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# **Bonn Oriental and Asian Studies insights**

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## **Bonn Oriental and Asian Studies insights (BOAS insights)**

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### **Concept**

BOAS insights is an online, open-access, peer-reviewed journal with articles as well as reviews which cover a variety of topics and themes across Asia, Africa and the Mediterranean. The editors encourage multi-disciplinary approaches which incorporate diverse perspectives and bridge deeply specialized fields. BOAS insights operates out of the Oriental and Asian Studies Department at the University of Bonn and includes an advisory board of senior faculty members. All submissions to the journal are subject to double blind peer-review.

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## Editorial

The impetus for establishing a new academic journal may stem from a lacunae of particular studies in a field, the lack of a periodical devoted to a specialized sub-field, or perhaps the need for a venue to present the findings of new kinds of research. The idea of launching a new academic journal for Asian and Oriental Studies was born not from the need of something new, but out of the desire to build on the momentum of an international peer group's collaborative activities.

The International Peer Group of the Bonn International Graduate School - Oriental and Asian Studies (BIGS-OAS) was initiated by Prof. Dr. Bethany Walker (head of the Islamic Archaeology Department) to support the integration of international students into German academic life. Our commitment to providing new studies to the fields of Asian and Oriental studies stems from the kind of the collaboration we experienced when working closely with colleagues from different backgrounds, who spoke different languages and who brought a wealth of different kinds of experiences. We found common ground in our collaborative activities: discussing, thinking and writing together, and we wanted to bridge deeply specialized or secluded circles of scholarship within our connected fields. This was the genesis. This kind of multidisciplinary synergy seemed replicable, and we aimed to bring this collaborative and interdisciplinary mindset to our journal.

We are aware of the loaded past of our field of Area Studies called 'Oriental Studies' and the complicity of European orientalists in the Western colonial project. The institute we operate from still bears a name that reminds us of this history of exploitation and of asymmetrical knowledge production concerning our regions of study. We do not wish to conceal this history but aim to address it through the research we publish and through our academic practice. As one of our basic prerequisites we look for research that relies on native language sources and encourage submissions by Black, Indigenous and authors of Color.

Getting a new journal off its feet in the midst of the Coronavirus pandemic was no small task. We strive to cross boundaries between disciplines, but we could not cross national boundaries to meet in conferences or conduct fieldwork. We look for diverse, international cooperation at a time when we have been staying at home and staying inside. But it is our belief that this could not be a more important time to keep working towards more multidisciplinary collaboration, to strive to make connections that transcend traditional boundaries, models, or institutional divisions. To facilitate this kind of research and

collaboration, our journal is entirely online and open-access, both free for readers and authors of articles and reviews. The journal operates out of the Oriental and Asian Studies Department at the University of Bonn and includes a board of senior faculty members. We could not have reached this point without the support of our advisory board, and we thank them for their guidance and consultation. In particular, we thank Prof. Walker and Prof. Dr. Christoph Antweiler for getting this project off its feet in the earliest stages.

Our network of academic professionals and established peers guarantee the publication quality of our journal in the field of Asian and Oriental Studies. This inaugural issue would not have been possible without the contributions of our peer reviewers, and we thank them for their service. We would also like to thank Jan Kenter and Dr. Daniel Rudolf from Bonn University and State Library for their assistance with the publication process.

Our common goal is to connect topics and themes across Asia, Africa and the Mediterranean including, but not limited to, those that deal with the contemporary and classical languages, literature, religions, politics, material culture and visual arts of those regions as well as with their former and contemporary communities and networks, providing a platform that is unique in its approach. A number of former team members helped us towards that goal since our journal's inception. We thank Amna Gillani, Shabnam Surita and Dorothee Kreuzer for their contributions.

Thus, we are most grateful for the opportunity to publish our inaugural issue, even in the midst of these trying times all across the world. Our first issue includes an article which investigates Mongolian communities living in Los Angeles by tracing men engaged in long distance trucking, exploring this diaspora community in the context of modern industry and capitalist conceptions of time. Our second article brings to light only recently published survey data from 1970's Iran. Pulling from media and film studies, the article challenges pre-conceived notions and status-quo interpretations of Iranian national identity creation through a greater consideration of the influences of radio, television, and cinema. Our review of new works includes a review of a German translation of the Turkish novel *Madonna'nın Son Hayali / Madonnas letzter Traum* (Madonna's Last Dream) and the first post-Yazidi-Kurdish work of fiction in German, *Die Sommer* (The Summers) by Ronya Othmann.

As we enter a new year, we stay committed to our goals and hope to expand on the steps we have taken, to look for new connections which offer alternative perspectives, to promote underrepresented studies and to search out scholars engaged in research which crosses disciplinary lines in order to better integrate the diverse fields of Asian and Oriental Studies. Any author willing to be

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a part of this collaborative endeavor is most welcome to submit their manuscript to us. Check out our website (<https://www.boas-insights.uni-bonn.de/en>) for the latest news, call for papers and constantly up-to-date submission guidelines and feel free to contact us anytime.

**Editorial Board**



Chima Michael Anyadike-Danes\*

## Trucking with Time: The Emergence of New Mongolian Mobilities in America

**Abstract:** How do time, space, and movement interpenetrate to shape the life choices of Mongolian men living in Los Angeles? In this article I contribute to an ongoing scholarly debate about how Mongolian lives have been affected both by socialism's 'end' and encounters with capitalism. While attention has been directed to Mongolians remaining in Mongolia, I extend the debate in this article by scrutinizing the experiences of Mongolians who embraced the new forms of mobility that capitalism ushered in; specifically of those who migrated to Los Angeles in search of the opportunity to lead, what they deemed, better, more fulfilling lives. These Mongolian immigrants encountered new and completely foreign regimes of time discipline that sought to structure their lives in ways that were heretofore unimaginable to them. Throughout this article I demonstrate the all-pervasiveness of these encounters which occur in both public and private life, and in areas as varied as people's apartments, public parks, offices, and nightclubs. I also explore how a subset of Mongolian men responded to what they regarded as a profound imposition; how they sought employment opportunities in the logistics sector that allowed them to exert some agency over time and to pursue their own ethical goals. Long-distance trucking, the area of the logistics sector these men entered, might seem a puzzling choice because it has routinely been derided by scholars of logistics as akin to working in a sweatshop. However, I argue, in examining this final puzzle, that the choices these men make complicate scholarly assumptions about contemporary capitalism's workings.

**Keywords:** time; logistics; Mongolians; Los Angeles; capitalism; mobility; 21st century; ethics

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## Introduction

In 2015 the United States' logistics industry was worth \$1.5 trillion.<sup>1</sup> However, it seems that circulating goods in a timely and inexpensive manner did not result in well-paid jobs for most logistics workers. Indeed, David Jaffee and David Bensman have observed that, if anything, work in the sector could be "characterized by low wages, unstable work arrangements, temporary employment relationships, underemployment, economic insecurity, an absence of employer-provided benefits, and a lack of legal and regulatory protections".<sup>2</sup> Several scholars have argued that retailers' endless pressure on suppliers to cut costs makes low wage labor vital to the industry and that spreading of production across the globe enables a reduction in labor costs.<sup>3</sup> In this paper I discuss why, despite these developments, a considerable number of Mongolian men in Los Angeles were eager to become long-distance truckers and enter the logistics trade. I contrast that enthusiasm to the attitudes of other Mongolian logistics laborers. In doing so, I explore how time, space, and movement wove together and shaped Mongolian male immigrants' lives in Los Angeles.

These logistics workers were part of a population of several thousand Mongolians. While this population was dotted across Los Angeles, its cultural activities centered on Koreatown.<sup>4</sup> Koreatown was the city's most densely populated neighborhood where large Salvadoran, Bangladeshi, and Korean communities resided. The Mongolian presence in Koreatown dated to the late 1990s when students came to study at its many universities. These students

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<sup>1</sup> Christine Cooper, Shannon Sedgwick, and Somjita Mitra, "Good on the Move!: Trade and Logistics in Southern California," Los Angeles, CA: Los Angeles County Economic Development Corporation, May 2017, [https://laedc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/TL\\_20170515\\_Final.pdf](https://laedc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/TL_20170515_Final.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> David Jaffee and David Bensman, "Draying and Picking: Precarious Work and Labor Action in the Logistics Sector," *WorkingUSA* 19, no. 1 (2016): 58, <https://doi.org/10.1111/wusa.12227>.

<sup>3</sup> Deborah Cowen, *The Deadly Life of Logistics: Mapping Violence in Global Trade* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), chap. 3, Kindle; Nicky Gregson, Mike Crang, and Constantinos N. Antonopoulos, "Holding Together Logistical Worlds: Friction, Seams and Circulation in the Emerging 'Global Warehouse,'" *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 35, no. 3 (June 2017): 388–89, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775816671721>; Kirsty Newsome, "Work and Employment in Distribution and Exchange: Moments in the Circuit of Capital: Work and Employment in Distribution and Exchange," *Industrial Relations Journal* 41, no. 3 (May 2010): 196–97, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2338.2010.00563.x>.

<sup>4</sup> Over the course of fieldwork with the Mongolians it became apparent that there was no readily available measure of population size. When the matter was discussed with community organizers, the figure they quoted varied by several thousands. Consequently, this article refers to several thousand rather than an exact figure.

established the Los Angeles Mongolian Association (LAMA) to support co-ethnics. When the millennium began the Mongolians numbered in the hundreds but around 2004, as Mongolia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) grew, Los Angeles' population swelled. Concurrently it became composed of people whose dissimilar life experiences sprung from the unique ways their different ethnic identities, class backgrounds, gender identities, religious commitments, and legal statuses entwined.<sup>5</sup> The most profound of these divisions was between Mongolian students and Mongolian settlers. As the latter grew in numbers, LAMA began to place a greater emphasis on community events aimed at preserving Mongolian culture.

In order to understand why Mongolian men became long-distance truckers, in this study I draw on ethnographic fieldwork, several ride-alongs with truckers, and thirty semi-structured interviews of logistics workers, their families, and the wider Mongolian population. Fieldwork was conducted between winter 2013 and autumn 2015 during which a Mongolian logistics worker roomed with me for several months and I volunteered at LAMA. Volunteering allowed attendance at meetings, participation in community events, and eventually a role helping to organize a basketball league. Logistics companies sponsored all these events and through them, I became acquainted with logistics workers. Long-haul trucking involved being absent from Los Angeles for several days at a time making it difficult to formally interview truckers. However, a chance discussion at a 2014 poker tournament, held appropriately enough in the back-room of a logistics company's office, led to an invitation to ride with an experienced Mongolian trucker. After the trip, I was invited to spend more time with truckers and participated in more ride-alongs. Simultaneously, initial interviews with logistics workers led to further interviews with the wider community.

In discussing Mongolian logistics workers and their lives and motivations, I make use of four concepts: time, ethics, mobility, and logistics. Time is employed here with reference to E. P. Thompson's work.<sup>6</sup> He suggested that time reckoning in pre-industrial and industrial societies was profoundly different; in the former it was distinguished by task completion while in the latter its elapsing was measured. This association of capitalism with a single temporal orientation is scarcely tenable in the wake of a number of workplace studies

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<sup>5</sup> These differences were evident in the growing variety of social organizations and amenities within the community. By the time I concluded my fieldwork in late 2015 there was a Buddhist organization, several Christian congregations, a couple of student associations, an after-hours school, a library, and a basketball league.

<sup>6</sup> E. P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," *Past & Present*, no. 38 (December 1967): 57.

revealing huge variations in time-reckoning within a single site.<sup>7</sup> Paul Glennie and Niger Thrift directly criticized Thompson's position when they argued, based upon their study of the variations in early modern time-keeping practices in England, that rather than a singular clock time a society possessed multiple clock times.<sup>8</sup> I embrace this point while insisting that task time and clock time can coexist. Furthermore, I equate all time with rhythm. What Jean Lave and Étienne Wenger called communities of practice – people collectively engaging in an activity – create rhythms through engaging with complex material-semiotic networks, like calendrical systems, to develop routines, standardize practices and coordinate actions.<sup>9</sup> The management of these rhythms extends to narrating the past, like the usage by historical societies of commemorative plaques, and shaping the future, like fortune-telling. The anthropologists Roxana Moroşanu and Felix Ringel label such attempts to manage the rhythms of the past, present, and future through modification, distortion, and so forth time-tricking.<sup>10</sup> Building on this observation I argue in this article that as everyone is part of multiple communities of practice, we not only attempt to trick time into desired shapes but we try trucking and trading between these communities with their distinct rhythms to achieve specific goals.

Communities of practice, the material-semiotic networks they engage, and the rhythms they co-produce are not immutable. In the 70s, Toyota introduced American businesses to just-in-time production. This practice greatly intensified the flow of goods, capital, people, and information across the world.<sup>11</sup> Retailers employed logistics – an approach to supply management that originated in 19th century European militaries and became linked to global capitalism in the 1950s – to manage such flows.<sup>12</sup> It aimed to discipline various heteroge-

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Burawoy, *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process Under Monopoly Capitalism* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1982); Mao Mollona, "Gifts of Labour: Steel Production and Technological Imagination in an Area of Urban Deprivation, Sheffield, UK," *Critique of Anthropology* 25, no. 2 (June 2005): 177–98, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275X05052022>; Donald F. Roy, "'Banana Time' Job Satisfaction and Informal Interaction," *Human Organization* 18, no. 4 (1959): 158–68.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Glennie and N. J. Thrift, *Shaping the Day: A History of Timekeeping in England and Wales 1300–1800* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 61.

<sup>9</sup> Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 29.

<sup>10</sup> Roxana Moroşanu and Felix Ringel, "Time-Tricking: A General Introduction," *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 34, no. 1 (May 2016): 17.

<sup>11</sup> Charmaine Chua et al., "Introduction: Turbulent Circulation: Building a Critical Engagement with Logistics," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 36, no. 4 (August 1, 2018): 619, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775818783101>.

<sup>12</sup> Cowen, *The Deadly Life of Logistics*, chap. 1.

neous temporal rhythms of production and ensure that goods arrived on demand.<sup>13</sup> While much of the critical work on logistics has treated it as rather undifferentiated, my focus here is on a very particular instance of logistics work. In concentrating on the specificities of the Mongolian situation, I hope to provide an example of the various distinct rhythms that logistics works to integrate. My approach builds upon work by feminist scholars stressing the need to be attentive to capitalism's specificities.<sup>14</sup> They advocate paying attention to "the messiness and hard work involved" in making capitalism's varied local forms appear stable and coherent.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, such scholars emphasize the fact that contemporary capitalism hinges "on social differences and divisions [...] and forms of social oppression starting from realms of social reproduction".<sup>16</sup> Apprehending how these variations are being generated requires attending to the numerous labor regimes that produce these differentiated laborers. While the term labor regime has a complex and varied history Tania Murray Li provides a helpfully generalized and succinct summation defining it as "the assemblage of elements that set the conditions under which people work".<sup>17</sup> This would involve not just the socio-legal systems of the place being studied, but generally the "heterogeneous processes through which people, labor, sentiments, plants, animals, and life-ways are converted into resources for various projects of production" which include things like marital practices, ideas concerning time, and notions of domestication.<sup>18</sup>

Central to the creation of Mongolian male logistics workers are new forms of systematic movement that became possible after the Cold War. Its denouement created the opportunity for a variety of western economic experts to

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<sup>13</sup> Markus Hesse and Jean-Paul Rodrigue, "The Transport Geography of Logistics and Freight Distribution," *Journal of Transport Geography* 12, no. 3 (September 2004): 176, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jtrangeo.2003.12.004>.

