

Farmer–Herder Villages and the Revolution¹

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As the Iranian Revolution gained momentum in the cities of Iran, many rural areas resisted Ayatollah Khomeini’s message and appeared to support the shah. In particular, agricultural villages did not respond to a revolutionary message in which use of resources, particularly oil and

¹This paper, written in 1989, has not previously been published. It is submitted with only a few minor corrections for this issue in honor of Ahmad Ashraf, who originally encouraged me to write it.

I was in Iran only once after the period described in this paper. In September 1992, I presented a paper titled “Settled and Nomadic Pastoralists in Iran” at an international conference on nomadism and development held in Shahr-e Kord. The Semnan Office of the Nomadic Organization (newly created after the revolution), which included the area of my research, was able to take me there for thirty-six hours after the conference. A wedding was being held in the village bringing back youth I had known who had married and moved to other Iranian towns for work. The village had a new mosque, water piped to family courtyards, and a new hammam. It showed some visible signs of individual economic success: a tractor owned by the son of one family and a couple houses made of commercial rather than local mud bricks. Poles for electricity were lying on the ground by the road to the village, signaling imminent plans for electricity. Most of these major projects had been in the planning stage while I was there in 1978.

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agriculture, was to be a key issue. This issue was linked in explanations of the performance and prospects of the rural sector in agricultural oil economies generally and in Iran particularly. For example, in 1978 an Iranian economist produced evidence for the rapid destruction of Iranian agriculture from 1963 to 1978 and demonstrated that the plight of the Iranian peasantry was “a direct consequence of increase in oil revenues and the adoption of public expenditure strategies which they have encouraged.” He warned that unless a radical change in public policy occurred, Iranians would experience a depletion of both their oil and their agricultural resources within the foreseeable future.² This call for a radical change in public policy found fertile ground in urban areas but did not mobilize certain rural Iranians against the Pahlavi regime.

The discussion here follows the events in the fall of 1978 in a smallholder agricultural village in an area in northeast Iran where in addition to a lack of active political response to the resource question, there was resentment at the politicization of Ashura (the tenth day of Muharram, commemorating the martyrdom of Hussein, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, at the Battle of Karbala). The brief return of urban relatives also brought into relief the dynamics of smallholder village migration to Tehran. The question of why these villagers did not respond to Khomeini’s revolutionary message in the same way as did the town and city dwellers is one which throws further light on Iranian society at the time of the revolution and on such issues as smallholder political options, the problem of security in outlying areas, and the relationship between politics and religious feeling. This article will first review the events of the autumn of 1978 and then discuss the issues raised by these events.

Autumn 1978 from a Rural Perspective

In the fall of 1978, I returned to Iran to finish investigating the use of resources in village populations in a steppic region at the northeastern edge of the *kavir* (central salt desert). It was a region in which extensive

²M. A. Katouzian, “Oil Versus Agriculture – A Case of Dual Resource Depletion in Iran,” *Journal of Peasant Studies*, no. 3 (1978): 347–69.

herding of sheep and goats (range-based operations rather than more intensive fattening operations) was combined with agriculture based primarily on *qanat* irrigation; a *qanat* is an underground channel which carries groundwater by gravity flow from an aquifer underlying relatively high ground out onto the surface at a point lower in a plain where there is good soil. Rainfall averaged less than two hundred millimeters per year in this region. The dominant form of land use was pastoralism of various types, sedentary and transhumant, and the settled and transhumant pastoral populations had a close, interdependent relationship. Agriculturally, it was set off from other rural areas in that it was an area of smallholders and had been so before the Land Reform of the 1960s.

My research was carried out in conjunction with the Turan Program for Ecological Research and Development associated with the Iranian Department of the Environment and UNESCO, which was coordinated by Dr. Brian Spooner from the University of Pennsylvania. I was concerned with the environmental consequences of the various strategies of pastoralism and agriculture, and the use of vegetation for fuel, fodder, food, construction, and medicine. My work had begun in 1974, and by the time of this visit in the fall of 1978, I had previously lived in the area under discussion for a total of seventeen months. I had been away for almost a year, one which had been a critical year for Iranian politics and was to culminate in the Iranian Revolution. In order to safeguard the identity of the people involved, the exact locality of the villages is not revealed.

The report that follows is primarily based on accounts by people in whom I had a great deal of confidence and was built up over months of painstaking research on cropping patterns, herd composition, grazing schedules, and the use of natural vegetation by both humans and animals. These questions, in fact, were still the main focus of my day-to-day inquiries as 1978 drew to a close, although the emphasis in the following account is not on yield per acre of tobacco, wheat, or cotton but on the course of the revolution in Iran and its local impact.

When I left Tehran for the village at the beginning of November, the city was in a state of unrest. Iranians sensed major changes, and the foreign

community was fearful. The government had reinstated restrictions and curfews after a period of relaxation.

I made two stops on the long drive to the research area which gave slightly different pictures of the events in the country. The first stop was in a town in the Alborz Mountains which was home to the Sangsari people. These transhumant pastoralists have regular summer grazing areas in the Alborz Mountains near Sangesar and winter grazing areas at the edge of the *kavir* that included the area near my destination. We talked of the large flock owner Hojabr Yazdani, who was extremely wealthy in flocks and other commercial interests. He employed numerous shepherds, both local and from the area of my research, and he was always a topic of conversation there. This time, the conversation was about his links with Shahpur Abdul-Reza, the shah's brother, in acquiring former common grazing land around Firuzkuh for flocks the two of them owned. The locals noted that not only was Yazdani a Baha'i, as were several of the Sangsari, but he had links with Bank Saderat, many of whose branches in Tehran were, by that time, only charred remains. This conversation concerning grazing land was the kind of subject which always engendered great interest in the villages of my destination. What was different was the topic introduced by the only boy from my research area sent away to high school (in this case, at the home of his maternal uncles). He spoke of books forbidden until just before this time—Behrangi's *Little Black Fish* and works by Gorky and Ali Shariati—books which played an important role in the revolution in urban areas. It was also different because I had always been careful not to discuss current politics during my research time in the field. On this visit, suddenly politics became part of daily discussions.

The next stop was Sabzevar, and unlike the previous stop, it was the scene of much political activity. I stayed with a family that, at one time, had owned grazing stations and significant amounts of land in my research area and with whom I had spent much time at grazing stations, in their home, and in their fields and gardens before they moved to Sabzevar. The husband said he was descended from Shiraz nomads who were placed in the region by Naser al-Din Shah and who, in recent

times, kept the area safe from the encroachment of the Basseri tribesmen living in the area of Semnan. Until the husband's father died in the forties, the Basseri came into my research area, usurped grazing area, and married local women. They remained a problem until the gendarmerie restored control in 1956. When anthropologist Brian Spooner (head of the Turan Project during the time of my research) was in Jajarm in 1958, he was told of the area discussed in this paper and was warned not to go there, because of disturbances with the Basseri. Now, this Sabzevar family and their relatives warned me not to go into the *biaban* (area away from the villages and fields) alone and to stay close to my village base because of the current national unrest. This was a warning I had never had before but took seriously because of the stories they had told of previous periods of unrest and breakdown of government control.

That evening in November 1978, the family was visiting a relative who had migrated to Sabzevar as a teenager, married a local, and raised her family there. Now, her teenage children were very active in the politics of the revolution. That evening, they were repeating a rhyme, "*Shah Iran kotak zad, Khomeini Iran poufak dad*" ("The Shah hit Iran, Khomeini gave Iran a cheese twist"), and reported that the local cinema had been burned earlier in the day.

