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**Culture in Iran:
the duality between
tradition and modernity**

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1. INTRODUCTION

The recent history of the Middle East has been characterized by a constant interaction with the West. The permeation experienced, whether desired or not has brought severe consequences on the relations between both geographical areas. It has been a coveted land for its oil and its resources, and overlooked in terms of its cultural legacy. Years of exerting influence on foreign countries by the main Western powers, has in some way contributed to the diminishment of the significance, importance, and in general the valuable cultural legacy of Middle Eastern countries, as an incessant influx of Western culture and values have aimed to make themselves room, creating a general sense of rejection towards this intromission. The West has made it seem as if modernity, development, and knowledge are intrinsic attributes of its own, being the reality quite far away from this narcissist assumption. Of course, the alignment of certain governments, and in some way the betrayal to their people and their own values, has made possible this permeation to a certain extent. It is no surprise that a deeply religious, nationalist and proud citizenship like Iran's, quickly felt how their traditions, their say over their land and their sovereignty was being taken away through an external and internal combination of interests far from the reality of their country. In response to what could be considered an attack on its culture and values, a fervent religious activity combined with a densely plural popular opinion arose against this attack.

The association between Western imperialism and modernity's positive aspects have certainly conditioned Iranian's future perspectives, as after the 1979 revolution, many of these aspects of modernity already embedded onto their daily lives were soon deemed illegal. The arts community in Iran experienced this repression very vividly with the arrival of censorship, the closing down of universities and thus the need to continue their artistic production either abroad or far from the government's eyes. The aim of this thesis is to offer a historical overview of Iran, the involvement of its population and rulers in the fields of the arts and the cultural exchange experienced, and to analyse the interaction with modernity, and its link to political interests. Henceforward, I will try and cover this interaction, before and after the revolution, as a way to affirm the compatibility, under whatever circumstances, demonstrating how the Iranian population has been able to embrace modernity and make it its own.

1.1. ULTIMATE PURPOSE

Iran's relevance in today's international system makes it a country worth to be studied. It is the country with the biggest Shia population in the world, it was considered a strategic location in the Middle East by Western powers, coveted for its resources and more recently under the attentive eyes of the international community for its uranium enrichment. However, the aim of this study is to pay attention to the artistic production that has been going on in this country for centuries, and which reveals a truly culturally rich country.

The years prior to the revolution saw a clear interaction between Iran and Western knowledge, as the Sha's favourable position towards the West permitted this permeation. The duality between tradition and modernity thus began. On the one hand, artists and academics benefited from the import of knowledge, as they could nurture themselves from the most avant-garde artistic practices being carried out in the West, as well as having access to the latest technological advancements. On the other hand, cultural imperialism somehow was also embedded into the country, creating a clash with millenary Iranian values and a big contrast with their reality. Despite this clash, the artistic communities inside the country have proved to be capable of managing that permeation for their own benefit without losing national elements on their artistic production. This has been the case after the revolution in the private domain, an interesting aspect which will be analysed to demonstrate that both interaction with modernity is inevitable and can certainly be positive and well managed.

Through this thesis an accurate image of Iran's artistic tradition will be given, while at the same time highlighting the country's cultural activity today and the different restrictions faced and overcome by artists.

1.2. STATE OF THE QUESTION

Among the different museums in the world that hold Iranian art pieces, New York's Metropolitan Museum has certainly covered most of Persia's dynasties and their involvement in the promotion of the arts, having documented and carried out exhibitions on the arts from the different sultanates. The literature available on art in Iran before and after the revolution is certainly extensive. From Robert Gluck's documentation of the Shiraz Arts Festival which brought avant-garde artists as well as eastern musicians together with Iranian culture; to Talinn Grigor's contributions on Iranian contemporary art; to the role played by organizations like ARTICLE 19 to highlight both the valuable artistic practices inside the country as well as the censorship to which they are being exposed today.

In terms of portraying an accurate and well documented image of the country, certain authors have contributed enormously to this point. Nikki R. Keddie's *Modern Iran* (2013) is a perfect document which covers Iran's most significant events and issues. From the role of religion and society in the 1800's to a linear historical narration which covers extensively the years of the Pahlavi dynasty, the 1979 revolution, the years after, and the policies and political system left after it, without leaving aside the importance of cultural and intellectual life. Among the different arts that could be covered in these thesis, music will be the main focus; this is due to the author's personal interest as well as to the literature available on the topic. In this sense, Laudan Nooshin's contribution portraying an accurate image of the country's musical scene was essential. Either through her essay on underground rock bands *Underground, Overground* (2005) to her chapter *Subversion and Countersubversion: Power, Control and Meaning in the New Iranian Pop Music* (2005) which perfectly connected the country's music scene with its politics, and which contributed enormously to the realization of this thesis. For further reading on the relation between politics and music in Iran, Nahid Siamdoust's *Soundtrack of the Revolution* (2017) was also essential to obtain a detailed perception of the current situation in the country.

Milani's book *Lost Wisdom: Rethinking Modernity in Iran* (2004) was an essential reading for acquiring an appropriate insight of the interaction of Iran with modernity, as the book explores this interaction taking into consideration multiple disciplines. The book

offers and explanation for the development of Shiite fundamentalism and rejects the general assumption of modernity being an exclusive feature of the best, contrary to what is generally assumed. In this book, the chapter named *Shadman's Modernity. Integrating East and West* (which summarizes the teachings of Seyyed Fakhr al-Din Shadman, an Iranian intellectual's intellectual) was particularly useful as it offered a subtle explanation of the dogmatic Islam and its encounter with modernity and the obstacle it supposed to Iran, while praising the Persian heritage.

While exploring the duality between tradition and modernity, one of the most beneficial readings for this study was definitely Jamshid Behnam's chapter *Iranian Society, Modernity, and Globalization* (2004) in which he presented the duality and contextualized it within the different thoughts inside the country as well as with the moment in time. Furthermore, the image obtained would have been less nurtured without the words of certain contemporary Iranian artists like Alireza Farhang, or the talks given by Ata Ebtekar, Siavash Amini or Sara Bigdelli Shamoo who are currently involved in the musical scene of the country.

1.3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As the thesis is mainly a historical overview of Iranian Culture where certain elements and situations are analysed, there are no defined theoretical frameworks used for this thesis. However, there are some theories that may be useful for a better understanding of this thesis.

The juxtaposition between Orientalism and Occidentosis is certainly appropriate for this thesis. While Orientalism could be described as the Western approach to the East and the depiction of these cultures, usually done with a patronising attitude (Said, 1979), Occidentosis defined by Jalal Al-I Ahmad, might be the Iranian response to this attitude, and the way in which traditional religious sectors of society looked at the West. While Orientalism is more focused on the study of Eastern cultures, Occidentosis serves more as a response to Western permeation, and relates it to a certain form of intoxication. If Orientalism looks for the acquisition of knowledge, Occidentosis rejects anything coming

from the West for their incompatibility with their own values, mainly derived from the Islamic tradition.

Another important theoretical approach in this thesis would be the consideration of the linear notion of history as a determinant factor for the encounter between the East and the West, outlined by Behnam (2004). In this notion, it is assumed that all countries must go through the same stages as developed countries and that this process will gradually make all countries uniform. This notion, connected with the arrival of modernity, contributes to the rejection of Western values, as there are certain elements which certainly clash with Iranian values and customs, but at the same time rejects other factors of modernity which may not necessarily be detrimental. In this sense the ideas of tradition and modernity are confined to remain in opposite poles. The interaction between tradition in the sense of millenary customs and values, usually linked to religion, and the more advanced aspects of modernity, like technology and the transfer of knowledge are also features under analysis to explore their compatibility or incompatibility.

