

THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

The Persianate as Comparative Literature: A Concept in Search of a Method

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Definitions: From Persian to Persianate

This is an apt moment to reconsider the value of the “Persianate” for contemporary researchers: 2024 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the dissemination of the concept in Marshall Hodgson’s *The Venture of Islam* (1974). In its second volume, focusing on what Hodgson dubbed the “middle periods,” from around 950 to 1500 CE, he explained how “the rise of Persian had more than purely literary consequences” by transmitting “a new overall cultural orientation” across what he classified as the “Persianate zone” of the Islamic world (2: 293).¹ This was distinct from the “Arabic zone,” where the chief Islamic language and literary model remained Arabic. Yet, as Persian spread eastward from its earliest sites of literary use in urban settings now divided between Iran, Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan, it encountered a series of spoken languages that had not yet been committed to writing. For Hodgson, the concept of the Persianate was meant to capture two related mechanisms of “cultural orientation.” One was the adoption of literary Persian itself by a range of different peoples; the other was Persian’s subsequent impact on the development of various other literary languages of Islam.²

It is to this two-tier process that he referred in his much cited definition: “We may call all these cultural traditions, *carried in Persian or reflecting Persian inspiration, ‘Persianate’*” (2: 293). The term *Persianate* is therefore an inherently comparative literary concept, originally coined to describe languages influenced by Persian as much as Persian itself. Yet even as researchers have set aside Hodgson’s Islamic prism to examine Hindu (and to some extent Sikh and

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Jewish, if not Christian) use of Persian, the more encompassing concept of the Persianate has all too often been used simply to refer to Persian literary culture, leaving its larger interlinguistic potential unrealized. In drawing together the major themes explored in the contributions to this *PMLA* special feature, the following pages therefore consider the methodological demands of developing a more robustly comparative—and interaction-based—approach to the Persianate.

Between the “Middle Periods” and Modernity

For Hodgson, it was in the three centuries after the Mongol conquest of Baghdad in 1258 that the paired processes of the spread of Persian and the Persianization of other languages projected “Persianate culture from the Balkans to Bengal” (1: 96). More recent surveys have revised the periodization of the high-water mark of the Persianate into the early modern centuries after 1500, while demonstrating—amid considerable regional variation—that Persian was still being used, and imitated, in the nineteenth century when new imperial and regional languages had gained much literary traction of their own (Amanat and Ashraf; Fani and Schwartz; Green, *Persianate World*). Hence, what is immediately striking about the essays collected here is the distribution of their period of focus: none focus on the centuries before 1500, three focus on the period from 1500 to 1800, and five examine the subsequent eras of colonization, nationalism, and postcolonialism or postnationalism, which have previously been considered “after the Persianate” (Kia and Marashi).

What holds together the periods collectively surveyed in these essays is the inheritance of an esteemed earlier corpus of Persian texts to which different authors—whether in Mughal India or Soviet Central Asia—felt culturally compelled to respond. In the case of the pioneering Afghan historians examined by Nicole Ferreira, the sense of compulsion is one of cultural self-defense, as “polite Persian society was often, in fact, noticeably hostile to the Afghans in their midst. This hostility was so prevalent that the earliest descriptions of Afghans almost uniformly

described them as fearsome, uncouth, and rustic.” The result was the writing of Persian histories by Pashto-speaking Afghans themselves, who absorbed the Persianate linguistic and generic norms of Mughal historiography to present themselves as a people with a past no less dignified than that of other peoples of the imperial court to which Afghan elites were somewhat grudgingly admitted (see Green, “Tribe”). For the Turkic-speaking peoples of the Central Asia regions conquered by the Qing Empire, discussed by David Brophy, this engagement with earlier Persian texts involved the translation into Turki during the eighteenth century of a canon of poetic, historiographic, and hagiographic classics. And in the modern era, this response to an earlier inheritance can be seen in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Iranian novels—and even in the English-language fiction of Abdulrazak Gurnah—compared in Alexander Jabbari’s essay. Here, there is no continuity of language or of genre (the novel was adopted into Persian along with its French name, *roman*). For Atefeh Akbari Shahmirzadi, this allows not only modern novels but also films and music albums to enter the analytic realm of the Persianate insofar as they can be conceived as “operating on a continuum” in terms of their representation of what the Persianate could entail.

