

## Historical Thinking in Intercultural Perspective: Iranian Narratives on the Mongol Era<sup>1</sup>

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This paper will apply Jörn Rüsen's „inter-cultural comparison of historical thinking“ to modern Iranian historiography on the Mongol period (C13th-14th). In order to appreciate the differences in the historical narratives under examination, Jan Assmann's „history of meaning“ with its „fictions of coherence“ shall be referred to. As the analysis of modern Iranian historiography on the Mongol era demonstrates, it is only under the assumption that these historical narratives are to be understood in the context of a relativistic history of meaning that it is at all possible to accept large parts of their content as plausible.

**Keywords:** Historical Thinking; Fictions of Coherence; Historical Narratives; Mongol Era; Iran

### “Intercultural Comparison of Historical Thinking”

Regarding historiography in an international perspective, how can we compare various national historiographies without falling into the trap of Eurocentrism? According to Chakrabarty, “Europe works as a silent referent in historical knowledge” (2). Its dominance “as the subject of all histories” is still part of the “theoretical condition under which historical knowledge is produced” (2). Bearing this in mind, we

may however search for universals in historical thinking shared by societies in various parts of the world that possess different concepts of time and meaning. In order to be able to compare these various types of historical thinking, one has to accept their dissimilarities. Yet, at the same time, one also has to relieve them from the dichotomy of “self” and “other,” and from related positive and negative attributions (Rüsen 16).<sup>2</sup>

German historian Jörn Rüsen proposes a theoretical approach that relates to an “intercultural comparison of historical thinking.” According to Rüsen, there is no exclusive and universally accepted historical interpretation of historical facts, because these same facts are located in different perspectives. Consequently, a perspective-based character of historical narrative and a diversity of historical thinking must be accepted as given (27, 32). To make room for different perspectives on historical circumstances, a “universal category of equality” would have to be a prerequisite. This “universal category of equality” includes the assumption of “equality in the use of reason to establish the plausibility of histories” accompanied by the “principle of the reciprocal appreciation of differences” (29).

In this paper, I will use the case study of modern Iranian historiography on the Mongol period to apply Rüsen's "intercultural comparison of historical thinking." These historical narratives were published in Iran from the 1930s until 2011. Mostly, they were written and published as textbooks to be taught at schools and universities, where they continue to imprint public historical consciousness. In order to appreciate differences in the historical narratives under examination, I will refer to Jan Assman's "history of meaning" ("Sinngeschichte"): What is the meaning bestowed on the Mongol era by modern historical narratives written in Iran? How are fictions of coherence constructed to shape meaning in the historical events of the epoch? As the analysis of modern Iranian historiography on the Mongol era demonstrates, it is only under the assumption that these historical narratives are to be understood in the context of a relativistic history of meaning that it is at all possible to accept large parts of their content as plausible.

### **The Emergence of Modern Iranian Historiography**

The first Mongol invasion into Muslim lands took place between 1219 and 1224. When Genghis Khan went back to Mongolia, he left governors behind to rule the

conquered territories in his name. About thirty years later, his grandson Hülegü undertook another campaign to defeat the remaining enemies of the Mongols on the Iranian plateau and in Mesopotamia. In this campaign, the Isma'ilis were crushed, Baghdad was conquered, and the Abbasid caliph killed. Although the first Mongol invasion had already been disastrous for the affected regions, erasure of the Abbasid caliphate by "unbelievers" was perceived as a disaster by many Muslim contemporaries and later commentators. Hülegü and his successors established themselves in Iran (roughly the region from Herat to the Euphrates) as the Ilkhanids (1258-1335). They not only rebuilt their ruined territories, but also integrated them into the vast Mongolian empire, with its strong focus on long-distance trade. The Ilkhanid government was the first to be closely associated with the Iranian plateau since the time of the Sassanians (224-651). And although historiography had already been written in the Persian language during the rule of the Buyids (945-1055), it was only at that point that Persian historiography truly flourished (Melville, "Historiography"). Rashid al-Din Fazlollah (ca. 1247-1318) and 'Ata Malek Jovayni (1226-83) rank among the most influential historians of their time. Their historiographical works are still con-

sulted as important sources on the Mongol era in Iran.

