Ethnography of Iran: Past and Present

October 2-3, 2015
Green Hall, Bowl O-S-6
Princeton University
Conference Abstract

Ethnography of Iran undertakes the challenge of discerning the major theoretical and methodological innovations of the Iranian cultural area, past and present. The first goal of our conference is therefore to take stock of anthropological scholarship on Iran – its various strands, overlaps and disagreements – to kindle further development. Our second goal, however, is to take a fresh look at new research and ask: what theoretical ideas are coming out of the Iranian anthropology? Can the anthropology of Iran be reconceived as a unified field of ethnological study? And further, what can this field of research contribute to understandings of Iran, the Middle East, and the discipline itself? Finally, we aim to examine the anthropology of Iran against the backdrop of contemporary world politics. Given the tense climate of Iran/U.S. relations, how and to what extent (if at all) should anthropologists engage with policy makers? This conference convenes renowned scholars of Iran who conducted research before the 1979 Revolution together with more junior scholars who have conducted fieldwork in the post-revolutionary Islamic Republic.

Conference Convener:
Rose Wellman, Postdoctoral Researcher
The Sharmin and Bijan Mossavar-Rahmani Center for Iran and Persian Gulf Studies
Princeton University

Special Thanks To:
The Sharmin and Bijan Mossavar-Rahmani Center for Iran and Persian Gulf Studies
The Princeton Institute for International and Regional Studies (PIIRS)
The Department of Anthropology, Princeton University
Schedule of Events

DAY ONE

Friday, October 2, 2015

9:00 a.m. Registrants Arrive at Green Hall, Princeton University
Morning Refreshments Available in the Main Lobby

9:30 a.m. Welcome and Introduction
Green Hall, Bowl 0-S-6 (Ground Level)
Rose Wellman, Princeton University

9:40-11:50 a.m. Panel 1 – Pre-Revolutionary Ethnography of Iran: Modes of Inquiry, Continuity, and Change

9:40 a.m. Anne Betteridge
Shifting Possibilities and Predicaments: The Place of Shi’ism in Anthropological Efforts to Understand Iran and Iranian Women

10:00 a.m. Mary Elaine Hegland
In the Aftermath of the ‘Islamic Revolution’: Secularization Trends in an Iranian Settlement

10:20 a.m. 10-Minute Break

10:30 a.m. Brian Spooner
Ethnography in a Changing World

10:50 a.m. Erika Friedl
Fifty Years and Counting: Longitudinal Research in Boir Ahmad

11:10 a.m. Panelist Discussion of Papers

11:30 a.m. Open Discussion (Audience members invited to ask questions)

11:50 a.m. Buffet Lunch
Green Hall, 2-C-18 (Second Floor)
1:10-2:50 p.m.  Panel 2 – Post-Revolutionary Iran: Nostalgia, “New Exotics,” and the Politics of Research

1:10 p.m.  Rose Wellman
Writing Basiji Lives: Ethics, Happenstance, and the Making of Ethnographic Subjects

1:30 p.m.  Afsaneh Najmabadi
Ethnography of the Possible, Anxiety of the Exotic, and the Angel of History

1:50 p.m.  Fariba Adelkhah
Anthropology of Iran: Between What We Do and What We Hope

2:10 p.m.  Panelist Discussion of Papers

2:30 p.m.  Open Discussion (Audience members invited to ask questions)

2:50 p.m.  25-Minute Break, Light Refreshments Available

3:15-4:15 p.m.  Keynote Address
William O. Beeman, University of Minnesota
DAY TWO

Saturday, October 3, 2015

9:15 a.m. Registrants Arrive at Green Hall, Princeton University
          Morning Refreshments Available in the Main Lobby

9:45 a.m. Welcome and Overview of Day Two
          Green Hall, Bowl 0-S-6 (Ground Level)
          Rose Wellman, Princeton University

10:00-12:10 p.m. Panel 3 – New Research and Prospects I

10:00 a.m. Zuzanna Olszewska
            Revisiting Personhood in the Ethnography of Afghan Refugees In Iran

10:20 a.m. Setrag Manoukian
            Ethnography without Personhood: Experience and Poetry in Iran