This sense of an ongoing, creative, and certainly contested set of engagements with earlier Persian texts redefines the Persianate in a way that allows us to include the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, when the form and content of Persian literary texts and cultural scripts have changed dramatically and when the impact of Persian on other languages—of the Persianate in Hodgson’s second sense, as Persianizing—have diminished considerably. From this perspective, the Persianate is not defined by any specific content, whether the Sufi vision of Islam, as put forward by Shahab Ahmed, or the proper social and aesthetic form of the more secular conception of the Persianate proposed by Mana Kia.

This brings us to the more explicit redefinition offered in Aria Fani, Kevin L. Schwartz, and Samuel Hodgkin’s contribution, as “engagement with a repertory of cultural forms, aesthetic practices, and literary traditions, more than with the language itself,

that highlights formal continuities with Persianate pasts.” Such a model of the Persianate is far more encompassing than previous definitions, whether in terms of period, media, content, or even language. As such, it affords greater possibilities of comparison—if comparison is the methodological *ne plus ultra*.

From Cosmopolitanism to Race

After springing from Hodgson’s profusely neologistic pen, the concept of the Persianate spent the first few decades of its life quietly, buried midway through a three-volume work of more than 1,500 pages. It was not until the 1990s—and especially the 2000s—that the term caught on in the context of theoretical discussions of “cosmopolitanism” (Breckenridge et al.), for which the Persianate seemed to present an appealing instantiation from Asia. Even amid the recognition that the expansion of Persianate culture was the work of sultanates and empires, of a “Turco-Persian” synthesis of military “men of the sword” (*ahl-i sayf*) and literary “men of the pen” (*ahl-i qalam*), for the next couple of decades, the term *Persianate* was routinely combined with *cosmopolitan*, which became the signature characteristic of the “Persianate zone,” itself rebranded as a “world” within the globalizing taxonomies of the early 2000s. Now in its illustrious middle age, the Persianate has attracted critics who have begun to question its cosmopolitan credentials, following the trajectory of such prior parallel concepts as Andalusian *convivencia* (Boum; Wolf).

In her discussion of derogatory Persian depictions of the Afghans, Ferreira quotes no lesser a Persianate luminary than the poet and mystic Amir Khusraw (d. 1325), who described Afghans as

man-slaying demons, for even the demons groan in fright at their shouts. Their heads like big sacks of straw, their beards like the combs of the weaver, long-legged as the stork but more ferocious than the eagle, their heads lowered like that of the owl of the wilderness. Their voices hoarse and shrill like that of a jack-daw, their mouths open like that of a shark.

Nor were these merely medieval tendencies. Writing of the contemporary Afghan poet Mohammad Kazem Kazemi, in their joint contribution Fani, Schwartz, and Hodgkin explain how his “career exhibits both the deep precarity and generative power of a fellow Persian speaker and the experience of a racialized other living in the Islamic Republic of Iran.” Similarly, with regard to Indians in Iran, Jabbari notes that in what is purportedly the best-selling Persian novel of all time, “characters mock the Indians’ speech and appearance.” Growing scholarly interest in Iranian slaveholding practices (see Baghoolizadeh; Lee, “Enslaved African Women” and “Africans”; Mirzai; Zdanowski), which Akbari Shahmirzadi notes was not formally abolished until 1929, has begun to prize wider cracks in the cosmopolitan plaster work (see Gedacht and Feener). So too has the impact of studies of slavery across the wider Persianate world (including of Shi‘i Iranians and Afghans themselves), whether in India, Central Asia, Afghanistan, or the Turkic borderlands of Qing China.³ Such historical recognition is important, and overdue, but has yet to be properly absorbed into the domain of Persianate studies. Nor for that matter have the more basic power relations that underwrote the widespread use of Persian as an exercise in linguistic, literary, and more broadly cultural hegemony (*pace* Hodgson’s notion of the Persianate as an “overall cultural orientation”) that was predicated on the power of imperial states, their bureaucracies, and their patronage (see Green, *Persianate World*). Read in relation to these less palatable underpinnings of political economy, much scholarship can appear an exercise in Persianate nostalgia that rejects contemporary nationalist and religious politics (whether Islamist or Hindutva) by turning to a past that never was quite so rosiy cosmopolitan. But this need not ring the conceptual death knell of Persianate cosmopolitanism so much as provide a context, check, and balance to it. In different ways, the essays in this feature wrestle with these moral complexities in a manner that dispels the lure of nostalgia.

This brings us to the issue of race and ethnicity raised by several contributors (particularly Akbari Shahmirzadi, Nersessian and Chander, and Jabbari).

