian. However scholars consider it unlikely that Iranians deserted their mother tongue and only cultivated Arabic[18]. The lack of any literary evidence from this period will certainly have been compounded by the destruction of Iranian libraries by the Mongols under Genghis Khan and his successors – and there may also be other reasons unknown to us[19].

The subsequent ‘Persian renaissance’ was marked by the advent of Classical Persian. This emerged in Khorasan in eastern Iran[20] and so was strongly influenced by Eastern-Iranian

19. Ibid. p. 222.
20. “It was in the east, remote from the centers of Arabic culture and with large segments of the population (notably, the dehqāns, the Persian-speaking native aristocracy [. . .] having no particular attachment to that culture, facilitated the rise of new Persian and its spread as the lingua franca of the region as well as encouraging literary composition in that language”, quoted from: J. S. Meisami, “The Past in Service of the Present: Two Views of History in Medieval Persia”, Poetics Today, Vol. 14, No. 2, Cultural Processes in Muslim and Arab Societies: Medieval and Early Modern Periods. (Summer, 1993), p.249.
linguistic elements. Arabic also had a major impact: with large numbers of loanwords, increasing palatalisation and also the inclusion of some grammatical elements. A modified version of Arabic script was adopted and some letter changes were made. For the purposes of this paper, the most important of these was the use of /F/ for /P/. As Arabic has no /p/ phoneme, the area of Pārs, the Iranian people who originated there and their language came to be described by natives as ‘Fārs’ and ‘Fārsi’.

After these linguistic changes, Persian then remained essentially unchanged until the nineteenth century. At that time, what is now called Modern or Standard Persian developed from the Tehranian vernacular – following the adoption of Tehran as the capital city of Iran by the Qajar s in 1787.

NOMENCLATURE

The name Persian derives from the province of Pārs (modern Fārs) in southwestern Iran. This was itself named after the Persian tribes of Indo-European nomads who migrated, along with some other Iranian peoples, from territories east of the Caspian Sea onto the Iranian plateau in the middle or later part of the second millennium BCE.

The Persians settled in the mountain country rising over the northeast side of the Persian Gulf and enclosing the high basin in the west in which Persepolis and Shiraz are situated, some time between the seventh and ninth centuries BCE. This region then became the birthplace of two Persian dynastic empires – the Achaemenids (550-330 BCE) and the Sasanids (224-651 CE) – as well as the cradle of the Persian language.

Achaemenid Persians called their language (Old Persian) Pārsa and the Greeks followed this in naming it Persis. From then on, other nations have predominantly named Persia and Persian using words based on the root Pārs-.

For example, the English use of the word ‘Persian’ has a five hundred year history and is derived from the Latin Persianus, itself drawing on the Greek Persis. Similarly, the French word is Persane, the Germans use Persisch, the Italians Persiano and the Russians Persiska.

As outlined above, Persian only came to be described as ‘Fārsi’ by natives of Iran following the P/F letter substitution associated with the Arab conquests.

SAME LANGUAGE, DIFFERENT NAMES

Persian is the language of at least 110 million people worldwide – sixty to seventy million of whom are mother-tongue speakers. The most substantial populations are in Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan, but there are also significant numbers in neighbouring countries – including

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27 Named after an Iranian tribe settled in southwest Iran around 1500 B.C.E. In the Achaemenid inscriptions it was called Parsa, in Elamite Parsin, in modern Persian Fārs, and in Arabic Fars, or Fārs) — it became the general name of the whole country under the Achaemenid dynasty (550-330 B.C.E.).
Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Turkey and the Caucasus— and also in the Persian Gulf states. In addition, since the 1979 revolution, emigration from Iran has led to the creation of Persian-speaking diaspora communities in many countries worldwide, especially in the United States, Europe, Canada, Australia and Israel. The largest urban community of Iranians outside Iran is now in the Los Angeles area.

All these populations use regional versions of Persian with different proportions of non-Persian loanwords and slightly different pronunciations compared to the Persian spoken in Iran. Some of the alternatives have different local names: Tajiks call their Persian Tojiki, while Afghans often use the word Dari.