10:40 a.m. 10-Minute Break

10:50 a.m. Arzoo Osanloo
            The Place of Forgiveness in Iranian Civil Society

11:10 a.m. Soheila Shahshahani
            The Response of Iranian Youth to the Many Dualities They Encounter: An Analysis of Their Short Stories

11:30 a.m. Panelist Discussion of Papers

11:50 a.m. Open Discussion (Audience members invited to ask questions)

12:10 p.m. Buffet Lunch
           Green Hall, 2-C-18 (Second Floor)

1:20-3:30 p.m. Panel 4 – New Research and Prospects II

1:20 p.m. Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi
            Six Days in March, Tehran, 1979: Hejāb, Global Sisterhood, Local Politics, and Women’s Rights
1:40 p.m. Narges Erami
The Raconteur and the Story of Rebirth

2:00 p.m. 10-Minute Break

2:10 p.m. Amina Tawasil
Challenges, Outcomes: Doing Ethnographic Fieldwork with the Howzevi (Seminarian) Women in Iran

2:30 p.m. Nahid Siamdoust
Iran's Counterpublic of Love

2:50 p.m. Panelist Discussion of Papers

3:10- 3:30 p.m. Open Discussion (Audience members invited to ask questions)

Public Portion of the Conference Ends
Participant Biographies

Fariba Adelkhah (Senior Research Fellow, Institut d'Études Politiques (Sciences Po), Paris)
Dr. Adelkhah is Senior Research Fellow at Sciences Po in Paris. She received her Ph.D. in anthropology from Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (1989). An anthropologist, her research focuses on the interplay between social change and political transformations throughout the second half of the 20th century in Iran. She has written a number of books on Islam and Iran, and her current research deals with the Iranian Diaspora. She is member of the editorial boards of Iranian Studies and Revue des Mondes Musulmans et de la Méditerranée. Her research focuses on political anthropology of Iranian society.

William O. Beeman (Professor of Anthropology, University of Minnesota)
Dr. Beeman’s interests include sociolinguistics and the semantics of interaction; cross-cultural comparison of theatrical and performance genres; opera; paralinguistic and nonlinguistic semiotics; action anthropology; philosophic anthropology; peasant and nomadic societies. For the purposes of this conference, he is an internationally known expert on the Middle East and the Islamic World, particularly Iran. He is further an advocate of action and public anthropology. Dr. Beeman will be giving the conference’s keynote address.

Anne Betteridge (Director, University of Arizona Center for Middle Eastern Studies)
An anthropologist with a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago, Anne Betteridge is a faculty member in the University of Arizona School of Middle Eastern & North African Studies. She served as Executive Director of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) from 1990-2002. Dr. Betteridge’s research focuses on Iranian culture, and women and ritual in particular. She conducted fieldwork and lived in Iran from late 1974 until early 1979, and has made three visits to Iran since that time. Dr. Betteridge now teaches a course on Iranian culture and society that is largely based on ethnographic works.

Narges Erami (Assistant Professor of Anthropology, Yale University)
Dr. Erami primarily works on the relationship between economy and religion and how it is played out in rituals of everyday life. Her work is centered in the Holy city of Qum in Iran. Her past research was a historical and ethnographic study of carpet merchants and the process of self-fashioning through the acquisition of specialized knowledge. Her current research continues to be focused in Qum, examining the cultural production of authority and knowledge through publications of Islamic texts and their global circulation. She is especially interested in the anthropology of the senses as it relates to subjecthood. Her courses include the anthropology of the Middle East and Iran; the ‘economic subject’; the anthropology of religion; field methods; and the politics of legitimacy and representation.
Erika Friedl (Professor Emeriti at Western Michigan University)
Together with Reinhold Loeffler (also professor emeriti at Western Michigan University), Dr. Friedl has visited a town in Boir Ahmad 14 times, before 1979 as well as since the Revolution. Starting in 1965, a pressing concern for the local people motivated the documentation of the traditional material culture and folklore. Among the first scholars to look at tribal life from the women’s points of view, she remains the only one with a book on tribal children’s culture. During an eight-year long hiatus of fieldwork due to lack of visas, matters of the people's philosophies of everyday life and the local culture’s choices for looking at the world and for living as expressed in proverbs, poetry and folktales became the main focus of her scholarly work, resulting in several publication.