<sup>14</sup> J. K. Gibson-Graham, "Rethinking the Economy with Thick Description and Weak Theory," *Current Anthropology* 55, no. S9 (August 2014): s152, <https://doi.org/10.1086/676646>; Seo Young Park, "Stitching the Fabric of Family: Time, Work, and Intimacy in Seoul's Tongdaemun Market," *Journal of Korean Studies* 17, no. 2 (2012): 385, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jks.2012.0023>.

<sup>15</sup> Laura Bear et al., "Gens: A Feminist Manifesto for the Study of Capitalism – Cultural Anthropology," *Theorizing the Contemporary, Fieldsights* (March 30, 2015), <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/652-gens-a-feminist-manifesto-for-the-study-of-capitalism>.

<sup>16</sup> Alessandra Mezzadri, *The Sweatshop Regime: Labouring Bodies, Exploitation, and Garments Made in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 6.

<sup>17</sup> Tania Murray Li, "The Price of Un/Freedom: Indonesia's Colonial and Contemporary Plantation Labor Regimes," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 59, no. 2 (April 2017): 247, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417517000044>.

<sup>18</sup> Bear et al., "Gens".

travel to Mongolia and argue for a singular developmentalist teleology. However, they were not alone in seeking to produce new mobilities. Mongolia's Kazakhs, for example, were invited to 'return' to Kazakhstan.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile commercial opportunities on the Mongolian-Chinese border meant people regularly commuted between Zamyn-Üüd and Erenhot.<sup>20</sup> By and large the literature on new forms of Mongolian mobility has centered either on internal flows, movements to near neighbors, or the movement of people, goods, and information into Mongolia. This case study of Mongolian male logistics workers thus provides insight into the mobility patterns of those Mongolians who engaged in a distinctly different pattern of movement.

Any understanding of how mobility is consequential for Mongolian male logistics workers' attitudes to both time and labor must contend with their ethical concerns. This article draws on Foucauldian ideas about ethics and morality. For Foucault morality consisted of three elements: morals, the concrete acts of moral agents, and ethics.<sup>21</sup> Morals are "a set of values and rules of action that are recommended to individuals through the intermediary of various prescriptive agencies", which could include the family, the church and state institutions.<sup>22</sup> The concrete acts of moral agents referred to how historical individuals reacted to these prescriptive moral codes. Finally, ethics refers to how we choose to interpret and then apply these moral codes to ourselves. Ethics consists of the ethical substance – the part of herself that the person works upon, the mode of subjection – the way the individual relates this conduct to the rules; the ethical work – what one does to become an ethical person, and the telos – the overarching ethical goal of which individual actions form a part.<sup>23</sup> My rationale for adopting this Foucauldian lens stems from Caroline Humphrey's observation that for Mongolians "the more important arena of morality appears in the relation between persons and exemplars" and that in that regard, Mongolians' approach to morality is similar to the division Foucault makes between ethics and morals.<sup>24</sup> Thus, a Mongolian interprets their chosen exemplars actions and behavior stressing certain elements of it over others just

<sup>19</sup> Holly Barcus and Cynthia Werner, "The Kazakhs of Western Mongolia: Transnational Migration from 1990–2008," *Asian Ethnicity* 11, no. 2 (June 2010): 210, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14631361003779463>.

<sup>20</sup> Gaëlle Lacaze, "Run after Time': The Roads of Suitcase Traders," *Asian Ethnicity* 11, no. 2 (June 2010): 192–93.

<sup>21</sup> Michel Foucault and Paul Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 352.

<sup>22</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: Volume Two of the History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley. Vol. 2. 3 vols. (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1985), 25.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 2: 26–28.

<sup>24</sup> Caroline Humphrey, "Exemplars and Rules: Aspects of the Discourse of Moralities in Mongolia," in *The Ethnography of Moralities*, ed. Signe Howell (London: Routledge, 2004), 25–26.

as Foucault argued those undertaking ethical work would interpret the existing moral codes in order to do so.

The central concern of this paper is why workers actively chose these specific blue-collar jobs. In order to understand that, I explore the livelihoods and lives of male Mongolian truckers and other logistics workers. I begin by examining how forms of time discipline associated with various public agencies and private enterprises operating in Los Angeles interpenetrate with the lives of Mongolian immigrants as they move between their apartments, public parks, offices, and nightclubs. In so doing I present not just the circumstances that produce Mongolian logistics workers, but the conditions truckers regard themselves as having escaped. Next, I discuss trucking as a form of labor, with specific reference to a ride-along that I made with a middle-aged Mongolian trucker. My goal here is to illustrate how the nature of trucking allows Mongolian men an abundance of time to pursue other ethical projects. Finally, I conclude by contrasting Mongolian truckers' work experiences to those of Mongolians engaged in other sorts of logistics industry labor. Here I draw on my engagement with two Mongolian men operating at different ends of the labor market. One of them owned a trucking company while the other worked in a shipping company. These comparisons shed further light on the distinctiveness of trucking labor. In examining the role of Mongolians in the American logistics sector, I am seeking not just to provide a case-study of logistics laborers but to highlight the necessity for Mongolian studies of attending to migrant populations and their implications for Mongolian life.

## **Time Discipline and Ethics in Los Angeles**

Los Angeles's Mongolians were members of numerous communities of practice with distinct ethical goals and temporal concerns. LAMA, for example, was largely concerned with preserving Mongolian culture and identity and one method it employed was organizing festivals. At events like its New Year's celebration, certain members of the community were honored for their exemplary works. However, Mongolian-specific communities of practice were far from ascendant in Los Angeles. Indeed, the dominance of other non-Mongolian communities of practice were reflected not just in symbolic practices but also in material infrastructure and legal systems, like zoning law and nuisance legislation. Here I trace the various settings in which this temporal dominance was consequential for my Mongolian interlocutors, while additionally highlighting how Mongolians membership of communities of practice based around work

led to them frequently being torn between competing time disciplines and ethics. Finally, I illustrate how because of these circumstances my Mongolian interlocutors had to resort to time-tricking and trucking to try and create futures that fitted with their ethical positions.

One evening in late-September 2013 the auditorium of Koreatown's Young Oak Kim Academy was packed. Stakeholders from across the neighborhood and their children milled around. The event's purpose was to draw attention to various city and neighborhood sponsored projects and social enterprises. While Korean Americans, Bangladeshi Americans, and Latinos mingled, I searched for and spotted a group of smartly dressed Mongolian women at the back of the auditorium. From conversation it emerged that Amy – a Mongolian community organizer in her early 30s – suggested they attend. However, she was absent. "Where is she?", one asked. "She told us to come and now she is not here. It is embarrassing that she is always late!", another exclaimed.

Considerably later Amy, a single mother, arrived with her pre-teen daughter and adolescent brother in tow. Unlike the others she did not work in Koreatown, but in the coastal neighborhood of Venice. It was roughly twenty kilometers from her office to the middle school, but in the weekday evening traffic the journey could take hours. Historians and geographers of Los Angeles have argued that there were two principle reasons the area evolved as a sprawling, polynucleated region in the early 20th century: Angelenos were opposed to density and they were unwilling to commute substantial distances.<sup>25</sup> However, by the 21st century the redevelopment of Los Angeles' city center through urban renewal projects, like California Plaza, had led to soaring inner city rents. Similarly, appealing beach neighborhoods like Venice had been affected by a municipal focus on attracting technology firms, like Google.<sup>26</sup> These rising rents meant that during peak periods the average Angeleno spent 104 hours waiting in traffic a year.<sup>27</sup>

Amy's work also affected her punctuality. E. P. Thompson's account of the rise of time discipline distinguishes between pre-modern task-orientated time where one worked to complete a task and modern clock time where one worked

<sup>25</sup> Sy Adler, "The Transformation of the Pacific Electric Railway: Bradford Snell, Roger Rabbit, and the Politics of Transportation in Los Angeles," *Urban Affairs Review* 27, no. 1 (September 1991): 82–83.

<sup>26</sup> Melissa Gregg, "FCJ-186 Hack for Good: Speculative Labour, App Development and the Burden of Austerity," *The Fibreculture Journal*, no. 25 (2015): 189, <https://doi.org/10.15307/fcj.25.186.2015>; Deike Peters, "Density Wars in Silicon Beach: The Struggle to Mix New Spaces for Toil, Stay and Play in Santa Monica, California," in *Protest and Resistance in the Tourist City*, ed. Claire Colomb and Johannes Novy (London: Routledge, 2016), 93.

<sup>27</sup> Bob Pishue, "US Traffic Hotspots: Measuring the Impact of Congestion in the United States," Inrix Research, September 2017, <http://www2.inrix.com/us-traffic-hotspot-study-2017>.

by the hour.<sup>28</sup> However, Amy's problem was that her employer made no such distinction. Her position as the office administrator responsible for employees' pay meant her labor was task-like, but she had to complete it by a deadline. If Amy did not resolve matters then she endangered her job. Being disciplined about time in one setting rendered it impossible for her to be disciplined in others. Tardiness was a common problem for Mongolian community organizers. On numerous occasions at ad-hoc, meetings members would wander in late bringing snacks and beer as an apology. This lateness led to evening meetings often finishing after midnight and the institution of a system of petty fines to incentivize punctuality. These attempts were foiled by working commitments that extended well beyond 9 to 5. For Amy, and others like her, the nature of their employment meant that time had to be trucked between community group obligations and work, and in such circumstances, time was always traded to work.

Mongolians also had to truck with various time disciplines in Los Angeles that extended beyond work and into their leisure time. In the summer of 2014, I attended a Mongolian streetball tournament – streetball is an informal form of basketball played outdoors without referees. It took place at a small public park in well-heeled West Hollywood.<sup>29</sup> LAMA, the tournament's organizers, had not reserved the public park's single basketball court. Instead, the first Mongolian team that arrived challenged the teams occupying the court and defeated them. Their victory justified their initial occupation of half the court and the rest of the Mongolian teams asserted an informal streetball rule called 'got next'. Sociologist Jason Jimerson, who studied the norms employed by streetball players, observes that such practices are "ritualistic aspects of gaining access".<sup>30</sup> This invocation by all the teams involved signified that the Mongolians would be occupying half of the court until they decided otherwise whereas in normal circumstances non-Mongolian teams would be allowed an opportunity to claim 'got next' and potentially evict the dominant Mongolian team by defeating them.

'Got next' is task-related, not informed by clock time, as streetball games are decided not by the elapsing of a certain period of time but by reaching a pre-

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<sup>28</sup> Glennie and Thrift, *Shaping the Day*, 44.

<sup>29</sup> West Hollywood's west side, where Plummer Park is located, has long been home to a large Russian community. At Plummer Park this presence was marked by the only memorial in the US to Soviet Second World War veterans. See Bob Bishop, "The Lengthy, Costly and Controversial Task of Memorializing Veterans," *WEHoville* (blog), August 15, 2016, <https://www.wehoville.com/2016/08/15/lengthy-costly-controversial-task-memorializing-veterans/>.

<sup>30</sup> Jason B. Jimerson, "'Who Has Next?' The Symbolic, Rational, and Methodical Use of Norms in Pickup Basketball," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (June 1999): 143, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2695854>.



agreed number of points.<sup>31</sup> After several hours, the Mongolian players drew the ire of community members, mainly Russians Americans and Eastern European Americans. They also wanted to use the court and were unhappy at the Mongolians subversion of 'got next' to assert an ongoing and seemingly unending claim to it. Initially, they stood on the sidelines and complained about the presence of the "Koreans", which was how they misidentified the Mongolian players and, in this context, signified a foreignness that rendered the Mongolians assertion of territorial claims to the courts dubious. Eventually feeling that the Mongolian community's continued usage of the court breached the ethics of streetball one went and complained to a park attendant. The attendant told LAMA that, in the future, if they wanted to host a tournament they would need to play at the city's other court. There they could pay and reserve exclusive access, whereas here they had to share. In effect he was asking the Mongolians to submit to the discipline of clock time as opposed to the tournament's task-based time.

To understand this incident it is necessary to accept that as Nathalie Boucher, an urban studies scholar, once observed "real public spaces are rare in Los Angeles. Those that exist are characteristically poorly maintained and equipped, or privately owned and over controlled [...]".<sup>32</sup> This was particularly true of Koreatown, which numerous community activists had argued was park poor even by the standards of the city. Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris, in her study of how different ethnics groups used public parks in Los Angeles, suggested that "Hispanics, in contrast to other racial groups, were observed to actively appropriate the park space, changing it and adding to it in order to serve their needs".<sup>33</sup> While Loukaitou-Sideris is not alone in discussing the appropriative behavior of Latinos in Los Angeles with respect to parks my own fieldwork suggests that park poverty has meant that other communities in Los Angeles, like the Mongolians, have sought to occupy public space in other areas, intending to restrict access.<sup>34</sup>

A month after the tournament LAMA lost their 4th-floor offices. The hunt for a replacement did not go well. One landlord said he would not rent space to

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<sup>31</sup> Francisco Vieyra, "Pickup Basketball in the Production of Black Community," *Qualitative Sociology* 39, no. 2 (June 2016): 110, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-016-9324-9>.

<sup>32</sup> Nathalie Boucher, "Going Down to the Place of Three Shadows: Journeys to and from Downtown Los Angeles' Public Spaces," *Urbanities* 2, no. 2 (2012): 46.

<sup>33</sup> Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris, "Urban Form and Social Context: Cultural Differentiation in the Uses of Urban Parks," *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 14, no. 2 (January 1995): 94, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X9501400202>.

<sup>34</sup> David Trouille, "Neighborhood Outsiders, Field Insiders: Latino Immigrant Men and the Control of Public Space," *Qualitative Sociology* 36, no. 1 (March 2013): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-012-9243-3>.

community groups, as they were too unpredictable: “You get people coming at unusual times of day!” This was certainly true of the LAMA offices, which had played host to parties, film screenings, anklebone shooting practices, a Mongolian school, and even healing ceremonies. For similar reasons a sympathetic Korean pastor refused to rent to LAMA. “I can only rent to you if you don’t smoke, drink, and create noise late at night,” he said. They had abused his generosity in the past, which had placed him in a difficult position with other tenants. In effect, both the pastor and the landlord were questioning LAMA’s ethics and their willingness to adhere to the moral codes associated with being good tenants, which required an attentiveness to clock time and an awareness of cultural standards concerning noise and revelry at particular times of the day. Parties were also a problem in the apartment complexes where many Mongolians lived. In the past late-night revels had resulted in noise complaints and the police being called to deal with this antisocial behavior. One consequence of this was that LAMA now rented clubs for parties. However, these often closed too early for people who did not get off work until 9 pm and did not arrive until 11pm. Thus, once again, problems arose due to the intersection of culturally specific ideas about time discipline and the fact that in Los Angeles Mongolians frequently had to truck time to communities of practice associated with work.