Although these relatives of my host family had known of me, this was their first opportunity to discuss with me personally my studies of local use of resources among pastoral and agricultural populations. One young man was impressed that villagers weren't planting food but cotton because of the price structure. He said Iran bought grain from the United States at one price and sold it in Iran for about a third of that price. In actuality, the cropping patterns in the area I studied were a bit more complicated. Cotton did compete with wheat and barley for irrigation water and had for some time. However, the wheat and barley lands were double cropped with tobacco and fodder crops. In previous years, opium had competed with wheat and cotton for land, yet the learned religious men or *ulama* had, at the turn of the century, united the country not against opium production but against the tobacco concession to "foreigners" in

what became known as the Tobacco Rebellion.³ The young man's point about wheat prices was valid, however, for wheat was planted only for local needs and not for outside markets—and prices played some role in these decisions. Yet as noted earlier, these discussions about agriculture mobilized the urban rather than rural populations politically. The remainder of the discussion was on questions of religion and politics, the extent of alcoholism and Islam in America, and whether any American Muslims were Shi'a. My host family's relatives talked of a *jihad*, or holy war, against the shah and were sure all Muslim countries would help.

The next day, as I made preparations to drive to the research area, there were demonstrations in the upper part of town, reports of no flour in the stores, and a report that if more than two people were seen walking together the next day, they would be shot. The following morning, a male family member returned from a trip to the store saying all shops and the bazaar were closed and only food places were open. Nonetheless, we went to buy gasoline for my Iranian Jyane, and I saw lines of people waiting for kerosene or trying to stock up on the supposedly nonexistent flour, despite the supposed decree that if more than two people went out together, they would be shot. Just as I was preparing to drive away, a young relative of my host came by proudly displaying his pro-Khomeini sign which would be carried in demonstrations "uptown."

I then set off for the villages at the edge of the *kavir*, which were about a five-hour drive via dirt road. This was an area of rangeland with small pockets of *qanat*-irrigated agriculture at the edge of an area protected by the Department of the Environment because of its wildlife (gazelle, onager, wild sheep, and wild goat). It was an area where governmental concern was with desertification, and it had been affected in the sixties in a variety of ways by national legislation forbidding the making of charcoal, limiting firewood collection to dead vegetation, and nationalizing rangeland and water. As this was already a region of smallholders, its agricultural base had not been affected by land reform.

³Nikki Keddie, *Religion and Rebellion in Iran: The Tobacco Protest of 1891-1892* (London: Frank Cass, 1966).

In the summer of 1978, as tension increased in urban areas, local life had continued at a pace that on the surface resembled previous years. The malaria squad had come through on one of their regular visits; wheat, barley, cotton, tobacco, and fodder crops were planted and harvested; sheep and goats grazed; milk products were processed; and animals were fattened for winter consumption. In November 1978, local discussion centered on the year's tobacco prices and what the government would finally pay per kilo (the locals had said that, in previous years, the government first quoted one price but then paid less).

When I arrived in the area, in addition to the regular catching up on family, grazing, and crop conditions that occurred whenever I returned, everyone asked whether Tehran and nearby provincial towns were in a state of unrest. I was warned, as in Sabzevar, not to leave the area in a hurry and not to go to the area away from the *maidan* (villages). In fact, there were indications that the national situation had already had significant local impact and that the areas away from the villages were less safe than usual. The Department of Environment game guard station in a nearby village was no longer occupied. One game guard had packed up and gone to his home village, a *qal'eh* (small fortified compound) in a remote area toward the *kavir*. An Iraqi Kurd had gone to another village where he had relatives. He was one of the Kurds who had been assigned to the Department of the Environment in 1976 as a part of the government attempt to disperse Kurds among local populations.

In mid-November when I drove family members to visit relatives shepherding at an *aghol* (sheep station) in the south, I saw something that truly indicated that the changes that were taking place in Iran were having an impact on the local region. The government had forbidden charcoal production in Iran since 1966, after which time many people for whom it had been a livelihood had migrated to the cities. A tremendous amount of smoke in the distance indicated the burning of charcoal. My passenger, a village neighbor working as a shepherd for the transhumant Sangsari, informed me that there was a lot of charcoal burning near the *kavir* at that time. This was serious evidence of the breakdown of control

over the hinterland by the environmental agencies assigned to protect the vegetation which charcoal burning threatened.

The theme of past insecurity was raised again and again. Residents of the rural research area compared the chaos to earlier periods of rioting and discontent, one of which occurred at the time of Mosaddeq. One resident noted that if the government hadn't applied force at that time, the country would have fallen to pieces, for there was no kerosene or food and there were constant strikes. Another *balva* (period of discontent) was the period during World War II, during which, according to one neighbor, Iran had had no way to protect itself—perhaps only ten thousand soldiers. When Reza Shah left the country, food prices soared, and residents had to buy wheat with copper, which was owned in relatively large quantities for milk processing. During this period, a lot of copperware owned by residents was sold.

News from outside, as in earlier peaceful days, came into the area with visitors, locals who brought back firsthand reports from the closest provincial towns, and the daily radio broadcasts. The amount and tenor of the news from the outside differed. In early September, for example, visiting relatives had reported bad news from Tehran in the form of fires and demonstrations, as well as stories—for example, that Israeli soldiers had been brought in because Iranians did not want to fight against Israelis.⁴ The discussions in people's homes now included the demonstrations occurring with increasing frequency throughout the country, the Abadan fire, and the Tabas earthquake. The radio news of the Abadan fire in August was the real turning point in local concern about the course of events in the country.

Eight days after the Abadan fire, the arrival of the new teacher, more religious than his predecessors, also signaled the changes underfoot. The *Sepah-e Danesh* (Literacy Corps) teacher supported the religious dimension of the revolution by insisting on the proper Islamic dress for his female students (fifth grade was the highest grade) and believed

⁴Reference to Israeli participation is also found in Karen Pliskin, "Camouflage, Conspiracy, and Collaborators: Rumors of the Revolution," *Iranian Studies*, no. 1–4 (1980): 55–82.

that the Abadan fire had killed four hundred people and had been set by government agents. The teacher lived separately, and except for occasional meals with village families who were entertaining him, he socialized primarily with teachers in other villages. He was not part of the regular social life of the village which occurred in the fields, at the milking pens, and in the *shab neshin* (evening visits between families).

As disturbing news from the outside increased that autumn, natural events occurred which some considered to have special meaning. For example, in mid-September the big earthquake in Tabas occurred. This earthquake was accompanied the same day by an eclipse of the moon. According to ethno-archaeologist Lee Horne, a UPenn researcher involved with the Turan Project who was there at that time, a local mother of seven claimed that the earthquake and the eclipse meant that God was displeased.

Tape recorders were locally popular for taping poetry and playing music. However, the tapes of Khomeini and Shariati did not have the overwhelming impact in rural areas that they did in urban areas. Instead, the radio played an important role during the five-and-a-half weeks of my stay. Unlike earlier periods of my research, when the radio was never a topic of discussion, in the fall of 1978 we all listened to and commented on the various news programs which came over numerous radio stations. They were often the first topic of conversation in the morning and the last at night. I listened primarily to the BBC World Service. The locals' choices included the Iranian broadcasts, BBC, Voice of America, and Radio Moscow. As we compared notes on radio news broadcasts, I received various comments directed toward my choice of listening to the BBC. The one comment that I heard often was that the BBC spoke lies.

The consistency of views about the BBC may have been one of the most significant indicators of local opinion about national politics, in the sense that the locals were shocked at the station's apparent support of Khomeini, indicated by news and views which differed from those of the government station. They were upset about what influence this

might have on local politics. Tehranian has commented that the “BBC’s World Service program in Persian, always popular in Iran as a source of reliable news, filled a vacuum left especially by the domestic mass communication blackout. It also enlivened its program by news that bordered on rumor and by special commentaries that were interpreted as support for the revolution.”⁵ It is not clear whether the local mistrust of the BBC had always been as strong, for we had never discussed news reports before. Whereas I saw the BBC as a source of reliable news, my neighbors saw it as a threat. They also displayed ambivalent attitudes toward Britain.