Behrooz Ghamari (Professor of History and Sociology, University of Illinois, Champagne-Urbana)
Dr. Ghamari is the author of a forthcoming book entitled, Foucault, the Iranian Revolution, and Enlightenment which advances a novel reading of Foucault’s writings on the Iranian Revolution and further shows how is encounter with the revolution informs his later lectures on ethics, spirituality, and enlightenment. The project explores the possibility of revolutionary politics outside the emancipatory frame of the project of Enlightenment.

Mary Elaine Hegland (Professor of Anthropology, Santa Clara University)
Dr. Hegland’s research centers on the Iranian Revolution of 1978-1979; women and gender in religion and politics in Iran; change and continuity in an Iranian village; and women and gender in Shia Muslim rituals in Pakistan. She recently published a book stemming from unprecedented longitudinal fieldwork: Days of Revolution: Political Unrest in an Iranian Village. Dr. Hegland has also conducted extensive ethnographic research in Turkey, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan.

Setrag Manoukian (Associate Professor of Islamic Studies and Anthropology, McGill)
Setrag Manoukian (PhD Michigan 2001, Anthropology and History) teaches at the Institute of Islamic Studies and the Department of Anthropology at McGill University in Montreal. He works on the anthropology and history of Iran and is the author of City of Knowledge in Twentieth Century Iran: Shiraz, History and Poetry (Routledge 2012).

Afsaneh Najmabadi (History and Studies of Women, Gender, and Sexuality, Harvard University)
Dr. Najmabadi’s latest book, Professing Selves: Transsexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Contemporary Iran (Duke University Press, 2014) was a finalist for Lambda Literary Award in 2014. In 2014, she received the Joan Kelly prize from the American Historical Association for best book in women’s history and feminist theory, and was a co-winner of 2015 John Boswell prize, LBGT History, American Historical Association. Her book, Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and
Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), received the 2005 Joan Kelly Memorial Prize from the American Historical Association.

Zuzanna Olszewska (Associate Professor in the Social Anthropology of the Middle East at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Oxford)

Dr. Olszewska specialises in the ethnography of Iran and Afghanistan, with a focus on Afghan refugees in Iran, the Persian-speaking Afghan diaspora, and the anthropology of literature and cultural production. She received her doctorate in Social Anthropology from the University of Oxford in 2010, and has held post-doctoral fellowships at St. John’s College (JRF, 2008-12) and LSE (LSE Fellow in Anthropology, 2012-13). Her doctoral research, to be published as a forthcoming book titled The Pearl of Dari: Poetry and Personhood among Young Afghans in Iran, was an ethnographic inquiry into how poetic activity reflects changes in youth subjectivity in an Afghan refugee community, based on work with an Afghan cultural organisation in Mashhad, Iran.

Arzoo Osanloo (Associate Professor at the University of Washington’s Law, Societies, and Justice Program)

Dr. Osanloo is an anthropologist who specializes in Iran and former practicing attorney who is interested in the fraught but often neglected relationship between “culture” and “rights.” She has published numerous articles in venues such as the American Ethnologist, Cultural Anthropology and Iranian Studies. Her book, The Politics of Women’s Rights in Iran was published in 2009 by Princeton University Press. Dr. Osanloo is currently working on a project that considers the Islamic mandate of forgiveness, compassion, and mercy in Iran’s criminal sanctioning system, jurisprudential scholarship, and everyday acts among pious Muslims.

Soheila Shahshahani (Associate Professor of Anthropology at Shahid Beheshti University in Tehran, Iran, and head of the department of Social Sciences).