And this in turn raises the methodological question of whether race is the most appropriate analytic category for Persianate source materials, particularly prior to the later nineteenth century, when European notions of race first spread to Iran, and later Afghanistan, by adapting the emic concept of *nizhad*, a term that in turn became the translational lens for engagements with American debates on race from the mid-twentieth century (see Green, “From Persianate Pasts”; Kashani-Sabet, “Colorblind” and “Anti-Aryan”; Zia-Ebrahimi). So far, there is no scholarship on the Persian lexicon of ethnicity to quite compare with the detailed studies of the conceptual terminology of premodern Arabic ethnology by such scholars as ‘Aziz al-‘Azma (al-‘Azma, *Al-‘Arab* and “Barbarians”) and Ramzi Rouighi, particularly regarding Africa. Mana Kia has written the most detailed synopsis of Persian ethnological concepts to date (122–62), albeit drawn primarily from the Indo-Iranian space, while earlier Imtiaz Ahmad and David Lelyveld provided helpful aperçus of the Indo-Persian and thence Urdu dichotomy of *ashraf/ajlaf* (“noble/base”) and Minoo Southgate examined medieval Persian representations of African peoples.

Yet what is most needed now are detailed, contextualized case studies of Persianate conceptions of human difference, of the criteria and gradations of alterity that this nomenclature was used to express at various points across the extended time and space in which Persian and Persianized languages were used to conceive different peoples (and their relations). A good example is Joanna de Groot’s study of the language of inclusion and exclusion used in relation to the Baloch, a people whose lands have long been bordered by, and been subject to, Persian-using states and empires. Yet de Groot’s investigation suggests that the othering of the Baloch was not based on ethnic—and still less on racial—concepts, allowing her to elucidate other criteria of human difference that were still products of the Persianate. As she explains in relation to a Qajar Persian geographic survey:

The “othering” of the Baluch in the *Joghrafiyya* is less about their “non-Persianate” status, than about their roles as incomers (rather than long established

residents of the region), as transhumant tent dwellers (rather than settled villagers or townspeople), or as disrupters of law and order. They are presented within conventions used to depict other pastoralists, bandits, or nomad groups, just as observations about Baluch elites parallel those about other local power-holders and their interactions with each other and with regional authorities. This seems to place Baluch groups and leaders within a Persianate framework of cultured approaches to the depiction of governance and social life, in which their ethnic otherness is less important than their social and political roles or potential challenges to law and order. (207–08)

Yet even if the concept of race was not adopted (and adapted) into Persian until the nineteenth century by way of Iranian and Afghan self-Aryanization discourses (Green, “From Persianate Pasts”; Zia-Ebrahimi), there undoubtedly did exist a premodern terminology of ethnic difference in Persian and other Persianate languages, albeit a terminology that owed nothing to Europe. This lexicon of ethnicity did, though, owe much—in its etymology, if not necessarily in its practical deployment—to an older Arabic lexicon absorbed into Persian as part of the latter’s large debt to the medieval Arabic human sciences. Still, this lexicon—including *qawm* (“people”) and *qabila* (“tribe”), *asl* (“ancestry”) and *barbariyat* (“barbarism”), *ashraf* (“noble”) and *ajlaf* (“base”), *jati* (“caste”) and *dhat* (“birth rank”)—is too generic to be understood apart from its contexts and referents, pointing again to the need for specific case studies.

This is the point where literary and language studies stand to gain most from the social sciences, specifically anthropology. Perhaps the most enduringly useful model here is that developed by the late Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth, not least because it emerged from reflections on Barth’s fieldwork in different regions of the Persianate world: among the Kurds of the Iraq-Iran borderlands, the Pashto-speakers of Pakistan’s Swat Valley, and the Persian-speaking Basseri nomads of southern Iran, who formed a fragile confederacy with one Arabic-speaking and three Turkic-speaking tribes. (Barth also worked in

the Darfur frontier zone between Arab and African communities in Sudan.) From these decades of observation, he developed a methodology for examining how ethnic identities are generated through interaction with peoples identified as others.⁴ Thus,

The critical focus of investigation from this point of view becomes the ethnic *boundary* that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses. The boundaries to which we must give our attention are of course social boundaries, though they may have territorial counterparts. If a group maintains its identity when members interact with others, this entails criteria for determining membership and ways of signaling membership and exclusion. (15)

This seems a particularly pertinent method for studying ethnicity across the Persianate world, not only because the Persianate world included (and excluded) so many different ethnic groups across its storied ambit from the “Balkans to Bengal.” But also, crucially, because these different groups constantly interacted with each other through Persian—whether in the urban spaces in and between which Persian served as a lingua franca or in the rural spaces-in-between where Persian hovered over local languages, which absorbed Persian terminology in turn. Moreover, the ethnic boundary—the point of contact where the identity of self and other is constructed—remains a locus that can be studied not only through live ethnographic observation but through numerous historical textual genres, whether travelogues, geographies, histories, or memoirs, not to mention the government documents in which places and their occupants were bureaucratically fixed in words. Barth’s approach, then, allows for a focus on the fault lines of the Persianate (see Green, *Persianate World*), where an ethnic boundary may alternately be reinforced or traversed by a linguistic boundary (i.e., an isogloss or heterogloss).