The knowledge of national politics varied. One woman from a neighboring village asked if my government and her government got on, and then commented that it was getting to be like old times, one ruler after another. Two brothers said they were happy about the help the United States had given Iran and disliked both England and Russia. At one point in December, my host expressed shock when he learned that the director of our research project was English. There was another expression of distrust of the BBC, this time because they thought it was against Iran.

Attitudes toward the Iranian government varied. A young man who had worked in Tehran in a shoe store appeared to be against the shah while his mother was for him. A local man said that Khomeini’s dissatisfaction with the Pahlavis would not end until the shah was gone, for Khomeini had *kineh* (a grudge). This was because, the man said, Khomeini’s father had been killed in an uprising against Reza Shah, and Khomeini’s son had recently been killed. The man went on to say that Khomeini was very old, and after a man is seventy, he begins to talk like a child again and one cannot take him seriously. I guessed that this man was against the shah, for even his little boy said “*Shah, velesh kon*” (“the shah, to hell with him”), although later events contradicted this assumption. A teenage girl said that the teacher must side with Khomeini as the teacher told the girls not to let their hair show from under their chadors. A mother

⁵Majid Tehranian, “Communication and Revolution in Iran: The Passing of a Paradigm,” *Iranian Studies*, no. 1–4 (1980): 5–30. Quote on p. 22.

of eight said she would like an Islamic Republic under the shah. This last statement represented then and now what I considered to be a major local sentiment toward the events in the country and one that would reappear dramatically as Ashura approached.

The news from this and other nearby provincial towns was taken very seriously. The villages in the region had links with a range of provincial towns because of trade, government offices, or relations living there. Sabzevar was the closest in terms of trade, transportation, and personal connections rather than official administrative relationships. Several households had moved to this town, either because they had little land or a lot of land (rarely in between). Thus, when on 14 November came serious news of disturbances and arrests in Tehran, there was little, if any, overt reaction. However, when talk turned to women in Sabzevar baring their heads, locals said, “What is the world coming to?”

The following day, I heard on the radio that Shahrud would become *sholuq* (in a situation of unrest). A man said, “It will never be okay again because people have forgotten religion.” He continued, “They are throwing the foreigners out.” This statement about foreigners was just a repetition of the news, not an impassioned cheer. Foreigners were rare in the region. Those who came were ecologists or anthropologists, generally not in large groups which would have distinguished them symbolically. Villagers told me that Sabzevar residents, for example, liked foreigners, and when a destitute Israeli came to the mosque, they collected seven to eight toman for him. This is in great contrast to the ideas of some villagers near Shiraz that the shah had planned the decline of Iranian agriculture to “provide a market for the crops of his American masters” or their complaints that Americans in Shiraz lived in separate compounds and didn’t like to mix with the Iranians.⁶

It is also in contrast to ideas about foreigners expressed by certain educated Department of Environment employees in Tehran. These employees noted that it was better for the Department of the

⁶Mary E. Hegland, “Islamic Revival or Political and Cultural Revolution? An Iranian Case Study,” in *Religious Resurgence: Contemporary Cases in Islam, Christianity, and Judaism*, ed. Richard Antoun and Mary Hegland (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1987), 194–219. Quote on p. 197.

Environment that the foreigners were gone because first, the United States was about fifty years ahead of Iran in environmental matters; second, Iranians had been technical assistants to foreign-run projects which were sometimes too advanced for Iran; and third, no Iranians had been getting the “big picture” of what was needed. These issues directly affected resource use in the area of national parks and protected areas where local populations, such as those described here, were increasingly being prevented from using local grazing area because foreigners and Iranian elite wanted the country to be in the forefront of the international ecological movement. Although the local populations in this case study were seriously concerned about an increasing number of laws affecting their use of resources, they did not see it as an issue of a foreign model of national resource development.

Several days later, I heard news of the closest arena of disturbance up to that point in a village to the north. The children were home from school because of the trouble. Some people were taken away after the nearest government center (Shahrud) had been contacted by the local gendarmerie via their wireless. I heard this report from a local man who worked as a shepherd for the wealthy flock owner Hojabr Yazdani and had been in Tehran selling sheep when the Jaleh Square massacre occurred on 8 September. He was also the one local man who had told me that he used to be a *dozd* (robber) in previous days when he had no resources and there was great insecurity.

By 22 November, the reports from Tehran were of disruptions and electrical cutoffs. A neighbor reported that the news had said that the cities are for Khomeini and the villages for the shah, and then asked, “What happened to our peaceful country?” The news from Khorasan was that Gonabad and Nishabur had, it seemed, demonstrated in support of Mashhad. That evening, the talk again turned to the events in Sabzevar. A woman who had been in Sabzevar with a sick child said that the wounded who were brought from Nishabur were not accepted by Sabzevar hospitals. She said that during the four days she was there, there were processions followed by slow-moving army vehicles and firefighting equipment. People had been calling Khomeini “imam,” but

she said that Khomeini himself said not to do this as he is only the “*ja neshin*” (temporary replacement) of an imam. She said that those in the processions were trying to replace every picture of the shah with a picture of Khomeini. Shops were half open, ready to close in an instant if the procession should come. Someone in the room suggested that 80 percent of Iranians were followers of Khomeini.

Ashura and the Differential Mobilization of Urban and Rural Populations

The month of Muharram approached with an increasing amount of tension nationally combined with local concern about the national situation. At the end of November, a young man who had returned from his work as a shepherd for the army said that the government was gathering up extra arms from the gendarmes, but they had not yet done so in our area. In fact, despite the disruption in the country, the following day a surveyor came to plan for the piped water for the hammam, the new bathhouse scheduled to be built by the government.

The Voice of America reported trouble in Tehran and Mashhad. The BBC spoke of evacuation plans for foreign embassies. On 1 December came radio reports that the British embassy had been set on fire and that Americans and English were being told to stay away from the bazaar and mosques during Ashura, the day of mourning on the tenth day of Muharram. I was scheduled to leave Iran the day after Ashura for a conference in India, so the subject of my departure and the timing of such became an item of discussion and a reflection of local assessments of the national scene. One woman said it would be bad to travel before Ashura because, I suspected, she wanted to be in the village through Ashura, and then go with me to Tehran. When her husband also said not to go until Ashura, I felt that his advice conveyed concern about the national situation and not his wife’s travel. The news of the following day confirmed his perspective, for I heard that Tehran had been *sholug* the previous night. After the curfew, people at Jaleh Square and in south Tehran took to the streets. Khomeini called for the overthrow of the government and the shedding of Muslim blood.

These events prompted me to go to visit one of the members of the village council who had always seemed so cool in contrast to other villagers. He had just returned from Shahrud, where he had been with another villager, and he reported that some groups were demonstrating for and some against the government, but that they were all kids. He suggested again that the BBC might be lying. We talked of what would happen if the army withdrew its support from the shah. He didn't think this would happen although his son, recently released from the army, said he thought the fate of the shah was in the hands of General Oveissi. Then, we listened to the national news together.

On the fourth of Muharram (3 December), the rain led to cancellation of the local *kharj* (in local terminology, the pledged feeding of the entire village by a family). The Voice of America reported a general closing of businesses and new clashes the previous night with men, women, and children dressed in the white sheets used for wrapping bodies for burial. According to a neighbor, Radio Moscow reported one thousand dead. Again, a neighbor said I shouldn't leave until after Ashura. Later, while I was visiting another family, Tehran radio gave news of the previous night's disturbances and the involvement of wives and children, and I was told not to budge until after Ashura, to go with people from the village, to wear village clothes (which I normally wore in the village, changing to city clothes on the trip back to Tehran), to go to the home of a person from the villages living in Tehran, and maybe not even take my car. I tried to guide the conversation to other topics such as range quality, previous silk production, and old routes across the desert, but they redirected the discussion to whether Americans could bear arms. My affirmative response triggered an impassioned speech about how the government controlled everything in Iran including people's having to pay a fee if they wanted a new door for their house. On a similar evening weeks earlier, the villagers' conversation had also revealed their special concerns when they spoke of wage increases (putting some blame for the increases on literacy among the young), of the old times when it was so dangerous here, and of the problems associated with the new hammam and the expected piped water.