Dr. Shahshahani is the editor in chief of the journal Anthropology of the Middle East (Berghahn publication) and Culture and Human Being (in Persian). She received her doctorate degree from the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research in New York in 1981. She was Senior Vice-President of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES) for eight years, and was on the editorial board of World Social Science Report of ISSC of Unesco (2010). In 2010 she started Commission on Anthropology of the Middle East within the IUAES. She is the author and editor of many articles, books, and volumes including The Four Seasons of the Sun, an ethnography of women of Oyun, a sedentarized village of the Mamassani pastoral nomads of Iran (1987), A Pictorial history of Iranian headdresses (1995), Meymand, we were one people one territory, an ethnographic study of a grotto-village (2005), Nomadic Peoples, Nomads and Nomadism in Post-revolutionary Iran (Vol 7, No.2, 2003), Body as medium of meaning (2004), and Cities of Pilgrimage (2009). She has recently finished, Clothing of Persia During the Qajar Reign 1779-1925, ready for publication (in English and Persian). Presently she is working on a website called Ethnic Iran, which will cover ethnic groups of Iran.
Nahid Siamdoust (Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies at New York University).

Dr. Siamdoust obtained her doctorate in Modern Middle Eastern Studies from the University of Oxford in 2013. Her dissertation examines the field of music production as a politically charged public sphere in post-revolutionary Iran. Titled “Iran’s Troubled Tunes: Music as Politics in the Islamic Republic,” it won the prizes for the best dissertation on any topic in Middle Eastern Studies from both the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies as well as the Middle East Studies Association. Her book “The Politics of Music in Iran” is forthcoming from Stanford University Press in 2016. Nahid's academic research focuses on the intersection between politics, culture and media (music included) in Iran and the wider Middle East.

Brian Spooner (Professor of Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania)

Dr. Spooner is a professor of anthropology and curator of Near Eastern Ethnology at the Penn Museum. He has written numerous articles, chapters, and books such as “Population Growth: Anthropological Implications”, and “Reading Nasta’liq: Persian and Urdu Hands, 1500 to the Present.” Dr. Spooner’s research interests regarding Iran have included the history of anthropology in Iran, rural development, pastoral nomadism, kinship, religion, ecology, Indo-Persian and Urdu.

Amina Tawasil (International Studies Institute, University of New Mexico)

Amina Tawasil holds a PhD in anthropology and education from Teachers College, Columbia University, and a master's degree in social sciences in education from Stanford University. She is currently a visiting lecturer at the International Studies Institute, University of New Mexico. Previously, she was the inaugural Andrew W. Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow in Middle East and North African Studies at Northwestern University, with a courtesy appointment in the Department of Anthropology (2013-2015). Her current research focus is on the intersection of women, Islamic education and the state. She completed ethnographic research on seminarian women (zanan-e howzeh) in Tehran to interrogate different ways of defining agency and empowerment. Her research interests specific to the Middle East are women’s education, women's Islamic education, and gender. Her general research interests are ‘slow’ work, apprenticeship, human trafficking, labor migration, and incarceration.

Rose Wellman (Postdoctoral Researcher, the Sharmin and Bijan Mossavar-Rahmani Center for Iran and Persian Gulf Studies, Princeton University)

Dr. Wellman is a postdoctoral researcher at the Sharmin and Bijan Mossavar-Rahmani Center for Iran and Persian Gulf Studies at Princeton University who specializes in Iran and the Middle East. Between 2007 and 2010, she conducted 15 months of ethnographic research in Iran, including 10 months in a small town outside of Shiraz. Rose Wellman's current book project, tentatively titled *Family, Shi'ism, and the Making of Post-Revolutionary Iran*, examines the lives of rural Iranian families with ties the Islamic Revolution and Iran-Iraq War (here, Basijis). This work adapts the anthropology of ethics, kinship and relatedness, material religion, and food to explore the conjunctions of kinship and nation-making at a granular, micro-processual level.
It contributes a much-needed, humanistic portrait of contemporary Shi’i Iranian sociality. Dr. Wellman received her Ph.D. in Anthropology from the University of Virginia in May 2014.
Participant Abstracts

Anthropology of Iran: Between What We Do and What We Hope
By Fariba Adelkhah

My paper tempts to both clarify my understanding of anthropology and the way I practice it throughout my fieldworks. I am aware this is rather a sketchy answer to your question. Being anthropologist does not free us from romantic ideas. Analyses of the Iranian society are often framed by good intentions, expectations of a better society that would limit disparities and enhance democratic practices.