1.4. AIMS, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND WORK METHODOLOGY

As part of the realization of this thesis, one of the main aims was to explore Iran's cultural legacy in order to both portray and obtain an accurate image of the country's arts scene, as well as the aim to see the extent to which its interaction with modernity has been a constant during Iranian history. By presenting different moments in history and significant events, this thesis tries to convey the idea of the cultural richness available in Iran. It is through events like the Shiraz Arts Festival which took place from 1967 to 1977 through which interaction with modernity is explored. The outcome of this interaction is somehow crucial to see to what extent are really tradition and modernity compatible. The fact that contemporary artists like Darius Dolat Shahi obtained knowledge from the West and were able to use it and adapt it for its own purpose creating one of the most well-known pieces of music combining classical Persian instruments and the most advanced electronics for that time in year, prove that they may be compatible. Of course, attention has also been paid to other contemporary artists to prove if this interaction is still possible nowadays. The case of artists like Ata Ebtekar prove these considerations to be on the right track.

Furthermore, the aim of this thesis has been also to partially explore Iran's underground scene. In this thesis the main focus has been on music, due to a lack of time and space. By exploring this scene, different approaches to the West have been explored as well as different ways of escaping or overcoming censorship. Despite the difficulty to predict a current trend in terms of repression or openness, this research aims to portray Iran's current cultural direction

The main idea behind this thesis was to offer a historical overview which connected different policies and the politics involved in everyday life together with the arts in Iran. The connection between crucial historical events and certain crucial events in the field of the arts are the main ways through which the duality between tradition and modernity is explored. The work methodology was initially focused on gathering information from various sources, which could enable the author to obtain a contrasted perspective. Both a historical overview, and an insight on the current music scene in the country were crucial to obtain a contrastive analysis. These sources were analysed and used to answer the fundamental questions of this study as well as being essential to obtain a conclusion on whether tradition and modernity may be compatible in Iran.

2. CULTURE IN IRAN: THE DUALITY BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY

2.1. TRADITION AND MODERNITY DURING THE PAHLAVI DYNASTY

Succeeding dynasties, migrations flows and a constant interaction between different cultures have in some way shaped the development of the country that we know today as Iran. What has seemed to vary the most in its history is the interaction with modernity and how leaders have confronted it, to a more or less successful degree. This interaction can be perceived through the country's artistic practices, and the aim of the analysis is to highlight the politics involved in this process, the possibility of disassociation between art and politics and the link between art and the cross-section of tradition and modernity.

2.1.1. IRAN'S CULTURAL LEGACY

The history of Iran, once known as Persia, if looked at closely, reveals a rich and vibrant cultural legacy, also associated with openness, diversity and cultural richness. Even before the arrival of Islam, during the time of Cyrus the Great (c.590 or c.580- 529 B.C.), the Persian empire was "a paragon of religious and cultural tolerance" (Milani, 2004, p. 12). Milani comments how there is even some consensus among historians which agree on the fact that he was the first ruler to ever establish a declaration of human rights, a millennium before the Magna Carta. Cyrus is also believed to have been "the first ruler to create a truly multi-cultural empire" (p. 12). as its citizens where allowed to maintain their own religion, language and cultural customs, which allowed the convergence of different ways of thinking, typical of today's modern Western societies, and from which Persia and its citizens where able to benefit at a very early stage in history.

Prior to the Arab conquest, different dynasties succeeded each other bridging cultural elements and knowledge from each other. If we look back at the Acheamenid Empire, which developed from 550 to 331 B.C., it was responsible for continuing and perfecting "on a far large scale than had ever been known, the ordering and interchange

of an imperial state whose begging's had been traced by the Babylonians and Assyrians" (Avery, 1971, p. 5). Cyrus and Darius (c.550-486 B.C.), where responsible for creating what could be considered as a system very closely linked to the modern cosmopolitan state. This tolerance, and thus the contact between different cultures did also have an effect on artistic practices which where latter translated onto some of the most well-known capitals of the territory. To begin with, the words used for art in Persian denote several meanings that reveal its intrinsic nature on Iranian culture and customs, and its connection to all aspects of life. According to Sayyed Hossein Nasr, the words *fann*, *hunar* and *san'at* each hide a meaning which connect art and everyday life. *Fann* can be understood as "the correct manner of doing it", *hunar* makes reference to "a particular skill or art" and *san'at* is used to refer to technology but in "crafts which are identical with the plastic arts" (Nasr,1971, p.19). Art in ancient Persia was mainly present in the sacred realm, manifested in buildings and architectural oeuvres. If we take as an example the ancient capital of the Acheamenid Empire, the mighty Persepolis, experts have asserted how "its architecture, combining eclectic influences from many corners of the globe, exemplifies the genius of the Persian spirit" (Milani, 2004, p. 14). This serves as an ancient example of how Persia and its dynasties not only incorporated but profited from the different cultures it encountered, adding its unique distinctive touch. The ability and desire of not only embracing and using the influence brought from different cultures, but their distinctly ability to make "'borrowing' fresh" (Avery, 1971, p. 7) adapting it to its own culture and going beyond a mere copy, are unquestionable characteristics of Iranian artists. Avery goes even further to affirm that from Herodotus onwards, "Iranian adaptability and quickness to borrow from others have frequently been commented on" (Avery, 1971, p. 8).

In addition, Iranian history demonstrates its involvement and its influential legacy in the fields of arts. From the Selujq sultanate (ca.1040-1196) in Iran and its promotion of the arts, with its subsequent impact on later artistic practices. The Safavids under Shah 'Abbas (r.1587-1629) and its relation with the European commercial expansion (1600-1800) which saw Iran participating in a larger economy dominated by the fruitful economic exchange obtained from the arts as well as an exchange in influences which "encouraged the growth of local crafts" (Sardar, 2003). Or the Qajar dynasty (1779-1924) which introduced new techniques to Persian arts but also returned to the cultural foundations laid by the Acheamenids (Ekhtiar & Sardar, 2004), experiencing a

complementary development of the arts between development and tradition. All these periods serve as an example of the Iranian intrinsic ability to mix different cultural elements for the sake of new achievements, and prove the compatibility of tradition and what could have then been considered as modernity. All these exchanges, interactions and the artistic nourishment experienced along its history, demonstrate that the territory which has encompassed Iran has definitely been a cultural crossroads.

2.1.2. TRADITION, MODERNITY AND WESTERNIZATION

The confrontation between tradition and modernity and the subsequent association of the later with Westernization and the development of social rejection towards the West are all outcomes of certain policies, interpretations and a failure to embrace compatibility, which have shaped the modern history of Iran. After the industrial revolution and through the development of the capitalist system modernity acquired a meaning and a deep association with the West. Development thus, the “mythical foundation of modernity that denotes gradual transformation towards an ideal human society” (Behnam, 2004, p. 4) was closely linked to modernity, and associated with ideas like freedom and equity, towards which most Iranians were favourable to fight against underdevelopment and the corrupt monarchy. However, the ascendance of Reza Shah to power (1921), and the creation of a centralized bureaucracy and the pursuit of a cultural Westernization created the general feeling that this development was “superimposed from above” (Behnam, 2004, p. 5) and began to enter into a conflict with Iranian identity and values.

Behnam also highlights two important factors of misinterpretation which contributed to generate this resentment towards the West. On the one hand it is what he calls the linear notion of history, in which it is assumed that all countries must pass through the same stages as the developed countries and that through this process “the characteristic of these societies would transform into something similar to those of developed countries” (Behnam, 2004, p. 7) which would imply advances such as innovation and creativity but as well accepting features of Western development like democracy and the separation of politics and religion, the latter one greatly rejected by most. On the other hand, the dual notion of the world, assumes that traditional and modern societies are placed at opposite poles, assuming that the Western are modern, and the third

world countries are traditional. However, even though it could be underlined that “development and modernity are grounded in modern science and technology that today are found in the West” (Behnam, 2004, p. 13) they could have been found in the past in other places of the world like China, India or even Iran. Thus today we tend to assume that they are inherent features to the West, when the West is basically just the “current custodian of these heritage of humanity” (p. 13).

