Cambridge Middle East Studies

Frontier nomads of Iran

Richard Tapper's fascinating book traces the political and social history of the Shahsevan, one of Iran's major nomadic peoples, living on the sensitive frontiers of Azarbaijan. The story, which is based on ethnographic fieldwork and extensive documentary research over more than three decades, is both tragic and dramatic. It recounts the mythical origins of the tribes in the seventeenth century, their unification as a tribal confederacy in the eighteenth century and their eventual decline under the Pahlavi Shahs when they were systematically stripped of both their economic and political influence. Although the confederacy has now ceased to exist, several thousand families of Shahsevan nomads still migrate near the frontier and thousands of other Iranians still acknowledge their identity as Shahsevan.

The book is intended as a contribution to three rather different debates. One concerns the riddle of Shahsevan origins, how and when the confederation was formed, while another considers how far changes in tribal social and political formations are a function of relations with states. The third discusses the relation between identity and history, and asks how different constructions of the identity of a particular people reflect or determine their view of the past. The author's synthetic approach to the history and anthropology of the region promises to make a major contribution to theoretical debates in both disciplines.

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Frontier nomads of Iran

A political and social history of the Shahsevan

Richard Tapper

School of Oriental and African Studies

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Preface

The social order in Iran, like many other Middle Eastern countries, was marked until well into the twentieth century by a tension between the central government and powerful, semi-independent chiefs of nomadic tribes. At the same time, the rulers themselves were either of tribal origins or dependent on tribal support – the Pahlavis (1925–79) were the first for nearly a millennium to be neither. Under the Pahlavi Shahs the major tribal chiefs were systematically stripped of their economic and political influence, but tribal loyalties and forms of social organization survived in many parts of the country, and indeed have continued relevance in the Islamic Republic.

In recent decades, the tribes of Iran have attracted the attention of both anthropologists and historians. Several book-length ethnographies and histories of individual tribal groups have been published, as have some broader historical and theoretical analyses of the tribe–state relation.

The present work, the fruit of both extensive documentary research and intensive fieldwork, attempts a synthesis of anthropological and historical approaches. It tells the story of one of the great tribal confederacies, the Shahsevan of Azarbaijan. The confederacy had ceased to exist by the middle of the twentieth century, and the changes that have now occurred are probably irreversible, but many thousands of Iranians still claim or acknowledge their identity as Shahsevan, many of them continue a pastoral way of life, and the component tribal groups persist. Although few Iranians now mourn the passing of the great confederacies, their history is central to that of the country as a whole. The story of the Shahsevan is a dramatic one; there are acts of glory and honour, but there are also darker scenes, and in the end, as with the other confederacies of Iran, it is a tragedy.

The book addresses three main themes. The first is the riddle of Shahsevan origins. The best-known story is that the Shahsevan were a special composite tribe formed in about 1600 by Shah 'Abbas the Great as a militia loyal only to himself; although it was discredited as history many decades ago, it has acquired a mythical status and remains the stan-

dard version. There are, however, two other versions: one tells of the immigration of Shahsevan ancestors from Anatolia and presents the confederacy as divided between nobles (descended from the original immigrant leaders) and commoners; the third declares that the Shahsevan have always been 'thirty-two tribes', all of equal status. In Parts I and II (Chapters Two to Seven) I examine contemporary evidence from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries in an attempt to establish the historical origins of the contemporary Shahsevan tribes, and how and when the tribal confederacy was formed.

Secondly, the book is intended as a contribution to current debates on 'tribe–state relations' in the Middle East and elsewhere. In Parts III and IV (Chapters Eight to Thirteen) I examine nineteenth and twentieth-century sources on the Shahsevan and their relations with various states, which are detailed and circumstantial enough to permit the reconstruction, informed by fieldwork, of transformations in Shahsevan social and political organization, and to explain how the confederacy broke down.

Thirdly, the book is concerned with the relation between identity and history: how different constructions of the identity of a given people may reflect or determine different understandings of their past. Having, during the course of the book, examined and evaluated each version of Shahsevan origins in detail, in the concluding Chapter Fourteen I show how each of them not only represents the perspective of a different class of actors (rulers, chiefs, and ordinary nomads), but validates a different construction and interpretation of Shahsevan history and identity.

Although these three themes run through the book, and it is thus intended as a contribution to three rather different debates, I shall be glad if it is read for its methodological interest too, as the work of a professional anthropologist with some pretensions as a historian. In the Introduction (Chapter One) I discuss some of the problems of writing the history of people without their own written records, and survey the sources used. I have tried to keep within the limits of my own competences, in an effort to avoid the criticisms that I level at a number of widely read recent publications which I consider to contain serious flaws. At the same time, I am only too well aware of many of the remaining real and possible shortcomings of this study.