## Escaping to Truck

Faced with the various forms of time discipline and surveillance that I have just described many of the Mongolian men I rode along with perceived becoming long-distance truckers as an escape. This position, while fitting well into the romanticized history of truckers in the United States as a community of practice who were heirs to the cowboy, would initially seem at odds with the contemporary realities of long-distance truck driving. The passage of the 1980 Motor Carrier Act is often regarded by labor historians and critical logistics scholars as a watershed moment, which led to a marked reduction in real income and resulted in truckers assuming an increased risk thus turning them into sweatshop workers.<sup>35</sup> As with many other types of 21st century logistics work this exploitation of truckers’ labor is presented as liberating them to be micro-entrepreneurs who make their own decisions, while omitting that they

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<sup>35</sup> See Michael Belzer, *Sweatshops on Wheels: Winners and Losers in Trucking Deregulation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Shane Hamilton, *Trucking Country: The Road to America’s Wal-Mart Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), Kindle; Steve Viscelli, *The Big Rig: Trucking and the Decline of the American Dream* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2016), Kindle.

are now assuming all of the risks as well.<sup>36</sup> However, the Mongolian truckers with whom I discussed this were not romantics but pragmatists. While they recognized the harshness of the logistics system, they prized the freedom from unwanted time discipline and the opportunity for ethical development that trucking offered. Furthermore, the potential financial rewards far outstripped what they could earn from other available forms of precarious employment like valet parking, the construction industry, and furniture removal; these were jobs whose time discipline was even more constraining.

My introduction to Mongolian truck driving was initially innocuous; I was picked up one autumn morning in the parking lot of a Los Angeles strip mall. However, as Mönkhbat – an experienced trucker – and I drove an hour west from Fontana, a city whose entire landscape seemed shaped by trucking, things became more interesting.<sup>37</sup> Having picked up a load of wood, we drove more than 1,500 miles to an industrial park in Missouri. There we dropped our load, located another, picked it up, and then returned to California. From our start at the Koreatown strip mall to our return to the industrial LA County city of Commerce, with its innumerable warehouses, the journey lasted six days. In what follows I will discuss how the capitalist temporalities specifically associated with long-distance trucking allowed Mönkhbat and others to pursue their own ethical goals.

E. P. Thompson argued that it was a mistake to conceive of the relationship between capitalist time and work-discipline as purely concerned with the factory.<sup>38</sup> Moralists long wished to make the ethic of time-thrift a part of mundane existence. However, the home, as a private place, needed to be accessed indirectly through public infrastructure and moral suasion. Indeed, there is a debate as to whether these industrial attitudes toward time ever fully gained access to the home. Thompson has argued that “the rhythms of women’s work in the home are not wholly attuned to the measurement of the clock”.<sup>39</sup> In contrast, Emily Martin has suggested that over time there developed a “sense of how desirable it is to be ‘efficient’ and ‘productive’ at home, much as it is in the workplace”.<sup>40</sup> Martin’s position is supported by other scholars, like Arleen Hochschild, who suggest that it is not that the market has not entered the home

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<sup>36</sup> Anna Tsing, “Supply Chains and the Human Condition,” *Rethinking Marxism* 21, no. 2 (April 2009): 162, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08935690902743088>.

<sup>37</sup> A working-class town located 75 kilometers away from the city of Los Angeles that is home to more than a hundred trucking companies, and associated businesses. See Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 2006), 375, Kindle.

<sup>38</sup> Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism,” 84.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>40</sup> Emily Martin, *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2001), 123.

rather than as its presence is gendered. As a consequence of this gendering men tend not to perceive its presence and women do.<sup>41</sup>

Mongolian truckers are not homemakers and their labor is valued, with some earning several thousand dollars a month. However, I would argue that given that they often spend several days in the cabins of their trucks these may also be sites ripe for the creation of communities of practice with different perspectives on time. This is possible because the truck can be “a platform for multitasking” allowing for one to truck with relatively minimal cost between different communities of practice to achieve a variety of ethical goals concurrently.<sup>42</sup> Mobility scholars, like Featherstone, have argued that such multitasking is a byproduct of the minimal levels of effort required to drive, which allows for the completion of work. However, the uses of such time-thrift are specific, and Mongolians use multi-tasking to create opportunities to perform work on the self, such as learning English.

When Mönkhbat and I boarded his truck, and set off for the Midwest, he immediately donned a Bluetooth headset, plugged his phone into the dashboard charger, and called his wife. This assemblage of man and machine blurred the lines between such divergent roles as efficient worker, doting father, loving husband, and community activist through connections to the global telecommunication network. The constant possibility of communication with his family meant he was able to perform a vital role despite his absence, such as when he successfully counseled his older daughter through her uncertainties about her career choices. This assemblage was by no means exclusive to trucking, but because of the rhythms of production associated with this type of labor Mönkhbat had considerably more unsupervised time to engage in such activities than his co-ethnics who were, for example, laboring as construction workers.

The assemblage allowed for the continual performance of phatic communion – that is “a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words”.<sup>43</sup> Various scholars have documented the phone’s potential in this regard.<sup>44</sup> Vikki Bell, for example, argued that for absentee, divorcee fathers

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<sup>41</sup> Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Second Shift* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2003), 2–3.

<sup>42</sup> Mike Featherstone, “Automobilities: An Introduction,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 21, no. 4–5 (October 2004): 8, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276404046058>.

<sup>43</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, “The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages,” in *The Meaning of Meaning; a Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism*, ed. C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, 8th Edition (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1946), 315.

<sup>44</sup> Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller, “Polymedia: Towards a New Theory of Digital Media in Interpersonal Communication,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 16, no. 2 (August 2012): 170.

in 1990s Britain, the phone was part of “a network as an extended hybrid”, which potentially aided in the creation and preservation of kinship.<sup>45</sup> Mönkhbat’s usage of the phone to achieve phatic communion, while driving, was evidenced in his regular calls to his wife, which established a reassuring sense of connection, however limited, even in absence.

However, for Mönkhbat, the phone’s role extended beyond the maintenance of kinship relations; it created the possibility of performing community work. I had first witnessed this practice when attending a LAMA planning meeting. Mönkhbat was driving in Arizona, but via speakerphone he organized and assigned tasks to everyone. This thoroughness was very impressive. It was a by-product of the lists composed while driving, as it gave him time to reflect on community matters. The phone allowed Mönkhbat to participate in certain community activities more fully than if he had been in Los Angeles. Of course, when it came to matters requiring a physical presence Mönkhbat was at a disadvantage, and his influence curtailed.

Mönkhbat used the freedom provided by trucking to participate, to the extent possible, in family and community life from afar. Other Mongolian truckers used the time differently to pursue their own ethical work: to learn English, to revise for their citizenship test, or to improve some other skill. Many, including Mönkhbat, used it to discuss both Mongolian and Mongolian diasporic politics. “No one knows more about politics than the truckers,” one boasted to me. This political knowledge has had tangible consequences in Los Angeles where the truckers were able to have a marked impact on LAMA because they operated as a political bloc.

On the road, a trucker also had to contend with the capitalist automobility system’s moral code, which demanded both acceptance of the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration’s Hours of Service (HOS) for commercial vehicles and delivering one’s load within the desired time-frame.<sup>46</sup> The desired time-frame is crucial here because while capitalists own and control the instruments of production and the subjects of production they do not control labor’s effort. As Harry Braverman documented in *Labor and Monopoly Capital* American capitalists’ desire to control output led to the introduction of time and motion

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<sup>45</sup> Vikki Bell, “The Phone, the Father and Other Becomings: On Households (and Theories) That No Longer Hold,” *Journal for Cultural Research* 5, no. 3 (July 2001): 383.

<sup>46</sup> The HOS were introduced by the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, and “Based on dozens of commissioned laboratory studies of driver fatigue and sleep, they set precise limits on the maximum number of hours drivers may work and the minimum number of hours they must sleep in order to prevent fatigue-related accidents”. See Benjamin H. Snyder, “Dignity and the Professionalized Body: Truck Driving in the Age of Instant Gratification,” *The Hedgehog Review* 14, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 9.

studies into early 20th century American automotive factories.<sup>47</sup> On the basis of these and other management consultants' findings manufacturing activities were systematically deskilled through the introduction of the production line so as to create predictable rates of work. This desire to control communities of practices' rhythms of production was by no means limited to deskilling. Aihwa Ong noted in her ethnography of the proletarianization of young factory women from a rural Malaysian village that in order to control the labor-force "capitalist discipline operates through a variety of control mechanisms in social, political and work domains [...]".<sup>48</sup> Amongst these mechanisms were the media and the Islamic authorities who constantly acted to defame factory women by portraying them as spendthrift and licentious. Here moral authorities partnered with capitalist industry to endorse regimes of discipline and surveillance linked to clock time.<sup>49</sup> This partnership was not novel in a global sense. Since the late medieval period the Catholic Church was a supporter of these regimes, which included authorizing the creation of *Werkglocken* to better regulate behavior.<sup>50</sup> The contemporaneous emergence of the notion that time wasting was "a serious sin, a spiritual scandal" increased the sense of regulation and surveillance.<sup>51</sup> It was this concern that led to various 14th century Italian scholars writing about the moral crisis provoked by wasting time. Amongst these was Domenico Calva who held that time wasting marked one out as an amoral animal rather than an immoral human.<sup>52</sup>

Mongolian truckers were aware of the presence of the clock while driving, but their profession's nature meant they were rarely subjected to direct visual surveillance of their time usage. Instead, oversight was provided by an array of technological assemblages that indicated the complex set of authorities involved in trucking. They included checking stations at state borders with their boom barriers, weighing stations and human authorities, GPS applications used by their bosses and dispatchers to monitor the truck's progress, the

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<sup>47</sup> Harry Braverman, *Labour and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*. 25th Anniversary Edition (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1998), 119–23.

<sup>48</sup> Aihwa Ong, *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010), 4–5.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, xvi.

<sup>50</sup> Jonathan Martineau, *Time, Capitalism and Alienation: A Socio-Historical Inquiry into the Making of Modern Time* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015), 68.

<sup>51</sup> Jacques Le Goff, *Time, Work and Culture in the Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 50.

<sup>52</sup> Domenico Calva of Pisa was a 14th century Dominican preacher who employed the language of the merchant when he criticized time wasting. See Gregory M. Sadleir, *Idleness Working: The Discourse of Love's Labor from Ovid through Chaucer and Gower* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 181.

trucker's logbook, speed cameras, and highway police with speed-guns.<sup>53</sup> Together, these systems were meant to ensure that truckers did not exceed the hours of work mandated by the HOS regulations, that they delivered their goods on time, that they did not tamper with the items in the truck, and were following state or federal laws while doing so.<sup>54</sup>

For Mongolian truckers state border-checks were the most worrying of the systems explicitly concerned with time, because they had the greatest potential to significantly slow progress, which could in turn lead to missed deadlines. Not only could they lead to one's truck being pulled over and inspected at length, they could potentially lead to problems with the law, as not all the truckers possessed the appropriate documentation. It was here that their habit of operating as a community of practice and sharing of information became valuable. During my trip with Mönkhbat we were only stopped twice despite crossing several state borders. We largely avoided the border checks by opting for a series of backroads. These routes and technique had been developed by Mongolian truckers over the years and communicated to each other via phone.

By comparison with the state's spotty oversight, that of the boss was seemingly absolute. Once, as I accompanied him to his bank, a trucking boss showed me the mobile phone application that allowed him to track his fleet's progress. The app provided detailed information about his truckers' driving, but unlike more recent apps described by logistics scholars that track a trucker's real time bodily movements it did not make the boss a presence in the cabin.<sup>55</sup> Unless told, the boss was unaware that truckers would on occasion take their families with them on their jobs, thus further blurring the line between work and home when they did so. Moreover, the app did not tell him what they were talking about over their own phones, or about the communal lunches that truckers often shared as they drove together. It did record speed and distance, but it also revealed the truth about trucking labor as task-like. That is, it was concerned only that an item be delivered within a certain time frame, and not about the circumstances in which the delivery was made. It was this disinterest that made trucking such a popular site for ethical development.

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<sup>53</sup> Karen E. C. Levy, "Digital Surveillance in the Hypermasculine Workplace," *Feminist Media Studies* 16, no. 2 (March 3, 2016): 363, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2016.1138607>.

<sup>54</sup> Benjamin H. Snyder, *The Disrupted Workplace: Time and the Moral Order of Flexible Capitalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), chap. 4.

<sup>55</sup> Cowen, *The Deadly Life of Logistics*, Conclusion.

## Time and the Logistics Industry

My explanation of Mongolian men's attraction to long-distance trucking has focused on its relationship to time discipline. Specifically, it allowed them to trick and truck with time to achieve a variety of ethical goals that they regarded as central to their senses of self. In what follows I offer the contrasting experience of Mongolian men who are involved in other areas of the logistics sector. For them, I argue, time discipline had radically different consequences. I illustrate this point with reference to my experiences with Tom, a Mongolian owner-operator who owned two trucking companies, and Munkh-Erdene, an administrator working for a small Mongolian courier company in Los Angeles that regularly sent goods to Mongolia from Los Angeles via China. Superficially, this hews more closely to recent descriptions of the logistics industry, as dominated by precarious workers who face a wide variety of challenges due in part to declining working conditions and diminishing worker power.<sup>56</sup> However, for Mongolian men these challenges very much center on the same questions of time and ethics that I have discussed thus far.

The story of Munkh-Erdene, a young man in his mid-twenties who had studied graphic design in Kuala Lumpur and then worked in advertising in Ulaanbaatar, is illustrative of this point about logistics' negative characteristics. Although he was officially in Los Angeles to study theology at a local Korean American evangelical university, he mainly worked low wage jobs, including as a furniture mover. During my fieldwork he worked for a small shipping company in their Koreatown office. As two of the rooms were used to store customers' goods before shipping them it also acted as a warehouse and Munkh-Erdene was expected to pick packages as well as handling paperwork and liaising with clients. He did not complain about the nature of this labor, but what he found difficult was that his public life constantly intruded upon his private life. The anger in his voice was audible as he detailed the occasions on which he was summoned back to work to confirm the status of a package to a customer. These interruptions interfered with his attempts at achieving his ethical goal of being a good Mongolian, which, deriving from his Christian faith<sup>57</sup>, he defined as spending time with his young wife and playing an active role in

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<sup>56</sup> Jake Alimahomed-Wilson and Immanuel Ness, eds., *Choke Points: Logistics Workers Disrupting the Global Supply Chain* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), Introduction.