In order to confront this approximation to the West and its values, and due to the inability to achieve compatibility between both the Iranian leaders and its society, this approximation began generating concerns about a loss of identity in the country. This loss, pushed many intellectuals to advocate for a return to the past, “a return to the tradition and religion, and even to nostalgia for simple village life” (Behnam, 2004, p. 6). Thus, the solution found was returning to the past life and the rural values and its connection to Islam, and this way of life was even idealized and evolved onto a cultural romanticism. Milani (2013) has argued that religious forces developed a nativist response to modernity which “hid its inherently anti-democratic sentiment in the garb of a fuzzy an eclectic anti-colonial rhetoric” (Milani, 2013, p. 11). This, combined with the escalation of the “concentration of political power and curtailed political freedom” (Behnam, 2004, p. 6), the questioning of the policies of the Shah during the 60’s and 70’s, in which modernization became a priority, and the questionable legitimacy of the government, contributed to the association between modernity and Westernization. This resulted on the creation of a logic which associated being anti-government with being anti-modernity, and at the same time modernity, due to the priority it was given by the government, became “interchangeable with Westernization in the public eye (Behnam, 2004, p. 6). This rejection of Westernization even led many authors and intellectuals to write about Westernization as a sort of intoxication. The most notable and well-known publication about this Westernization is Jalal Al-e Ahmad’s *Gharbzadegi*, which has been translated as “Occidentosis” in which its author compares it to a disease and its ability to spread, while highlighting its poles, being one composed by Europe, Soviet Russia and North America and the other by Asia and Africa, as well as mentioning some of their weapons or tools, in which he mentions organizations like the FAO or the UN, or mentioning the “Earliest signs of the Illness” (Al-e Ahmad, 1973).

Milani (2013) goes further to comment that “nineteenth-century encounters with modernity and with the all-powerful West caused a crisis of identity, and as expected, the crisis soon manifested itself in language” (Milani, 2013, p. 74). In parallel, in the West we could see that modernity was linked to national languages, as can be noted in Shakespeare’s influence to the English language, which not only contributed to its development but to the assertion and deepening of national identity. Thus he underlines the important relation between language and national identity, something that Iranians seemed to have forgotten. As cited by Milani, Sayyed Fakr-al-Din Shadman, the enlightened cultural critic who also served as cabinet minister, argued that “learning Persian is the first condition for our future progress” and that if thought is not articulated through an own language it may lose all what is implicit to the language: history, tradition and culture. As the author comments, “language is not merely a tool of thought, but an essential component of it” (Milani, 2013, p. 74). Shadman also comments how in schools, they seemed to have “forgotten that Persian and not Arabic is their native tongue” (cited by Milani, 2004, p. 74) and wonder why scholars do not write books in Persian. And despite his unconditional love of the Persian language, and his continuous praising to the language, which he insisted on having the “best poetry in the world” (said by a man who mastered English, French, Arabic and Persian), he also accepted the flaws and limitations of his own language, especially in the fields of science and technology. He knew they had “never had a complete scientific language” and that Persian is “ill-equipped to convey specific scientific concepts” (cited by Milani, 2004, p. 75) and that a solution should be found, especially in a time when scientific and technological discoveries are world driving motors. Shadman was keen, as he knew its importance, to the incorporation of certain concepts to the Persian language, which resulted on the creation of Persian words which could describe these concepts. Furthermore, the author believed that “Persians must learn to distinguish modernity’s genuine promises and accomplishment from its deceptive temptations” (Milani, 2004, p. 81) and that for this it is essential to have critical and sceptical rationalism, as well as mastering the Persian language, having profound knowledge of both Western and oriental culture, and a society which is deeply engaged in the cultural change. Such genuine promises were grasped by certain Iranians, especially in the fields of the arts, who did not limit themselves with this continuous confrontation of tradition and modernity, but rather embraced the advantages of both. The realization of this embracement of tradition and modernity can be seen in a particular event which took place during the last years of the Pahlavi dynasty, the Shiraz Arts

Festival, in which Western avant-garde artistic practices were complemented by the richness of the cultural tradition of Iran.

2.1.3. THE SHIRAZ ARTS FESTIVAL

The Shiraz Arts Festival, held for eleven consecutive years from 1967 to 1977 in the millenary city of Persepolis, was a festival dedicated to arts such as dance, theatre and music, and was able to merge the most traditional aspects of Iranian traditional artistic practices and the most avant-garde Western and technological aspects of the time. Traditional Persian music, dance and drama, for example the Persian passion play *ta'ziyeh* (“mourning” or “consolation”) (Gluck, 2007) which portrayed the founding events of Shi’a Islam, shared stage and audience with Western artists like the Merce Cunningham Dance Company and its avant-garde approach to dance, with experimental musicians like John Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen or Iannis Xenakis, as well as with other non-Western acts like a Balinese gamelan ensemble or the Senegalese National Ballet (Gluck, 2007). This created a fertile ground for cultural exchange, which was able to influence artists and audience alike from different nations, enabling them to create and to understand far away from political borders and constructions.

Such events, despite a part of the audience being composed by the Iranian political and cultural elite, as well as foreign visitors and dignitaries (Gluck, 2007), were able to influence a new generation of Iranian artists, in particular several music composers. One of the most outstanding Iranian composers influenced by the Festival was Darius Dolat-shahi, who initially attended the festival as a mere attendant and was eventually able to perform his pieces. Dolat-shahi eventually became a teacher in the Teheran Conservatory until he was able to further develop his studies, gearing himself towards the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Centre in New York, with the aim of acquiring the necessary knowledge in order to transfer it to future Iranian musicians. Both the Festival, the ability to study abroad and his traditional musical knowledge were materialized in his album *Electronic Music, Tar and Sehtar* (1985), which combined electronic musical elements, in line with what he had learned in Columbia, and the most traditional instruments and melodies from Iranian classical music. The figure of Dolat-shahi and his musical production, as well as the influence the Festival exerted on him, are clear examples of the

compatibility of modernity and tradition, if there is no aim to create a clash between them and if separated from political interests and impositions.

Unfortunately, the festival had its days numbered. As Gluck comments, “the Festival’s seeming demonstration of artistic and intellectual openness sharply contrasted with the lack of freedom experienced by Iranian people” (Gluck, 2007, p. 20), as well as the increasing economic crisis experienced in the country and the fact that the elimination of the secular opposition resulted on the increase of Islamic movements which saw the Festival as contrary to their traditional values, again in danger of Western penetration. At the same time, still under exile, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini¹ criticized the Festival by stating that “indecent acts have taken place in Shiraz” (Khomeini, 1977), forecasting the growing resentment towards the Shah and thus, towards anything associated with the West. On the other hand, when asked to perform again in the Festival, most of the dancers of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company refused to attend again despite Cunningham and Cage’s desire to repeat the experience in order to learn from the people rather than from unelected regimes towards which the boycott was aimed (Gluck, 2007). Iannis Xenakis who was selected to design the arts centre in Iran and who had in mind the creation of a Centre for Studies of Mathematical and Automated Music, eventually refused to collaborate with the regime for political reasons. He expressed his attachment to Iran and the pain experienced on refusing such a privilege, but highlighted that due to the “unnecessary police repression that the Shah and his government are inflicting on Iran’s youth, I am incapable of lending any moral guarantee, regardless of how fragile that may be, since it is a matter of artistic creation” (Xenakis, 2007, p. 57).

¹ **Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini** remained in exile from 1964 until 1979 for his criticism against the Sha’s reduction of religious states which sparked many riots across the country.

2.1.4. ROYAL DICTATORSHIP – LEANING TO THE WEST

The Pahlavi's approach to the West was not only cultural, its citizens could also experience it through the policies carried out prior to the revolution. The growing expenditure on military armament from 1972 onwards, favoured by the US, who saw Iran under the Shah as a potential policeman for the Gulf region, complemented by the rise in oil prices, had several consequences on Iranian ground. The increase in military expenditure also implied the construction of naval bases and building projects, for which most of the cement of the country was used, as solid spaces for military storage where needed (Keddie, 2003). The complex projects for military storage and the lack of local technological expertise, implied the import of foreign technical knowledge which was at the same time faced by a housing shortage which led to "overcrowding, shortages, inflation and anti-American feeling" (Keddie, 2003, p. 164) inside Iran. Inflation was a major concern which led to the appointment of Jamshid Amuzegar as Prime Minister in 1977, and through his deflationary program, though necessary, there was also a general increase in unemployment which contributed to the creation of a "classic pre-revolutionary situation" (Keddie, 2003). At the same time the decade of 1970 saw a confrontation to Westernization by "radical new interpretations of Shi'ism, particularly with Ali Shariati" (Keddie, 2003, p. 165).