Of course, we should go beyond these categories. Ethnographic research through fieldworks should help to reconstruct the discourses and agency of actors and their contextual dialectics. Practices and discourses have to be taken for what they are, before any attempt to interpret them in an anthropological analysis. By only doing this, one has a good chance to identify trends that challenge a status quo and those that are often labelled negative by researchers themselves. In that sense, ethnographic studies are at the crossroad of all questions related to what does exist, what can be expected and should somewhat answer them.

To make my views clearer, my paper analyses the various terms and labels used by Iranian stakeholders and actors in the international community to describe financial flows generated by economic activities such as smuggling or speculation practiced by limited partnership companies. Interestingly, Islamic Republic of Iran's authorities label these flows by using the international term (“dirty money”) and not a religious word (“haram”). Behind this nuance, one can identify a specific logic grounded in the history of economic liberalisation in Iran and its paradoxical acceptance of an international realm.

Shifting Possibilities and Predicaments: The Place of Shi’ism in Anthropological Efforts to Understand Iran and Iranian Women
By Anne Betteridge

In planning to conduct research on pilgrimage to local shrines in Shiraz in the 1970s, I received conflicting advice from faculty members and fellow students, much of it determined by notions of the place and nature of religion in Iran. I was variously counseled to follow my lights and do the study I had in mind; not to study religion, which was of little importance in Iran; that it would be impossible for me to interview clerics—after all, they wouldn't even shake hands with me; and wished good luck in trying to figure anything out because there are as many Islams as Muslims. As it turned out, Shi‘i Islam was of some importance in Iran; one doesn't need to shake hands in order to conduct an interview; and some general remarks can be made about religion, with due attention to variety. In the 1970s, a number of researchers devoted attention to various aspects of the practice of Shi‘ism, providing a foundation and, to some extent, baseline for future research. My focus on Shi‘i local pilgrimage led me inevitably to participation in a wide range of women's religious activities and to interest in their significance more generally. The challenges of studying religion and Shi‘i women’s involvement in religion in Iran, and of helping others to understand them, altered substantially once religion came to define Iran in many arenas after 1978. This fact has important implications for research, teaching, and for public engagement in efforts to help others understand Iran.
The Raconteur and the Story of Rebirth
By Narges Erami

In this presentation I recount the story of a ex-cleric who is the de facto leader of the local Narcotics Anonymous (NA) chapter in the Holy City of Qum. In 1998 he is imprisoned for buying and selling heroin. He is subsequently de-robed through a clerical court. His time in prison transforms him as a preacher of reformed lives. Unofficially the seminary in Qum encourages his activity and helps fund his activities in prison. He leaves incarceration with a renewed sense of his role as a cleric. He never stops thinking of himself as a mu‘ānam. Members of NA and their families appreciate his role as a preacher and his personal story becomes a source of adulation. Muhammad, who preferred to be called simply by his first name without an honorific and always correcting those who called him haji or aqa, connects his story of rebirth to that of the Islamic Revolution and the city of Qum. On the one hand, Muhammad’s story and the NGO simply known as Rebirth or tavalud-i dawbarh is a new venture in combatting narcotics addiction. In other ways, it is a story of community building and the significance of the storyteller in the figure of a preacher. I trace this story as a genre of research in Iran laying emphasis on story-telling and ethnography as both ephemera and epiphenomenal in its alterity.

Fifty Years and Counting: Longitudinal Research in Boir Ahmad
By Erika Friedl

Ethnographic research over five decades in one place turns ethnography into a knotty problem of historiography, of how to deal with ongoing change. For anthropologists, trained as we are to focus on the fieldwork horizon and the ethnographic present, preparing data for analysis is relatively easy when the topic is current and fits a narrow time frame. But when we are in for the long haul the inevitable changes we witness turn into a heuristic problem with, at best, only ‘good enough’ solutions, as data become slippery and hard to squeeze into scholarship. People tend to change ‘facts’ when remembering them and then to act on these changed ‘facts,’ and now I, the ethnographer (as historian, as it were,) must decide what information by whom and when to privilege over others. While the ethnographic present turns into a blip of history, often an embarrassing or irrelevant one, I have to take sides and live with the consequences, and the scholarly enterprise becomes an ethical and practical conundrum. This philosophical problem is well known but understudied, and my recollections in the form of some examples will contribute to its discussion. The experiences and insights are consequences of my quiet fieldwork habits that let me listen for what makes people do what they do. Thereby I honor their seeming fickleness in remembering, can dig for the choices their culture provides for living, and can let the chips fall as they may.