This approach enables the reintroduction of cosmopolitanism as methodology rather than moral plaudit. For Barth’s model explains how the stable conceptual and social management of ethnic boundaries enabled the very practices of complementarity, interdependence, and symbiosis that have fallen

within the ambit of “Persianate cosmopolitanism.” As Jabbari has written, “[T]he Persianate was cosmopolitan in the sense that Persian learning was not the purview of one religious or ethnic community, but rather the common language of varied groups, allowing for connections across a highly diverse *Kulturkreis* without a single geographic core or center” (613). Using Barth’s conceptual compass to survey anew this Persianate “zone” or “world” of many ethnic and religious communities will allow us to see how Persian was used by such diverse groups not merely to communicate with one another but also to conceptually demarcate their separate identities—albeit identities that were ultimately dialogic outcomes of those very acts of communication. Because as Barth made clear, “categorical ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of mobility, contact and information, but do entail social processes of exclusion and incorporation” (9).

This certainly rings true in the use of Persian to write the earliest histories of the mobile Afghans of Mughal India—first by non-Afghans then by Afghans themselves—whereby identity and difference were inscribed at the boundary as a point of “contact and information.” The same can be said for the formal inscription of Kurdish historical identity in 1597 through the use of Persian rather than Sorani Kurdish in the *شرفنامه* (*Sharafnama; Book of Honor*) of Sharaf al-Din Bidlisi (1543–circa 1603), a Kurdish notable operating at the boundaries of Ottoman and Safavid imperial power. Like the *تاریخ خان جهانی* (*Tarikh-i Khan Jahani; Khan Jahan’s History*) commissioned at the Mughal court in 1613 by the Afghan general Khan Jahan Lodi (1587–1631) as a response to the belittlement of Afghans as a people without a past or pedigree, the *Sharafnama* articulated ethnic difference by adopting the Persian language and adapting Persianate cultural values to render the Kurds recognizable but different; that is, as having respectably commensurable values but with a distinct historical identity (Green, “Idiom” and “History”). Here, either side of 1600, are Persianate examples of Barth’s intertwined “processes of exclusion and incorporation.” These paired processes reverberate through Supriya Gandhi’s discussion of the “fraught

intimacy” of Persian-using Hindus from their seventeenth-century heyday in Mughal government service to the “time of fierce religious polemics between Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, and various Hindu groups” around 1900 (see also Pellò; Stark). Many other such cases remain to be uncovered across the profusely multiethnic Persianate world.

In this way, instead of inscribing the flattening effect of cosmopolitan sameness, the Persianate presents the methodological possibility of desecrating and deciphering notions of difference in the past and the present. The concept can also show how those differences have been managed on both the private conceptual and public governmental levels at which Persian has been used. This method has the benefit of being applicable to any period or place in which Persian is used—not least (though by no means only) contemporary Iran and Afghanistan, where Farsi and Dari Persian are languages of state amid remarkable linguistic diversity. Whereas in contemporary Iran up to half of the population speak as their mother tongue Azeri Turkish, Kurdish, Luri, Gilaki, Mazandarani, Khuzestani Arabic, Balochi, Turkmen, Armenian, or another Caucasian language, in Afghanistan as many as fifty-nine living languages are still spoken (“Language Data”).

Yet what of Africa, the origin of many enslaved people, and their descendants, in Iran, as well as the Indian Ocean littoral of India/Pakistan? While there are extensive studies of Arabic literary engagement with Africa—which, for good empirical reasons, Hodgson placed in his “Arabic zone”—there has been very little investigation of Persian-language accounts of the continent or its peoples. Such accounts were, after all, very few before the mid-twentieth century, when Iran’s involvement in the Non-Aligned Movement prompted a flurry of diplomatic encounters and publications (Steele, “Keur Farah Pahlavi Project” and “Two Kings”). Even so, Persianate languages such as Urdu and Ottoman Turkish generated an earlier corpus of texts on eastern and southern Africa from the nineteenth century, which are only beginning to be examined (Gençoğlu; Green, “Urdu”).