Keddie comments that the increasing cultural Westernization of the Pahlavi dynasty created resentment from most of the Iranian citizenship from popular classes, the bazaars, and by the ulama² (Keddie, 2003). This process of Westernization and the monarchy's persistence to confirm its incompatibility with traditional values, and thus the inability to achieve development while maintaining those traditional values, was in fact the initiation of the breeding ground for the revolution. Nooshin sets as an example the role of the communications and the way in which they were used by Mohammed Reza in order to import this Western mentality no matter its compatibility or not with its society and their lifestyle. Nooshin comments that "the television in particular became a vehicle for promoting modernization, broadcasting a high percentage of imported (mostly American) programs that were disconnected from the reality of most people's life's" (Nooshin, 2005b, p. 233) contributing to the creation of a pure rejection from certain

² **Ulama:** clergy responsible for reasoning and interpreting Islam.

sectors of society against this imposed culture, which clearly clashed with the Iranian society's own personal realities and values. This continues to shed light on something that seems to have been a constant issue in Iran, the debate between the compatibility or incompatibility of tradition and modernity in Iranian society, and clearly the Shah's "insistence on the incompatibility" not only closed a highly necessary debate, but also created resentment among its population. This, together with the policies previously mentioned, contributed to the development of the already mentioned concept of "westoxication" or "occidentosis" and set the ground for a revolution.

Despite the fact that not all policies were a complete failure and the vast amount of wealth in resources from which Iran benefited, the directions of the government were clearly not successful. The industrial policies were partially successful and the rise of oil prices generated what could have been a prosperous economic uprising with the consequent ability to exert political influence. As Keddie (2013) comments, the rate of industrial growth was one of the highest in the world and the economic boom experienced from 1963 to the 1970's implied that the country's GNP per capita from \$200 to \$1000 in real terms. Theoretically this should have led to a diminishment of the gap between the rich and the poor, but instead the opposite became the reality. In addition, the "preferential policies towards the Western-style industries" and "the disfavouring of small craft and industries" (Keddie, 2013, p. 163) which were the ones able to create employment and to reduce income inequalities, contributed to the already present feeling of displeasure towards what had become a royal dictatorship with its eyes set on the west, and a vehement fantasy to become one of the top five world powers.

The Iranian Revolution shared many factors with other modern revolutions – such as the American, French, Russian or Chinese revolutions – such as the "inter-elite and inter-class struggles, development of new social groups and economic forces, which were blocked from access to power, economic turbulences and the impact of the international forces" (Amineh & Eisenstadt, 2007, p. 135). In the case of the Iranian revolution, it could have been predicted that the fierce contradictions that emerged during the Pahlavi Dynasty, would lead to an awakening of the Iranian citizenship. Amineh & Einstadt argue that "the contradictions between the development of many new modernized economic and professional classes, but at the same time denying them any political autonomy, any autonomous access to the political access to the political centre" (Amineh & Eisenstadt,

2007, p. 135) are more than sufficient reasons for the establishment of a fertile ground for the development of sentiments which rejected the Western intromission into the Iranian lifestyle. This resulted on the creation of a specific movement which aimed at overthrowing the corrupt regime, corrupt for empowering the established elites and for subverting deeply rooted millenary values and customs.

From 1977 onwards the opposition towards the Shah and his policies started to grow considerably. By late 1977 the opposition was still centred towards the publication of manifestos and letters to the Shah, such as the letter sent by 53 lawyers which demanded the formation of a special commission to ensure the independence of the judiciary from the legislative (Abrahamian, 1982). Intellectuals and writers with different political inclinations, from Marxists, to liberals, advocates of secularism and even the clergy began to demand jointly the overthrowing of the Shah and the arrival of the commander of the revolution, Ruhollah Khomeini. As of 1978, the Iranian citizenship started to demonstrate all throughout the country. Demonstrations were initially peaceful and held in Iran's main cities: Tehran, Qum, Isfahan, Mashhad, Ahwaz, Shiraz and Rasht (Abrahamian, 1982). With time, the peaceful component of the demonstrations faded away and the main targets during the demonstrations were identified. These were basically the signs of corruption of the government and anything with a link to the West: casinos, luxury hotels, police stations and foreign banks. As police repression augmented, and casualties augmented, more and more people joined the protests. Historian Charles Kurzman even comments that in the demonstrations against the Shah on the 10th and 11th of December 1978, up to a 10% of the country marched in the demonstrations, which could be considered as the "largest protest event in history" (Kurzman, 2004, p. 122). Despite his attempts of retaining control by appointing different opposition prime ministers, and his latest desire of just remaining in Iran, the Shah flew to Cairo on the 16th of January 1979 (Abrahamian, 1982). As a result, Khomeini returned to Iran on the 1st of February 1979 and was received by an estimated amount of three million supporters in the streets of Tehran (Abrahamian, 1982).

As it has been presented, Iran's history demonstrates an intrinsic ability to encounter, learn and incorporate elements from different cultures. The failure to embrace compatibility had its sprouts in the relation created between modernity and the West, and the insistence by certain sectors of Iranian society to deny the viability of incorporating

certain advantageous elements of modernity to their daily life. As seen through this chapter, specially through the example set by the Shiraz Arts Festival, Iran was capable of hosting a cultural mix in its grounds. In this Festival not only the most avant-garde musicians and artists from the west influenced Iranian artists, but the other way around, without forgetting the huge variety of artistic traditions present in the festival such as the Balinese gamelan ensemble, which prove that cultural permeation is not only exclusive to the approximation to the West. The Festival serves as an example of compatibility and of cultural exchange, reminiscent of the Persian past in which different cultures permeated in Iran. Of course it has also been made apparent that that the imposition of Western values together with high levels of corruption, political repression and foreign intrusive political interests are the perfect mix for the awakening of the Iranian citizenship.

2.2. THE 1979 REVOLUTION

The 1979 revolution in Iran signified the end of the reign of the Pahlavi Dynasty in Iran, and thus the change from rule based on a Constitutional Monarchy onto an Islamic Republic firmly rooted on the implementation of Sharia law as the basic guideline for the country, as a response to the Westernization that Iran had previously experienced. This revolution also contained an Islamic Cultural Revolution, due to the essential role that culture had taken for the development of a fertile revolutionary breeding ground. As Imam Ayatollah Khomeini claimed “the road to reform in a country goes through its culture, so one has to start with cultural reform” (Youssefzadeh, 2000, p. 37). A reform which would get rid of those modern Western-brought values - such as secularism or women’s suffrage - that the monarchy had embedded into Iranian society, and which were to be replaced by truly Islamic values. This of course had as well a severe effect on the arts communities and the universities, which were closed down for years until they could be set under a truly Islamic path.

One of the most important and distinctive aspects of this newly established Islamic Republic was the implementation of what is known as *Velayat-i Faqi*, which could be translated as the Government of the Islamic Jurist, who is the country’s Supreme Leader. This resonates with Shia Islam principles which consider that, after the death of the Prophet, only a few, especially those that belonged to the family of the Prophet, could rightly interpret the teachings of the Prophet and thus lead his legacy and its followers. As reflected in the essay *Art and Censorship in Iran* authored by the organization ARTICLE 19, Ayatollah Khomeini himself declared:

“Men would not be able to keep their ordained path and to enact God’s laws unless a trustworthy and protective individual (or power) were appointed over them with responsibility for this matter, to prevent them from stepping outside the sphere of the licit and transgressing the right of others” (Bahar, Fellow Silberberg, & Brown, 1993, p.10).