Modern Iranian historical thinking as well as its historiography were deeply influenced by European concepts since about the middle of the 19th century. As Ansari has pointed out in his recently published book on Iranian nationalism, Iranian memories and historical narratives were in that era replaced by a European metanarrative. Histories provided by Iranians "were relegated to the realm of literature, redeemed only by their artistic and aesthetic qualities." They had to be substituted by "facts" (17). However, only a few intellectuals were able to implement these new standards, which led to a "simplification of the intellectual corpus into digestible morsels which often bore little relation to the complex realities of intellectual life in the West" (29).

During the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi (1925-41), historiography became a part of nation-building. Although traces of proto-nationalist historiography could already be detected in the late 19th century (Amanat, "Legend" 292-93), it was only in the 1930s that an official historiographical project was begun. By means of a state-sponsored official historiography, "national history" from the Achaemenids (558-

330 BC) to the Pahlavis (1925-79) came into being (Amanat, "Historiography"). As part of the ideological framework, "the idea that the Iranian 'nation' in its combined geographical and political sense emerged during the Achaemenid period" was adopted (Ashraf). Alessandro Bausani referred to this concept in establishing what he called "Aryan and Neo-Achaemenid nationalism" (ibid.).

During most of the Pahlavi era, a lack of political freedom and the impossibility to write critical or even balanced historical or political treatises resulted in the reserve of historians. Additionally, the use of history for politically motivated contortions and embellishments entailed frustration on the part of historians as well as the public (Azimi 428). Analytical and independent critical thinking was not encouraged in the humanities. Instead, a quasi-textual positivism, in "learning by rote and unquestioning deference to elders" were cultivated (429).

Although some professional historians familiar with European concepts of historiography got to work in Reza Shah's time, they were not successful in completely or in some cases even mainly replacing specialists for literary studies and other enthusiasts in providing textbooks for schools and universities to this day. Yet,

professional historians or not, they were all under the influence of the official nationalist discourse, and convinced that "Iran" had existed as a cultural entity since Achaemenid times.

Even before the Iranian government decided that a national history had to be written, three of the founders of modern Iranian historiography—literary historian 'Abbas Eqbal (1897-1956), political thinker and politician Hasan Pirniya (1872-1935), and journalist, publicist and politician Sayyed Hasan Taqizadeh (1878-1970)—met in Paris in order to plan for such an endeavour. Eqbal and Pirniya later counted among the illustrious authors who contributed to this multi-volume national history. Whereas Pirniya was responsible for ancient Iran, Eqbal dealt with the period from the Mongols to the Qajars (1779-1925) (Andisheh 139; Vejdan 310-11, 330-32). Even though 'Abbas Eqbal was not a trained historian, he was the first scholar to concern himself with the Mongol era as part of an Iranian national history. In doing this, he laid an important cornerstone of modern historiography in Iran.

Furthermore, beginning in 1924, a large number of European—including Russian—publications on Iranian history were

translated into Persian (Azimi 424). In this way, even those writers of historical narratives who had no knowledge of European languages were able to acquire insight into European or American scholarship on Iran. Until this day, well-known authors of the early 20th century to the late 1970s are quoted by those writing about the history of the Mongol era in Iran. Their interpretation of this historical epoch still influences Iranian historiography. However, it appears that this attempt at providing a Persian-speaking public with international, state-of-the-art historical writing has been considerably reduced since 1979. At least as regards historiography of the Mongol era, hardly any publications that have appeared outside Iran after the revolution are quoted in Persian historical narratives under review.

Returning to the Pahlavi era, it is important to note that apart from the official nationalist discourse that influenced the writing of national history, a number of counter-discourses also existed. Nearly all Iranian intellectuals who participated in these various nationalist discourses, be they laypersons or clerics, had one thing in common: They all believed in "the primordialist nature of Iran as a twenty-five-hundred-year old nation" (Aghaie,

"Nationalist Historiography" 25). Yet, they disagreed on questions of Iran's "relationship to the West, the nature of its government and leadership," and, of course, "the role of religion vs. secularism in shaping Iran's national identity" (ibid.).