<sup>57</sup> Munkh-Erdene was part of a small Mongolian Evangelical Christian community of several hundred people. At the time of my fieldwork, there were at least three Mongolian Christian congregations in Southern California. These met for worship weekly and organized a variety of other events for their congregants.



raising his daughter, and on one occasion they had led to him missing a holiday celebration. Unfortunately, as he acknowledged, he was in a precarious position and his employment opportunities were limited. He had tried to apply for various jobs as a graphic designer only to discover that no one would hire a graphic designer lacking the correct visa documentation. "I don't want to be like those Mongolians who come over here and sacrifice themselves totally for their children. I want a life of my own!", he confided.<sup>58</sup> He described those who sacrificed themselves in this manner, by working all hours, as already dead having time-trucked their future for their children's.

Munkh-Erdene equated his plight as a logistics worker in Los Angeles's shadow economy with death. The connections he drew between death, capitalism, and labor are familiar to students of America's history. It was evident in late 18th century Russian merchants' accounts of life on California missions; desperate natives in desperate places devoted to producing goods for Spanish fathers to sell.<sup>59</sup> It was equally evident in a mid-19th century Southern medical doctor's justification of slavery as a bulwark against unwanted "negro liberty".<sup>60</sup> And in the early 20th century when American travelers appropriated the zombie to describe laborers on Haitian American Sugar Company plantations.<sup>61</sup> And most recently in accounts of Latino laborers existing as permanently deportable labor toiling in penury.<sup>62</sup> The connections that Munkh-Erdene made in his account contradict an American myth, 'the American Dream' that immigrants made their descendants Americans through sweat and sinew.<sup>63</sup>

To continue with the terms I have employed throughout this article this American myth held that through migration and labor one could trick time. This was a myth central to Koreatown, a place that my Korean American community organizer acquaintances argued was partially produced through their

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<sup>58</sup> Although I carried out no specific inquiry into the attitude of self-sacrifice that Munkh-Erdene discusses here it seemed more prevalent amongst older Mongolians who had come to California with the specific intention of staying.

<sup>59</sup> Kent G. Lightfoot, *Indians, Missionaries, and Merchants: The Legacy of Colonial Encounters on the California Frontiers* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), chap. 4, Kindle.

<sup>60</sup> Samuel Cartwright, "Report on the Diseases and Physical Peculiarities of the Negro Race," *The New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal* 7 (May 1851): 711.

<sup>61</sup> Raphael Hoermann, "Figures of Terror: The 'Zombie' and the Haitian Revolution," *Atlantic Studies* 14, no. 2 (April 3, 2017): 152–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14788810.2016.1240887>.

<sup>62</sup> Leo R. Chavez, *Shadowed Lives: Undocumented Immigrants in American Society* (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1998), 1–2.

<sup>63</sup> James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 256, Kindle.

forebears' sacrifices.<sup>64</sup> In 1976 in one of the first sociological works about Koreatown a trio of sociologists even gave the activity that underwrote this claim a name: "Korean Thrift." Thrift meant that "the immigrants may work so hard that their health suffers".<sup>65</sup> Here the immigrants knowingly trucked in time replacing care of their own bodies for care for their children's futures. For Asian immigrants, like the Koreans and Mongolians, such sacrifices were not always successful. Indeed, scholars in the interdisciplinary field of Asian American studies have consistently pointed to a history of Asians being specifically excluded, Orientalized, and othered, such that they are prevented from benefiting from their forebears' sacrifices.<sup>66</sup> In Los Angeles the most powerful example of this phenomena had been the internment of the Nisei (American-born Japanese American citizens) in concentration camps during World War II on the entirely unwarranted belief that they were disloyal to the United States.<sup>67</sup>

Not all the Mongolians laboring in the logistics industry thought about the future in terms of life and death as Munkh-Erdene did. Tom, now in his mid-thirties, had come to the United States, specifically Washington State, as an exchange student to learn English. It had been a difficult experience at first, but he had regularized his status through winning the green-card lottery and had founded a third-party logistics business. Initially he had been an owner operator managing his own truck, but now he owned two trucking companies, a dozen trucks, and rented multiple yards in Fontana. Recently he had taken on the role of a community activist and thus had to combine his business interests with resolving whatever problems were occurring within the community.

While dealing with community problems via phone Tom travelled around Los Angeles County attending to various issues relating to his trucking business. On one occasion we drove for an hour down to the industrial area of South Los Angeles to pick up a second-hand truck that he had bought. We then drove the truck to a garage where it would be serviced and restored. While that labor was being undertaken Tom and I drove to a mall where he purchased a stencil

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<sup>64</sup> As Korean American organizers felt the neighborhood's Koreanness was under threat from both white gentrification and Bangladeshi attempts to create a named neighborhood of their own in Koreatown this was a recurrent topic of conversation during my fieldwork.

<sup>65</sup> Edna Bonacich, Ivan H. Light, and Charles Choy Wong, "Koreans in Business," *Society* 14, no. 6 (September 1977): 55, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02712519>.

<sup>66</sup> Keith Aoki, "Foreign-Ness' & Asian American Identities: Yellowface, World War II Propaganda, and Bifurcated Racial Stereotypes," *UCLA Asian Pacific American Law Journal* 4, no. 1 (1996): 9–10; Erika Lee, *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration during the Exclusion Era, 1882–1943* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 6–7.

<sup>67</sup> Scott Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race: Black and Japanese Americans in the Making of Multiethnic Los Angeles* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 9.

with his trucking logo, a stallion, and the appropriate registration documentation. After that was done, we then returned and picked the truck up to take it to another garage. There he performed several minor repairs on other trucks in his fleet. Once the repairs were accomplished, we drove the new truck down to the port of Los Angeles where he discussed business matters with an associate who worked as a stevedore. By then the sun was setting and we drove back to Koreatown. However, before dropping me off a client called to confirm the delivery of his items. Tom talked to the client, called his driver to confirm the location, and then called the client back and debited their account using a payment app on his mobile phone. Having completed the transaction he dropped me off before driving the truck onwards to one of his yards in Fontana, so that it could be used the next day.

While clock time and time discipline were very much part of Tom's labor, as is evident from this description, much of what he had to do was task orientated. The hours that he worked extended well beyond 9 to 5. One consequence of this was that he had to engage in forms of time-trucking despite acknowledging the negative consequences that it had on his body. Thus, for example, Tom regularly consumed junk food. "I just do not have time to stop," he would say by way of explanation. There was, he felt, no time to prepare food himself or even have his sister prepare it for him. Tom undertook this sacrifice and trucked with time in this way because he sought to create a future for himself in which he could manage his business from Mongolia while establishing a new trucking empire there hauling from the country's various mines. Tom's sacrifice of his body to this endeavor is such a common practice amongst long-distance truckers in the US that it is referred to as "running hard". When a trucker runs hard, they purposefully time truck with their bio-rhythms desynchronizing them in order to maintain synch with other rhythms and achieve their ethical goals. Over the long-term this can have a marked effect upon their health.<sup>68</sup> Tom was already beginning to see evidence of this in the form of weight gain and joint pain. His performance as a basketball player, once celebrated throughout the Mongolian community, was also not what it had once been as his mobility was hampered.

Despite this Tom was wistful for his past as a trucker. One evening as we dined with some of his employees at a Korean barbecue buffet restaurant, he engaged in acts of fond reminiscences. Tom enthused being a trucker was the best as it freed one from all these unfortunate commitments and allowed one to live a simple life. "I miss it," he confessed. And on other occasions he

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<sup>68</sup> Kevin Birth, "While the West Sleeps: Deglobed Globalization and Its Consequences," in *Time, Globalization and Human Experience*, ed. Paul Huebener, Susie O'Brien, Tony Porter, Liam Stockdale, and Yanqiu Rachel Zhou (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 122.

admitted that when the demands of his job or his position as community organizer seemed to overwhelm him he thought about either returning to simply being a trucker, with its far lighter burdens, or returning to Mongolia where he felt ideas of time in communities of practice were more congenial to his own. In this he was far from alone. Munkh-Erdene, faced with what he considered death, too expressed the view that if this was what life in Los Angeles was to be, he would rather return to life in Mongolia.

Judged purely by their material circumstances Tom and Munkh-Erdene could not be more different. However, they were similar in their attitudes to the time discipline that they faced in their respective spheres of the logistics industry and in their distaste for how the necessity of trucking time was shaping their sense of self. It is tempting, particularly in the case of Tom, to make a technologically determinist argument that it was their ability to be permanently contactable via their telephones that was the cause of their predicaments. However, as Judy Wajcman observes “the contemporary imperative of speed is as much a cultural artifact as it is a technological one [...] if we feel rushed time and pressed for time, it’s because of the priorities and parameters we ourselves set rather than the machines per se”.<sup>69</sup> As an alternative I suggest attending to time discipline’s origins in Christianity; these lie in the desire of monks to be vigilant in prayer. This was a single-minded focus on one task.<sup>70</sup> In contrast the current world of logistics requires that third-party logistics operators, like Tom, and employees, like Munkh-Erdene, balance a multitude of rhythms with very little margin for error. As at its heart logistics is a task-like activity when a problem occurs it takes precedence over everything else. Consequently, everything one is scheduled to do must then be rescheduled, and, as Chuck Darrah has argued, this continual rescheduling results in psychological and physiological fatigue from the feeling of being overwhelmingly busy.<sup>71</sup> While those Mongolians who were working as long-distance truck drivers also had to contend with the need to accomplish a task within a set timeframe their labor allowed significant flexibility and multitasking, with minimal surveillance.

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<sup>69</sup> Judy Wajcman, “The Digital Transformation of Everyday Life,” *Sociologisk Forskning* 53, no. 2 (2016): 194.

<sup>70</sup> Benjamin H. Snyder, “From Vigilance to Busyness,” *Sociological Theory* 31, no. 2 (2013): 252–54.

<sup>71</sup> Charles Darrah, “The Anthropology of Busyness,” *Human Organization* 66, no. 3 (September 2007): 268, <https://doi.org/10.17730/humo.66.3.n0u0513p464n6046>.

## Conclusion

The accounts I have presented in this article suggest that ideas about time and ethics are central to the constitution of labor regimes. Mongolians who moved to Los Angeles encountered and had to navigate a variety of different communities of practice with distinct perspectives on time, many of which were in direct conflict with their own ethical goals. For some men the response to such encounters was to seek opportunities in professions that conflicted less with their senses of self. Trucking was one such profession. Not only did trucking allow these men considerably more agency over their own work than other activities, they might engage in, it also allowed them a great deal of latitude as to what else they do whilst trucking. Specifically, the lack of direct surveillance allowed them to engage in time-trucking and time-tricking to shape their selfhoods in ways that they desired. This was in contradistinction to other areas of the logistics industry such as working in third-party logistics or stock administration where my Mongolian interlocutors found themselves harried by the various demands that they had to deal with on a regular basis.

While much of the critical logistics studies literature frames late modern capitalism as red of tooth and claw, with an overwhelming tendency to increase workers precariousness, in this instance I suggest things are perhaps more complex than such a grand meta-narrative would allow. In stressing the reasons why Mongolian men living in Los Angeles come to regard trucking as a desirable activity I have been greatly influenced by contemporary feminist analyses of capitalism, which emphasize that it is reliant on creating niches that are attractive to actors for specific reasons. In the case of Mongolian truckers this attractiveness derives, in part, from both oppressions experienced outside of work and an awareness that other potential jobs would not diminish these oppressions. However, this attractiveness is radically contingent, and when my interlocutors find circumstances that they adjudge even more congenial they are apt to abandon environments they now deem exploitative.

Just as universalizing narratives about the nature of capitalism are of limited value so too are teleological representations of clock time replacing task time with the emergence of capitalism and accounts of clock time that treat it as a singular phenomenon. In reality, clock time and task time are perhaps best understood as ideal types at extreme ends of a spectrum with various gradations in between. While hybridized forms of clock and task time are now present in most places, the values imputed to them vary considerably. This variation means that different communities of practice employ time differently and possess different rhythms hence the ability to truck between these. Time, even

when it is associated with capitalist labor, must thus be scrutinized more closely and treated more carefully than accounts of contemporary life often allow.

Finally, in offering this account of the working lives of Mongolian men in Los Angeles I have sought to contribute to a fast-growing literature within Mongolian studies on post-socialist Mongolian life. While I have focused on Mongolian diasporic life there are obvious connections with life in Mongolia that extend beyond the mere flow of goods. Mongolian studies could fruitfully benefit from greater consideration of how exposure to time discipline and labor practices outside of Mongolia is shaping practices in Mongolia itself.

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Kaveh Abbasian\*

## The Role of Modern Audio-Visual Media in the Construction of Iranian National Identity

**Abstract:** This paper sheds light on a less explored aspect of the modern construction of Iranian national identity. It investigates the role of modern audio-visual media including cinema, radio and television in this modern construction. Although the study of Iranian national identity has developed well beyond the orthodox romantic nationalist approach dominant during the 20th century, not enough attention has been given to the study of modern audio-visual media. While the printing press had an important role in the construction of what Benedict Anderson calls an ‘imagined community’ of Iranians, it was the emergence of cinema, radio and television that crucially contributed to the spread of the Persian language as the national language of Iranians. I also argue that these media were essential in the propagation of the nationalist ideology of the Pahlavi dynasty. Another widely overlooked area in Iranian media studies is the importance of the 1979 Revolution in further popularization of audio-visual media. I investigate recently published data from research conducted in 1974 in order to show that despite the availability of these media, many Iranians refrained from using them, mainly due to religious reasons. The 1979 Revolution and the subsequent Islamization of the audio-visual media, however, changed this dynamic and accelerated the popularization of these media even among the hardliner religious population. This contributed to further construction of an Iranian national identity.

**Keywords:** Iranian national identity; nationalism; audio-visual media; cinema; radio; television; Pahlavi dynasty; the Islamic Republic; the Iranian Revolution; 20th century

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## Introduction

In this paper, I intend to trace the modern construction of Iranian national identity from the perspective of media studies and more specifically film and television studies. I explore the role of modern audio-visual media, including cinema, radio and television, in the construction of Iranian national identity. In doing so, I have divided the paper into two main parts consisting of three sub-sections. The first main part deals with ongoing academic discussions in the fields of media studies and the construction of national identity in Iran. In the second, analytical part, I present a recently published study about media consumption in late Pahlavi Iran from whose findings I draw my conclusion.

In the first sub-section, following Benedict Anderson's theory of nations as 'imagined communities'<sup>1</sup> I discuss the rise of the printing press in Iran and its role in the spread of the Persian language in late 19th and early 20th century. I argue that although important in creating the idea of Iran, Persian publications remained unreadable for the illiterate majority of the population. A full review of national identity studies of Iran is beyond the scope of the paper, however, in the context of Anderson's work, there are other media crucial to the development of identity which have not been considered enough. I extend Anderson's theory in order to discuss the emergence of modern audio-visual media, including cinema, radio and television in the 20th century as a major catalyst in the construction of Iranian national identity. During the Pahlavi dynasty (1925–1979), cinema, radio and television proved critical in the dissemination of the Persian language as the national language as well as propagation of the nationalist ideology of the newly emerging nation-state. I discuss the specific role of each of these three media (cinema, radio, television) and offer a brief case study of the first Iranian sound film, *The Lur Girl* (1934), which included an authoritarian nationalist message.