That evening when the conversation drifted back to the events in Tehran, it became clear that the events in the country had become very disturbing to local villagers. One deeply distressed man said that if Muslims were killing Christians, it wouldn't be so horrible but "Muslims are killing Muslims!" He then asked, "What is it that brings women and children out to be killed and allows their husbands to let this happen?" Another man said that it was only those who lost relatives who were driven to do this and that the Communists had a hand, as well. Later that same day, the BBC reported that the government, too, was shaken by the last few days and that Ambassador Zahedi had been called back from Washington.

On 4 December, my discussion with neighbors was about Khomeini being upset because the government did not help the farmers and they were all leaving the land. They were leaving the land because the government bought wheat from the United States at nine toman per *man* (3 kg) and sold it for four toman per *man*, raising the question as to why the money wasn't given to farmers to grow wheat. A few weeks earlier, a large land and flock owner had said that, of course, he would plant more wheat if the price were higher. Nonetheless, people in this region did not leave the land because of wheat prices. Wheat was not a cash crop locally as were tobacco and cotton. Enough wheat was planted to meet local food needs.

As political activity increased throughout Iran in early December, there was increased discussion about the disturbances in provincial towns. One view was that Sabzevar was not *sholuq*, for no one had been killed there and only processions had taken place, but that Gorgan was considered in worse shape because they were *mazhabi* (religious). Reports said that two factions that had clashed in Nishabur, pro- and anti-shah. Shahrud was pro-shah, my neighbors said. Whatever photos of Khomeini had been put up had been removed. However, the bazaars were closed in Shahrud, and the two local men who had gone there could hardly sell their sheep. The national situation continued to deteriorate.

Ever since the death of a revered resident sheikh (mullah) in a neighboring village, visiting mullahs had been brought into the area

from outside for special religious holidays, such as Ramadan and Muharram, and serviced several villages. The one who came for Muharram this particular year appeared to be a problem. There was talk that the sheikh had told people to take photos of the shah down from the *Husseinieh* (the building set aside for religious gatherings). The villagers did not like this and said they couldn't pay him if he did not like pictures of the shah. One man muttered that all these troubles were caused by the sheikhs and "who needs them anyway." "They've taken our *namus* (honor)," said another.

In past years, every night during the first ten days of Muharram, the entire village had gathered at the *Husseinieh* for *rozeh-khani* (mourning performance). It was a time of religious excitement anticipated by men, women, and children, a time of "liminality"⁷ when daily life was transformed. When the sheikh arrived, he would preach and then recount the events at Karbala in 680 AD. In unison, the audience would unite in ritual weeping at the recounting of the story of the cruel martyrdom of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson Hussein, at the hands of the Ummayyad dynasty.

This year, the men were talking politics before the sheikh arrived. I couldn't hear exactly what they were saying as they were all up in front, and I was in the back with the women and children. The sheikh arrived, mispronounced the name of the next town, and spoke of prayer and how to do it correctly. Finally, a member of the village council suggested that he get on with the *rozeh-khani* so that the woman and children could get home. The sheikh then spoke of Mashhad and the recent desecration of the shrine there by the government. However, he was losing the attention of his audience and, at several points, got everyone there to give a *salavat* (the verbal invocation "Aliahumma salli 'ala Muhammad wa asli Muhammad," "Oh God, bless Muhammad and his kin"). Then, he said he was talking history, one moment speaking of Harun al Rashid, the fifth Abbasid caliph, then jumping to the 2500th anniversary of civilization in Iran and how much it cost and how that money should

⁷Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974).

have been given to the poor. The women were bored with all this political talk; they just wanted a good cry at the recounting of the Battle of Karbala and some *sineh zani* (chest beating).

When I went visiting again, I heard that the sheikh had put up a picture of Ayatollah Khomeini in the *Husseinieh*. Later, I heard that village men had put a photo of the shah underneath it. The next night at the *Husseinieh* while everyone was listening to taped *rozeh-khani*, the sheikh came and began to speak of prayer. The men challenged him a lot this night and, at one point, told him he was lying. However, he kept pursuing topics of proper ritual such as how one pinhead of menstrual blood ruins a prayer. When I left, he had not yet seen the shah's picture.

Later, someone came by to tell me that the sheikh had gone to the next town (gendarme headquarters). It seems that the previous night he had finally seen the shah's photo and torn it down. One man told him that this was shah territory. The sheikh said that if the man wanted to turn him over to the gendarmes or to file a *shekayat* (complaint), he could, but that he was not afraid.

Later, a woman told me that the sheikh wouldn't come that night, and she repeated the words of another from the morning: "If he doesn't like the shah's picture, he can tear up the money we'll give him." There were also some threats of beating him up. People were unhappy that the sheikh wanted to talk about *naft* (oil). "What does *naft* have to do with Islam?" they asked. The sheikh had also annoyed them by speaking against opium addicts, touching on a habit shared by several influential men in the village. Others were annoyed with his requirements for proper prayer. For example, on 7 December, a grandmother about to pray cursed the sheikh when I jokingly told her I would watch and see if she did it in the correct manner he had prescribed: controlling arm movements so she did not appear to "fly."

The next morning, the daughter of a village leader came to tell me what had happened the previous night when the sheikh came, after all. The gendarmes were present, and one was dressed up in *shaksi* (street) clothes. The others were outside, all around. The sheikh said to the

undercover gendarme, “Are you from here?” and the gendarme said, “I was in the city.” Sheikh: “Which city?” Gendarme: “I move around.”

This went on until the sheikh asked the undercover gendarme his name and then said, “I know you” (that is, that you are a gendarme). The gendarmerie was pro-shah and very upset with anyone who wasn’t. They had expressed surprise that one villager, whose brother was a government employee, was pro-Khomeini. In the case of the sheikh, it sounded like they would have beaten him up if he had said the wrong thing. Apparently, he did not say the wrong thing, as no violence occurred that evening. After he had torn down the shah’s photo, the sheikh had gone (or been taken) to the town where the gendarmes were stationed, but I had no news of what transpired next. Accounts differed as to whether local leaders had made a formal complaint about the sheikh’s behavior.

The following day, the sheikh was still there and staying with a family I knew well. When I came to visit, he was then sitting alone in the next room. The grandmother whispered that the gendarmes had come to get the sheikh and her son-in-law had brought him back (the granddaughter said she didn’t know who had brought him back). They both reported that the sheikh kept saying that Iran shouldn’t be selling its oil to foreigners. Ironically, that night the BBC reported attacks on clergy members—and that one might have been killed in Bushire.

As Ashura drew nigh, the gendarmes seemed to think that it would become *sholuq* here after Ashura. The previous day, a neighbor had brought news that Sabzevar was *sholuq* and several had been killed. By now, the question had become, “What will happen to Iran?” Two men suggested that the shah would have to go if the army said so. The BBC reported that three ayatollahs from Qom said that soldiers would not fire on their coreligionist brothers. Both the ayatollahs and Sanjabi (general secretary of the National Front) said that the processions planned for Ashura should be peaceful.

Four nights earlier, as we had sat and recounted what we had heard on the news, we received reports that several local people from villages to the north had returned from Tehran, where they were living and working. Based on a phone conversation between people in Sabzevar and in Tehran, a relative reported that there were about sixty in Tehran from the local villages, that Tehran was *be dard-e-ma nemihore* (no good to us) at the time, and that they possibly would come back for Ashura. These migrants to Tehran all had good jobs in factories, companies, or stores. They were basically young men with a local sixth-grade education and further training in the army. Although they could have made good money working as shepherds for the Sangsari, they had chosen urban living. Many were unmarried, and others, married to local girls, had their wives with them. Their families supplied them with local dairy products and usually visited in the winter. The migrants came back for weddings, holidays, and sometimes, to help with the harvest, but not usually for Ashura.