Six Days in March, Tehran, 1979: Hejāb, Global Sisterhood, Local Politics, and Women’s Rights
By Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi

Through a historical ethnography, this paper traces the competing discourses that informed the controversial International Women’s Day rally in Tehran on March 8, 1979. The rally, its preparations and consequences, occurred at the historical trajectory of revolutionary politics, postcolonial sensibilities, patriarchal assertions, feminist interventions, and religio-cultural particularities. The interlocutors of the events in Tehran, from American and French feminists to
In the Aftermath of the ‘Islamic Revolution’: Secularization Trends in an Iranian Settlement  
By Mary Elaine Hegland

During the 1978, 1979 revolutionary period in Iran, a Shia Muslim framework was used by leaders to unify, organize, and motivate people into revolutionary activity. Research in Aliabad for an additional ten months between 2003 and 2014 has allowed investigation into how people's ideas and practices related to the central myth of Karbala and Islam in general have become transformed since that time. Tendencies of secularization are apparent, including: involvement in Muslim practices as followers of a religious figure unsupportive of the regime; practicing one's own Islam, irrespective of the regime's interpretation of Islam; observing Moharram rituals as cultural events; abstaining from self-flagellation with the attitude that these rituals are organized and owned by the regime and its agents for political or financial gain; refraining from observing Moharram as it is seen as irrelevant; avoiding Muslim rituals due to lack of interest and/or cynicism about the clerics running the country; accepting the need for advice from ayatollahs only regarding religious issues; dismissing ayatollahs and their authority due to their failure to live up to Muslim teachings; accepting only Imam Husein; dismissing the battle of Karbala as just one of the many fights among the early Arab tribes for power; seeing Islam as one among the various religions, which are to teach people to lead better lives, but no better than any other; seeing religion as a personal thing; viewing trying to be a better human being as central rather than a better Muslim; and accepting God, but nothing else in religion.

Ethnography without Personhood: Experience and Poetry in Iran  
By Setrag Manoukian

Walter Benjamin famously argued that modernity coincided with a loss of experience that under modern conditions could only be recaptured through specific means. In the 20th century ethnography has been one such mechanism. Inseparable from colonialism, declined as masculine and solitary, ethnography recaptured experience through a combination of exoticism and cultural critique, and was increasingly endowed with the power to restore personhood to both the researched and the researcher. Today not much remains unchallenged about this modernist exercise. However, ethnographic experience was also inextricably the simultaneous effort to acknowledge a zone of understanding unconcerned with the mutual recognition of selves, and oriented instead at the detection of impersonal events and forces. How can one account ethnographically for forms of thought and action that cannot be subsumed into personhood?

Iran offers an apt vantage point to gauge the possibilities and limits of these passages into the impersonal, given that the question of subject formation—and therefore the experience of self and its concretion into personhood—seem to occupy center stage in current anthropological and
historical research on the country. Reflecting on long-term ethnographic research in Shiraz, this essay engages these questions by discussing how poetry in Iran, often perceived as a national treasure as well as the ground of personality itself, is also the line of flight that relocates experience in a different domain where public culture, social recognition and conventional politics take second place in relation to the event of recitation itself and the affects that it elicits. The power of poetry opens up a different relationship with the world, and therefore a different ethnography of Iran.

Ethnography of the Possible, Anxiety of the Exotic, and the Angel of History
Afsaneh Najmabadi

As a newcomer to ethnographic field research, I am not qualified to address some of the more general and theoretical issues that inform this conference. Based on my familiarity with a selected number of works-in-progress, my research for Professing Selves, and my current micro-history of family lives, this presentation will suggest some topics that may at first strike us as impossible to research; but I suggest interdisciplinary work — in particular, bringing into conversation ethnography, oral history, micro-history, and memory study — could help generate exciting new scholarship in Iranian studies and contribute to the larger state of research in each of these disciplines.