In the second section I reflect on different arguments concerning the question of Iranian national identity. A comprehensive review of identity studies and nationalism in Iran is beyond the scope of this study; however, I reflect on some of the notable developments in order to pinpoint the specific area in the academic study of Iranian national identity on which I put the focus of my argument and also in order to make clear the lines of thought and methodologies that have influenced my own study. I discuss Anderson's theory<sup>2</sup> and accordingly, the modernization approach in the study of Iranian national identity. I

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<sup>1</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Books, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

contend that the investigation of modern audio-visual media and their role in the construction of Iranian national identity remains a lacuna in the field.

In the second part (my third section), I focus on recently published research conducted by ‘Alī Asadī and Majīd Tehrānīyān in 1974.<sup>3</sup> Using detailed statistics, I provide an analysis of the popularity and the reach of these media in Iran during the Pahlavi dynasty up to the 1979 Revolution. I show that due to several obstacles, including religious opposition, these media did not reach the peak of their popularization until after the 1979 Revolution. Contrary to popular belief, I suggest the revolution and the subsequent Islamization of these media resulted in their further popularization, making them essential tools in the construction of Iranian national identity.

While taking into account the political ideology of both the Pahlavi dynasty and the Islamic Republic, I have tried to take the argument beyond mere rhetoric and focus on a continuous process of the construction of Iranian national identity and the crucial role of the audio-visual media during both periods.

## Part 1: Public Media and the Nation-State

In his book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Anderson argues that the modern emergence of the nation as an idea is associated with the invention of the printing press and rise of print capitalism.<sup>4</sup> He argues that in order to maximize profit, capitalist entrepreneurs preferred to publish books in vernacular languages (instead of exclusive languages such as Latin). When people who spoke various dialects of that language became able to read the same books and papers which were previously published in limited numbers, a sense of unity was created inside groups of people who didn’t necessarily know each other. This opportunity was used by elites in order to produce the feeling among the readers that they shared a set of interests. This feeling was then used towards the creation of a sense of nationalism that gave birth to the nation state. Through this analysis, Anderson refers to the nation as an “imagined community” which in his words is deeply rooted in “religious communities” and “dynastic realms”.<sup>5</sup> This understanding of the nation is particularly significant for the study of Iranian national identity for the importance that it gives to modern media and their role in spreading vernacular

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Alī Asadī and Majīd Tehrānīyān, *Šidāyī ki shinīdih nashud: nigarishhā-yi ijtimā’ī-farhangī va tūsi’ih-yi nāmūtivāzin dar Īrān* (A Voice That Was Not Heard: Socio-Cultural Attitudes and Uneven Development in Iran) (Tehran: Nashrīnī, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 44.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

languages towards the construction of nations and also for the link that it establishes between the nation and its political power.

In Iran, publishing houses and publications such as books, newspaper, and magazines first emerged during the 19th century under the Qajar dynasty (1785–1925) and continued to flourish into the 20th century. Although these publications were fundamental in the formation of the idea of Iran as a nation-state, they remained unreadable to the illiterate masses. This dynamic changed in the 20th century with the introduction of modern audio-visual media, including cinema, radio and television. These media were capable of communicating with a much larger section of the population regardless of their level of literacy and thus, played a significant role in propagation of the Persian language as a unifying factor in the construction of Iranian national identity. The emergence of cinema, in particular, coincided with Rizā Shāh's nation-state building program (1921 and 1941).

As pointed out by Afshin Marashi, the Rizā Shāh period was the first political era in Iranian history in which the state self-consciously used nationalism as its ideology.<sup>6</sup> Rizā Shāh's implementation of authoritarian nationalist politics in Iran involved military force and heavy oppression of the opposition but also included other means of propagation of his nationalist ideology. In addition to print publications, he also recognized at an early stage the great potential of the new medium of cinema. His son, Muḥammad Rizā Shāh, added radio and television to the list of media utilized in this ideological campaign. Cinema, radio and television all became crucial in maintaining the hegemony of the state. Modern audio-visual media, not only important in creating a sense of shared identity through Persian language, also served as essential tools for propagating the nationalist ideology of the Pahlavis.<sup>7</sup>

### Cinema

Cinema appeared in Iran first in 1900. That year the French Catholic mission opened the first public cinema, Soleil Cinema, in Tabriz. The first commercial cinema in Iran opened its door to the public in 1904 in Chirāgh-Gāz Avenue in Tehran, showing trick films, comedies, and newsreels from the Transvaal War in South Africa.<sup>8</sup> Its founder, Mīrzā Ibrāhīm Khān Ṣaḥāfbāshī, was a modern educated constitutionalist who, after travelling the world, returned to Iran with a

<sup>6</sup> Afshin Marashi, *Nationalizing Iran: Culture, Power, and the State, 1870–1940* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Hamid Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema: A Political History* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*. Vol. 1. 4 vols. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 57.

film projector. His early endeavor to establish a movie theater in Tehran, however, was foiled. Only a month after opening his cinema, Şahāfbāshī was forced to shut it down due to religious outrage.<sup>9</sup> The main argument of the clergy and traditionalists who opposed the introduction of this new medium was that it was morally corrupt (and corrupting) and against Islamic doctrine, which objected to figurative representations.<sup>10</sup> Despite the religious opposition, cinema was not going to go away; after all, the modernists saw cinema as an interesting modern means of communication. Several film theaters sprung up during the turbulent years of the Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911) and the years after. Another well-travelled modernist pioneer of cinema was the Iranian Armenian Ārdāshis Bādmāgryān (1863–1928), known as Ardashīr Khān. After opening a cinema in his own apartment in Tehran in 1909, Ardashīr Khān set out to open an actual film theater in 1915. He named his eighty-seat public cinema *Tajaddud* meaning modernity.<sup>11</sup> This modernist fascination with cinema eventually found its way into Rizā Shāh's authoritarian modernization project. Inheriting a society with an illiteracy rate of over 80 percent,<sup>12</sup> Rizā Shāh understood cinema as a means of mass communication. Under his rule, new theaters were opened across Iran in order to show foreign films. These films typically opened with scenes of Rizā Shāh's modernization campaign, showing the inauguration of the telegraph and railway industries, the construction of new bridges, roads and highways, and military marches. These images were accompanied by the national anthem while the audience was expected to stand to attention.<sup>13</sup>

By 1930 there were up to thirty-three film theaters across Iran and this number continued to grow. In that year Uvānis Uhānyān (1896–1960) established the first film school under the title of *Parvarishgāh-i Ārtīstī-yi Sīnamā* (The Artistic Film School) and released the first Iranian film, a silent comedy named *Ābī ū Rabī* (Abi and Rabi).

The most iconic example of Rizā Shāh's incorporation of cinema in his nation-state building campaign is *Dukhtar-i Lur* (The Lur Girl), the first Iranian talkie which was released in 1934. The film was produced in Persian in Bombay, India under the Imperial Film Company, where making a sound film was possible. The idea for the film was initiated by 'Abd al-Ḥusayn Sipantā (1907–1969), a pro-Rizā Shāh modernist and nationalist Iranian who wrote the script

<sup>9</sup> Naficy, *A Social History*.

<sup>10</sup> Nacim Pak-Shiraz, *Shi'i Islam in Iranian Cinema: Religion and Spirituality in Film* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011), 41.

<sup>11</sup> Naficy, *A Social History*, 67.

<sup>12</sup> Sadr, *Iranian Cinema*, 13.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.



and turned it into a film with the aid of Ardashīr Īrānī (1886–1969), an Indian Parsi. *Dukhtar-i Lur* is an outright propagator of Rizā Shāh's authoritarian campaign of nation-state building. The ideological approach of the film is evident even in its alternative title *Iran: Yesterday, Today*, which appeared on the posters. The story of the film takes place mainly in the Lur inhabited part of Southwest Iran. The Lurs in this area had shown fierce resistance against Rizā Shāh's national unification campaign. Tribal and nomadic forces had fought bloody battles against Rizā Shāh's military which eventually led to their defeat and subjugation and the consolidation of centralized power.<sup>14</sup>

The film begins with an explanatory text on the screen: "Before the auspicious era of Pahlavi, when South and West of Iran were under the influence of various tribal and nomadic forces (*ilāt va 'ashāyir-i mukhtalif*)". The first sequence of the film is dedicated to introducing Gulnār who was kidnapped as a child by bandits and was taken to Luristan where she was held in a teahouse as an entertainer. Ja'far (played by Sipantā himself) is a government agent who is sent to the Lur inhabited part of the country to deal with the problem of bandits. He is fully clothed in Western dress and has an air of power and wisdom unlike the people around Gulnār, who are depicted as backward savages. The two characters meet and fall in love. Ja'far helps Gulnār escape her captors. After a series of clashes and after Ja'far kills several bandits including their leader, they manage to flee. Fearing the revenge of the bandits, they escape to Mumbai.

After their arrival in Mumbai, the film is interrupted by a series of intertitles. The intertitles inform the audience that years passed, Rizā Shāh seized power, and happiness overtook Iran. Then, on a background of the national flag, the new government's 'achievements' are noted one after another: 'Economic development', 'construction of factories', 'unified dress code', 'protection of women's rights', etc. The screen is then filled with three lines of text reading: "All of this progress has taken place just in a few years and as a result of considerations of the great *Shāhanshāh* (King of Kings) of Iran" which then cuts to another three lines: "This progress not only created comfort inside Iran but was also a cause for pride for all Iranians abroad". In his 2006 book, *Iranian Cinema: A Political History*, Hamid Reza Sadr claims that these intertitles were suggested by the state "to make clear that the lawlessness it depicted took place during the reign of the previous dynasty".<sup>15</sup> The last sequence of the film shows the now unveiled and 'modernized' Gulnār playing piano under a framed picture of Rizā Shāh on the wall while Ja'far sings a Nationalist pro-Pahlavi song. In the end, during a dialogue between Ja'far and Gulnār, Ja'far declares that the

<sup>14</sup> Stephanie Cronin, *Tribal Politics in Iran: Rural Conflict and the New State, 1921–1941* (London: Routledge, 2007), 26.

<sup>15</sup> Sadr, *Iranian Cinema*, 32.

“fatherland” is now “blessed” and is full of “happiness” and that they should go back to Iran. The film concludes with an image of Riżā Shāh.

As Sadr argues, *Dukhtar-i Lur* has a colonial adventurer narrative with an Orientalist approach.<sup>16</sup> This is evident in the role of Ja‘far as the Westernized male savior of the female victim trapped in a backward society. After rescuing his ‘damsel in distress’, the hero introduces her to Western culture and ‘modernity’, presumably as a metaphor for what Riżā Shāh did to Iran. The similarity between Ja‘far’s outfit and that of Riżā Shāh is not a coincidence. Like Ja‘far, Riżā Shāh also set out to ‘save’ Iran from ‘backwardness’ and ‘savagery’ and in order to do so he did not hesitate to kill his enemies. The savages in the film were in reality tribal and nomadic Lurs who resisted Riżā Shāh’s national unification and forced sedentarization campaign. In case their military defeat was not enough for their complete subjugation, they were now demonized in the first Iranian sound film. So, Iranians who for the first time went to cinemas to watch an Iranian sound film, were subjected to a fictionalized version of their government’s authoritarian national identity building project. It is worth noting that as a result of making the film in India and using Indian actors, most of the characters when speaking Persian had Indian accents. Also, the character of Gulnār who was introduced in the film as a Lur was played by Rūḥangīz Samīnizhād (1916–1997) who was from Bam in Kerman province and had Kermani accent. Ja‘far however (who was played by Sipantā himself), spoke Persian with a Tehrani accent. So, while introducing the Persian language as the language of the nation, the film also introduced a specific accent of that language as the accent of power, wisdom, and progress. The Lur people weren’t only demonized in appearance and deeds but were also stripped of their Luri language and were made to speak Persian in non-native accents in the film.

The importance of cinema for Riżā Shāh’s administration is also clear in its approach towards another film with Lur tribes at its center. However, where *Dukhtar-i Lur* was favored by the central administration, the other was very much disliked and banned: a documentary film titled *Grass: A Nation’s Battle for Life* (1925). The filmmakers, Merian C. Cooper (1893–1973) and Ernest B. Schoedsack (1893–1979), were the same duo who went on to produce *King Kong* in 1933. The colonial adventurer eye that led to the making of *King Kong* is very much present also in *Grass: A Nation’s Battle for Life*. The film follows a branch of the Bakhtiari tribe of Lurs as they and their herds make their seasonal migration. They endure such hardships as crossing the Karun River and trekking the Zard-Kuh, the highest peak (4,221 m) in the Zagros Mountains. The filmmakers depict their own journey from Angora (modern day Ankara, Turkey) to the land of the Bakhtiaris as a journey through history; a journey to

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<sup>16</sup> Sadr, *Iranian Cinema*, 29.

find what they call ‘the forgotten people’. The film then depicts these ‘forgotten’ people’s culture as a primitive way of life, preserved in time in a primitive Eastern part of the world. This of course did not sit well with Rizā Shāh’s modernization campaign and the image he tried to present of Iran and Iranians. As a result of this conflict, the film was banned from Iranian cinemas. It was only after Rizā Shāh’s abdication and during his son’s reign, in 1964, that *Grass: A Nation’s Battle for Life* was finally shown in Iran, albeit with additional commentary added in order to alleviate its negative impact.<sup>17</sup>

Theoretically speaking cinema was accessible for people regardless of their level of literacy, and thus could communicate with a larger portion of the population. In practice, however, there existed several obstacles. A lack of infrastructure was one significant obstacle but also the fact that the clergy and traditionalists remained critical of the new medium limited its proliferation. Nacim Pak-Shiraz argues that their criticism wasn’t only due to the ‘corrupt’ Western content of the films being shown but also because by “creating a space for mixed-sex entertainment, cinema also created a dangerous new ‘unislamic’ leisure ritual”.<sup>18</sup> This is particularly important because many religious rituals had been suppressed under Rizā Shāh and cinema seemed to offer an alternative.

Despite this conflicting relationship, the popularity of cinema gradually grew, making it an important source of communication. Rapid industrialization and the adoption of capitalist modes of production resulted in the establishment of increasingly more cinema venues, film production companies and also a boost in the urban population.<sup>19</sup> The first volume of Jamāl Umīd’s book *Farhang-i filmhā-yi sinimā-yi Īrān* (Encyclopaedia of Iranian Films)<sup>20</sup> provides us with detailed information regarding films made in the early years of Iranian cinema. A close examination reveals that in regard to Persian-language film production, between 1930 and 1936 a rate of at least one film per year was made, but by 1953 more than ten films per year were being produced, and this number continued to grow. This did not even include the foreign films which were dubbed in Persian and widely distributed as well.

The Allied Forces’ occupation of Iran in 1941 which had led to the abdication of Rizā Shāh, had also allowed for a development of a lively free press. The number of newspapers, magazines, and other publications continued to grow during and after the war. This growing number of publications, together with

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<sup>17</sup> Sadr, *Iranian Cinema*, 20.

<sup>18</sup> Pak-Shiraz, *Shi’i Islam in Iranian Cinema*, 41.

<sup>19</sup> Naficy, *A Social History*, 10.