The book has taken a long time to complete. It began life as part of a doctoral thesis, for which the research was done in the 1960s. In the summers of 1963 and 1964, as an undergraduate student, I visited the Shahsevan, both nomad and settled, and collected ethnographic field materials including taped interviews with older tribespeople on historical matters. During the remainder of 1964 and much of 1965, as I prepared for more extended fieldwork, I began reading published sources on

Shahsevan history. In Tehran in the autumn of 1965, while awaiting permission for field research, I completed a preliminary historical paper (Tapper, 1966).

During fieldwork in 1965–6, although my major research focus was on contemporary economics, social organization and ritual behaviour among the nomads, I continued to record legends and personal memories among tribespeople of various classes. I also talked, and in some cases recorded interviews, with a number of outsiders who had had personal dealings with the Shahsevan, or were able to relay historical accounts they had themselves heard earlier.

On returning to London in late 1966 to write up my field material, I soon decided that further documentary research was necessary in order to try to establish, first, what could be said of Shahsevan historical origins, secondly, what was the nature of the tribal political organization which seemed in the 1960s to be in a state of fragmentation, and thirdly, how the Shahsevan came to have a system of individuated grazing rights which seemed unique among pastoral societies. This led me to extensive work in the archives at the India Office Library and the Public Record Office in London, and in Russian and Persian published and manuscript sources.

The thesis was completed in 1970; subsequent field research in Afghanistan (between 1970 and 1972) and Turkey (between 1979 and 1984) have limited my publication on the Shahsevan so far to an ethnographic monograph, some comparative anthropological papers and a number of historical papers (parts of the book are revisions of material published elsewhere (especially R. Tapper, 1974, 1983c, 1986, 1988b, 1991a, 1991b, 1994)). During 1986 I began the revision that was necessary to update the historical part of the thesis in order to make it into a book; in 1992, 1993 and 1995 I was able to make further visits to Iran, during which I collected new materials for the book.

In all this long gestation, I have revised and refined my own thinking about the subject, and have attempted to keep abreast of relevant publications that have appeared since my original research in the 1960s. Although I have come across significant further materials, published and unpublished, there are others which time or other limitations have prevented me from tackling, and which, as sources for Shahsevan history, await the attentions of another day – and perhaps another researcher.

Acknowledgments

I list here numerous individuals to whom, collectively, I owe an immense debt of gratitude for help and support during the long gestation of this book, at the inevitable risk of offending some I may have omitted, and in the sad knowledge that several of those listed are no longer alive. Initial stimulus and continuing encouragement at the early stages were provided by Peter Avery, Abdallah Bujra, Meyer Fortes, Edmund Leach, Peter Lienhardt, Lawrence Lockhart, Adrian Mayer, Vladimir Minorsky, Cornelius Op't Land, Jonathan Parry, Brian Spooner and Eric Sunderland. Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, Ann Lambton, David Morgan, Sandy Morton and Paul Stirling read various early drafts and offered valuable comments. My researches among the Shahsevan were facilitated in Iran, initially by Ehsan Naraghi, Nader Afshar-Naderi and Paul Vieille of the Institute of Social Studies and Research, and latterly by Ali Ghanbari and Seyed Hasan Nurbakhsh of the Organization for Nomadic Affairs. Nancy Lindisfarne-Tapper shared much of the fieldwork in 1965–6 and 1968, and I am deeply indebted to her for help and support during the initial historical research and the writing of the thesis. My thinking about Shahsevan history benefited much from discussions and correspondence with numerous fellow researchers and experts on Iran, particularly Peter Andrews, Hasan Arfa, Peter Avery, Marcel Bazin, Lois Beck, Dan Bradburd, David Brooks, Patrick Clawson, Stephanie Cronin, Jean-Pierre Digard, Eckart Ehlers, Willem Floor, Gene Garthwaite, William Irons, Nikki Keddie, Mehdi Mizban, Pierre Oberling, Mohammad-Hussain Papoli-Yazdi, Fereydoun Safizadeh, Philip Salzman, Günther Schweitzer, Parichehreh Shahsevand-Baghdadi, Brian Spooner, Georg Stöber, Jon Thompson, Martin Van Bruinessen and Sue Wright. Iraj Afshar, Jaber Anasseri, F. Ershad, Pierre Oberling, Hans Roemer and Mehdi Mizban kindly sent books or documents relating to Shahsevan history. Several people helped with translations of tapes or documents at earlier stages of my research: Leslie Collins, Michael Cook, Tourkhan Gandjei, Caroline Humphrey, Farokh Ebrahimi, Hasan Javadi, Shery Majd, Sandy Morton, Brian Spooner,

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A note on transliteration

I have been concerned mainly with ease of reading and some closeness to spoken Azarbaijani Turkish and Persian. The full range of English vowels is used to convey those in Persian words and names, though long and short 'a' are not differentiated except in the Glossary below.