Upon hearing the news that the migrants might return, the mother of two of the sixty told of her dream in which she had seen her sons talking about the troubles in Tehran. The youngest said that he was leaving Tehran but could not come home as she (his mother) wanted but would go to another city. Nonetheless, on 8 December, the two arrived after the long drive from Tehran. Another village boy and his wife were expected to arrive the following day.

The two returnees reported that every night after 9:00 in Tehran, there was the sound of shooting and their car had a broken window from a demonstrator. We discussed radio reports that on Ashura, eight processions would converge at the Shahyad monument. When I said I had heard my report on the BBC, their response was that of other villagers: the station lied. They suggested Radio Moscow for news that was correct.

As they continued their reports of Tehran, they spoke of television reports of the queen drinking alcohol. They said bread was available but that shops were shut because shopkeepers were afraid of being burned.

Over a hundred Mercedes-Benzes, which had been imported for the police, had been burned. They said that the police station attack which we had heard about on the radio had been near Roosevelt Avenue, or a bit further east, and Russian guns had been used. Gas was not rationed, but capsule gas could be gotten from only the company. Electricity was on and off, and sugar had run out in Tehran. On the way to the village, they had observed that there was no kerosene in Biatjomand, the seat of the *baksh* (local governmental division).

As the reports of Tehran continued, one of the brothers said a BBC reporter had been shot and another thrown out. One person from the region had been killed in Tehran. He spoke of accidents and the police not coming because of Khomeini and of Khomeini paying the newspaper staff's wages. He felt that the students were causing a lot of the trouble. The arms that were found were Russian. He continued, saying that the Russian soldiers were by the borders waiting and if it were not for the Americans, the Russians would already be in Iran. He shared a story of men who had dressed up in chadors and demonstrated. A man from his brother's factory, Iran National, had disappeared on the Karaj road, and no one knew his whereabouts. Foreign parts were not coming in for the cars at Iran National. His local sister-in-law reported to me that whenever there was a demonstration, the two brothers would shut down their gate and retreat to the second floor of where they lived and that one of them had told her that if anyone said they were for the shah in Tehran, their tongue would be cut off.

10 December: Tasu'a, the Ninth Day of Muharram

I had retired the previous night thinking that the sheikh had not come to the *Husseinieh*. However, the next day, I heard that the sheikh had come late, about eleven or so. A village council member came to compare news reports. Everyone was praying that the day's march in Tehran would be peaceful, for there had been talk of people dressing up in soldier's clothes and firing. At 3:30 p.m., the BBC reported that the march had been peaceful. My neighbor's wife exclaimed, "May God

have mercy!” At the home where the two sons had returned, however, no one but me seemed excited that it had been peaceful.

About 9:00 p.m., when I went to the *Husseinieh*, the men were deep in discussion. They finally started *sineh zani*, but the sheikh arrived and they had to stop. The sheikh spoke of *qosl* (ritual bathing). The women were bored as were many men, but people kept asking questions. He again said men should change clothes before praying. This was not only another example of the conflicting demands of ritual purity and agriculture noted by Loeffler⁸ but also a lack of consideration for the women, who already devoted most of one day a week to heating water and washing clothes by hand. No wonder, when later he referred to *bichareh zanan* (the unfortunate women), a young wife visiting from Tehran muttered, “*bichareh khodet*” (“unfortunate yourself”). Then, he talked again about Muslims in Spain. “A country with faith cannot fall,” he affirmed. Next, he gave another illustration of a village overflowing with milk and honey. “Why was it this way? Because there were no thieves.” His politics were more subtly expressed by that time. However, he was still in trouble with the local population. Several times, he had to tell the audience not to laugh, that his time here was almost up. The story about Karbala was not sung or chanted but preached, and the audience was even more unhappy.

11 December: Ashura

In many ways, this day was like the other two village Ashuras in which I had participated. In the early morning, the family providing bread for the day’s *kharij* began baking with the help of relatives. The village was gathered to help make the meal of the day: sometimes *halim* (a mixture of cracked wheat and meat) or *ash* (a soup with meat and spices). The latter had been made daily by families who had made religious vows to do so, but this was the only day in which regular activity was significantly modified. Some families commandeered all the limited available transport in the area to make the pilgrimage to the nearby shrine on

⁸Reinhold Loeffler, *Islam in Practice: Religious Beliefs in a Persian Village* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988).

Mount Peyghambar. Most people checked out the cooking process or made *gulach* (a special bread) to take to the cemetery. As in other years, the radios were on in the courtyards, broadcasting from Tehran the Ashura processions and recitations.

Locally, Ashura seemed peaceful, and I had plans to join a convoy of returned migrants which would set off for Tehran in three days. In the afternoon, the entire village proceeded together to the cemetery to mourn the local dead and for the men to read from special books for the occasion and to engage in *sineh zani*. The trip to the graveyard this year was very emotional because of the recent death of a wife and mother from cancer. Then, the villagers returned, more religious reading and *sineh zani* by the men took place, and a lull set in until the evening. Ashura evening was in many ways not unusual. Each family sent a representative to collect bread and *ash* for the women and children, who ate at home. The men ate together in the *Husseinieh* and were joined later by their families, who watched the *sineh zani* and listened to the story of the events of Ashura. On this Ashura, the drama with the sheikh had been played out, and it was a quiet evening. In one home later that evening, the conversation drifted to the national events. One of the returnees agreed that the Abadan cinema fire was the work of SAVAK. He started talking about how good an Islamic state would be. He spoke of a girl walking in Tehran who would be followed by ten men saying *matalaks* (taunts), and that it is these *lat o luti* (hoodlums) who were burning shops.

Four days before Ashura, another event had occurred which had strongly affected the local populations and indicated local views about serving in the army at this time. The local village headman and other village men had gone to the neighboring village as twenty local youths were taken away to be soldiers. Parents, men and women both, were most reluctant to see their sons leave, even more so at this insecure time. An influential and religious man from a neighboring village reportedly said that no one should go to the army from this area. Earlier in the year, the mother of a boy serving in Ahvaz said that they had not heard from him during the postal strike and his father was ready to go to Ahvaz to see how he

was. On 12 December, a flock owner from the edge of the *kavir* came looking for my neighbor to write a letter of complaint. His son had been taken into the army but was needed at home because his father was very old. The whole family were gathered at their original village next to ours. The father would take the letter to Semnan himself.

The day after Ashura, some families still made the pilgrimage to the shrine at Peyghambar, while other villagers compared notes about the collections for the sheikh. The neighboring village collected one thousand toman for the sheikh and six hundred toman for a *seyyid* (a direct descendent of the Prophet Muhammad through his daughter Fatimah and then through the male line) married to a woman in our village. Here, they collected seven hundred toman for the sheikh, an amount which was considered little and which reflected their unhappiness with this sheikh.

On 14 December, departure day, I drove away with the old man who felt his son had been taken unjustly into the army. As we drove past mile after mile of steppe vegetation and periodic flocks of sheep and goats, a Sangsari shepherd hailed a ride from us. For a while, it was almost as if nothing had been happening elsewhere in the country. However, indications of the serious nature of the changes in the nation and region soon arose. Here, driving at the edge of an area protected from hunting, I was told that poachers were killing endangered onager and selling its fat for medicinal purposes. This was another indication of the breakdown of government control in the hinterland. The Department of the Environment could no longer control poaching and was no longer able to prohibit charcoal production. In Shahrud, we saw that the barbed wire around the statue of the shah had been removed, and in Semnan, his statue had been torn down.