However, unlike Arabic, all the alternatives are mutually comprehensible. Contrary to the views of some academics and institutions, they are the same language.

The Cultural Heritage News Agency of Iran explains why the versions of Persian have at least a strong a claim as those of Arabic to be considered as one language:

“Some mistakenly believe that, in English, the official language of Iran should be called Farsi, while the language spoken in Tajikistan and Afghanistan should be called Dari, and Persian should be utilised to refer to all of them. However, the difference between the Persian spoken in Iran, Afghanistan, or Tajikistan is not significant or substantial enough to warrant such a distinction and classification. Consider the following case: an Egyptian and a Qatari engage in conversation in Arabic. They will encounter a great deal of difficulty in comprehending each other. Despite this fact, the language used in their conversation is referred to as Arabic... On the other hand, Iranians, Tajiks and Afghans can converse in Persian and easily understand each other. Why, then, should their dialects be classified separately and referred to by different names?”

Despite this, however, some academics and academic institutions are treating the Persian spoken in Iran and elsewhere as separate entities.

Professor Michael Hillman from the University of Texas, for example, whilst lecturing at the ‘Fifth Biennial Conference on Iranian Studies’, assumed that ‘Farsi’ and Tajiki are dialects of

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32 “The modern southern Iranian languages include southwestern Persian (spoken in Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan); northwestern Baluchi (in eastern Iran, western Afghanistan, and south-western Iran, as well as the language spoken in Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan); and numerous remnants of Median and Parthian dialects in central and northwestern Iran, and also northern Iran, and eastern Turkey” (Gernot L. Windfuhr, “Persian”, The Oxford Encyclopaedia of Archaeology in the Near East, vol. 4., American Schools of Oriental Research, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 293.).
35 “The Persian spoken in Tajikistan and Afghanistan have been “strongly influenced by classical Arabic and – to a lesser extent – old Mongolian and various Turkic dialects, all of which are non-Iranian languages”, but still fully comprehensible by other Persian speakers; (Homa Katouzian, “Problems of Political Development in Iran: Democracy, Dictatorship or Arbitrary Government?”, British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, Vol. 22, No. 1/2. (1995), p.16)
37 Of course “Persian-speaking people of the Khurasan, Kerman, Fars, Isfahan, Tehran and the Caspian provinces have different accents or speak a dialect which is not understood by the others, but they have (and often take pride in) their own specific provincial identities, ranging from poetical genres and styles to local cuisines. Furthermore, the typical Isfahani’s character is clearly distinct from the typical Shirazi’s, despite the fact that both of these cities belong to the heartland of ancient Persia.”, quote from Homa Katouzian, “Problems of Political Development in Iran: Democracy, Dictatorship or Arbitrary Government?”, British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, Vol. 22, No. 1/2. (1995), p.15.
Persian\textsuperscript{39,40}, while undergraduates at Emory College in US are taught ‘Farsi’ as one variety of Persian\textsuperscript{41}. Even the Faculty of Oriental Studies at Oxford University, who have been teaching Persian since the seventeenth century – and who therefore really should know better, now describe Tajik as one of the ‘branches’ of Persian\textsuperscript{42}.

**THE PERSIAN LANGUAGE AND IRANIAN IDENTITY**

The rich legacy of the Iranian nation – that is, Iranian identity at its most fundamental – is defined by, and intertwined with, the Persian language.

Professor Ehsan Yarshater, editor of Encyclopaedia Iranica, affirms this eloquently\textsuperscript{43}.

“Persia has cherished and preserved against all odds . . . the shared experience of a rich and rewarding past. It finds expression primarily through the Persian language, not simply as a medium of comprehension but also as the chief carrier of the Persian world view and Persian culture. The Persian language . . . is a reservoir of Iranian thought, sentiment and values, and a repository of its literary arts. It is only by loving, learning, teaching and above all enriching the language that the Persian identity may continue to survive”.