Revisiting Personhood in the Ethnography of Afghan Refugees in Iran
By Zuzanna Olzewska

Much of the ethnographic material that has framed anthropological debates on the nature of personhood has emerged from India, Melanesia and Africa, where the ‘dividual’ person has been contrasted with the purportedly autonomous ‘individual’ of the ‘West.’ While implicitly present in many analyses of Middle Eastern societies, the question of personhood has not been related sufficiently to the lively theoretical debates in the ethnographies of other regions. The ethnography of educated Afghan refugees in Iran reveals a context in which families and lineages retain corporate importance, but in which the concepts of autonomy, unique personality and the importance of making one’s own way in life are certainly understood and prized, albeit unevenly distributed, highly gendered, and something one often has to work hard to attain. At the same time, the inherent value of being an individual endowed with certain basic rights has been gaining traction in this community thanks to the republican ideologies and educational projects of the Islamic Republic.

This paper examines the life histories of several Afghan poets, male and female, to show how they have been able to negotiate personal versus familial choices and public versus private personalities to carve out a sense of uniqueness and autonomy as persons, and even to achieve renown in their communities. Despite the sense that rhetoric on individualism is a ‘modern’ phenomenon, I argue that being a poet is one time-honoured way of achieving individual eminence that has persisted to this day. Further, I argue that placing this material in comparative context is an important way to avoid the air of exceptionalism surrounding many accounts of Persian personhood, particularly the perennial debate on the *zaher* and the *baten*.
The Place of Forgiveness in Iranian Civil Society
By Arzoo Osanloo

My talk explores the role of forgiveness in Iranian civil society. With a focus on criminal sanctioning, I will examine how different civil society actors use the Muslim mandate of mercy to negotiate reconciliation among parties in a criminal context, with the aim of bringing about forbearance of retributive sanctioning. I draw on the advocacy of several key groups that direct their work toward forbearance in this unregulated spaces of negotiation. This advocacy work, to which civil society actors refer as culture-building (farhang-sazi), emphasizes the commitment to mercy and forgiveness in Islam. My talk will highlight this “forgiveness work” as emerging through what I show are increasingly affective spaces, drawing on the recent work on affect (Navaro-Yashin 2012), which index culturally significant and both aesthetically and emotionally stirring sites to produce or bring about “the feeling of forgiveness,” as numerous interlocutors described it.

The Response of Iranian Youth to the Many Dualities They Encounter: An Analysis of Their Short Stories
By Soheila Shahshahani

Growing up in Iran is definitely ethnic, class and gender dependent. Furthermore, it is growing up in many dualities such as the duality of kinship and face to face relations and a civil society in an Islamic Republic. From the day children go to school they feel a difference exists between their public and formal life, and their private life at home and with friends. At school they face a duality of upholding scientific aims with a glimpse of a western world from which sciences and technology have come, and a hope develops in them to leave the country to have access at this bustling world of new ideas. On the other hand they get Islamic and Iranian education, and these two are at times in coordination and at times opposing each other. At home their life opposes the outside world and the child learns to have a boundary between the outside and inside worlds. His words and behavior become measured. The child is taught not to be expressive, not to talk about his family’s thoughts and behaviors. He/she grows up accepting many dualities, paradoxes, contradictions. Our attempt in this paper is to analyze short stories written by young Iranians and try to see how they have handled the many dualities with which they were faced in their childhood and how they express them in their early youth. Their knowledge of how to write to get across censure and how to write to be expressive without being offensive is our first step into understanding how they have learned to cope.

Iran’s Counterpublic of Love
By Nahid Siamdoust

I delineate what I call “Iran’s Counterpublic of Love.” I argue that this counterpublic was already in the making for about a decade or so when it erupted in the weeks before the 2009 elections, and that it has periodically erupted since in small and bigger ways. In its greatest manifestation yet, those who participated in the green movement caused through their very representation of this site a transformation of public space that stimulate the imagination into a recognition that the world could indeed be different, in many ways as represented in these very sites, i.e. one that allows for freer expression, self-determination, diversity, representation, and is to a much greater extent feminine, more reflective of actual society. I argue that the affect of love is
inherently anti-authoritarian, and gender egalitarian, explaining the importance of women’s participation in this public. My theory offers a compelling alternative to the “sexual revolution” paradigm that is too often applied to any act in Iran ranging from a woman’s red lipstick to street parties.