In Semnan, the convoy stopped at the home of a gendarme who had once served in the villages from which we had just come. We sat and talked of demonstrations in Damghan, where opposing factions had fought, resulting in two casualties. General Azhari was on television, but transmission stopped periodically and our discussions continued. The

host was upset because he thought that the one guest who said he was on the side of truth was pro-Khomeini.

The next day, we waited for car repairs. I spoke with a student at the National University in Tehran who had lived just about everywhere in Iran, including the villages near the *kavir* we had just left, because his father was a gendarme. He was hostile to me at first and asked why I was damaging Iran's *ab-e-ru* (face) by studying agriculture. I told him that village production was something to be proud of, not ashamed of, for my research had shown that small-scale production indicated respectable yields per hectare. Then, our three-car caravan went on to Tehran, and I left the country.

The following summer, Brian Spooner, head of the project, visited the area briefly. He felt that the local situation had reverted to that of the 1950s, that unstable period when the villages had been left alone to work out their own security and had lost grazing lands to the Basseri. By the summer of 1979, the gendarmerie was in the hands of several former leaders in the village, those same men who had put up the picture of the shah in the *Husseinih*.

Villages, the Pahlavi State, Shi'ism, and the Revolution

As we have seen, the smallholder villagers who were actively engaged in mixed herding and agricultural pursuits in the region under study did not take up the revolutionary message and often manifested pro-regime sentiments. The local farmer-herders' response occurred despite the presence of issues such as agriculture, mass mobilization in the cities, and the dissemination of revolutionary propaganda in the villages both by the media (especially the BBC) and by means of political messages delivered in religious gatherings, which served as the traditional means of anti-regime political communication in urban areas. The residents of this rural region did not become active against the regime even at the critical stages of mass demonstrations, mass strikes, and dual sovereignty.⁹ They remained non-receptive in the last month of the old

⁹Ahmad Ashraf and Ali Banuazizi, "The State, Classes and Modes of Mobilization in the Iranian Revolution," *State, Culture and Society*, no. 3 (1985): 3-40.

regime, during which such foreign radio stations as the BBC, Radio Moscow, and the Voice of America widely covered and disseminated the news of the revolution (from an outside perspective) throughout the rural areas, and the locals regularly accused the BBC of lying. Tehran migrants returned to their villages during Ashura, whereas in areas closer to the cities, village youth joined urban demonstrators.¹⁰ Furthermore, and even more significant to analysis of the revolution, was the villagers' resentment toward the transformation of traditional means of communication for political mobilization in Iran: the mosque. They were unreceptive to the mullah who carried the revolutionary message and gave him a reduced payment.

Not all rural residents had the same responses to the events of the revolution. In the revolutionary period, these rural residents of Iran can be divided into four social categories:¹¹

1. Farmers and herders (34.3 percent of the rural population of Iran, which was 53.1 percent rural).
2. People in direct contact with the cities (intellectuals, teachers, students, laborers, clerks).
3. The elite (cadres and those from institutions of the old regime).
4. Clergy (who do not usually live in the villages but are often in them).

After the revolution, some reports indicated village support for anti-shah activity¹² whereas others reported that villages were not always anti-shah or vigorously in support of the revolutionary religious perspective.¹³

¹⁰Hegland, "Islamic Revival"; Manijeh Dowlat, Bernard Hourcade, and Odile Puech, "Les paysans et la revolution Iranienne," *Peuples Méditerranéens* 10 (1980): 19–42.

¹¹Dowlat et al., "Les paysans," 20.

¹²Mary Hegland, "Ritual and Revolution in Iran," in *Political Anthropology*, vol. 2, *Culture and Political Change*, ed. Myron Aronoff (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1983), 75–100; Mary Hegland Hoogland, "One Village in the Revolution," *Merip Reports*, no. 4 (1980): 7–12; Mary Hegland Hoogland, "Religious Ritual and Political Struggle in an Iranian Village," *Merip Reports*, no. 5 (1982): 10–17; Eric Hoogland, *Land and Revolution in Iran 1960-1980* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982).

¹³Dowlat et al., "Les paysans"; Anonymous, "Current Political Attitudes in an Iranian Village," *Iranian Studies*, no. 1–2 (1983): 3–30.

Consideration of revolutionary activity according to the four categories helps to clear up some of the confusion of reports where the “villages” supported the revolution. For example, in Hegland’s discussions of the anti-regime activities among villagers outside Shiraz, peasants (that is, farmer–herders) were distinguished as a group which “stayed out of the fray entirely.”¹⁴

It is the behavior of farmer–herders that concerns us here. Three aspects of their behavior deserve attention: first, their relationship to the government; second, the traditional ways of seeking change; and third, their particular experience of Shi’a Islam and its role in their lives.

The Pahlavi state is often blamed for its failure in the Land Reform program, for its urban bias, and for the relative failure of its agricultural policies.¹⁵ These issues are often taken as a major cause of the revolution, both by the revolutionary leadership and by observers of the revolution. However, various constituencies in Iran at the time of the revolution had their own histories with the state, some marked by periodic overt and violent confrontations, as with the *ulama* and certain nomadic tribes. The villages of the region described here had their own history. As a place distant from the centers of current and past political control in Iran, the area had been subject to raids or struggles for territory from nomadic tribesmen such as the Turkmen and Basseri, respectively. Under the Pahlavis, however, there was security, a factor of extreme importance to the local population’s outlook.

One approach to understanding the relationship of these residents, vis-à-vis the government at the time of the revolution, is to consider the totality of services received, restrictions imposed, and expectations raised.¹⁶ The primary impact of the national policies of the sixties and seventies in the region had been on improving the “household” or the

¹⁴Hegland, “Islamic Revival,” 201.

¹⁵cf. Haleh Afshar, “An Assessment of Agricultural Development Policies in Iran,” in *Iran: A Revolution in Turmoil*, ed. Haleh Afshar (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), 58–79.

¹⁶John Bennett, *Of Time and the Enterprise: North American Family Farm Management in a Context of Resource Marginality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 196.

quality of personal life, as opposed to the agricultural pastoral enterprises. While some Westerners and Iranian elite may have chastised the government for not doing enough for the rural household, it was, in fact, the experience of household- or personal-oriented policies that was important for the communities in this case study in the revolutionary period. In particular, those services which affected improvements in security, education, health, and sanitation, minimal as others might have considered them, were important in affecting local residents in their assessments of the Pahlavi regime. Government services were somewhat limited in contrast to other regions of the country. As in many Iranian villages at the time of the revolution, electricity and running water were not available in the region under study. Access to television gives one clue as to the extent of electrification in the country. Tehranian reported that 100 percent of the country had access to radio while 70 percent had access to television.¹⁷ The main government services included schools up to the sixth grade, and the nearest medical facilities had just recently been established in the administrative center at the edge of the region, several hours away. Public health and agricultural extension services were periodic, and veterinary services did not exist. Kerosene and gasoline were available in a locally administered cooperative. Nonetheless, beginning in the late seventies, the government undertook a program of building new public bathhouses in the villages, part of an ongoing program in the area. These bathhouses were desired for religious reasons, and the shah's government was providing them. There was also a plan for electricity and piped water for the local hammam and a hospital in the neighboring village where the gendarmerie was located.

Over the years of Pahlavi control, the power of the central government increased. Government bureaucracy affected more and more areas of the country, bringing rural populations under the ever-increasing influence of government policies. At the time of the revolution, the major administrative links were limited to resident government personnel such as the gendarmerie, game guards of the Department of the Environment,

¹⁷Tehranian, "Communication and Revolution," 16.

and teachers performing their army service with the *Sepah-e Danesh*. Periodic visits to the region occurred for malaria control and other public health programs, and the government tobacco program, with less frequent visits from other government agencies.