2.2.1. CULTURAL REVOLUTION

As in most revolutions, divergence in opinions of the participants of the revolution is nothing new, and the 1979 Iranian Revolution was no exception. But what did come as a surprise was the “unique leading role of the clerics” (Keddie, 2003, p. 240) after the revolution, who led a much more important role in the country’s politics than what had been envisioned by those supporters of the revolution. The plurality of views in the revolution ranged from leftists to liberals, all the way to the clerics, and their subsequent political parties. The first appointed governments did not reflect the ambitious plans Khomeini had in mind, but it was all a matter of time. Despite the leftist’s contributions to the revolution, they soon became one of the main targets of the Islamic Government, and were soon displaced from power. As Keddie comments, “the decade of Khomeini’s rule was marked by the ever-growing power of his followers and elimination, often by violence and despite resistance, of opposition groups, and by increasing enforcement of ideological and behavioural control on the population” (Keddie, 2003, p. 241).

Leftist political parties were one of the main targets of the increasingly powerful Islamic Government, and thus most leftists were forced out of their headquarters and took refuge in the universities (Keddie, 2003). Universities then became a forum for ideological debate, which increased Khomeini’s desire to purge these centres in order to direct them onto a straight path in accordance with Muslim values and beliefs. According to Malekzadeh, on the 12th of June 1980, Ayatollah Khomeini established the Headquarters for the Cultural Revolution which initiated what has been known as the Cultural Revolution (1980-1983) which had an initial aim of eliminating those Western aspects which had infected Iranian universities, though it was mainly considered to be a “play by the ruling authorities to consolidate their own power on campus” (Malekzadeh; 2016, p. 177). The aim of this revolution was to “Islamize” higher education centres, and thus to influence or even conduct the thought that could emerge from universities be it in the fields of the arts or the social sciences, constraining the artistic and academic production onto what was considered to be a truly Islamic path.

Shahrzad Mojab, professor at the University of Toronto, comments that a technique used to control the university campuses was the conduction of full checks on students' political loyalties. Therefore, students would only be admitted back in university after an investigation had been conducted. These investigations had to find proof that students had attended the mosque prior to the revolution or were loyal to Islam and the Islamic regime (Mojab, 2004). This contributed to the silencing of campuses and the inability for students which disliked the new regime to raise their voices against it as they "were no longer allowed to form any organization, write slogans, post any writing anywhere, or distribute literature" (Mojab, 2004, p. 1). As a result, Iranian universities experienced a severe modification and were limited to the guidelines enacted by the regime.

Furthermore, a real purge was made, through the established Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution. Both schools and universities were closed, with the aim of eliminating those inside the educational system which did not represent or foster Islamic values. According to Homa Omid, around 40,000 teachers were expelled or compulsorily retired, and all textbooks and material were to be revised in order to check if they transmitted truly Islamic values. As it may be obvious, this produced a huge shortage of teachers, both in primary, secondary and higher education, and created a gap in the citizens' education. The Islamic Government desire to provide free Islamic education therefore encountered considerable obstacles, due to its own policies.

It must also be commented that the Cultural Revolution coincided with the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) which, together with the revolution, had severe effects on the country's population. As Omid comments, "by the end of the decade 40 per cent of the population was illiterate and despite government attempts at opening up the university system, only 0.5 per cent of the population gained access to any form of tertiary education" (Omid, 1994, p. 177). All this combined with the growing population, increased the governments impossibility to supply a decent educational system and those who could afford it turned to the private educational system. Despite the future prospects of the revolution, the reality by the end of the decade was that the distribution of wealth remained practically unchanged, as "10 per cent of the people owned 64 percent of wealth" (Omid, 1994, p. 177) and these were the ones who could afford private education and that had previous connections with the West during the Shah's period. The

Cultural Revolution proved to be a failure, as education became inaccessible and despite the attempt to purge the flow of Western films and music, those who were wealthy enough continued to have access to those immoral materials (Omid, 1994). Even Khomeini's son had to admit that:

“All these anti-religious films, videos and music, these un-Islamic ways of dressing and these anti-Islamic books and magazines...they are leading our youths astray. If we are not careful the entire social culture will become anti-Islamic... Our unsuspecting youth is being lured away by the shiny tinsels of worldly materialism and self-centredness of careless living. The more we oppose these, the more they think it's fashionable to adopt these ungodly ways. We have failed to produce anything like as attractive a material to woo our youths back. We are losing our Populist touch. With our dear leader dead, our new leaders no longer queue in the bus stops, along with their people. The leadership is too busy amassing wealth and aping the West. We are in danger of losing our revolutions to Western values and ideas” (as cited by Omid, 1994).

2.2.2. OUTCOMES OF THE REVOLUTION

As pointed out in ARTICLE 19's essay, previously mentioned, the 1979 Constitution of Iran, declared that it is the Supreme Leader's duty to appoint the head of the judiciary, six of the twelve clergy members on the Council of Guardians, the commanders of all the armed forces, Friday prayer leaders, the head of the radio and television, plus having the final say on the President's election, which directly limits the Iranian citizenship desire and ability to influence the direction of their country. As commented previously, for the sake of controlling the cultural domain to which the Iranians would be exposed, the Supreme Cultural Revolution Council was created, meaning that all art forms such as “music, theatre, cinema and literature were to submit to the watchful eyes and firm hand of censorship” (ARTICLE 19, 2006, p. 7) of this council, which had also the ability to control the guidelines of all educational and research activities. Thus, through its different bodies, the government controls and monitors all the artist activities which are wished to be taught or carried out in the public domain. It is important to note that the control is mostly limited to the public domain, as exerting control over what happens behind closed doors in the private domain is a much more difficult task, and it is where most artistic practices inside the country have developed,

becoming the only space available for true freedom of expression. Today, this has been reinforced by the role that the Internet and technology play in modern societies, contributing to the empowerment of individuals with differentiating between the location, tradition, or any other factor which may concern the individual.

State censorship is without question a massive issue affecting the Iranian population, especially those involved with the arts scene, but another issue to which attention must be paid is to the role of self-censorship. When researching for this project we got in contact with some Iranian artists, with the intention of getting a better grasp of the reality in Iran. Despite the fact that most of the time we tried to get in contact, we did not get a response, while asking on the role of the Ministry of Culture and the censorship exerted to artists, the Iranian-French composer Alireza Farhang, commented that the Iranian society is a highly complex society, and that it was hard to understand it without living at the heart of society, as he believed that “none of written or told words can give you the right image of the reality”, but that most importantly you cannot talk about the Ministry of Culture “without understanding the huge variety of religious or non-religious beliefs that may be greater than censorship”.³ As commented previously, the revolution came in some way due to the inability to cope with those traditions that are fully embedded into the Iranian society, and for which they take much pride, so it would be an error to solely attribute censorship to the State institutions. Nevertheless, the role of the Ministry of Culture, through its guidelines and the amendments it makes to the artist’s work, has contributed to blur the line between what may be considered as state infused censorship and self-censorship. The essay by Article 19 affirms that it is quite hard to separate the words censorship and self-censorship in Iran as “both during the Shah’s reign and after the revolution, have firmly implanted a culture of censorship within Iranian society” (ARTICLE 19, 2006, p. 7).