A key element in the history of Persian language and culture, within the discourse of Iranian history, is the struggle between Arab-Islamic and Iranian-nativist identities\textsuperscript{44}. This is not to say that Persian has not contributed to Islam: on the contrary, Persian played a major role in the propagation and spread of the religion in the Indian Sub-Continent, Central Asia and even as far as China and the Far East.\textsuperscript{45}

**REGIONAL AND EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVES ON PERSIAN**

The above concentrates on Iranian and Middle Eastern perceptions of Persian. Looking further afield, there is a long tradition of valuing Persian language and culture: “At its height, [the Persian language] stretched from the Aegean in the West to Sinkiang and the Bay of Bengal in the East and from the Russian steppes in the North to the Indian Ocean in the South”\textsuperscript{46}.

Persian, in what Arnold Toynbee has called the ‘Iranic Society’\textsuperscript{47}, was the administrative and literary language of the Ottomans and of Mughal India\textsuperscript{48,49}. All medieval histories of India are written in Persian\textsuperscript{50} and under British rule, for the English who aspired “to high office in India, knowledge of Persian was desirable”\textsuperscript{51}. Indeed, until 1834, it was the medium of all official correspondence in India\textsuperscript{52}. 

\textsuperscript{41} Emory College, Office for Undergraduate Education, http://www.college.emory.edu/current/support/fame/pdf/students/ForeignLanguages.pdf; retrieved June 11, 2007.
\textsuperscript{44} “What is Persian?”, The Center for Persian Studies, University of Maryland (US): http://www.languages.umd.edu/persian/persianlanguage1.php; retrieved June 14, 2007.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{50} “Persian”, Department of Persian Language, University of Mumbai, http://www.mu.ac.in/Department/persian.html; retrieved June 18, 2007.
Taking a more purely European view, the Persian epic stories were first brought back to France by the Crusaders. Wolfram von Eschenbach then translated versions into German by around 1180. Presenting what became known as the Parsifal Legend, Eschenbach utilized several Persian legends dating from about 600. By transmuting the sacred personages of the original legends into romantic knights, he modernized the tales for his own time. For this modernization he took as model a grand epic from the end of the eleventh century, the Barzu-Nama, the story of a knight named Barzu.

However, it was not until the reign of the Safavid dynasty (1507-1702) with their increasingly international commercial and political links, that any Europeans began to learn about Persian literature in any depth. The earliest extant reference to Persian literature in English seems to be from the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. In The Arte of English Poesie (1589), George Puttenham gives four Persian poems in translation.

The 17th century German Orientalist Adam Olearius then played a significant role in popularising knowledge about Iran, following his visit there in 1633 as secretary to the ambassador of Frederick III of Schleswig-Holstein.

**PERSIAN NOT Farsi**

As well as being a linguistic nonsense, it has culturally undermining effects to use the word ‘Farsi’ rather than ‘Persian’.

Linguistically, it is widely accepted that native speakers and foreigners use different words to describe the same language. Alex Bellem from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, observes:

“If we insist on ‘Farsi’ then shouldn't we insist also on ‘Türkçe’ or ‘Español’ or ‘Elinici’ , and so on? Since it is accepted in linguistics as natural that non-native words are adapted to conform to the phonology of the borrowing language (perhaps via an intermediate 'conveyor' language), can we object to 'Persian' on linguistic grounds?”

Joseph Bell, Professor of Arabic and Middle-Eastern Languages and Cultures at the University of Bergen in Norway is stronger in his condemnation:

“No one would seriously consider substituting Deutschland for Germany, or Deutsch/Deutscher for German in English. 'Deutschland' exists, of course, in English, but with connotations for which a high price was paid . . But to use the word [Farsi] as the normal term for the national language of Iran has to be classified as one of the greatest affronts to great cultures in our time.”

He goes on to examine the negative cultural implications of the usage of this term:

“Saying Farsi instead of Persian robs the language and the culture of all the sense of splendor the name Persian has taken on in western languages through two and a half

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54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
millennia of war, trade, religious and cultural influence, and other forms of confrontation or subtle interaction”.