<sup>20</sup> Jamāl Umīd, *Farhang-i filmhā-yi sinimā-yi Īrān* (Encyclopaedia of Iranian Films). Vol. 1. 4 vols. (Tehran: Nigāh, 2010).

cinema in the form of both dubbed foreign films and Iranian films, played a significant role in the spread of the Persian language as a unifying force. In this way, the emergence of what Anderson calls 'Print Capitalism' along with the rise of cinema as a capitalist endeavor with state guidance supported the construction of the 'imagined community'<sup>21</sup> of 'Iranians'. However, it must be noted that even in the early 1950s when some of the daily political publications had a circulation of 50,000, the majority of the population remained outside their sphere of influence due to the high illiteracy rate of 80 percent.<sup>22</sup> While dissemination of these ideas could have also occurred through word of mouth, with such a high illiteracy rate, it must be questioned how influential these publications really were throughout Iran. Moreover, as discussed previously, a significant portion of society refused to go to cinemas due to their religious beliefs. Therefore, the introduction of radio with its greater accessibility to all came to be an important medium in the construction of Iranian national identity.

### Radio

Emergence of radio in Iran is linked to Nazi Germany's special interest in the country and their attempts to spread Aryan national ideology among Iranians. The Aryan national ideology which became an important component of the Pahlavis' nation-state building project had found its way into Iranian political debates among the elites and intellectuals in the late 19th century; however, a significant event that helped boost this ideology amongst a broader number of Iranians was Nazi Germany's interest in Iran and especially their presence in the country during Riżā Shāh's reign. Matthias Küntzel discusses the special relationship between Iran and Germany and the role of the Nazi movement in the development of Aryan ideology among the larger Iranian public.<sup>23</sup> He presents evidence that since the late 19th century and especially after the rise to the throne of Wilhelm II (1859–1941) in 1888, the Germans had shown a special interest in the Islamic world. This was due to their competition with other European powers, whose influence in the East they wished to restrain. Küntzel argues that this special interest and attempt to develop a relationship

<sup>21</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

<sup>22</sup> Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ali Mohammadi, *Small Media, Big Revolution: Communication, Culture, and the Iranian Revolution* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 55.

<sup>23</sup> Matthias Küntzel, *Ālmānī-hā va Īrān: Tārīkh-i guzashtih va mu'āsir-i yik dūsti-yi badfarjām* (The Germans and Iran: History and Present of a Fateful Friendship), trans. Michael Mobasher (Paris and Cologne: Editions Khavaran and Forough Publishing, 2017), <https://rangin-kaman.net/wp-content/uploads/images/post/ald.pdf>.

entered a new phase during the rule of the Nazi Party.<sup>24</sup> Unlike Britain and Russia, Germany was not involved in colonial and imperial politics in Iran and thus didn't have that negative implication of a foreign invasive power for Iranians. Moreover, Nazi Germany played a crucial role in the industrialization of Iran during Rizā Shāh's regime. This all helped to establish a friendly image of Germany for Iranians.

When it came to making an ally in the East, the Nazi propaganda machine led by Joseph Goebbels made good use of the Aryan ideology. One important channel through which they publicized this ideology was the Persian-language Radio Berlin broadcasts that started in 1938; the first Persian radio to be heard by Iranians was dedicated to an Aryan ideology that declared Iranians to be of the same race as their German 'brothers'.<sup>25</sup>

Küntzel draws upon reports from the German ambassador that suggests during World War II Germans were favored by many Iranians, including the clergy. This support for Germany was extended to many Shi'a clerics claiming that Hitler was a descendent of the prophet Muḥammad; some even declared that Hitler was in fact the Hidden Imam (the Twelfth Imam, Muḥammad al-Mahdī) of the Shi'as who had finally emerged to revive Islam.<sup>26</sup> In their radio program, the Nazis accompanied their analysis with verses from the Quran. For instance, in order to advocate their anti-Jewish policies, they used Quranic verses in regard to Muḥammad's campaigns against the Jewish tribes who lived in Arabia.<sup>27</sup>

The Allied Forces' occupation of Iran in 1941 and the subsequent abdication of Rizā Shāh put an end to the special relationship between Iran and Germany; however, the influence of the Nazi ideological campaign was to last for decades to come. A true son of his father, the new monarch, Muḥammad Rizā Shāh continued the campaign of national identity building. His ideological approach is signified by the fact that after the Second World War he appointed Bahrām Shāhrukh (presenter and head of Radio Berlin in Persian) to the post of director of news and propaganda.<sup>28</sup>

The state-controlled Radio Iran was inaugurated on April 24th, 1940, two years after Radio Berlin started its Persian broadcasts. The date was symbolically chosen as it was the crown prince's twenty first birthday. The first broadcast which lasted for four hours from 7pm to 11pm, started with the Iranian

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<sup>24</sup> Küntzel, *Ālmānī-hā va Īrān*, 34.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>28</sup> Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism: Race and the Politics of Dislocation* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2016), 160.

national anthem. After the crown prince enacted the necessary formalities, the prime minister, Aḥmad Matīn-Daftarī (1897–1971) read a short message outlining the benefits of radio for the general public and that listening centers would be set up where people could listen to radio for free.<sup>29</sup> The press took notice of this historic event: The newspaper *Iṭṭilā‘āt* published a piece describing radio as “one of the most important human inventions [...] among the most valuable gifts of civilization and progress” that could be considered “the voice of a nation heard in different parts of the world [...] and can be used as an element in strengthening the unity of a nation”.<sup>30</sup> In an interview published in his semi-autobiography, *Umīd va āzādī* (Hope and Freedom), Īraj Gurgīn, a prominent producer, reporter, and news anchor for Radio Iran stated:

From its foundation until many years later, radio in Iran was considered a section of the General Bureau of Propaganda and Publication, and a state broadcasting institute whose task was propaganda, not necessarily according to journalistic etiquettes.<sup>31</sup>

This policy continued under the second Pahlavi ruler. The anchor was instructed to start every program with the latest news on the “*Shāhanshāh Āryāmīhr*” (King of Kings, Light of the Aryans).<sup>32</sup>

On December 29th, 1940, eight months after the first broadcast of Radio Iran, BBC Radio also started Persian-language broadcasts, and in the 1960s Radio Tehran was added to the state-controlled radio, with more entertainment programs gradually being included in their broadcasts.<sup>33</sup> Compared to cinema and the press, radio managed to penetrate deeper into the public and to engage a larger part of the population. According to a UNESCO report, by 1940 20,000 radio sets existed in Iran; a decade later this number rose to 60,000, roughly one set per 300 people.<sup>34</sup>

### Television

The 1953 coup was followed by years of political oppression and economic growth. With the resumption of oil revenues, government money started to flow again, and an atmosphere of entrepreneurship and capitalist competition

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<sup>29</sup> Īraj Gurgīn, *Umīd va āzādī* (Hope and Freedom) (Los Angeles: Ketab Corp, 2012).

<sup>30</sup> Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi, *Small Media, Big Revolution*, 53.

<sup>31</sup> Gurgīn, *Umīd va āzādī*, 28.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi, *Small Media, Big Revolution*, 53.

took over.<sup>35</sup> Among these entrepreneurs was Ḥabībullāh Ṣābit, who acquired state permission to establish the first television station in Iran. As a result, while radio in Iran started as a state-controlled means of ideological dominance, television (at least at its beginning) took a different route and was founded as a private business. As well as establishing the television station, Ṣābit imported and sold television receivers, while also selling advertisement airtime to local entrepreneurs. The *Television of Iran* was inaugurated in October 1958 with a speech by Mohammad Riżā Shāh.<sup>36</sup>

Following the success of Ṣābit's *Television of Iran*, the government set out to establish its own state-run television station. On October 26th 1966, National Iranian Television sent out its first broadcast, a message from Muḥammad Riżā Shāh. Complete programs started on Nowruz, the Iranian New Year, in March 1967. In July 1969, Ṣābit's *Television of Iran* was taken over by the state, after which television became a state-run organization. In 1971 National Iranian Television was merged with the thirty-five-year-old radio network and National Iranian Radio and Television (NIRT) was born as a public broadcast monopoly operating as an independent government corporation.<sup>37</sup>

Comparatively, television broadcasts reached a considerably smaller part of the population than those of radio (mainly the emerging middle and upper class), but it did continue to grow. By 1979, NIRT had about 9,000 employees. NIRT was heavily incorporated in the state's political campaigns, so much that according to Gurgīn:

In regard to what was called matters of national security, especially after the emergence of urban guerrilla movement and a rise of armed clashes, and also in the critical period prior to the revolution, NIRT didn't have anything to say; it was information and security authorities of the country that were the references and provided the content of reports in regard to these matters.<sup>38</sup>

Moreover, due to its visual qualities, television was considered a significant medium in propagation of the Pahlavi's national ideology. It was through this new medium that in October 1971 the 2,500th anniversary of the Persian Empire was broadcasted live for both national and international audiences. Monarchs and heads of state were invited from around the world to take part in a lavish party organized to strengthen Muḥammad Riżā Shāh's position both in

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<sup>35</sup> Homa Katouzian, *The Political Economy of Modern Iran: Despotism and Pseudo-Modernism, 1926-1979* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1981).

<sup>36</sup> Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi, *Small Media, Big Revolution*, 62.

<sup>37</sup> See Hossein Shahidi, *Journalism in Iran: From Mission to Profession* (London: Routledge, 2007), 95.

<sup>38</sup> Gurgīn, *Umīd va āzādī*, 44.

Iran and also on the world stage, and to introduce him as a true heir to a supposedly continuous Persian monarchy founded by Cyrus II (also known as Cyrus the Great). The world, and more significantly Iranians, watched the Shah on the first day of the celebrations when he stood in front of the tomb of Cyrus and called him “the immortal hero of the history of Iran”, before pledging allegiance to him: “Cyrus! [...] Sleep in peace, for we are awake! And we always will be”.<sup>39</sup>

The people of the Shah’s ‘nation’, however, were not allowed anywhere near the celebration, which was reserved for the domestic elite, foreign monarchs and heads of state. Instead, they were to hear about it only on the radio or television.

### **Iranian National Identity: A Contested Idea**

A comprehensive discussion on all aspects of the study of Iranian national identity is beyond the scope of this paper; however, by briefly reviewing some of the main trends as well as influential scholarly arguments, I aim to make it clear as to where and how my own approach fits into this study. The academic study of Iranian national identity in the field of Iranian studies was until recently dominated by an arguably primordialist, romantic and nationalist approach. For instance, in his 1982 book, *Huvīyat-i Īrānī va zabān-i Fārsī* (Iranian Identity and the Persian Language), Shāhrukh Miskūb claims that “of course, in previous ages also, we were a nation with our own specific identity, and had an idea of Iran and Iranian”.<sup>40</sup> Even as late as 1993, such claims were being made by leading scholars of Iranian studies such as Ehsan Yarshater, who declared that “Iranian identity is clearly asserted in the inscriptions of Darius the Great (522–486 BC), who as an Aryan and a Persian was fully conscious of his racial affiliation and proud of his national identity”.<sup>41</sup>

In this classic or orthodox approach, the ‘nation of Iran’ and ‘Iranian identity’ are considered natural, homogenous, and continuous elements in history. Persian ethnicity is at the core of this notion of Iranian identity and the Persian language is recognized as the carrier and savior of this identity even through such challenges as the Arab invasion that ended the Sassanian Empire in 651. There is also a special emphasis put on the ‘Aryan’ racial aspect of Iranian identity. Furthermore, Zoroastrianism is considered to have had been the original national religion of Iranians and Persians, before the foreign imposition of Islam

<sup>39</sup> Zia-Ebrahimi, *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism*, 204–05.

<sup>40</sup> Shāhrukh Miskūb, *Huvīyat-i Īrānī va zabān-i Fārsī* (Iranian Identity and the Persian Language) (Tehran: Farzān, 2006), 17.

<sup>41</sup> Ehsan Yarshater, “Persian Identity in Historical Perspective,” *Iranian Studies* 26, nos. 1–2 (Winter–Spring 1993): 141–42.



by the invading Arabs. It is also argued that Persians modified Islam to make it fit their own identity.<sup>42</sup>

The most radical opposition to the orthodox primordialist approach came in 1993 with the publication of Mostafa Vaziri's book *Iran as Imagined Nation*.<sup>43</sup> Only three years after Anderson's seminal work *Imagined Communities*, Vaziri took a similar approach in his analysis with regard to the construction of 'the nation of Iran' and Iranian national identity. He aimed to challenge what he summarized as "the dominant nationalist historiography which had anachronistically conceptualized and traced Iranian national identity to the remote past".<sup>44</sup>

By taking a 'modernization approach', Vaziri considered 'Iran' and 'Iranian identity' modern constructs. The core idea of his book was the importance he gave to the works of 19th century European Orientalists, who studied the 'Orient' and as he claimed, came up with the ideas of 'Iran' and 'Iranians' as a country and its people. He argued that the beginning of this formal study of Iran can be tied to two events at the end of the 18th century: first, the discovery of the Indo-European language family and subsequently the idea of the 'Aryan people'; and second, the competition between the two imperial powers of France and England over parts of Asia. While England controlled much of what is today India, Napoleon I became interested in both India and the region to its west: Iran.<sup>45</sup> Vaziri argued that in studying the people of this region, both past and present, the Orientalists used a nationalist methodology to categorize diverse populations. This methodology, he believed "may have been inevitable and even, to a certain degree, natural after Europe had gone through the historical experiences that led to the formation of national identities in a narrow context".<sup>46</sup> By taking this methodology and under the influence of the Aryan model, they applied such modern concepts as race and national identity to communities of the remote past whose perceptions were conditioned by non-modern ideas. The eventual result of such an approach, as Vaziri points out, was the Orientalist belief in "homogeneity and the Iranianness of communities

<sup>42</sup> See Jalāl Khāliqī-Muṭṭlaq and Jalāl Matīnī, "Īrān dar guzasht-i rūzgārān" (Iran through the Passing of Time), *Iranshenasi* 4, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 233–68; Yarshater, "Persian Identity"; Jalīl Dūstkhwāh, "Huviyat-i Īrānī: Vahm yā vāq'iyat" (Iranian Identity: Illusion or Reality), *Iran Nameh* 12, no. 3 (Summer 1994): 509–20; Miskūb, *Huviyat-i Īrānī*; Muḥammad Ja'far Maḥjūb, "Guftār darbārih-yi ba'zī mustafrangān va farangān" (Essay on Some Wannabe Westerns and Westerners), *Iran Nameh* 12, no. 4 (Fall 1994): 673–714; 'Abd al-Ḥusayn Zarrīn-kūb, *Dū qarn sukūt* (Two Centuries of Silence) (Tehran: Sukhan, 1999).