Since the end of the revolution the role of the President of the Islamic Republic has become somehow atypical. In theory, the President is the second highest ranking official in Iran, though the fact that he is positioned below the Supreme Leader and its Council of Guardians, and thus to their will to preserve a truly Islamic governance, clearly limits the President’s margin of manoeuvre, and obviously also the citizens’ ability to

³ Personal e-mail correspondence with the artist on the 26/10/2017.

conduct the country on one way or another. This has led to the continuous confrontation between political factions that have either been categorized as reformists/liberals or conservatives. There is a clear link between the conservatives and the teachings of Khomeini, which has contributed to the maintenance of the conservative's influence in the country despite the several landslide victories that the reformist political candidates have obtained. Politically there have been alternating moments of repressions and relative opening. During Mohammad Khatami's term, starting in 1997 with a surprising victory where he obtained an approximate 80 per cent turn out (Alavi, 2005), liberalization was partially made a reality as the country experienced a certain degree of openness, and the "political debate was relatively unbridled, revolutionary dogma was more openly challenged and the nation was able to demand greater intellectual and artistic freedoms with less fear of punishment" (ARTICLE 19, 2006, p. 11). But, despite the intentions of reforming the country, Khatami's reforms were constantly undermined and it gave the impression that though the President was in office, it clearly did not have the power that is traditionally (or *Westernly*) associated to a President. Some have argued that due to the inability to compete or confront with the conservatives, clearly supported by the upper state structures, it did only contribute to put "a civilized face on an uncivilized regime in order to prolong its existence" (Sohrabi, 2006, p. 3), as internationally a less Islamic hard-line image was portrayed, but the power grip was still maintained by a strictly *sharia* inclined State apparatus. The alternation of power between conservatives and reformists will be later on developed, but in order to see the extent to which the Supreme Leader and the Guardian Council have the ultimate say, it is interesting to highlight that in the 2000 parliamentary elections, the reformists had won around three-quarters of seats, and thus tried to pass several reforms like a ban on torture, a Free Press Bill and to raise the legal age for marriage, and all these reforms were vetoed by the Council (Alavi, 2005). This story has been continuously repeated, thanks to the upper structures desire either to soften any reformist attempts or to favour the ability to rule of conservatives, which clearly indicates the situation of the country and the political climate to which Iranian citizens are exposed.

Of course the arts are no exception and were subject to the State's apparatus and their ability of repression. If we take music as an example, the theocracy began vastly legislating against "a wide range of musical activities, from public concerts to music classes" (Nooshin, 2005b, p. 238), setting a heavy burden towards not only mere citizens

who listened to music, but specially onto those who devoted their life and studies to music. Musicians were now restricted by the decisions of the Music Office at the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (*Ershād*), which is responsible “for issuing all necessary permits for recording, publication of music, licenses for production studios and educational centres, as well as concerts and all other music-related matters” (Siamdoust, 2017). As stated on the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance’s website, one of the responsibilities of the Deputy Minister in Arts Affairs, it to promote “the genuine aspect of the Islamic and Iranian Arts and cleansing them from alien elements” (Ministry of Culture & Islamic Guidance, 2018). Of course, the only permitted types of music were either religious or traditional music also known as *musiqi-e assil*, and any other music, especially if considered to have any connection with the West were prohibited, without mentioning music which contained either singing or dancing by women, and thus Western music and Iranian pop were deemed illegal in the newly established Islamic Republic of Iran (Nooshin, 2005b). It is understandable that the connection that existed between pop music and the West is unquestionable, and therefore the desirability to disassociate the newly created music with the Sha’s period. However, the strict approach taken by the theocracy rejected the fact that “traditional music was no longer able to meet the needs of an increasingly urbanized and cosmopolitan youth” (Nooshin, 2005b, p. 239). If the Sha and his policies had failed to understand the valuable and intrinsic elements of Iranian tradition, the new regime failed to embrace the inevitable modernity and “replaced one set of polarized discourses (Westernization at the expense of tradition) with another, which depended on a growing dislocation between modernity and tradition” (Halliday, 1996, p. 73). It is no surprise that even if some artists like the well-known Iranian Pop diva Googoosh (Fa’qeh Atashin) remained in Iran for some time after the revolution, though completely silenced by the ban on the solo female voice (Siamdoust, 2017) , most pop artists left Iran and went to Los Angeles, which eventually became “the focal point for an expatriate Iranian pop music industry” (Nooshin, 2005b, p. 238).

Nevertheless, two things have changed in the Iranian arts panorama in the following years. On the one hand the *Howzeh-ye*, the Music Centre for the Arts Domain, received an unprecedented support by Ali Khamenei, Iran’s current Supreme Leader, which has contributed to their ability to incite artistic production as they do not have to obtain permits as they count with their own supervisory councils (Siamdoust, 2017). This has contributed to the ability of Iranian musician’s like Mohsen Namjoon or the avant-

garde composer Alireza Mashayekhi to continue developing their arts inside the country. The other crucial factor in the art world in Iran, is the importance of the private domain, which has been reinforced and used as a refuge after the revolution by most censored artists which did not go into exile. If the public domain is constantly under supervision of the different bodies of the Supreme Council for Cultural Revolution, the private domain is where censorship can be escaped, and “the sharp divide between the private and the public... is exacerbated by private property laws that protect, at least in principle, home studios and home showrooms” (Grigor, 2014, p. 244) being the only places where Iranian censored art has experienced continuity after the revolution, and which has created what can be known as the Iranian Underground Scene.

2.3. MUSIC IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

Since the start of the 1979 Revolution, after the chaotic experience of the Cultural Revolution and the enormous repression suffered by the academic and artistic communities in particular, censorship through the Ministry of Culture and its different bodies has been shaped by the different political situations and presidential terms that have succeed each other. At the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1983, the country and its citizens were heavily influenced by the Iran Iraq war (1980-1988) which was even used as a “pretext to restrict music making” (Nooshin, 2005b, p. 242). The end of the war, the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 and the election of president Rafsanjani initiated a “process of social reform and the reestablishment of Iran’s international relationship” (Nooshin, 2005b, p. 245). The country experienced a political reconstruction which brought artistic renewal to the country. Galleries gradually reopened across the country (Keshmirshakan, 2015) and music concerts were starting to be allowed (Siamdoust, 2017) adding a relaxation to the country’s cultural sphere. However, the changes in government have greatly influenced the cultural domain. As Khalaji, Robertson & Aghdami (2011) have commented, “each president of the Islamic Republic of Iran has formed his own Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and they have all had different opinions concerning music” (Khalaji, Robertson & Aghdami, 2011, p. 68) which has contributed to a constant duality between openness and repression in Iran.

The era of reconstruction began under Rafsanjani’s presidency who pursued political and cultural openness throughout both terms. During the first term, with Mohammad Khatami as Minister of Culture, their attempts to include the plural views of society and to promote a diverse spectrum of cultural production was considered to be initially successful (Farhi, 2004),⁴ though it did not last long. Their desire to open up the Iranian cultural panorama, free from drastic religious interpretations, can be seen in the document issued in 1992 titled the *Cultural Principles of the Islamic Republic* in which they clearly stated that “a pragmatic approach to cultural issues was valued, and the task

⁴ The information cited was sourced from an article written by Farid Farhi in connection with her participation in the conference entitled “*Iran After 25 Years of Revolution: A Retrospective and a Look Ahead*” which was held at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars on November 16-17, 2004, an accessed from the Wilson Center web page.

of handling these issues and determining solutions should be left in the hands of experts not the clergy” (Farhi, 2004, p. 5) which clearly highlighted the more liberal approach of the Government, and which also explains the rejection expressed by the conservatives. Though conservatives initially tolerated the liberal sociocultural approach of the Government, towards the second term of Rafsanjani they increased pressure, forcing the resignation of Mohammad Khatami and eventually they were able to control the official sociocultural policies of the country from 1992 to 1997 (Farhi, 2004). Nevertheless, the conservative’s grip on power, their heavy censorship and their use of the Ministry as a “watchful eye of an ideological system” (Farhi; 2004, p. 7) eventually resulted on the election of Mohammad Khatami in 1997. His term was considered to be a “defining moment in Iranian cultural policy and artistic movements” (Keshmirshekan, 2015, p. 134) and even if conservatives still controlled over the radio and television, this did not prevent this more liberal Government from passing foreign movies or easing censorship, granting licences and promoting cultural actives in general (Farhi, 2004).