Ethnography in a Changing World
By Brian Spooner

Professional ethnography began in the Persianate world with the work of Elizabeth Bacon, C. G. Feilberg, and Edmund Leach in the 1930s, followed by L. Edelberg in Afghanistan and K. Ferdinand in the 1940s and 1950s. But the work that inspired a new generation of anthropologists looking for material for doctoral dissertations in the 1960s and 1970s was that of Fredrik Barth who began working on pastoral nomads in southern Iran in the late 1950s. Iran remained a fashionable arena for young Western ethnographers until the revolution in 1979. It is interesting now to look back on this work and see how the theoretical assumptions and the research questions have changed.

Unlike the sites of most earlier ethnographic work (e.g. in Africa and Oceania) Iran was being studied in other parts of the curriculum besides anthropology—especially in what was then known as Oriental Studies, a field that had originally branched off from Classical Studies in the 19th century. But Anthropology continued as a separate field of study, defined in terms of its own original objectives of developing a cultural map of the world, with special attention to the non-literate parts, rather than those of Oriental Studies which were to improve our understanding of historical civilisations, with special attention to the historical development of written language. This conditioning of the history of ethnography in Iran and the larger Persianate world was further complicated by the history of the word “tribe,” and the different cultural and political conditioning of the Colonial Period.

Challenges, Outcomes: Doing Ethnographic Fieldwork with the Howzevi (Seminarian) Women in Iran
By Amina Tawasil

In 2008 and from 2010 to 2011, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork on the Iranian howzevi (seminarian) women; women in an educative setting where they could become Islamic jurists, and/or developers of nationwide programs for the Islamic regime. Five women were students of the Supreme Leader and the Chief Justice. Over 21 were Basij (volunteer military organization) members. Historically, as religiously conservative women, they had been kept away from public participation. The 1979 revolution facilitated their mobility as they were summoned to partake in state-building. My findings are based on fifteen months of participant-observation in south Tehran’s Pirouzi as a neighbor to the howzevi. I examined their educative trajectories, what facilitated and limited their participation, what womanhood and education meant for them, and how they saw themselves in various contexts. The women pursued an Islamic education and re-inscribed Islamic authority away from male-domination in unconventional ways. Yet, they did so in order to embolden the socio-political hold of a regime whose maxim is to derail western domination in the Middle East. My ethnography, thus, challenges the assumption that girls’ and women’s education is intuitively a path towards enlightenment, and resistance against patriarchal domination. My presentation will focus on the challenges in doing
this fieldwork. I will discuss how I navigated the uncertainties of doing participant-observation paying particular attention to the privilege of institutional representation, anthropological approach to analysis, self-censorship as both self and research preservation, and the good graces of my interlocutors.

Writing Basiji Lives: Ethics, Happenstance, and the Making of Ethnographic Subjects
By Rose Wellman
In the past ten years, there has been a flurry of new publications and interest in the ethnography of Iran. One of the main topics of this research has been Iranian urban youth culture. This research, which is often situated in the urban spaces of Tehran, has undertaken rich explorations of themes such as uprising and defiance, social movements, and resistance and rebellion. Another focus of research, however, has been the religious practices of Shi‘i women and men, whether they are laymen, Islamic seminary students, or Basijis. Carried out by scholars interested in Islam and religion, this research has explored the intersection of Shi‘i ritual, piety, and post-revolutionary politics. In this paper, I draw from my research among Basijis in provincial Iran to interrogate how we as ethnographers constitute our objects of study. What motivates us to decide on particular topics for research? To begin to answer this question, I explore the combination of happenstance, ethics, and politics that led me to conduct research among Basijis. I ask: how did my positionality as a Western scholar influenced my research? And further, why did the category of Basiji emerge as relevant in my writing on Iran? This paper draws from fieldwork in the Fars Province between 2007 and 2010 and from a working book manuscript currently titled Family, Shi‘ism, and the Making of Post-Revolutionary Iran. It seeks to address traditional anthropological subjects such as the ethics of anthropology, reflexivity, and methodology in the context of Iranian ethnography.