<sup>43</sup> Mostafa Vaziri, *Iran as Imagined Nation* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2013).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>45</sup> Vaziri, *Iran as Imagined Nation*, 55.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

who lived in the land of Iran in different historical periods".<sup>47</sup> Vaziri then argued that this approach was followed by the Iranian nationalist thinkers of the late 19th century onwards, who worked towards modernizing, democratizing and secularizing the country they were helping to create.<sup>48</sup>

There were also other scholars who, to varying degrees, challenged the orthodox view on Iranian identity. Mohammad Tavakoli-Targhi, although critical of Vaziri's book, also took a revisionist viewpoint. He claimed that Vaziri's approach in considering the national historiography a "product of European colonialism" to be an 'Orientalist' approach itself.<sup>49</sup> Tavakoli-Targhi instead emphasized the role of late 19th century Iranian intellectuals themselves. He argued that the crafting of a modern Iranian identity was linked to the efforts of these intellectuals towards the configuration of history and a re-styling of language. He showed how certain terms such as *kishvar*, *millat* and *Īrān*, which already existed in Persian, were "rearticulated" in their texts in order to express new modern meanings of 'country', 'nation' and 'Iran' (in its modern national sense). For instance, he presented evidence on the evolution of the term *vaṭan* (homeland) from referring to one's village or town to signifying 'motherland' in a national sense. He argued that in these texts the history of Iran replaced the history of Islam, and that the forgotten pre-Islamic past was described as a utopia. In this reconfigured history, Islam and the Arabs were blamed for Iran's backwardness and in order to regain the glory of the past, these historians looked to the 'cultured west'; to the culture that they believed was originally Iranian.<sup>50</sup>

In his recently published book *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism: Race and The Politics of Dislocation*,<sup>51</sup> while acknowledging the significance of both Vaziri and Tavakoli-Targhi's studies, Reza Zia-Ebrahimi presents his alternative argument starting with a critique of the two scholars:

Where Vaziri attributes the conceptual framework and narratives of Iranian nationalism to European orientalists alone, Tavakoli-Targhi keeps them squarely within the Persianate domain, seeing the origin of many nationalist myths in local sources

<sup>47</sup> Vaziri, *Iran as Imagined Nation*.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Mohammad Tavakoli-Targhi, "Tārīkh-pardāzī va Īrān-ārayī: Bāzsāzī-yi huvīyat-i Īrānī dar guzārīsh-i tārīkh" (Crafting History and Fashioning Iran: The Reconstruction of Iranian Identity in Modernist Historical Narratives), *Iran Nameh* 12, no. 4 (Fall 1994): 583–628.

<sup>50</sup> Mohammad Tavakoli-Targhi, "Historiography and Crafting Iranian National Identity," in *Iran in the 20th Century: Historiography and Political Culture*, ed. Atabaki Touraj (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 5–21.

<sup>51</sup> Zia-Ebrahimi, *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism*.

exclusively. Vaziri rejects the agency of Iranians themselves (beyond their mere 'imitation') while Tavakoli-Targhi refutes any claim that European models could have been used to reimagine the Iranian nation.<sup>52</sup>

Zia-Ebrahimi presents evidence on the claim that specific nationalist ideas that emerged in late 19th century Iran, were first expressed by European authors rather than in any local tradition. However, he argues that it was Iranian thinkers who "hybridized" these ideas into the Iranian nationalist ideology. He conducts detailed research to show the complexity of the process through which particular ideas were selected at the expense of others.<sup>53</sup>

The above-mentioned scholars presented a new outlook into the study of Iranian national identity. But they remained preoccupied with Persian publications of the late 19th century in order to show how the idea of Iran and Iranian identity was crafted in the works of Iranian and non-Iranian intellectuals of that period. Like Anderson, they place much importance on the emergence of the printing press and publishing houses, but they rarely consider the larger implications of this new medium for the propagation of the Persian language. Instead, they mostly focus on the content of those publications. Accordingly, they rarely investigate the specific role of modern audio-visual media in the propagation of the Persian language as well as the concept of Iran as a nation amongst everyday people.

## Part 2: 1979 – A Revolution in Media

I have built my argument in this paper on the basis of other scholars in the field who took a modernization approach towards the much-debated topic of Iranian national identity. However, I have tried to further their arguments by incorporating modern audio-visual media. The 1979 Revolution presents a significant moment in the modern construction of Iranian national identity.

A recently published study conducted by Asadī and Tehrānīyān in 1974 provides us with detailed statistical data on the use of public media and cultural habits in pre-revolution Iran.<sup>54</sup> Before proceeding to discuss the findings of this research, it is important to reflect on its history and validity of its methods. Although the research was conducted in 1974, it took more than 40 years for it to be publicly accessible in the form of a book. In their foreword for the book,

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<sup>52</sup> Zia-Ebrahimi, *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism*, 13.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Asadī and Tehrānīyān, *Šidāyī ki shinīdih nashud*.

‘Abbās ‘Abdī and Muḥsin Gūdarzī, who are responsible for its recent publication, discuss the background of the research. They mention the unprecedented rise in the oil price during the 1970s which, in their words, resulted in the “illusion that Iran was about to become a world power”.<sup>55</sup> This was accompanied by a rapid increase in the use of radio and television and a general change in the economic structure and social behavior of Iranians. In such a setting a group of sociologists and communication specialists got together and decided to conduct a series of social forecasting studies (*muṭālī‘ātī āyandih nigarī*). According to their foreword, ‘Alī Asadī and Majīd Tehrānīyān were the main members of this group. Financial backing of the research was secured via the NIRT as one of the main aims of the research was to study how radio and television could help in the “development process of the country”.<sup>56</sup>

The findings of the research were presented and discussed at a conference in Shiraz in 1975. However, they were not made available for the public. ‘Abdī and Gūdarzī argue that this was perhaps because the findings of the research did not fit the image that the authorities had of themselves and the vision they had for the society. The findings showed that despite the rapid industrialization and expansion of the middle class, religious tendencies were still strong and dissatisfaction with radio and television were widespread.<sup>57</sup> For ‘Abdī and Gūdarzī, these findings were indicators of the revolution that took place only four years later in 1979. The book consists of the findings of two of the surveys. The first is a study of the role of the media in national and cultural development with a small statistical population mostly comprising of the educated elite and employees of the NIRT.<sup>58</sup> The second survey – which is of more interest for this paper – has a much larger statistical population designed to represent the national population. It was titled *Girāyishhā-yi farhangī va nigarishhā-yi ijtimā‘ī dar Īrān* (Cultural Tendencies and Social Attitudes in Iran) and was conducted as a pilot research in 23 towns and cities and 52 villages in different provinces.<sup>59</sup> According to the researchers’ introduction to the survey, the statistical population was chosen carefully to be representative of the adult (over fifteen years old) population of the whole of the country. They were chosen according to their residential location, gender, age, education, employment and income. Twenty-five experienced researchers and 300 interviewers were involved in the research. The survey was conducted simultaneously in every location and included 5,000 interviewees (case studies) of which 4,420 were

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<sup>55</sup> Asadī and Tehrānīyān, *Šidāyī ki shinīdih nashud*, 12.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 12–13.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

eventually confirmed and were included in the study. According to ‘Abdī and Gūdarzī, the survey’s documents such as the individual answers to the questionnaires and the coding method for the open-ended questions have been lost.<sup>60</sup> However, the questionnaire itself and the results of the survey have remained. The questionnaire included 126 questions with 107 of them being closed-ended and the other 19 being open-ended. Each questionnaire was filled with the help of an on-location interviewer and lasted for about an hour. Questions were designed to cover topics such as radio, television, cinema, newspapers, magazines, periodicals, books, news sources, leisure time, religion, family, hopes and ideals, social relations and more. The findings of this research shed a light on a less explored aspect of the cultural habits of Iranians in the years leading up to the 1979 Revolution.

According to the findings of the survey, by as late as 1974, only 7% of the population relied on newspapers and the press as their source of news. According to UNESCO, in 1976 the Adult literacy rate in Iran was 36.5%.<sup>61</sup> This indicates that even two years after the survey was conducted, a large section of the population remained outside the readership of publications; however, the wide gap between 7% and 36.5% points to the fact that people were relying on other sources of news. This can be explained by the growing popularity of radio and television. According to the findings of the survey, radio had a much higher share than newspapers, at 53%, with television at 21%.<sup>62</sup> So, while the readership of Persian language publications remained very low, the audience of the audio-visual means of communication were on the rise. This allowed for radio and television (and, on a smaller scale, cinema) to play an important role in spreading a single national language and thus contributing to the formation of Iranian national identity. However, as discussed previously, the road to popularity for these media was not an easy one. The difficulty was due to many factors including lack of infrastructure, high cost of individual devices, and religious opposition. Although the religious opposition was mainly towards cinema and television (due to their visual quality and “immoral” content), radio was also opposed by some (for example because it broadcast music, which was considered by some as anti-Islamic). An interesting account is by Muḥammad Javād Ṣarīf, Iran’s current minister of foreign affairs, born in 1960. In an interview with the daily newspaper *Īrān* on January 7th 2015, Ṣarīf recounted that while growing up not only did he not go to cinema until he was fifteen, he didn’t

<sup>60</sup> Asadī and Tehrānīyān, *Ṣidāyī ki shinīdih nashud*, 9.

<sup>61</sup> “Literacy Rate, Adult Total (% of People Ages 15 and Above) – Iran, Islamic Rep (Data from UNESCO Institute for Statistics),” The World Bank, last modified September 2020, accessed January 8, 2021, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.LITR.ZS?locations=IR-1W>.

<sup>62</sup> Asadī and Tehrānīyān, *Ṣidāyī ki shinīdih nashud*, 143.

have access to either television or radio at home due to his family's religious beliefs. He mentioned that although his father owned a radio, he always kept it in a locked closet and only used it during the month of Ramadan to listen to the Morning Prayer.<sup>63</sup>

According to Asadī and Tehrānīyān's research, by 1974, 77% of Iranian households had at least one radio,<sup>64</sup> while the percentage of households with televisions was 34%.<sup>65</sup> Among the people who didn't listen to radio, 21% stated that they didn't listen because they believed listening to radio (especially music) was sinful, while 46% said that they didn't have access to radio.<sup>66</sup> The study also shows that 85% of television owners watched TV on a daily basis,<sup>67</sup> while 11% of television owners didn't watch TV because in their view it was sinful.<sup>68</sup> The study also gives an interesting insight into people's habit of going to the cinema. The percentage of cinema goers was even lower at 27%,<sup>69</sup> with 23% of people refusing to go to the cinema because it was sinful.<sup>70</sup>

The study clearly shows that while by 1974 a large portion of the population had access to audio-visual public media, a significant part of them refused to use these means of communication due to their religious beliefs. The 1979 Revolution, however, resulted in a major change in the attitude of this portion of the population towards television, radio and cinema.

On February 1st 1979, immediately after landing in Tehran upon his return from exile in Paris, Rūhullāh Khumīnī travelled to Bihisht-i Zahrā cemetery to meet his followers, who had flocked to the streets to welcome him. In one of the most historic speeches in Iranian history, he expressed his opposition to the Shah and his reformed administration: "I will hit this government on the mouth".<sup>71</sup> He then outlined the future that he envisioned for Iran: "With the backing of this nation, I appoint the government".<sup>72</sup> A significant part of this speech was dedicated to the public media:

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<sup>63</sup> Muḥammad Javād Ẓarīf, "Nāshinidihāyī az zindigī-yi Ẓarīf dar rūz-i tavalludash" (Unheard Stories from Ẓarīf's Life on His Birthday), accessed October 23, 2019, <https://www.isna.ir/news/93101709584/>.

<sup>64</sup> Asadī and Tehrānīyān, *Šidāyī ki shinīdih nashud*, 70.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>71</sup> Rūhullāh Khumīnī, "Šahīfih-yi Imām" (Scriptures of the Iman), vol. 6, 10–19, accessed July 25, 2018, <http://www.imam-khomeini.ir/Theme1/fa/pages/165.aspx?catid=207&id=51237&lang=fa>.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

Since he was a servant [for the west], this man [the Shah] created centers of corruption. His television is a center of corruption. His radio is mostly corruption. [...] Our cinema is a center of corruption. We are not opposed to cinema; we are opposed to corruption. We are not opposed to radio; we are opposed to corruption. We are not opposed to television; we are opposed to something that is serving the aliens for holding back our youth and taking away our human resources. Did we ever oppose stages of modernity? [Rhetorical question implying that they are not against modernity] When symbols of modernity entered the East, especially Iran, from Europe, instead of being useful, they took us to savagery. Cinema is one of the symbols of modernity that should be in the service of the people, in the service of the education of the people. But you know that it ruined our youth. The same goes for the other symbols. That is why we are opposed to them. They betrayed our country in every sense of the word.<sup>73</sup>

Soon after this speech, Khumiyīnī's followers seized power. The new regime's attitude towards cinema, television and radio followed Khumiyīnī's guidance and his belief that "in an Islamic country everything must be Islamic".<sup>74</sup> A period of 'cleansing' (*pāksāzi*) and 'purification' (*taṣfiyih*) ensued. Many media professionals were prosecuted, banned, imprisoned and even executed. Many others fled the country along with a vast number of other Iranians who chose a life in exile.

The Islamization of the media had an inevitable consequence: it broke the taboo of modern audio-visual media for those sections of the society that due to religious reasons did not use them. The revolution ploughed the Iranian land to an extent that radio and television became an inseparable part of 'pious' households that previously refrained from allowing such symbols of 'corruption' to enter them. For them, these media were now channels through which they could hear the voice and see the image of their Imam. Cinema venues also became a hangout of Islamic revolutionaries. For instance, on its opening night, a cinema venue called *Shahr-i Qiyām* (The City of Uprising) showed a new 'Islamic' film titled *Sarbāz-i Islām* (The Soldier of Islam) in the holy city of Qom. As a result of this development, it can be argued that for the first time in history, the entirety of the Iranian population was open to the idea of using modern audio-visual media.

The Islamic Republic inherited the Pahlavi nation-state building program and continued with many aspects of it, most importantly the heavy incorporation of modern audio-visual media. The outburst of the Iran-Iraq War (1980–

<sup>73</sup> Khumiyīnī, "Ṣahīfih-yi Imām".

<sup>74</sup> Rūhullāh Khumiyīnī, "Sukhanrāni dar jam'ī a'zā-yi anjuman-i islāmī-yi dānishjūyān-i Īrānī dar Urūpā" (Speech for Members of the Islamic Association of Iranian Students in Europe), accessed November 26, 2018, <http://emam.com/posts/plain/2716>.

