

# **WHAT IS CULTURE?**

## **Gatha and Iranian Culture**

Fariborz Rahnamoon

Humans have been described as RATIONAL Animals. Compared to other animals we have a larger brain but strangely enough we do not use all of it. In order to survive we do not need such a large brain. It is said an average human uses only 5 percent of the brain capacity, it is estimated that Albert Einstein used only 9 percent of his brain. Inventing the fork to eat spaghetti with it, is not biologically necessary for survival nor is the playing of chess. Many mothers and babies die through childbirth complications caused by the size of the head. Why then has evolution allowed the brain to grow to such a hazardous size?

Could it be connected with the purpose of our life on Earth?  
For that matter what is the purpose of life on Earth?

If it is to lead a holy life and go to heaven we do not need such a large brain. Religions are very clear on this. Adam and Eve lived in Paradise and would have continued to live there had they not eaten from the TREE OF KNOWLEDGE. They were thrown out of Paradise for using their brains. Organized religion has always been against the use of the brain. It makes no difference which religion one follows, when someone is sick with an unknown disease or has a problem, and they need a solution, it is recommended they take some offering (from a candle to a lamb) to the house of their God and pray for his intervention and help. No research and development is necessary no invention and discovery is required. The philosophy is - Only if God wants you to live the medicine will work; if you are destined to die no medicine can cure you; etc. Then why do we have such a large brain?

There is another school of thoughts based on the ancient understanding of the ancient teachings of one of the greatest teacher mankind has ever had - Zarathushtra. Which says - use your brain in a good way, discover the truth, and use the information to improve your life, progress towards PERFECTION. **Now this not only requires a large brain but also requires the full use of it.**

In order to discover the Truth, in order to improve our life, in order to progress, in order to reach a level of perfection in life, we need to organize ourselves, we need to Cultivate ways and means and be structured and geared towards progress. We need to formulate Khash Atra Vairya - Good guidance -, to help society to progress. This is what the Human Mind has been trying to do since time immemorial and we have called it CULTURE.

The Oxford dictionary defines CULTURE as: - Tillage; Rearing; **Improvement by mental or physical training; Intellectual development.**

Thus Culture is not crucial for survival but is a promoter of unification and benefactor of progress.

The great teacher Zarathushtra has talked at length in his Gathas about the development of a culture based on the proper use of Wisdom and the promotion of intellectual development in order to achieve perfection.

Whenever the use of the mind is suspended Culture gets limited to what we copy from person to person by imitation. During the stagnating period of the brain, there is very little change in the behavioral pattern within a culture. During such period culture has been described to operate just like the human genes<sup>1</sup>. They copy and replicate. Visualizing humans as coping machines is scary although this copying function is envisaged as a stabilizing factor, which brings about order and peace. Whenever culture becomes an unquestionable belief it acts as a deterrent of progress and is a cause to worry. It is here that culture does exactly the opposite of what it is supposed to do. It stalls PROGRESS.

Culture is kept alive by a combination of stories, information and festivals that are stored in a population of human brains. The preference or spread of one idea over another or the disappearance of an idea, is cultural evolution. Many factors influence, the spread or disappearance of an idea or, the change that occurs in the presentation of the idea. Communication is the most important factor in the success of a culture and present day communication has started to revolutionize culture.

Culture of a nation is made up of a combination of cultural components like, Social Culture, Financial Culture, Legal Culture, Religious Culture, etc.

### **SOCIAL CULTURE**

Humans are also described as Social Animals. They like to live in groups and cultivate relationships with each other. Culture provides a sense of belonging, which help form the society. The status attributed to a society, is its' driving force. Just for the reward of belonging to a group we imitate the group. The practice of the group is not to be questioned for the fear of becoming an outcast. To initiate a Social Culture the use of the brain is required but to follow it, no extra effort is necessary. It becomes like a chain letter with instruction to "Copy and Pass on". Soon after coping you start to believe in it as the eternal truth and bet your life on it. Some intellectuals may, while passing on the culture, shrewdly change the process without others noticing it and the coming generation will believe in it as having been in existence since the birth of time. Others may act in a revolutionary way to change the belief and practice. The revolutionary types usually divide the society and a sub group may be formed. Within the society classes may be formed based on status, profession, wealth etc. which gives rise to class culture within the main culture.

### **FINANCIAL CULTURE**

Overvaluing a piece of paper or metal by calling it a note or coin is part of financial culture. Without consensus as to the specific value of the bills and coins, money is worthless. Today our cultures are strongly influenced by financial culture. Capitalism is a financial culture where in humans strive to accumulate wealth, measured by money, and the most successful capitalist is the one who dies with the highest measure of such wealth. All means applied to accumulate such wealth also become legitimate in such culture. Slavery, child labour and war have been legitimate means of achieving wealth.

### **LEGAL CULTURE**

Legal Culture regulates society. Justice, which is the main aim of legal culture, may differ from society to society. Some may define justice as fairness and ownership others may define it as a service or revenge, which has given rise to the two maxims of " turning the other cheek" and "eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth".