This is underlined by the Academy of Persian Language and Literature (Farhangestān-e Zabān va Adab-e Fārsī) in Iran which clearly advocates the use of the word ‘Persian’ not ‘Farsi’

62. “Persian has been used in a variety of publications including cultural, scientific and diplomatic documents for centuries and therefore it connotes very significant and cultural meanings. Hence changing Persian to Farsi is to negate these important established precedents. Changing Persian to Farsi may give the impression that it is a new language, and this may well be the intention of some Persian users.”

Hossein Samei, Linguistics Professor at Emory University in Atlanta, argues that: 63.

“Persian, alongside the name of a language, may be used as an adjective for the other aspects of our history and culture. For example, we can speak about ‘Persian Literature’, ‘Persian Gulf’, ‘Persian Carpet’, ‘Persian Food’. In this way, ‘Persian’ may be [seen as] a common concept and function as a link between all aspects of Iranian life, including language. ‘Farsi’ does not have such a characteristic”.

Franklin Lewis, Professor of Persian Language & Literature at University of Chicago, reaffirms 64:

“As there is no such thing as Farsi carpets, Farsi literature, Farsi cats, Farsi food, etc., it seems rather ridiculous to use this English neologism as a general adjective for the language”.

Hossein Nasr, Professor of Persian literature at George Washington University in the US, asserts that: 65.

“The synthesis of Persian culture has not changed with the Iranian revolution . . . classical Persian culture, philosophy and religious thought are still intact . . “.

He also suggests that: “Persians are aware of their uniqueness in the Islamic world”.

The use of the word ‘Farsi’, however, dilutes this distinctive quality and undermines Iranian culture.

Kamyar Abdi, Professor of Anthropology at Dartmouth College in the US, emphasises the importance of the Persian language and its association with Iranian national identity and unity 66:

“Perhaps the most vital factor in this cultural continuity and the hallmark of Iranian national identity is the Persian language. Having been used in Iran at least since the time of Achaemenids in the sixth century B.C.E., the Persian language has assumed a distinctive Iranian character and become intertwined with Iranian national identity and unity. Not surprisingly, in recent times the Persian language has been one of the most important contexts in which Iranian nationalism has flourished”.

Professor Ehsan Yarshater, the Editor of Encyclopaedia Iranica, hammers the point home 67:

“[The word ‘Farsi’] has no foundation in the English language and its relationship to the identity of Iranian civilisation and culture – as reflected in phrases such as ‘Persian literature’, ‘Persian art’ and ‘Persian poetry’ – is not at all clear . . . As well as the linguistic points, when the word Farsi is used in English for the Persian language, it ignores all the positive cultural connotations of the word Persian.”

WHO IS PROMOTING THE WORD ‘FARSI’ AND WHY?

Some of those using the word ‘Farsi’ may be ignorant or have misunderstood. A Wall Street Journal editor, for example, naively surmises⁶⁸:

“Supporters of the name Iran prefer calling the language Farsi, it seems, while the supporters of the historical name Persia prefer Persian”.

Professor Geoffrey Lewis tries to be charitable⁶⁹:

“. . hard though it is when dealing with the Farsi-merchants. Some of them probably use the term because they feel uncomfortable with the seemingly fuddy-duddy ‘Persian’ and are deterred by some spark of good sense from calling the language of Persia ‘Iranian’. For that is a family name which covers many other languages besides Persian”.

Professor Bell asserts that the problem is lack of knowledge and respect⁷⁰:

“If we know a people well enough to respect them, we will not tamper with the corrupt forms of their names, their place names, and the names of their languages. It is only when we do not have sufficient respect that we yield to the urgings of the mapmakers and revert to the ‘native’ form.”

Considering those who may have other reasons, however, there are three main groups worthy of further discussion: those in the West; Islamic fundamentalists and pan-Arabists; and, perhaps most worryingly of all, the Iranian diaspora.