This was all reversed with the 2005 election of president Ahmadinejad whose “official attitude towards art echoed the first phase after the revolution” (Keshmirshekan, 2015, p. 138) and who used the judiciary as a tool to counter the cultural openness favoured by the Khatami era (Farhi, 2004). The situation today does not seem to differ much from previous ones, being rule based on a constant alternation and balance of power between reformist and conservatives which confront each other’s cultural policies. The actual president, Hassan Rouhani, initially pursued a more liberal approach towards culture, with Ali Jannati as Minister of Culture. Jannati’s policies contributed to the improvement of the quality of Iranian cinema and theatre, the suppression of cultural actives and to an increase of music concerts in Iran (Bozorgmehr, 2016). However, and it comes as no surprise, conservative’s constant pressure and criticism have contributed to Jannati’s resignation in 2016, and thus to the Governments new cultural direction (Bozorgmehr, 2016).

Instability and constant change in the cultural domain has been the reality in Iranian artist’s life since the arrival of the revolution up to today. All art forms have experienced a certain degree of openness and repression as reformists and conservatives have disputed the direction that the cultural sphere shall take. Under constant fear of contamination of Islamic values through more modern approaches to cultural practices

and the interaction with the international arts scene, conservatives have pressured for the continuity of the Islamic ideals pursued right after the revolution. However, the complex and varied society in Iran has expressed its desire to open itself without losing its strong national identity. If all artistic practices have experienced censorship to a certain extent, “music has been the most harshly repressed due to its historically controversial status within Islam and its association with the attempts made by the Shah to Westernise Iran” (Khalaji, Robertson, & Aghdami, 2011, p. 79). Nevertheless, this has not prevented different generations of Iranian musicians to engage in musical production and to spread their work through non-governmental mediums. As a result, an underground culture has been developed, creating an interconnected community on the fringes of society.

2.3.1. THE IRANIAN UNDERGROUND

The private domain in Iran has somehow acquired a special position in the country’s arts scene. Even if restrictions have prevented the manifestation of certain forms of art, this has not prevented artists from finding other ways to continue with their work. It is of particular interest for this study, the role played by the underground, and how artists have been able to escape either state censorship, self-censorship or rejection from society, rendering them a place without conventional limitations for the development of their arts. From theatre plays in underground thermal baths, to rock bands rehearsing and playing in basements, to private galleries, the private domain has contributed to the development of an alternative scene in Iran. As Talinn Grigor comments, the sharp divide between the public and the private domain has also been “exacerbated by private property laws that protect, at least in principle, home studios and home showrooms” (Grigor, 2014, p. 244). In some ways this is why the proliferation of art was not drastically summited to an end, as alternatives were possible because even if “artists were pressured and galleries were closed down, the constitution enables the ownership and running of private show rooms ... the selling and buying of that art ... and above all the flourishing of artists’ studios” (Grigor, 2014, p. 244). The only real limitation might be the actual artist’s own will to surpass those difficulties which they encounter, and in some cases it might even be a motivation as it “incites artists to be more creative and innovative, pushing the limitations each time a little further away” (Suyker, n.d., p. 1). Thus, art in its different forms, has continued its natural aspect to divulgate, though in less conventional ways that we are used to in the West. We must understand

that our own traditions and customs in the West do not match those of the Middle East, and thus the development of their arts and their promulgation will not match ours. We may assert that their artistic landscape, unquestionably rich and vibrant, is conditioned by their own reality.

During a lecture that took place in the Asia Society of New York in 2013, Rachel Cooper, the Director for Global Performing Arts and Special Cultural Initiatives of the Asia Society, recalled an experience she had while visiting Iran back in 2008 in an official visit. Despite her travel being focused on Iranian classical music, she encountered other experiences during the visit. Particularly she recalls being given a ride by one of the official's son, and it is there, in direct contact with the country's youth where it seemed that she had her first encounter with what can be considered as Iranian underground music. According to her testimony, immediately after entering the car the son started pulling out many cd's and told her that there was actually so many music-making going on in the country, but that it could not necessarily be found in the shops. This testimony can serve as an example of the involvement of the Iranian youth, despite the restrictions that may be faced by the Government, to continue the artistic production intrinsic to human beings. The lecture of the Asia Society was focused on Mohsen Namjoo, a well-known Iranian musician, and his relation with underground music in Iran. As we will see further on, what is called as underground music in Iran vastly differs from our conception of underground culture in the West, and has more to do with what we consider as pop or commercial music, which is of course closely related with Western musical genres. Namjoo, to begin with, states a crucial factor for this difference, and the reasons for the absence of pop in Islamic societies. He insists that their culture first of all does not have "the roots of mythology that bring some sense of collective festivities or carnivals" which could have led to these modern day practices. He points out that there is even no such figure as the one of Dionysus, and thus the possibility of Islamic cultures to embrace the idea of festivity in a similar way to the Western way is quite remote. Furthermore, he describes that what could be considered as underground music today in Iran is similar to alternative music that "needs to grow and develop different from the support and recognition of governmental units" (Asia Society , 2013).

The lack of such a “pop culture” and the leaning to the West encouraged by the Sha can explain both the desire of the Iranian society to embrace new cultures and its rejection by certain parts of society for its conflicting elements with their own traditional values. After the ban on music, “the illegally imported pop music of the 1980’s was a symbol of resistance, but it was a resistance by consumption rather than creation” (Rastovac, 2009, p. 74). Thus here began as well a subculture pegged to the difficulty to acquire or to produce commercial Western-led, but illegal, music. Iranian citizens and musicians could nurture themselves from both the superficial and the artistically valuable aspects of the influence of Western music, influencing and increasing the duality in what can be understood as underground music. While some argue that “many musicians experiment with a variety of musical styles such as blues, jazz, flamenco, among many other Western styles, as well as localized sounds – predominantly Persian lyrics” (Rastovac, 2009, p. 73) favouring the brilliantness of cultural exchange and that “much of the music being made by underground musicians goes beyond mere imitation” (Rastovac, 2009, p. 73), which gives an impression of a musically vibrant community, there are other features of the underground that reveal another connotation for this scene.

In Sanam Zahir’s essay titled *The Music of the Children of Revolution: The State of Music and Emergence of the Underground Music in the Islamic Republic of Iran with and Analysis of its Lyrical Content* (2008), the author reveals certain aspects of the Iranian underground scene more connected to what could be considered as a commercial scene to the eyes of the West, though deemed to remain underground for its transgressing messages. The author identifies three main underground scenes: the traditional, the entertainment and the engaged. The traditional underground is that which maintains certain national elements like language or Persian instruments but in a more modern way, as in the case of the incorporation of female singers which are generally not allowed to sing or perform in public. As Zahir (2008) comments, those who belong to the underground that are mostly connected to the entertainment, are those which may be more similar to today’s Western pop or trap music scenes, with a constant reference to themes such as sex and drugs, and thus unable to appear in the public sphere for its clear clash with Islamic values, though in proximity to the youth’s reality. Last but not least, the politically engaged underground in Iran is that composed by nationalist and politically aware musicians which mainly cover political themes in their lyrics, showing national pride in their lyrics by making references to the Iranian legacy such as the achievements

of Cyrus the Great, or which cover some of modern Iran's issues like Namjoo's song which makes reference to the scandal over the distribution of a sex tape of a well-known actress and photographer who eventually had to flee the country. In this sense, the Iranian underground music scene is hugely varied, as it embraces different types of music that have no real connection between each other, except the inability to obtain governmental acceptance.

Of course, it is named underground as it is both "metaphorically and physically" (Nooshin, 2005a) developed in the underground. As Nooshin points out in her essay "Underground Overground" it is in real basements where most rock bands continue to rehearse or perform due to their inability to access the public sphere and thus it is in this basements where transgression from the real world takes place and where wedding receptions and mixed parties are able to take place (Nooshin, 2005a). In contrast with the conception of the underground scene in the West, Iranian citizens and artists remain underground mainly due to their inability to either obtain permits to release or play their music in the public domain, or for reasons so simple as the inability to attend a mixed party or go *clubbing*. In the West, those that belong to underground scenes, are those that decide to remain as such, needing no mass recognition from the mass society to develop their arts and which in fact generally make no attempts of leaving the cultural underground circuit to which they belong. By contrast, most Iranian musicians do wish to obtain that mass recognition, mostly associated to commercial or pop music in the West. In "Underground Overground" Nooshin cites the testimony of the drummer of the band Amertad who explains that he does not think that being underground will satisfy them as they want to give concerts and have contact with people, which leads her to assert that "given the current trends, it seems likely that an increasing number of bands will shift from underground to overground" (Nooshin, 2005a; 22). So it could be asserted that the term "underground", at least from a Western perspective, however symbolic it may be of certain cases, does not fit properly the actual music scene of Iran as this music is actually "so widespread that it is quite 'aboveground'" (Siamdoust, 2017 ; 225) for its popularity among the Iranian citizens, and today we could actually make a distinction between underground and alternative music in Iran.

