

**'Ali Shari'ati and the re-politicization of the Karbala paradigm:  
The role of myth in cultural power struggles**

"Myth hides nothing and flaunts nothing; it distorts; myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflexion."  
- Roland Barthes, 1957

"The West is now everywhere, within the West and outside; in structures and in minds."  
- Ashis Nandy, 1983

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Arthur Néron-Bancel

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Professor Hamid Dabashi

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## I. Introduction

In the twentieth century, the agents of decolonization forced themselves onto the world stage, and through their voices and their struggles imposed themselves as the most prominent symbols of a growing global movement of resistance against the forces of Western political and cultural hegemony. Starting in the 1940s, countries in all continents cast off direct foreign control in national liberation struggles that initially seemed to herald a return to national autonomy and self-determination. And yet, in the decades since, post-colonial societies have continued to wrestle with the destructive legacies of colonialism.<sup>1</sup> Throughout this struggle, these societies have come to realize that ‘de-colonization’ would require far more than dismantling colonial structures of political control. Indeed, it has gradually become increasingly clear that what had emerged out of Western Europe during the 19<sup>th</sup> century was in fact far more subtle and insidious than originally thought. Beyond outright political or economic domination, the construction and consolidation of colonial systems relied heavily on complex cultural and psychological processes that had profound and lasting transformative effects on the very psyches of colonized individuals and societies.<sup>2</sup> Starting with the works of Aimé Césaire (*Discours sur le colonialisme*, 1955), Frantz Fanon (*Wretched of the Earth*, 1961), and Albert Memmi (*The Colonizer and the Colonized*, 1957), post-colonial intellectuals began to map out the processes through which colonization had effectively neutralized and suffocated indigenous cultures and collective identities, in order to then produce colonial subjects and ‘primitive, native cultures’ whose internalized sense of inferiority meant that submission and obedience could more easily be ensured.<sup>3</sup>

In transitioning towards this idea of the ‘colonization of the mind’, post-colonial studies have become intimately tied to a much broader field of research which looks at the cultural and psychological dimensions of power and domination as they occur in all forms of human society, irrespective of time and place. This field of thought, perhaps most prominently represented by the likes of Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault, is dedicated to the analysis of different types of power structures (disciplinary, institutional, cultural, imaginative) and how they have developed historically in societies in ever-more complex and technologically-advanced forms.<sup>4</sup> Viewed from this perspective, the underlying forces and processes of colonialism come to be seen as the replication (albeit on an unprecedented scale) of forces and processes that operate to varying degrees in all human systems. The ubiquity of these strategies and instruments of power is reflected in concepts such as ‘hegemony’ and ‘governmentality’, developed

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<sup>1</sup> See Said, 1989: 207

<sup>2</sup> That these effects were not limited to the colonized will be mentioned in section II.a.

<sup>3</sup> “The sweeping, leveling nature of colonial domination was quick to dislocate in spectacular fashion the cultural life of a conquered people. The denial of a national reality, the new legal system imposed by the occupying power, the marginalization of the indigenous population and their customs by colonial society, expropriation, and the systematic enslavement of men and women, all contributed to this cultural obliteration.” (Fanon, 2005: 170)

<sup>4</sup> Here technology is used in the sense of both hard and soft technologies.

respectively by Gramsci and Foucault to describe the ways in which the dominant forces in European countries exercised *domestic* social control over their own population.

Of course, the inescapable corollary of studying how a system of power was built is the search for ways to challenge or overturn it. This proposition is especially true in the scope of de-colonization. The thinkers of post-colonialism have therefore not only become leading figures in the development of broader theories of power, but also in the sociology of ideas and the role of cultural and ideological formations in resisting power. This interest has largely been driven by the observation that, “[as] Frantz Fanon has shown, once national independence is achieved, the new nation-state elites replace their colonial masters in administering the same institutions that were used to control them.”<sup>5</sup>

With this in mind, rather than venture into the complexities of how power structures and systems are established, it is on the logic of resistance and on techniques for the symbolic subversion of cultural hegemony that the following paper will focus. One cannot look at the processes of social and political mobilization in the lead up to the Iranian Revolution of 1979 without discovering a wide variety of different articulations of dissent. These multiple forms of resistance are targeted against similarly numerous forms of domination, the latter being distinguishable as much by their sources (e.g., domestic or foreign) as by their spheres and modes of operation (e.g., political, cultural, economic). Within this fluid and polycephalous national resistance movement, our analysis will be limited to one particularly prominent voice of dissent: that of ‘Ali Shari’ati. In light of the remarkable influence and mobilizing capacity that he was able to develop in 1960’s and 70’s Iran, our objective will be to explore the ways in which Shari’ati’s discourse (language, themes, symbols, myths) allowed him to accumulate social power by de-legitimizing and challenging structures of authority that dominated pre-1979 Iran.