Those in the West

Professor Franklin Lewis reflects that⁷¹:

“The term "Farsi" began to creep into English in the 1960s, mostly as a result of foreigners in Iran hearing it from native-speakers who, presumably, did not know English well enough to know that the English name of their language had always been Persian.”

Then an Iranian commentator blames the western media⁷²:

“. . [during the 1979 Revolution] a bunch of western journalists who didn’t speak the language were sent to Iran to report about the revolution. Using this exotic word “Farsi” instead of Persian might have made the impression that they knew what they were talking about, which very often they didn’t. I was just a teenager at that time, but I still remember. In most cases they were hanging out in the Hotel ‘Marmar’ and drinking beer, then reproducing bar gossip as authentic reports from the heart of the revolution.”

Frances Pritchett, Professor of Modern Indic Languages at Columbia University in the US believes that the use of the word ‘Farsi’ was further propagated by Urdu-speakers living in West73.

“All my Urdu-speaking friends refer to Persian as ‘Farsi’, which is its Urdu name; they tend to transfer that name into English quite naturally. I picked up the habit directly from them”.

Now the habit is becoming institutionalised at the highest levels. The Guidelines for UK Government websites as well the British Embassy in Tehran currently describe Persian as ‘Farsi’.

The BBC, with its long-established ‘BBC Persian’ radio service, is launching a range of TV channels for the Middle East in 2008. This includes a Persian language service which is to be called ‘Farsi TV’. Interestingly, the Arabic counterpart is named as Arabic TV – rather than ‘al-Arabiat TV’. Many Iranians still remember the partisan posture taken by the BBC in both 1953 (supporting the coup against Dr Mossadegh’s democratically elected government74) and also in 197975 (as what became widely known as the ‘Ayatollah BBC’76). With these events in mind, it is difficult to interpret the BBC’s choice as anything other than a conscious decision.

Across the Atlantic, despite the US Congress Standards recommending the use of the word ‘Persian’77 ‘Farsi’ is used in the United States for Security Initiative Programmes of language teaching as well as in other official documents and websites78. American usage of ‘Farsi’ instead of Persian has not only has created confusion, but even suggests division amongst Persian-speaking peoples. For instance, according to the CIA’s ‘World Fact Book’, the language of Iran, Afghanistan and the UAE states as Persian, while Bahrainis’ speak ‘Farsi’79.

Islamic Fundamentalists and Pan-Arabists in Iran

On the other side of the ideological divide, things are not very different. In post-revolutionary Iran, news agencies80, English language journals81, textbooks issued by the Ministry of

Islamic Culture and Guidance, and resources for foreign tourists often refer to Persian as ‘Farsi’.

Since the coming of theocratic regime to power in Iran, the regime leaders have dedicated significant resources to restructuring Iranian culture and values. Iranians are now vigorously-encouraged to choose Arabic/Islamic names for their children, and a large number of Iranian names have been outlawed. Many pre-Islamic historical and archaeological sites have been devastated under the cover of development projects: destroyed as part of highway, railway track construction, contaminated irrevocably by chemical factories; undermined by nearby hotels, obliterated as part of mining, or submerged beneath dam reservoirs. There have even been threats to bulldoze Persepolis. In general, pre-Islamic Iranian heritage has been downplayed and undermined in favour of the promotion of Islamic culture, the Islamic way of life, and above all the Arabic language. There have even been systematic attempts to change to ‘Farsi’ the name used in the international community for the Persian language – as a political statement.

Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic regime, publicly made no secret of his contempt for pre-Islamic Iranian culture – deriding everything Iranian from Noruz to the Persian language. According to Roya Hakakian: “...[Khomeini] made no secret of his contempt for the non-Muslim dimensions of Iranian life. He injected Persian with so many Arabic words that it confounded the ordinary listener, something for which he compensated by repetitiveness.”

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"Iranian literati invited to Tajik, Farsi speakers biennial", Mehr News, date: 2006/09/03.