If local discontent existed, it was not with the services provided but with the nature and extent of government bureaucracy over certain aspects of the locals' lives. Because grazing was a key to local economic success and was subject to government restriction, it was a subject of concern for local owners of sheep and goats. Government actions affecting grazing were a serious local issue, as were restrictions on the collection of vegetation for fuel (important for milk processing and bread baking). The reactions of these populations were not unlike those in the American West a year or two later, in what was described as a "Sagebrush Rebellion." The issues in this "rebellion" were related to government control. For example, according to a Nevada state legislator and rancher, "the people resented Washington [. . .] coming out here with a packet of regulations and policies telling us what to do."¹⁸ Although the history and nature of control of rangelands was not always the same in both the United States and Iran, the reaction of the local owners was resentment of government control.

The concerns were different with agriculture. Government regulation of agricultural activity had occurred only in relation to tobacco (or, in the past, opium) and curtailed free market trade of only tobacco. Low tobacco prices would have caused great resentment as they were set by the government, and this was an important cash crop. This contrasts with wheat prices, which were low, not because they were forced on this population, but because of larger agricultural policies. The role of smallholders in national production had been a significant issue nationally when the government had planned for future agricultural projects,¹⁹ but like the questions of models for national resource development, it had not become a local issue.

¹⁸Larry Eichel, "The West Gets Wild over the Public Lands," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 17 January 1981.

¹⁹Fatemeh Etemad Moghadam, "The Effects of Farm Size and Management System on Agricultural Production in Iran" (Ph.D. diss., Somerville College, Oxford, 1978).

The response of local residents to government policies depended on whether a policy provided opportunities for the individual or their family to respond positively, or instead attempted to impose controls. Those policies in which control was attempted without alternative means of advancing the individual's enterprise or household often placed local residents in a position where the only options for survival were protest, as with fuel-gathering regulations; escape through sellout; and occasional urban migration which occurred as a result of new policies concerning rangeland. Other traditional political strategies have been petitions, evasion, and occasional protest through legal channels if possible, or if not, through such unusual means as use of poetry to state grievances. These kinds of actions are the "weapons of the weak," the "everyday forms of peasant resistance [. . .] the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so on [. . .] that typically avoid any direct, symbolic confrontation with authority."²⁰

The political actions of these farmer-herders relate to larger questions about the political "nature" and strategies of peasants—for example, whether they are political or nonpolitical²¹ and whether they are revolutionary or non-revolutionary.²² The position taken here is that peasant-herder political response is individual—ranging from political indifference to extreme involvement²³—and is based on individual options and resources. Peasants can take any position depending on circumstance. Concerted political action by peasants (farmer-herders) is a difficult and complex question, whether it be protesting injustice or government regulations on overgrazing, and is related to individual

²⁰James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), xvi.

²¹Hoogland, *Land and Revolution in Iran*.

²²Farhad Kazemi and Ervand Abrahamian, "The Nonrevolutionary Peasantry of Modern Iran," *Iranian Studies* XI (1978): 259–304; Ahmad Ashraf, "State and Agrarian Relations before and after the Iranian Revolution 1960-1990," in *Peasants and Politics in the Modern Middle East*, ed. Farhad Kazemi and John Waterbury (Miami: Florida International University Press, 1988); Eric R. Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).

²³Loeffler, *Islam in Practice*.

options and the pressures to act as a group. Nothing in peasants' "nature" predisposes them to act one way or another.

However, there is the issue of when and under what conditions these villagers (as well as other people) would be moved to concerted political action, to change a condition or to attempt to change the established system itself. In responding to a problem or risk, what determines whether a group attempts to maintain or change the system? In *Risk and Culture*, Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky have analyzed why people emphasize certain risks while ignoring others and why so many in our society have singled out pollution as a source of concern.²⁴ I wish to turn their analysis to the question of various political strategies in the Iranian Revolution. Why is it that the clergy emphasized certain risks and ignored others, seeing use of oil money, the importation of agricultural products, and the presence of foreigners as the pollution generated by the shah? Why were these problems not viewed in the same way by farmer-herders? Why did one group try to bring down the system and the other seek to maintain it?

Whether we are speaking of God or nature as the cause of threats, the model is the same. It consists of a center which seeks to maintain the system, whatever it may be (from church to company to state), and a border, self-defined by its opposition to the encompassing larger system:

The first difference between the border and center views is about what the future will be like. The center takes it to be an extension of the present. Sectarians expect discontinuity. They expect a different future and they expect it will be bad. Established society is incorrigibly evil [. . .] The border is worried about God or nature, two arbiters external to the large-scale social systems of the center. Either God will punish or nature will punish; the jeremiad is the same and the sins are the same: worldly ambition, lust after material things, large organization.²⁵

²⁴Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky, *Risk and Culture* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983).

²⁵Douglas et al., *Risk and Culture*, 122–23.

Historically, the religious hierarchy in Iran has been “border” in relation to the ruling state. Whereas Douglas and Wildavsky seek to illustrate why the movement of social concern began earlier and with greater strength in America than in Europe, the processes and patterns they are isolating shed light on the events in Iran. For example, in the United States the economic boom and the educational boom together “produced a cohort of articulate, critical people with no commitment to commerce and industry.”²⁶ Douglas and Wildavsky argue that it is this shift to service industries that makes room for “educated people of the border [. . .] where before, engaged in production, educated people could see why collective constraint might be necessary, working in the service sector suggests such subordination is unnecessary. Removed from the ‘firing line,’ not having to meet the ‘bottom line,’ the boundary between service and production becomes one between border and center. The more the means of production are ideas rather than things, the less the hierarchical organization or production appears essential.”²⁷

The authors see parallels with the Russian intelligentsia and the period between the Bolshevik Revolution and 1961, noting that when a return of the people to the land was advocated, the peasants they came to help did not want such a return. Similar parallels can be made with Iran.

The authors go on to assert that so long as loyalties are turned toward centers or borders, people “will buy a whole package of political judgments about nature, human and physical, that go with center or border views.”²⁸ We can see in the 1978 Iranian Revolution that “the package of political judgments about nature” of the “border” was expanding in its adherents—but that these adherents were not the farmer–herders or all of their hardworking migrant relatives in the cities. They were, for example, the students, the intellectuals, and the servicesector. This was a time when the rural population was still the majority in the country, but not by much. The educated sector had increased, and there was prosperity. Some parts of the population were

²⁶Douglas et al., *Risk and Culture*, 159.

²⁷Douglas et al., *Risk and Culture*, 160.

²⁸Douglas et al., *Risk and Culture*, 174.

more susceptible to a certain kind of political explanation prevalent in the revolution whereas the groups discussed here, farmer–herders who represented the center, wanted to maintain the “system.”

In another model of radical change, or revitalization of a society, Anthony Wallace approaches the question of the charismatic leader whose message explains to the collection of highly stressed group members why they are experiencing problems and what can be done about it.²⁹ In Iran at the time of the revolution, there were numerous individuals who for their own individual reasons felt under psychological stress, a phenomenon which can have a material or intellectual basis, ranging from change in “purity” of lifestyle to actual or “felt” deprivation due to disease, war, foreign occupation, or loss of land to a highway. These situations of populations with serious accumulated stress are ripe for charismatic leaders, and the pre-revolutionary period in Iran was a time when there was a leader, Khomeini, who could unite the differing groups until the system was changed. However, when the level of group stress (built up from individual experiences of stress) is low, it seems only natural that the leader’s message is answering “unasked questions,” and he will not represent the group. Such, I suggest, was the case with the farmer–herders discussed here.