Much work remains to be done, so it is most encouraging to see Africa mark its presence in this

issue in two ways: as an explicit space of comparison in Jabbari’s discussion of Gurnah’s novels about Zanzibar and, more implicitly, as a space of connection in Akbari Shahmirzadi’s discussion of the influence of southern Iranian *bandari* (“port”) music on the band Damahi. The comparisons Jabbari draws with the representation of multiethnic Zanzibar—and the evocation of the Persianate past—in contemporary anglophone literature are methodologically fruitful. Gurnah’s novels force readers to grapple with one of the most curious and complex developments in modern East African history: how in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the descendants of African peoples transported as slaves to Arab-ruled Zanzibar constructed for themselves a new identity as Shirazis (Brennan)—that is, as the high-status progeny of medieval Iranian Muslim merchants, or even princes, from Shiraz. This Persianate Shirazi identity adopted by a formerly enslaved African people was shaped in distinction to the Arab identity of the erstwhile ruling (and slaveholding) Omani elite of Zanzibar and the several ethnic identities of the communities grouped together in Swahili as *Mhindi* (“Indians”). These African Shirazis at the same time rejected the pejorative designation as *mshenzi* (“savages”) by claiming links to a medieval Persian diaspora whose history was being recovered by German missionaries and British colonial administrators. Here again we see the crucial role of group interactions, and the assertion thereby of ethnic boundaries, in the construction of racial and ethnic identities.

What is perhaps most striking in this example is the disjuncture between identity and language. For East Africa’s self-designated Shirazis speak a language—Swahili—that despite its small number of Persian loanwords is primarily Arabicate (in the sense of Arabic-influenced) rather than Persianate (in the sense of Persian-influenced). Yet elsewhere, as a result of the far greater exposure to Arabic as a language of literature and state on the Indian Ocean littoral of Iran and India/Pakistan, Swahili did come into generative contact with both Persian and such Persianate languages as Balochi, Sindhi, and Urdu (see the word lists in Freeman-Grenville). As the descendants of enslaved Africans adopted

these languages from surrounding communities in Iran and India/Pakistan, they preserved the memory of their African past by using fragments of their former language, whether as everyday loanwords or as supernaturally powerful names for spirits and saints with whom they maintained special relations. The social relations that shaped language, identity, and ethnicity were therefore not solely mundane and material, as presented in the secularized visions of the Persianate that have largely dominated the scholarship. (Ambler's and Gandhi's essays offer valuable counterpoints.) Social relations were also forged in the invisible spiritual realms that formed a central part of all but the most scientifically desacralized Persianate cosmologies. Thus, along the southern coasts of Iran, into recent times there flourished the cult of the *Ahl-i hava* ("people of the winds") in which Afro-Iranian ritual specialists used words, drums, and trance to summon the spirits, or "winds," that crossed the Indian Ocean with their ancestors.

In the mid-1960s, the Iranian ethnopsychiatrist Ghulām Hussain Sā'idī published an ethnography of the *ahl-i hava* that now serves as a primary source on word rituals that were still being practiced at the time Hodgson was coining the term *Persianate* in Chicago. There is no emic Persian term for *Persianate*. But as an etic method, we can see the interlingual and interethnic dimensions of the Persianate in the mix of Arabic, Persian, and Swahili words uttered by those people of the coast, and its winds, who were possessed by Zar spirits blown across the sea from Africa.

NOTES

1. Although Hodgson preferred the term "Islamdom" for the Islamic world, after the model of "Christendom," the larger point remains that he was committed to the notion of Persian and the Persianate as vehicles for a specifically *Islamic* ethos, or in his own terms, "conscience."

2. In Hodgson's estimation, "the most important literary language so moulded in the Persianate tradition was Turkish" (2: 486). Subsequent scholarship has looked at many other Persianate literatures, ranging from Urdu and Pashto to even Malay.

3. For case studies of different regional systems of enslavement across the Persianate world during the medieval and early modern periods, see Chatterjee and Eaton; Hopkins; Levi; and Newby. On nineteenth- and twentieth-century Iran, see Amanat and Khazeni; Baghoolizadeh, "Seeing" and *Color*; and Kashani-Sabet, "Colorblind" and "Anti-Aryan Moment."

4. For a brief biographical outline of Barth's career in generating theory from field research, see Lewis. Houston makes a persuasive, evidence-based argument against the default assumption that, as a European observer, Barth was by definition embedded in Western colonial projects.

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