Since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, concern with historical matters has apparently increased. Yet, historiography is still dominated by enthusiasts who are mainly interested in reviewing documents instead of critical study and contemporary research (Amanat, "Study of History" 6). Even though we may interpret mere publication of documents as a strategy to avoid political controversy (Aghaie, "Islamist Historiography" 235, 259-62), the fact remains that methodologically and analytically satisfying studies are scarce. Typical of what Aghaie calls "Islamist Historiography" is its condemnation of 19th- and early 20th-century orientalism. Additionally, Islamist historiography characteristically accentuates the importance of Islam in Iranian history, divine predestination, and the central role Shiite scholars (*'olama'*) allegedly played in political incidents (234). Simultaneously, historians of different convictions and approaches also write historical narratives. In addition, those scholars who were active during the Pahlavi era are either still working, or at the least, their publications from

this period are still consulted. Overall, we can conclude that Iranian historiography until this day continues to be strongly determined by the placement of historical consciousness in a literary tradition of myths and legends, as well as the ideologically dominated narratives of various political currents.

### **Iranian National Historiography and the Mongols**

In undertaking an "intercultural comparison of historical thinking," we have to focus on cultural as well as socio-political contexts of historiography. Regarding our case study, this includes, inter alia, how Iranian historians are situated in respective systems of government and rule. As regards the situation of these authors, 'Abbas Eqbal may be considered to have been a part of the system. He was, after all, asked by the Reza Shah government to write part of the envisioned Iranian national history. With this survey work, which was supposed to reconstruct Iranian history "from the beginnings to the present," a distinct "Iran-time"—that is, the creation of a unique time frame connecting "glorious" pre-Islamic Iran with an awakened present and a rejuvenated future (Tavakoli-Targhi 97)—was established that served to legitimize the rule of the Pahlavi shah. Although nationalism was one of the most important

subjects in his life and work, Eqbal had managed to keep his distance and not become part of the socio-political elite of his time (Azimi 381-83). In the same way as Eqbal, the literary historian Abd al-Hoseyn Zarrinkub (1923-99) argued the cause of nationalism, and supported the official nationalist discourse under Mohammad Reza Shah.

In the Islamic Republic, essential components of these nationalist ideas have been preserved. Therefore, those authors who argue for these ideas do not necessarily oppose the current regime. On the contrary, as in the case with the historian Shirin Bayani (b. 1938), her reasoning aligns very well with the present official ideology that emphasizes the correlation between Shiite Islam and Iranian nationalism. Accordingly, the ruling elite of the Islamic Republic is legitimized insofar as the narrative of Iran's ultimate liberation from any kind of foreign rule, as well as the final victory of Shiite Islam, are approved to have been procured by the revolution of 1979.

Turning back to Rüsen's "intercultural comparison of historical thinking," it is important to note his assumption that there exists "consistency in the use of reason." According to Rüsen, this consistency is essential for the plausibility of historical narratives, and has to involve

the “principle of mutual recognition of dissimilarities” (Rüsen, “Einleitung” 29). As regards modern Iranian historical narratives about the Mongol period, these are largely affected by reinterpretations and fictions of coherence. These reinterpretations and fictions of coherence have for their part to be ascribed to socio-political conditions and associated nationalist and religious ideologies, respectively. Consequently, on closer examination they often lack plausibility and do not comply with scholarly standards like verifiability, rationality, and reflection of the individual scholar’s own viewpoint. It is only under the assumption that these historical narratives are to be understood in the context of a relativistic history of meaning that it is at all possible to accept large parts of their content as plausible. Instead of deconstructing perceived fictions of coherence, a relativistic history of meaning simply recognizes them as plausible. We also have to consider that history itself is the produce of a culture or society within its own semantic paradigms (Assmann vii, 13). A relativist approach to the history of meaning may be compensated for insofar as the historical narratives point to a diversity of historical thinking in inter- as well as in intra-cultural perspectives. In this way, the polyphony and contingency of historical actions

cannot be suppressed by a monophonic narrative.

Now, what exactly are these fictions of coherence that can be found in historical narratives on the Mongol era? And, in which way has this era’s history been reinterpreted? A few examples follow, which will be subsequently analyzed:

In order to transform defeat into victory, the narrative of the Iranian phoenix persistently rising from the ashes is used to reinterpret history: helped by their superior (Islamic-) Iranian culture and civilization, Iranians overcame the Mongols and tamed the Mongolian dragon.