According to Austin Dacey, this policy had in fact a reverse effect on Iranians since “...lot of young Iranians are turning their backs to Islam, rejecting a privilege of having the name of the prophet.” (See: Reading Madison in Tehran - The Next Secular Revolution, http://www.secularhumanism.org/index.php?section=library&page=Dacey_25_4; accessed June 25, 2007)


As just one example, Persepolis was threatened with bulldozing by Sadeq Khalkali, one of the most notorious clerics in Iran. However, the inhabitants of the nearby city of Shiraz set up barricades and risked their lives by laying down in front of the bulldozers – so saving the ancient site from destruction. Khalkali had intended to continue on in to attack the mausoleum of Ferdowsi, as the greatest Persian writer of the greatest Persian epic, but was dissuaded by the strongly negative public reaction at Persepolis.


This attitude was mirrored in the views of many other prominent members of the Islamic regime. Although the Friday Sermons organised by the Islamic Republic say little about the Persian language – indicating its perceived relative lack of importance – a detailed and explicit statement was made in 1981 by Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani in his role as the Islamic Republic’s Chairman of the Expediency Discernment Council. On that occasion, he linked the fate of the Persian language directly to that of Persian nationality: in his view of the future, both shall vanish.100

“. . . we believe that the future [is] Arabic, not Persian . . . on the day the united Islamic government is established, certainly its language cannot be anything but Arabic”.

Some senior regime members are less negative – at least in their words, if not in their actions. Ali Khamenei, then the state President and the current Spiritual Leader of the Islamic Republic, emphasised the importance of the Persian language in 1988 in a speech entitled “The Greatness of the Persian Language and the Necessity of Protecting it”101. He spoke about:

“[the] revolutionary duty to promote the national language, and [how] that national language constitutes the most important and original determinant of cultural identity for any nation”.

He then asserted the past and present international importance of the Persian language in the Islamic world, and especially in India and Central Asia, concluding that: “[Today,] Persian is the language of true . . . and revolutionary Islam”.

More recently, various Islamic commentators have been somewhat less committed to the Persian language. For example, in 2003, Naser Pourpirar102 demanded that the national language of Iran should be replaced with Arabic:

“It is very unfortunate that we cannot put the Persian language aside and replace it with the language of Qur’an. However the future of Iran is at the hand of Islamic Unity. Spreading the Arabic language among Iranian youths and incorporating it more seriously into the education system . . . can make a foundation for such Islamic Unity.”

Pourpirar has a startling range of views – including that the Parthian and the Sasanian dynasties are baseless fabrications by Jewish-Orientalists and that the indigenous peoples of Iran were wiped out by the ‘savage Slavic Achaemenids’ so that Iran was then free of human settlement until the Muslim Arabs arrived. He is however recognised as a scholar by the Islamic regime, who quote extensively from his written work.

Ghahreman Safavi is another of the Islamic Regime’s new breed of scholars. He is based in the UK and presented a paper on ‘Iranian identity’ in 2004 at SOAS. He consistently used the word ‘Farsi’ – although unfortunately always inaccurately104:

“Old Farsi is a branch of [the] Avestan language . . . [and the] Avesta has been written in Iranian language (Ancient Farsi) . . . [while] New Farsi, which is Dari Farsi . . .”.

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102 Naser Pourpirar is a former member of Communist Tudeh Party, who was expelled for theft from party’s fund, according to Nur ul-Din Kianuri (see: “Khātārat-e Nūr ul-Din Kiānūri”, Etela’at Daily, Tehran SH/1372 – in Persian). According to Alireza Nourizadeh, an Iranian journalist based in UK, Pourpirar was an interrogator with the Islamic Revolutionary Courts, who later proclaimed himself as a scholar. He believes a significant portion of Iranian history, including the Parthian and the Sasanian dynasties are baseless-fabrications by Jewish-Orientalists and Zionists. He also claims that Abu-Moslem-e Khurasani, Babak-e Khorraramid, Mani, Mazdak and Zoroaster historical figures were invented by modern Jewish historians, and the Achaemenids were “savage Slavic people” which with the help of Jews of Susa massacred the indigenous people of ancient Iran who incidentally were Arabs, to the point that Iran was completely wiped out of human settlement until the beginning of Islam (See; Naser Pourpirar, “Haq va Sabr”, Official Weblog of Pourpirar, http://www.naria.blogfa.com; (in Persian) retrieved June 14, 2007)
The Iranian diaspora