1988) was an important moment in the nationalist politics of the Islamic Republic and in the construction of Iranian national identity. Radio and television took the news of the warfronts to the remotest parts of the country and encouraged Iranians to sign up as volunteers in order to fight a common enemy. Cinema also gave birth to a new filmmaking movement officially titled *Sīnamā-yi difāʿ-i muqaddas* (Sacred Defense Cinema) which depicted and supported the war effort. The Persian language was at the heart of this campaign. In a country where just above half of the population spoke Persian as their mother tongue,<sup>75</sup> the audio-visual war propaganda was mainly in Persian. So, at the time when modern audio-visual media reached its most widespread state, its content was not only calling for national unity against a foreign enemy but also was contributing to the further spread of the Persian language and thus helped to create the ‘imagined community’ of Iranians. The Persian language, which was an important factor in the construction of the idea of Iran during the late 19th century and later, became a pillar of the national ideology of the Pahlavis and continued to occupy a significant position under the Islamic Republic. The extent to which the new regime valued the Persian language in its audio-visual productions is clear in the words of Murtizā Āvīnī, director of arguably the most influential Iranian television war documentary series titled *Rivāyat-i fath* (Chronicle of Triumph, 1986–1988). In an interview published first in 1992 he goes as far as placing Persian above Arabic and defends it with a sense of Iranian exceptionalism:

Our language is the language that we arrived at in the 8th century [14th century CE] and this Persian language that has flourished in Islam is a language that in fact has taken a Shiʿi character and is much more beautiful than the current Arabic language. Of course, the language of the Quran is a divine language and something heavenly, but the language that we arrived at in the 8th century with Saʿdī and Ḥāfiz, is the most beautiful language existing on the planet earth.<sup>76</sup>

## Conclusion

In this paper I aimed to open a new chapter in the study of Iranian national identity. Although currently the dominant approach in the field is that Iranian national identity is a modern construct, the role of modern audio-visual media

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<sup>75</sup> “Country Profile: Iran,” Library of Congress, Federal Research Divisions, last modified May 2008, accessed October 30, 2019, <https://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/cs/profiles/Iran.pdf>.

<sup>76</sup> Murtizā Āvīnī, “Sīnamā, tiknūlūzhī va sākhtār-i huviyati barā-yi insān-i nū” (Cinema, Technology, and Identity Structure for the New Man), in *Āyinih-yi jādū* (Magic Mirror), ed. by Ūmid Rūhānī, vol. 3 (Tehran: Vāḥih, 2015), 144.



in this construction is seldom considered. I based my argument on a number of scholarly works in both Persian and English in the field of Iranian Studies as well as Anderson's theory of 'imagined communities', all belonging to the modernization approach towards the study of 'nations' and 'national identities'. While acknowledging the role of late 19th century Persian publications in the crafting of the idea of Iran and construction of Iranian national identity, I tried to focus on the role of the audio-visual media in this construction. In this attempt I benefitted from works of several scholars of Film Studies and Iranian Studies as well as historical resources such as speeches, interviews and autobiographies. An important argument of this paper regarding the further popularization of modern audio-visual media as a result of the 1979 Revolution became possible after a close study of a recently published book containing the findings of a survey conducted in 1974.<sup>77</sup> The 1979 Revolution and the subsequent Islamization of the audio-visual media made it possible for these media to find their way even into homes of the most pious members of the society. In a society with low literacy rates, the widespread use of audio-visual media, especially during the eight-year-long Iran-Iraq War, helped to create a sense of national identity.

These media continue to play an important role in the nationalist politics of the Islamic Republic of Iran and in creating a sense of national unity among their domestic audience. A careful study of the current trends of politics in Iran, especially considering the state's involvement in regional wars, should take into account the nation-state building project that the Islamic Republic inherited from the Pahlavi dynasty and the essential role of modern audio-visual media in these programs.

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<sup>77</sup> Asadī and Tehrānīyān, *Šidāyī ki shinīdih nashud*.

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## Review:

Doğan Akhanlı: *Madonnas letzter Traum* (Madonna's Last Dream).  
Novel, translated from Turkish by Recai Hallaç.  
472 pp. Bremen: Sujet, 2019. 24,80 €. ISBN 978 3 96202 042 2.

## On Past, Present and Calamity

“This is not how Maria Puder died.” – It is this sober observation that opens Doğan Akhanlı's Novel *Madonna's Last Dream*, originally published in Turkey in 2005 and now translated into German by Recai Hallaç at Sujet Verlag in Bremen.

Who is, or who was, Maria Puder? She was a Jewish woman, a resident of Berlin in the 1930s and the great love of Raif Efendi, who left Istanbul for the German capital after his father forced him to sign up for job training in Germany. Both Raif Efendi and Maria Puder are the protagonists of Sabahattin Ali's groundbreaking novel *Madonna in a Fur Coat*, originally published in 1943 and only rediscovered in the course of the last twenty years. Today, *Madonna* is considered to be one of the defining works of modern Turkish literature. Ali, who was murdered in 1948 at the Turkish-Bulgarian border while attempting to escape the country after he was threatened with arrest on account of his political attitudes, also deals with his own experiences in this work. The obvious references to his own biography, to his time in Berlin and Potsdam from 1928 to 1930 and to a great unrequited love (who in reality lived in Istanbul and received Ali's handwritten poems by mail) cannot be overlooked. In the end, Maria Puder dies without Raif Efendi ever seeing her again as a result of his return to Anatolia.

Doğan Akhanlı revisits the earlier work of Sabahattin Ali. *Madonna's Last Dream* can be read as a continuation, a variation of and an homage to the original. However, Akhanlı's narrative is more comprehensive than Ali's story was. The work attempts to consider the entire 20th century and establishes connections between the genocides of Armenians and Jews with the right-wing extremist assassination attempts of Solingen all the way up to the present-day experiences of refugees. These are Akhanlı's central themes: his novel *Judges of the Last Judgment* was the first work of Turkish prose to openly address the Armenian genocide – still a taboo topic in Turkey, where even the mention of

this crime is a punishable offence. The Holocaust, the mass murders of repressive regimes, the suppression of free speech, the persecution of minorities: Doğan Akhanlı is an author who does not want to simply accept the past but instead wants to remind us of it, to show us that history repeats itself. This interest is informed by own experiences. Over the last forty years he has been imprisoned several times in Turkey, wrongly accused of murder, tortured and finally expatriated. Since the end of the nineties he has been living in Germany, mainly in Cologne and Berlin. When he returned to Turkey in 2010 to visit his terminally ill father, he was once again brought to trial. When his father died, he was held in prison. And finally, in 2017 the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had him arrested in Andalusia with an Interpol warrant. The Turkish request for extradition only failed because of enormous international pressure. Akhanlı was able to return to Cologne and finally came to terms with his own story in his book *Detention in Granada*. In light of his background, it's often forgotten that Akhanlı is first and foremost an author of popular literature and not a 'full-time persecutee' of various Turkish regimes.

*Madonna's Last Dream* begins with the murder of Sabahattin Ali – and with a secret he takes to his grave: Maria Puder did not actually die in puerperium. She was killed while travelling on the refugee ship *Struma*, which was sunk by Soviet torpedoes in the Bosphorus in February 1942. As the ship was sailing for Palestine, Turkish authorities had not allowed the *Struma* to dock in Istanbul. 760 people died.

Akhanlı's novel, whose cover is adorned with a *Stolperstein* (tripping stone), refuses to forget, not only in terms of content but also in terms of design. The names of the 760 refugees killed accompany the reader on every page, each one placed at the bottom of the page next to the page number. Thus, the book itself becomes a literary *Stolperstein*.

Ultimately it is the protagonist and narrator of the story who traces Maria Puder's tale and falls for her at least as obsessively as Raif Efendi once did – and this narrator is a Cologne-based author with Turkish roots. As Sabahattin Ali did before him, Akhanlı also plays with his own biography. He sends out a supposedly real person to search for a fictitious one that is considered real – and therefore on a journey that leads from Germany via Turkey, through Poland and the Czech Republic, along the fault lines of the bloodiest conflicts of the past century and into the present. He visits Villa Marlier, where the Wannsee Conference once took place. Today, this building where the 'Final Solution' was decided upon is a memorial, and the narrator collapses feeling the power of history and the horrific reality. The fact that Akhanlı actually succeeds in juxtaposing this horror with passages of light humor surely is one of the many strengths of this novel. These passages serve as a proposition to a certain kind

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of attitude towards life, one that is not willing to surrender to the horror but instead strives to carry on.

And then there are such unintentional winking elements, in which reality and fiction converge, even mix with each other: in Berlin's Motzstraße, where Raif Efendi and Maria Puder once met, where the fictional Akhanli follows their footsteps, today one can find the headquarters of the Binooki publishing house, which exclusively publishes German translations of Turkish literature. This publishing house was founded in 2011 – six years after the first publication of Akhanli's novel.

If the boundaries between fiction and reality are still clearly drawn in the first half of the novel, they blur completely towards the end – what is fiction and what is reality becomes indistinguishable. The lone exception is the story of the *Struma* and the fate of its passengers, which hovers above every word, above every syllable like a memorial.

**Gerrit Wustmann**

Independent critic, Cologne



## Review:

Ronya Othmann: *Die Sommer* (The Summers).

Novel.

288 pp. Hanser: Munich, 2020. 22,00 €. ISBN 978 3 446 26760 2.

## Narrating the Unspeakable

With her autofictional text titled *Vierundsiebzig* (Seventy-four), German-Kurdish writer Ronya Othmann won the 2019 Audience Award of the Ingeborg Bachmann Prize in Klagenfurt, Austria. In the literary competition, Othmann narrated her bearing witness to the (televised) genocide of the Yazidis in Shingal, Iraqi Kurdistan in 2014. While the author's own family is from a Kurdish-Yazidi village in Syria, the first-person narration speaks of the narrator's experience sitting in front of the TV, motionless, staring at the images of the catastrophe happening in front of her eyes in real-time: moving images of women like her grandmother or her aunts in floral dresses, men dressed like her grandfather, all running for their lives with nothing but what they carried.

The author then revisits a trip to Iraqi refugee camps, where she talked to survivors of the genocide, to women fighters, who showed her the remains of the catastrophe. She re-tells their narratives of remembrance.

A considerable part of the subsequent panel discussion in Klagenfurt concerning Othmann's *Vierundsiebzig* centred around the question of defining the work itself. Her text dealt with unspeakable suffering in an almost journalistic manner and is narrated by an author who belongs to the same religious community subjected to the genocide. A part of the panel questioned whether this could even fairly be reviewed and judged as a work of fiction at all. Some members said that they found themselves unable to do so.

It is telling, therefore, that the point of view in Othmann's subsequent debut novel is not a first-person narration as in her initial competition contribution, but a third-person narration about the girl, and later young woman, Leyla. Othmann's novel is called *Die Sommer* (The Summers) and its fictionalized point of view and plot around the 2014 genocide of the Yazidis have evolved beyond her earlier work. The story is intertwined with the history of the Kurdish people. In the first part of the novel, the narration focuses on the microcosm of the village Tel Khatoun next to the Turkish border. Every childhood summer, Leyla and her parents travel from Munich to her father's homeland, the Kurdish part of Syria. Although there are several hints that indicate Leyla's



partial alienation from village life, she seems to live her life in Germany from summer holiday to summer holiday.

For Leyla, Tel Khatoun is a place of warmth and familiarity. The vegetable beds and fruit trees, the chicken and the simple house with its three rooms make a humble idyllic scene. Because it is so hot during the summers, the whole family sleeps on a metal bunk bed in the courtyard.

Othmann describes all this in a sober narrative voice, almost documentary. And yet there is so much beauty in her narration. The reader is touched by this world, in which one is completely immersed despite the matter-of-fact tone. It is precisely this tension in Othmann's language that is so compelling, and – in the later part of the novel – so painful.

The central figure in Leyla's Kurdistan is her grandmother. She is a quiet, hard-working woman who holds the farm and family together. Her piety is viewed somewhat disparagingly by her son, Leyla's father. But she instructs Leyla in the Yazidi prayers and rituals and passes the religious mythology of the arch angel Melek Taus on to Leyla. Othmann describes practices of cultural memory within a religious community that is perpetually threatened by extinction. On a figurative level, all these practices performed together with her grandmother make Leyla feel accepted and at home, something she is often denied otherwise.

You could see the decades of work not only in the grandmother's body, in the hump, in the muscles and in her horny hands, but also in her movements. If she threw her grains to the chickens, for example, she always did so with the same hand movement. The metal bowl with the grains in her left hand, she grabbed the grains with her right hand and hurled them in a regular way that never changed. Leyla could still see it in front of her years later, like a movie. [...] Nothing about the grandmother ever left any doubt about anything. (p. 56–57)

This security hardly exists for Leyla in her Munich life, which increasingly comes to the fore. From the descriptive narration of the village idyll, the novel transforms into a postmigration narrative. Leyla and her mother's relationship remains distant and somewhat blurry, as does the character of the mother, a Swabian nurse. For her, things must be practical above all. This character trait becomes essential only in the last part of the novel, when the family from Tel Khatoun is granted political asylum through the mother's sedulous activism. More sharply drawn is the portrait of Leyla's father. As a former member of the Syrian Communist Party, he has to escape as an activist and so-called 'ajnabi' (foreigner), as a Kurd without Syrian citizenship. Actually an intellectual person, he works in construction in Germany and is too tired to read in the evenings. He passes on a different kind of cultural memory to Leyla: that of the Kurdish history of political persecution and oppression. His narrations of his

torture in Syrian prison, his family's displacement from the Turkish part of Kurdistan, that he went into exile so that she would have a better life all have a formative effect on Leyla. But he also tells Leyla comforting stories: about the village in spring, about the neighbours and his youth. She must never forget her Kurdish identity – this is his message to her. While German-language post-migrant literature is often concerned with the search for the self in or in between two or more cultures, Othmann addresses a different aspect of migrant identity here: the collective trauma of living in exile. It is not enough that her father is forced to hide his accent from his German neighbours and colleagues - Leyla is insulted at school because of her heritage. Teachers and friends know little and care little about her Kurdish-Yazidi identity. There is no place for her beloved village in her German life. Othmann's postmigrant narrative is radical because it defies the perpetual German narrative of 'integration'. What if Germany is not the promised land? What if the well-known cliché of the second generation that is only a summer guest in the old homeland of their parents turns into its exact opposite? What if you feel constantly misplaced in your own life? Othmann paints a very intense picture of her protagonist's state of being:

It's so cold here. The fig tree hardly bears any fruit, the father said. There's hardly any sun, the tomatoes don't ripen. The soil in the garden at home is more fertile, he said. [...]. As if her German garden was just a cheap copy of paradise, Leyla thought, her tomatoes just a substitute for the real tomatoes, her bread just a substitute for the real bread. Was their life, Leyla thought, just a substitute life for the life they could have actually lived. (p. 147–48)

As Leyla grows older and moves away for college, it seems as if the two ends of Leyla's narrative would find each other in her love for the silent Sasha. She seems at ease with her queer relationship. But this falls apart the moment disaster strikes in northern Iraq and fighters from the so-called Islamic State attack Yazidi villages. Leyla's world narrows down to the screen of her laptop, which now shows the same images as her father's television screen:

Leyla and he [her father] both stared at the women in their grandmother's clothes, their aunts, their cousins. Leyla saw a vast, bare plain, parched grass, straw. Leyla saw men like the grandfather, the father, the uncle. She saw them all running for their lives with nothing but what they carried. (p. 256)

This was the seventy-fourth attempt in the history of the Yazidis to kill their people and wipe out their community. Othmann's description of the media's conveyance of the unspeakable horror makes it so authentic to us as readers.

We have all seen these images on screen and have forgotten about them already. Ronya Othmann's debut novel is not only the first post-Yazidi-Kurdish work of fiction in German, it is also an impressive account of how cultural memory is established and at work in threatened communities today.

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