It is the alternative music scene in Iran which is recently experiencing a flourishing in the country, and specially in Tehran. By alternative we can refer to music that is both outside the main musical circuits, but as well disconnected from the commercial and superficial characteristics that may be part of the Iranian underground music. In this last part of the thesis I will mainly concentrate on the experimental music scene in Tehran due to the inability to cover any other arts or musical scenes operating either on the underground or alternative sphere.

During a panelled discussion held at Berlin's 2017 CTM Festival focused on Contemporary Sound in Iran, the festival invited some of Iran's most prominent sound artists: Ata Ebtekar, Sara Bigdeli Shamloo and Siavash Amini. Both Amini and Ebtekar are currently involved in developing the country's experimental music scene both through the organisation of a festival called SET and through several music performances around the city of Tehran. All participants coincided on the evolving process that the country is facing. Despite there being certain obvious restrictions: licences are always required in order to hold an event in the public sphere; the Ministry of Culture's stamp is indispensable for any artist wanting to release music; or the fact that, as Ebtekar (2017) mentions, "there are no clubs in Iran, there is no mixed dancing allowed" which contributes to ongoing development of parallel underground scenes far from the Government's eyes, they all agreed that there is much hope, as long as there is willingness, for the country's arts future. Even if licenses are required, they all agreed that it is certainly feasible to acquire them and that in most cases "they usually take around one week" (Amini, Bigdeli Shamloo, & Ebtekar, 2017). This probably has much to do with the fact that this scene's sound is predominantly without lyrics and even if it incorporates electronic sounds which may have been developed in the West, there is no close relation with the West. Even Namjoo mentioned in the Asia Society talk that "Tchaikovsky or Debussy's music was allowed on state TV" (Asia Society, 2013) as it contained no lyrics and did not contain those perverse elements associated with the West. Sara Bigdeli Shamloo even mentioned her experience performing music at a theatre play in Tehran where she was able to play for 40 nights and "it was legal, one of the best-selling theatre performances" which coincides with their positive views of the future in Iran (Amini, Bigdeli Shamloo, & Ebtekar, 2017). However, on an interview with *The Quietus*, Iranian musician Ash Koosha, compared the scene in Tehran and London and its obvious differences:

"The main difference is that here a musical event is a casual event. You listen to music, enjoy the arts and have fun. In Iran, it's not a casual event. It's well-prepared (if it's legal, and most Western music is illegal in Iran). So there's a huge element of stress. A lot of adrenalin is involved, regardless of whether you're a performer or an audience member. At any moment you could be arrested. It's an intense state of mind; you're always on edge. You think, 'what I'm doing is so big and so important. I could be arrested but I'm still here.' The idea of having fun and having a couple beers at a gig in Dalston really isn't the case in Iran. It's quite the opposite - it's a really big deal." (Koosha, 2016)

It is true that the country still faces many challenges, as for example both three musicians commented that you cannot buy music from iTunes or Bancamp in Iran and therefore the maintenance of the underground and alternative scene will be kept alive as far as governmental restrictions in the country are maintained. As we have seen, artists will inevitably encounter themselves with more or less restrictions in terms of artistic expression depending on the presidency, though for the time being, and according to the three artist's testimonies, there now seems to be a gradual opening.

As far as commenting on the direction or the development of this scene in the future, it is already too early to even attempt to make any predictions. Whether the government, through the Ministry of Culture's agents, is already following the steps of this scene and the musicians involved in it is yet unknown. For the time being, as stated by the participants of the 2017 CTM talk *Contemporary Sound in Iran*, licenses are being granted as some events were held during 2017 and Iranian experimental musicians continue to release music. It must also be taken into consideration that despite the aim of the Government to suppress any artistic practice, the role played by the Internet today grants individuals a much larger freedom than ever experienced before. Censorship can easily be escaped as the use of pseudonyms is common and hindering IP address traceability is more accessible than ever. However, as commented previously, the pressure exerted by the government greatly depends on the presidency and the flexibility granted by Iran's Supreme Leader.

3. CONCLUSION

Iranian history has demonstrated the feasibility of embracing and adapting knowledge from different parts of the world to its own reality. Centuries of cultural exchange, but more importantly, centuries through which Iranian culture has been developed and reinforced, have resulted on the creation of a rich and vibrant culture. The fields of the arts have especially benefited from the knowledge exchange, and the country itself has also benefited enormously either in the form of architecture, paintings or music, as well as from the diaspora around the world which has been able to expose the richness of Iranian art. Despite the political attempts to prevent its citizenship from “Western intoxication”, Iranian citizens have proved to be loyal to their culture, their roots and their legacy, with no need of a political establishment to dictate what they should or should not be influenced by. It has been apparent that pride for Iranian identity is very strong and the ability to incorporate elements from modernity to their own reality is something that has already been done and has worked for centuries.

Of course, as in most Middle Eastern countries, it has been hard to separate those positive elements in the form of knowledge and modernity that may have been brought from the West, as they have been brought together with political intrusiveness, greed for oil and as a consequence, an inevitable feeling of manipulation. As the deeply religious country that Iran is, foreign interference and the attack to its sovereignty have contributed to the awakening of radical Shi’ism and extreme interpretations focused on the need to retrieve the country to its ordained path. Internal corruption by a monarchy gripped to power in which transparency was conspicuous by its absence, plus the connection between modernity and the oppressive regime, are more than enough motives for the development of a fierce opposition towards anything from abroad. However, the Iranian society, while still firmly supportive of their own traditions and values, has demonstrated that the country and its citizens have nothing to fear from cultural permeation, as they will embrace it and make it their own.

For now, the direction of the country will be most probably uncertain due to the alternation in power, and the subsequent openness and repression, depending on the position of the president and the support or pressure on cultural policies exerted by liberals or conservatives. The secure and efflorescent space that the private domain, also

known as the underground, grants to artists will continue to generate different art forms, free from censorship, either from one self or from the government which will definitely contribute to the proliferation of art in the country and, thanks to the advances in communications and the facilities it has granted to the people, knowledge will be received and exchanged without possibility of repression.

Drawing from the information and opinion given by the participants of the talk on *Contemporary Sound in Iran* in 2017's CTM Festival, we may expect a brighter future for art in its different forms in Iran. For example, as they commented, licenses are being granted, it is possible to obtain permits and to publish new music inside the country. It may all be a matter of desire and wit to overcome restrictions. Artists will inevitably face difficulties, as they do anywhere else in the world, but what will make a difference is what it can be done about it. Certainly, the less superficial and the smarter the discourse of Iranian art, less difficulties will be faced. In this ever expanding globalized world we should not forget that our reality will not necessarily match others, and that a deep effort is always required to understand other countries, their customs, traditions, and ultimately their way of life and what is derived from it.

There are certain questions related to this research that remain open and which will be relevant to future studies. It would certainly be of great relevance to study to what extent the Government is trying to repress or not both the alternative and the more commercial underground scene in the country. If there is any pressure exerted on those undercover events which are being held far from the public sphere and on the contrary, what is the experience by those who hold them publicly. And of course, the future interaction with the West is something of great interest for this study, especially since the election of the latest American President and his unpredictable stance towards Middle Eastern countries. Due to the extension limit for this thesis, and also to the difficulty in accessing information on current issues concerning the arts sphere in Iran, these questions remain open for the moment for future researchers. For the time being, the arts world in Iran remains subject to the balance between artist's wit and the government's stance.

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