According to a frequently repeated narrative, the Mongol conquest of Baghdad and the fall of the Abbasid caliph are transformed from an irritation brought about by a historic breach or rupture for contemporary Iranians and Shiites into a long-desired and hailed affair, comprising the liberation from the Abbasid-Arab-Sunni yoke.

By reinterpreting history in relation to Ghazan Khan’s (gov 1295-1304) conversion to Islam, the Mongol enemy is seen as forever subdued; conquered and conquerors exchange places, the Islamic-Iranian element prevails, and Shiite Islam becomes the predominant religion in Iran. This fiction of coherence marks the begin-

ning of a new era, equivalent to the victory of the “Iranian element,” the triumph of the Shia, and the reestablishment of an Iranian nation-state.

According to a primordial nationalist assumption, a nucleus of “Iranianness” is ultimately simply indestructible.

With the purpose of transforming defeat into victory, it is essential to confront the brutality of the Mongol conquests with a spiritual and moral elevation on the part of the defeated Iranians. In light of the oft-described decadence and symptoms of decline in Iranian society on the eve of the first Mongol invasion, this becomes a difficult task. Nonetheless, most authors try to emphasize the mental superiority of “Iranianness” based on cultural heritage.<sup>3</sup> As maintained by these modern writers: At the end of the day, the people who are culturally more powerful will prevail. Iran, which is said to have been Islamized by the pen rather than the sword, had always fought a war of the pen and emerged victorious (Eqbal 81-82; Hajj Sayyed Javadi 395-97; Alborz 84-87; Dadfar 81-82; Qadyani 11-12; Kasayi 986-88; Bayani, Vol. 2 383).

More than anybody else, Shirin Bayani has provided a reinterpretation of the Mongol era. Her fiction of coherence integrates

well into the political landscape of the Islamic Republic: That is to say, Bayani attributes a fundamental significance to Shiite Islam as a substantial element of Iranian identity, and to the Shiites as champions of Iran's independence. Since she cannot prove the alleged Shiite resistance to the Mongols, Bayani not very convincingly argues that their prevalence is due to dissimulation (*taqiyyeh*) and to the fact that the majority of 13th- and 14th-century historians had been Sunnites (Bayani, Vol. 1 304-05; Vol. 2 571). She places Nasir al-Din Tusi (d. 1274) in the center of this fiction of coherence on the Shiite battle for Iranian independence. Bayani is convinced of this famous scholar's religious as well as political obligation to help overthrow the Abbasids when the time had come (Vol. 1 305-09). Bayani is joined in her appraisal of Nasir al-Din Tusi by other authors who also see in him a personification of the Iranians' political presence and their national consciousness (Kasayi 988; Ja'fariyan 52).

Shiite Islam relies on the martyrdom of prophet Muhammad's grandson al-Hoseyn, who was killed in the battle of Karbala in 680, according to its origin myth. Referring to the significance of martyrdom, Bayani emphasizes the crucial commitment of Shiites who fought against the Abbasids and the Mongols, using

martyrdom as a means to reach their aim (Vol. 2 571). Again, Iranians—this time as Shiites—are described as sufferers, as victims of arbitrariness and oppression, who can only fall back upon the war of the pen, their secret struggle, and their willingness to give their lives for the common cause. In this ongoing “clash of cultures” evoked by Bayani in one of her books, Iranians used religion and administration to fight the Mongols. Islam, mainly Shiite Islam, was brought into play against the Mongol code of law (*yasa*), and the “Iranian element” in the end succeeded in destroying and absorbing the “foreign elements” (367-69). For Bayani, like for other authors, the final point of assimilation was reached when Ghazan Khan converted to Islam. Through his conversion, the enemy was forever subdued; conquered and conquerors traded places, the Islamic-Iranian principle prevailed, and Shiite Islam became the predominant religion in Iran, thus initializing its religious independence (435-36). Ghazan Khan, it is said, was one of the greatest rulers of the Orient and Iran; apart from being Muslim, he was also an Iranian ruler, thus transforming the Ilkhanid into an Iranian reign (466, 471; Mortazavi 89, 173; Montazer al-Qa'em 1, 255). This fiction of coherence on the Islamization and Iranization of the Ilkhanid ruler (who additionally ended a period of