Perhaps most worrying, however, is the use of the word ‘Farsi’ by some Iranians, especially in the diaspora. It is difficult to understand why they might, however inadvertently, allow themselves to contribute in this way to the denigration of Iranian cultural achievements.

Professor Yarshater writes about 105:

"... the Iranians living in the USA, when they answer questions about languages that they know in their application forms for jobs or university courses. I suspect that they even feel gratified to think that 'the known word of Farsi' can now be used in the English language. If only they knew that by using the word 'Farsi' ... they find themselves damaging irreparably the fame and cultural status of Iran."

A number of Iranian academics now use the word ‘Farsi’ to refer to Persian in their English publications 106. For example, Dr Mohammed Chaichian, Professor of Sociology at Mount Mercy College, discusses the question of cultural identity in first generation Iranians – always using ‘Farsi’, and thereby himself diminishing that identity 107.

Professor Franklin Lewis reflects on the snowball effect that this has when the media get involved 108:

"The media has accelerated and canonized [this] process with the spread of the Iranian diaspora around the English-speaking world, especially, perhaps in North America."

For those Iranians in French-speaking countries, the use of the word ‘Farsi’ for the Persian language is incidentally doubly incongruous since it sounds indistinguishable from the word ‘farci’, or ‘stuffed’ 109.

Some diaspora Iranians have, however, at last woken up to the problem and are now proposing action. A contributor to Persian Gulf Online comments that 110:

"The significant point which unfortunately seems very difficult to get through to the Iranian Diaspora, specially those residing in the United States – by far the biggest and potentially most influential group of Iranian émigré community – is that by keeping the term 'Persian', we help preserve a ‘CONTINUITY’ which is an important cultural necessity."

He suggests that:

"We cannot preserve the best in our culture unless we are prepared to take care of it. I believe we Iranians have succeeded in confusing everyone about our identity and culture, ourselves included. We have diluted our identity by overeducating foreigners. We are so eager to defend the Iranian image outside of Iran that we have created confusion about the name of our country, the name of our people, the name of our seas and the name of our language."

IN CONCLUSION

Dr John Perry, Professor of Persian Language at the University of Chicago, emphasises the importance of language for a nation 111:


“Of all man's cultural badges, that of language is perhaps the most intimately felt and tenaciously defended”.

Sadly, it seems that sizeable numbers of Iranians are not yet defending their cultural heritage stalwartly enough.

Of course, it may still not be too late – even though warnings were being issued over twenty years ago. Professor Geoffrey Lewis, from Oxford University, was outraged in 1984 by the inappropriate use of the word ‘Farsi’112:

“It may still not be too late to put an end to the grotesque affectation of applying the name ‘Farsi’ to the language which for more than five hundred years has been known to English-speakers as Persian.”

Yarshater adds his full intellectual weight:

“We should, in order to protect our literature and ancient cultural credibility in the West, strictly avoid using the word ‘Farsi’ and instead use the same old and well-known word of ‘Persian’. We should realise that the usage of the word ‘Farsi’ instead of ‘Persian’ acts against our national interests”.

In conclusion, using the word ‘Farsi’ for Persian in any Western language, and in particular English, is a linguistic nonsense. Additionally, it undermines all the positive cultural connotations of the word ‘Persian’ for modern Iran and adds to the recent media portrayal of Iran as a strange and distant society113.

To use the word ‘Farsi’ instead of ‘Persian’ is an insult to the Iranian peoples and their culture and “one might even venture to say uneducated”114. It is “one of the greatest affronts to great cultures in our time”115.

Bibliography given in the text (footnotes)