### **RELIGIOUS CULTURE**

The fear of the unknown is the backbone of religious culture. Things that cannot be proved flourish under its umbrella. Like the existence of Angels, Devils, Heaven and Hell. Once the unknown is known it loses its attraction and its power to bring people together. To keep its bag of

unknown's full it prevents and opposes research. One important condition of religious culture is, " the faithful and unquestionable coping of the information and imitation of the practices". Religious culture usually has a back up threat of eternal damnation for not coping and a promise of everlasting bliss for coping. The trump card of religious culture is Life after Death.

### **PROGRESSIVE Religious Culture.**

In religious culture progress has no meaning because usually it is the words of God that has laid its foundation and the words of the all knowing creator is Ultimate there is nothing more that you can add to it. Ibn Khaldun the Arab historian says; " When the Arabs conquered Iran they found library after library of books, so the commander Abu Waqas wrote to Omar the Khalifa, asking him permission to distribute the books as booty among his soldiers. Omar wrote back; ' God has given us all that is to be known in the Quran, if the Iranian knowledge is good it is in the Quran and if it is not, God does not want us to know it, so destroy the books'. " <sup>ii</sup>

Zarathushtra is the only one who has laid the foundation of a progressive religious culture. He tackles death, the most powerful aspect of religious culture, by teaching how to conquer the Fear of Death -Amordad.<sup>iii</sup> He also promotes the break up of chain coping when he says.

Listen with your ears to the supreme facts  
Consider with open mind  
Between the paths before deciding  
**Person by person for his own self.**  
Before greatness of the message  
Is truly spread, understand each one.  
Zarathushtra -Gatha - Yasna 30.2 (FR)

He not only breaks up the coping chain but wants people to progress by listening and looking for facts with an open mind, without bias, and then individually chose the best path for each situation, keeping in mind the Supreme Facts. He also advises the person who wants to promote or spread a new finding, to first understand it and be sure of its result.

Many scholars to prove that there is freedom of choice and that dualism is limited to between good and bad wrongly use this verse of the Gatha. If we look at the first line of the verse it says

**SARO TA GEUSH AISH VAHISTA**

Vahista means the best, the highest, the supreme, which would not be said of EVIL.

This is in fact, the guidance for a Progressive Religious Culture. The constant element is the highest Truth, the FACTS. Thus the Iranian culture became an advancing culture progressing towards perfection.

A combination of the various groups of the culture makes up the Culture of a people. During the course of the history of a people one or the other group takes a dominant position and influences the trend of their culture. Today the Financial culture is dominant in the West while Religious culture is dominant in most of the Middle Eastern countries.

## **CULTURE IN ANCIENT IRAN**

Herodotus under Persian Customs has said, " No race is so ready to adopt foreign ways as the Persians; for instance, they wear the Median costume because they think it handsomer than their own, and their soldiers wear the Egyptian corselet."

This is proof that the Persians rightly considered Custom and Culture as a means of progress. So if they saw something better they adopted it. Ancient Iran was a progressive society that believed in life and the enjoyment of it while working to achieve perfection. This can be seen in the sudden progress that the world made in the centuries that the Iranians enjoyed the status of a super power.

The religious segment of culture dominated ancient cultures. The Iranian culture was no exception. By encouraging the use of the human mind they were successful in changing the face of the earth even to the extent of changing the belief of the people in God. When the Persians became a dominant power they believed in the one and only God Ahura Mazda the Creator of Wisdom who was not anthropomorphic. While the rest of the world that they came into contact with, believed in human like God or gods. The Persians through education and not force were able to change this important culture and introduce the concept of a single non-anthropomorphic God.

By building roads and making traveling easy and safe throughout their Empire they promoted communication and this made it possible for the

exchange of ideas and helped progress. For them culture was about sharing of knowledge, beliefs and values.

Knowledge when you gain  
With minds good use  
Having realized wisdom  
The path to creativity  
The ultimate message of Wisdom  
Through words excellent  
We shall turn (convert)  
Those who do not know  
By speaking  
Zarathushtra- Gatha HA 28.5

The Greek and the Romans after coming into contact with the Persians became philosophers. Socrates was in the army at the age of 18 and he became a hoplite with heavy armor at twenty. Having been born in 469BCE, in 449 when the peace treaty was signed between Persia and Rome, he must have lost his army job of a hoplite and therefore enlisted as a philosopher. What Socrates said was alien to his culture and finally the democratic legal system of Athens condemned him to death by consumption of poison, in 399 BC.

The charges against Socrates were:<sup>iv</sup>

- Corrupting the young, of not recognizing the gods recognized by the state, of believing in spirits and practicing rites foreign to the Athenians.
- Meddling in the things, which are outside his competence, of enquiring into things under the earth and things above the sky and arguing with everybody on all subjects, trying constantly to make the weaker arguments appear the stronger.
- Not believing in gods and believing in supernatural beings.

The Iranians were able to spread the wisdom to all corners of their Empire and with the peace treaty of 449 BCE the golden age of knowledge had been introduced into Europe and today we know it as Greek philosophy, Greek mathematics, Greek medicine etc.