humiliation and initiated a new era in Iranian history) is supported by contemporary narrative sources like Rashid al-Din's famous universal history “Collector of Chronicles” (*Jame' al-tavarikh*) (Melville, “History and Myth” 140). According to Melville, some verse-chronicles describe the rule of the Ilkhanids in the style of the *Shahnameh*, yet “another cycle of Iranian kingship, brought to a peak with the reign of the philosopher king and just ruler, Ghazan Khan” (142). There obviously is a great similarity of myth and history contained in these narratives. In the context of the construction of meaning, this new era becomes equivalent with the victory of the “Iranian element,” the triumph of Shia, and the reestablishment of an Iranian nation-state.

### Conclusion

As part of my conclusion, Rüsen's already mentioned “principle of mutual recognition of dissimilarities” should be read-dressed. This principle would imply that scholars in Iran and abroad had been reciprocally aware of each other's publications. However, in the case of the historical narratives discussed here, this does not seem to be the case. As already stated, hardly any publications on the Mongol era printed in European languages after 1979 were included in the texts analyzed here.

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More precisely, Iranian authors writing about this period do not give attention to the state of the art in international academic research. It is difficult to determine to what extent scholars working on the Mongol period abroad, for their part, are observing how that is being done in Iran. For the present, it can only be stated that concerning the relevant references studied, one hardly comes across any allusion to related Persian publications. Regardless, the pre-1979 impact of "Western" (and Russian) scholarly literature concerning the Mongol period on the construction of meaning by Iranian authors remains considerable.

As stated above, the fictions of coherence included in the historical narratives analyzed in this study serve as constructions of identity and self-assurance. Therefore, they cannot be defined simply as "fabrications." On the contrary, they have to be recognized as constructions that give meaning to often contingent historical events. Questions of governmental legitimacy become involved in this context, as do standards of truth that are conveyed by historical narratives. Closely linked to self-awareness is the established collective memory that not least builds on fictions of coherence like the permanent victimization of Iran. If nothing else, these fictions

of coherence are consolidated by modern historical narratives on the Mongol era in Iran and maintain significant bearing on political thinking and action in the country. Modern Iranian authors studying Mongol history in Iran are assigned the task of giving meaning to this history. They must integrate this particular era into the "linear time of the nation" (Özkirimli 209) and comply with requirements of society regarding the construction of meaning. In this regard, their outlook on Mongol history in many respects clashes with today's international academic standards.

The extent to which outcome of these historical narratives is accepted as plausible depends not least on the respective academic paradigms. Until the 1970s, the entanglements of historical narratives written in Iran and abroad were relatively firm. Afterwards, however, a more sophisticated approach—tightly linked to the standards of historical science in general—eventually became widely accepted among international historians of the Mongol period. This approach additionally changed the way these historians perceived their sources. Historians then began to make allowances for their narrative character. Historians of the Mongol period also became aware of the fact that they themselves depended on observation theories of con-

temporary historians. But the Iranian authors cited here have not joined in with these new paradigms. Therefore, this "principle of mutual recognition" has only rarely been applied in the past thirty years. As a result, Iranian historical narratives may represent alternative interpretations of history, which decode the same facts from various perspectives. However, these narratives can for the most part only be accepted as plausible if one reads them as contributions toward a history of meaning that leaves room for fictions of coherence, which in this context must be recognized as legitimate.

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## → Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a paper given at the conference "Persia and Rum" in November 2013 at the British School in Rome. For a more extensive study of modern Iranian historiography regarding the Mongol era see my *Geschichtsschreibung und Sinngeschichte in Iran: Historische Erzählungen von mongolischer Eroberung und Herrschaft, 1933-2011* ("Historiography and the History of Meaning in Iran: Historical Narratives on Mongol Invasions and Rule, 1933-2011"). The book also includes an English summary.

<sup>2</sup> All translations from German are my own.

<sup>3</sup> Boroujerdi accuses Iranian historians who reduce historiography to the study of Iranian cultural heritage of "fetishization of the past." He calls this approach "heritage-ism" (45-46).

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