For Shahsevan Turkish, I have not attempted an accurate or consistent representation in either proper names or vernacular terms. I use 'ı' for the Turkish back vowel (e.g. in 'Qızılbash'), pronounced as in spoken English 'the' before consonants, but the upper-case version remains undistinguished from that of 'i'. Umlauted 'ü' and 'ö' represent Turkish vowels similar to those so written in German; 'ä' represents the 'a' as in 'flat' (plain 'a' is rounder, as in 'dark'; not so far back as the Persian 'long a'. At the risk of occasional confusion, I have used 'sh' and 'ch' for sounds pronounced as in English; 'kh' for the 'ch' in Scottish 'loch'; 'gh' is like Parisian French 'r'; 'j' as in English 'jug'; the glottal plosive 'q', when final, is usually pronounced as 'kh' or 'gh'. Palatalizations of j > dz, ch > ts, k > ch, g > j, strong in Tabriz and Ardabil, are much weaker among the Shahsevan.

Diphthongs:

ai as in 'high'
ei as in 'hay' (except with *bey* and *elbey*)
oi as in 'boy'
ou as in 'owe'
au as in 'how'

Glossary

alachiq – Shahsevan tent; round, felt-covered, with self-supporting wooden frame.
äläfchär – payment for grazing.
anjoman – Constitutional local cell; *änjini*, Shahsevan term for a raiding expedition, derived from *anjoman*.
aq-saqal (P. *rish-safid*) – grey-beard, elder of tribal section or camp.
'äshayer (pl. of Ar. *'ashira*/*'ashiret*) – nomad, tribesman.
äshrar (*luq*) – (time of the) rebels, disorder.
bajanaq – relationship between a man and his wife's sister's husband.
bey (*baiğ*) – chief of taifa (P. *bīg*, *bīk*).
beyzadä – sons of chiefs; the 'noble' class.
binä – herding camp, often herding animals of absentee owner such a chief.
chob-bashı – grazing dues.
divāni/*mamālek* – state lands.
el (P. *il*; pl. *ilāt*) – tribe, tribal confederacy, people.
elbey (*elbeğı*) – paramount chief, chief of *el*.
gholām – servants, slaves (cf. *qollar*).
göbäk – lineage, often equivalent to *tirä*.
hākem – governor of sub-province, district.
hāmpā – non-chiefly, commoner; companion, worker.
hokumat (T. *hökümät*) – government.
ilkhāni – paramount chief, e.g. of Bakhtiari, Qashqa'i, Qajar, Kurds; not Shahsevan.
jamahat (Istanbul T. *cemaat*, Ar. *jamā'at*) – community.
kalāntar – chief (not Shahsevan) equivalent to *bey*.
katkhodā – headman of village or tribal section (not Shahsevan).
khāleseh, *khāsseh* – Crown lands.
khān – lord, self-declared chief.
khankhan(*luq*) – (time of) independent khans.
kümä – smaller Shahsevan tent, felt-covered, barrel-vaulted structure.
nasaqchi-bāshı – Qajar police chief (Chapter Eight).

nökär – servant, retainer.
oba/obeh – camp.
oimaq – tribe, section.
ojaq – hearth.
olka (*ölgä*) – tribal territory.
oulād (*aulād*) – lineage; lit. children, descendents (not Shahsevan).
qabila – tribe (not Shahsevan).
qanlı – feud (from *qan*, blood).
qıshlaq – winter pasture, winter camp.
qollar – 'slaves'.
qorchi (*-bāshı*) – royal guard, praetorian guard.
qoum/qaum – tribe, 'ethnic group', people, family.
qrān – unit of currency, one tenth of a toman; equivalent to present rial.
qurultai – general gathering and council.
rayät – commoner, farmer, subject.
rish-safid (P.) – white-beard, elder of camp or tribal section (not Shahsevan; cf. *aq-saqal*.
sarparast – supervisor, leader.
soltān – army rank.
soyurghāl – land grant, exemption.
tabaqeh – class.
taifa (*tayfa/tayfeh/taifeh/tāyefeh*) – tribe.
tira (*tirä*, P. *tireh*, Basseri *tira*) – tribal section.
tiyul (*-dār*) – (holder of) land grant, immunity from taxation
vaqf – endowment.
yailaq, *yeilaq* – summer quarters, summer pastures.
yurt, *yort* – camp-site, pastoral territory.
yüzbashı – captain of one hundred men.
zakāt – religious alms.