The value of Douglas and Wildavsky’s approach is to help us understand why some groups experience more stress because of their “world view.” Shi‘a Islam, like other major religious traditions, has its local meanings and expression.³⁰ When religion became the attempted vehicle for revolution, whether by tape or sermon, the revolutionary message was rejected among certain of the rural populations. This seemed more perplexing because these populations were the rural contingent of Iran’s “moral majority,” the people for whom living a moral, upright life meant following the ideas of the Prophet and his family, as exemplified in the Karbala tragedy. The attempted change during Ashura of 1978 was in the content of the evening *rozeh-khani*, an important Shi‘a ritual. There

²⁹Anthony Wallace, “Revitalization Movements,” *American Anthropologist* 58 (1956): 264–81.

³⁰Loeffler, *Islam in Practice*; Michael Gilson, *Recognizing Islam: Religion and Society in the Modern Arab World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982).

was an attempt to change this ritual from its traditional form, to intellectualize it and invest it with another world view, and it was this change that was resisted.

Mary Douglas has struggled with interpreting the varying local contexts of Catholicism in London and why the same rituals meant different things to different constituents.³¹ For the “Bog Irish”—those immigrant Irishmen for whom neighborhood, kin, and, often, livelihood overlapped, making them part of a strongly bounded group, and whose relationships with each other within the group were regulated by years of custom—ritual played an important role. The change in ritual in the Catholic Church (in which eating fish on Fridays and the role of Latin in the mass were abolished) was welcomed by the intelligentsia within the church, but to the Bog Irish, it was a threat to their identity. A parallel change in the meaning of ritual can be seen in the revolution in Iran. The urban dwellers invested Shi‘a ritual with a new meaning which weighed less on “traditional ritual” than on a revolutionary message. In these situations, ritual served a communal function, uniting groups hitherto disunited. But for villagers who were still part of bounded groups with traditionally defined relationships between them, the attempts to politicize Ashura were more of a threat than an opportunity. Because it did not meet their needs in the same way as it met the political and intellectual needs of many urbanites, the other paradigm was not adopted. For example, the need to retrieve a national Islamic identity was not experienced in the country as it was in the cities by the “de-peasantized” migrants³² or others coping with the negative side of contact with the West. In the farmer–herder villages, the evening *rozeh-khani* and march to the graveyard were the only time when the village did anything together. This Ashura unity could conceivably have led to group resistance, but in this setting, it could not be used to politicize the villagers, for reasons explained above. It has been suggested that ritual contributes to the “organization of political groups in a variety of ways ranging from the integration of the individual

³¹Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982).

³²Dowlat et al., “Les paysans,” 21.

member into the group to the integration of the group itself into its larger political environment.”³³ In the area described here, it was the role of ritual in integrating the group into the national political environment that was lacking and could not be developed by the visiting mullah.

Shi‘a Islam has what has been referred to as active and passive modes,³⁴ true of Christianity, as well. Michael Gilsenan describes the martyrdom of Hussein as offering an image of the world as it is—with the oppressors triumphant.³⁵ The “true” order of things is reversed by the actual historical order: the world is seen as morally and politically upside down, and the source of religious and social authority is contained in the hidden imam figure. This “reversal of the world” can be taken in diametrically opposed ways. In the passive sense, it offers an image of suffering to be endured and an experience of oppression that is mythologically and historically the fate of the community. True believers can only await the return of the savior at some unspecified and uncertain point in the future. On the other hand, Gilsenan notes an active mode, in which “this reversal of the world contains a potential for mass mobilization and an extremely dynamic view of the community’s role and duty. It radically exposes the illegitimate power of the rulers and asserts the legitimate authority of the believers who await [. . .] the emergence of the concealed Imam.”³⁶ This latter mode is the ideal mode of the “border” groups described by Douglas and Wildavsky.

Gilsenan illustrates this general theme of variation and transformation in Islam by looking at southern Lebanese Shi‘a villages described by

³³David Kertzer, “The Role of Ritual in Political Change,” in *Political Anthropology*, vol. 2, *Culture and Political Change*, ed. Myron Aronoff (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1983), 53–73. Quote on p. 56.

³⁴Gustav Thaïss, “Unity and Discord: The Symbol of Husayn in Iran,” in *Iranian Civilization and Culture*, ed. Charles Adams (Montreal: McGill University, 1971), 111–19; Gustav Thaïss, “Religious Symbolism and Social Change: The Drama of Husein,” in *Scholars, Saints, and Sufis*, ed. Nikki Keddie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 349–66; Mary Hegland, “Two Images of Hussain: Accommodation and Revolution in an Iranian Village,” in *Religion and Politics in Iran from Quietism to Revolution*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), 218–43; Loeffler, *Islam in Practice*.

³⁵Gilsenan, *Recognizing Islam*.

³⁶Gilsenan, *Recognizing Islam*, 62.

Emrys Peters.³⁷ In this situation, “the drama of Hussein become[s] an overt attempt to confirm rather than to deny the order of the world.”³⁸ The main point he is trying to make about southern Lebanon is one which I wish to make about the case study here from northeast Iran. In the fall of 1978, the nightly *rozeh-khani* and the Ashura procession and meal confirmed “the order of the world”—in this case, the village in the shah’s, not Khomeini’s, Iran. The comparison is particularly interesting because the Lebanese setting was a stratified one in which sharecroppers and landowners lived, in contrast to the smallholder village I experienced. Nonetheless, in both cases the Ashura activities confirmed the status quo and did not challenge it. In the Shi‘a villages of Lebanon and Iran, there are somewhat related questions of the meaning of symbols in times of social change,³⁹ power and symbolism in a complex society,⁴⁰ religious paradigms and political action,⁴¹ and the individual response to change and the charismatic presentation of new paradigms⁴² which touch on the case which I am attempting to explain. The situation in southern Lebanon has changed dramatically since that time, with many descendants of those villagers adopting the “active” mode as they moved into lifestyles in which border views were likely to prevail.

Conclusion

The case study presented here has described the reaction of smallholder agriculturalists and pastoralists to the events of the revolution in 1978 and to the messages about the revolution during this period. For several reasons, the farmer–herders were not moved to political action: their historical relationship to the Pahlavi state, their status as smallholders

³⁷Emrys Peters, “A Muslim Passion Play: Key to a Lebanese Village,” *Atlantic Monthly* 198 (1956): 176–80.

³⁸Gilsenan, *Recognizing Islam*, 62.

³⁹Clifford Geertz, “Ritual and Social Change: A Javanese Example,” in *Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, ed. Clifford Geertz (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 142–69.

⁴⁰Abner Cohen, *Two-Dimensional Man: An Essay on the Anthropology of Power and Symbolism in Complex Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).

⁴¹Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*.

⁴²Wallace, “Revitalization Movements.”

with a special dependence on pastoralism, and an Islamic world view which was less disposed to change the system. While they had grievances against certain governmental policies, these grievances did not predispose them to overthrow the system which they considered to have made positive contributions to their lives. The question of the political role of ritual has also been raised. The use of the Karbala paradigm as a political example is suggested to be one strategy to attack the prevailing political system. In fact, in two excellent articles about Iran, the use of the Karbala paradigm as a political strategy is so persuasively stated for urban settings that readers may see it as a pervasive “Shi‘a” response, particularly in the United States after the hostage crisis.⁴³ Thus, it becomes even more important to note that in the case presented here, it was not adopted, because it was a strategy related to someone else’s political agenda. The villagers had a different cultural and political assessment of the problems in Iran and the necessity and means of change than did those in the urban areas.

Understanding the political options and strategies of farmer–herders remains a goal to be attained through analysis of their daily lives. Their reactions to the events of the revolution are surprising only when viewed from the outside; when these and other responses are compared to their day-to-day approach to the government and religion, and in an ethnohistorical context, their reactions are more understandable.

⁴³Catherine Bateson, “‘This Figure of Tinsel’: A Study of Themes of Hypocrisy and Pessimism in Iranian Culture,” *Daedalus*, no. 3 (1979): 125–33; Peter Chelkowski, “Shia Muslim Processional Performance,” *The Drama Review*, no. 3 (1980): 18–30.