For example, Kanat or Ghanat is an underground canal used to transport water from its source to the place of consumption that is usually scores of miles away deep into the desert. It is so well designed that it keeps erosion of the walls of the sandy canal to the minimum. It is a system known for over 3000 years and is used to this day in the Iranian deserts of Yazd and Kerman. Pythagoras, was a prisoner of war in Babylonia<sup>v</sup> and was given his freedom by Kurosh the Great upon liberating Babylonia. Pythagoras chose to come to Iran where he saw the system of ghanats and in trying to understand how it is built he learns geometry, which he records when he goes back to Athens. Today we know it as Pythagoras Theorem.

Plato (born 428 BCE), Antristhenes (born 446 BCE), Euclides (born 435 BCE), and Xenophon became students of Socrates.<sup>vi</sup> It is interesting to note that the majority of the so-called Greek Scholars were born and lived outside Athens away from Greek influence and most of them lived in the Persian Empire. The Peace Treaty of 449 BCE is an important event in the history of world progress in knowledge and philosophy. For the spread of knowledge the Iranians knew no border. The first thing they gave their defeated enemies was knowledge, for they believed it is with the spread of knowledge and the change in the way of thinking that the world would be a better place for every one to live. Their aim was to spread " The ultimate message of Wisdom Through words excellent among Those who do not know, peacefully, By speaking (Zarathushtra- Gatha HA 28.5)

When the Iranians liberated Babylonia they did not destroy their temples or their statues of gods, but on the contrary Kurosh the Great bowed to the statue of Mardukh the god of the Babylonians. A few decades later Herodotus travels through Babylonia and records that the people had no temples or alters, nor did they sacrifice animals. Two hundred and twenty years later when Alexander conquers Babylonia the first thing he does is restore the temples, which had been abandoned. This shows that change had taken place by imparting knowledge, by speaking and not by force.

The Iranian culture was true to the meaning of the word culture. **Improvement by mental or physical training; Intellectual development.**

The progress of the world towards perfection was disrupted by Aristotle, who was a sinister product of the Iranian Culture. It was he who as a teacher of Alexander advised him - "If you destroy the Persians you will have destroyed one of the pillars of excellence in the world." Alexander symbolically destroyed Persipolis the cultural capital of the Iranians while he spared Sush the political capital. The next step taken by Alexander was to send thirty thousand Iranian youth to Rome to be trained in the Roman way of life. Slowly but steadily the period of stagnation was introduced into the Iranian culture and westernized.

Today the real meaning of the cultural symbols and festivals of ancient Iran are lost to its people who have become coping machines. Scholars tend to give Grecian meaning to what is left of the ancient culture even if they do not fall into place. For example Mehregan is connected to Mehr the god in Mitraism and even animals are sacrificed among some in Roman fashion.

Deep into the ancient culture lies tell tale signs of knowledge and progress, far from superstition. For that very reason the Iranian Culture has survived the forces of history and the changes in the beliefs of its people. Celebration of Nou Rouz, Tirgan, Mehregan, and Sadeh are related to the astronomical position of the earth. They are a proof of the high standard of knowledge in ancient Iran with regard to the position of the earth and the solar system.

Iranian cultural festivals were an occasion for happiness. Daryush the Great has left behind, written on stone, his belief that Ahura Mazda created Happiness for humans. Gahambars were to mark happy occasions in the agricultural cycle<sup>vii</sup>, but has lost its national appeal because they were converted to solemn religious functions connected with the dead. All these are proof of the **Intellectual development in Ancient Iran.**

Thus we may conclude that  
**Culture is Progress and Tradition is Stagnation.**

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<sup>i</sup> Paper presented by Dr. Susan Blackmore. She calls these transmitting entities as Meme. She argues that Memes have been and are a powerful force shaping our cultural evolution. (Scientific America Oct.2000)



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<sup>ii</sup> The Muqaddimah - An introduction to History - Ibn Khaldun Translated from Arabic by Franz Roesenthal, Princeton University Press.

<sup>iii</sup> Amordad means Free from the Fear of Death. It is achieved by individuals when they attain perfection - Khordad. See the description of the Seven Eternal Laws of Zarathushtra in Iran Zamin Vol-1 No.1&2.

<sup>iv</sup> History of Greek Philosophers by Luciano de Crescenzo Translated by Avril Bardoni, 1990 Pan Book)

<sup>v</sup> Pythagoras -Lover of Wisdom. By Ward Rutherford - The Acquarian Press Northamptonshire

<sup>vi</sup> The Greek Philosophers - from Thales to Aristotle. ByW.K.C. Guthire 1950-1972 Harper&Row Publishers.

<sup>vii</sup> There are six Ghambars as follows;

Hamas-path-maedem (equality of heat and cold). Sowing time March 16 to 20. Maidh-yo-zarema (mid spring) when fresh vegetables are in plenty. April 30 to May4.

Maidh-yo-shema (mid-summer) the time for harvesting corn. June 29 to July 3.

Paiti-shahem (harvesting of fruits). Sept. 12 through 16.

Aya-threm (sowing of winter crops) and that closes the summer season. Oct. 13 to 17.

Maidh-ya-rem (the period of perfect rest). January 1 to 5.