In a first section, we will develop a theoretical framework intended to detail our understanding of the sociology of ideas. This basic framework will include exploring the different potential social and political functions of cultural and symbolic systems, addressing the central importance of the conceptualization of history as a site of discursive conflict, and finally a brief discussion on the semiological mechanics of mythology drawn from the work of Roland Barthes. Afterwards, we will turn to analyze Shari’ati’s discourse through the lens of this particular theoretical perspective. More specifically, our objective will be to show how Ali Shari’ati’s discourse represented a masterful blend and re-interpretation of different conceptual and symbolic components so as to challenge the hegemony of established authorities in pre-1979 Iran.

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<sup>5</sup> Massad, 2001: 2

## II. Theoretical Framework

### a. Social and political functions of cultural systems

In this section we discuss a pattern of tension and struggle between two contrary modes of culture, one that perpetuates the status quo and the other that defies and challenges it. We will refer to a few examples to illustrate the ways in which cultural systems serve as important sites for power struggles between competing social forces. First we will turn to Frantz Fanon's discussion on the role of national culture during the decolonization process, then draw an example from Ashis Nandy's "The Psychology of Colonialism" that reflects the transformative processes that take place when one culture overpowers another, and finally an example from James Clifford's *The Predicament of Culture* will remind us that the processes we are describing are not limited to the state or overtly political systems.

Our point of departure will be a Foucauldian understanding of culture as "a body of disciplines having effective force of knowledge linked systemically, but by no means immediately, to power."<sup>6</sup> It is important that this should not be interpreted as adopting a unitary conception of culture. Instead, for the sake of our current analysis we will promote the idea of a struggle between two contrary modes of culture. On the one hand, we have a dominant cultural mode that supports the consolidation and perpetuation of power structures, and on the other, we have oppositional or disruptive cultural modes that challenge the status quo and are perpetually constitutive of alternative emergent possibilities.<sup>7</sup>

Due to inevitable power imbalances in any social order, most contexts witness the consolidation and institutionalization of a cultural paradigm that is aligned with and legitimizes the existing structures of power. The growing domination of one cultural system means the gradual normalization and canonization of a specific set of aesthetic and ethical codes and practices. The strategic importance of this process for any logic of power is perhaps best understood from the perspective of a Weberian definition of legitimate authority as relying on a combination of 'external means' and 'internal justifications.'<sup>8</sup> This definition implies that in order to establish a system that affirms the legitimacy of their authority,

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<sup>6</sup> Clifford, 1988: 265

<sup>7</sup> That the cyclical renewal of this dialectic of domination and resistance may be not only an inescapable feature of social systems but also the driving force behind history is suggested by Hamid Dabashi (1993:28): "As in the Manichean pre-eternal cosmogony, world history commences when particles of good and evil begin to recognize themselves – and with themselves, their opposites – in some universal frame of reference. Insofar as that recognition in terms of two opposing dialectics continues to be the quintessential mechanism of human self-knowledge, history continues. If not this ideology, then another; if not this utopia, then another. Every dis-enchantment paves the way for the coming re-enchantment. Every disillusion marks the coming re-illusion. History cannot have an end if the historical men and women are to people it."

<sup>8</sup> Wondering about the "legitimations of domination", Weber writes "When and why do men obey? Upon what inner justifications and what external means does this domination rest?" (1946: 78) This particular conception of legitimate authority is evoked and discussed in Dabashi, 1993: 18. Philip Rieff writes: "a culture survives, I think, by the power of its institutions to bind and loose men in the conduct of their affairs with reasons which sink so deep into the self that they become commonly and implicitly understood." (2006: 2)

structures of power need to systematically support and promote those cultural elements that will contribute to creating and sustaining the necessary ‘internal justifications’ within their subjects. As a result, as one cultural system accrues power, some elements are consistently primed and elevated to the status of ‘formal’ and ‘official’, while others are systematically de-valued or even proscribed.<sup>9</sup>

Our conception of culture is not limited to a “system of moral and aesthetic hierarchies”<sup>10</sup> that legitimizes authority, but also includes its role as a force which determines the articulation of both individual and collective consciousness. To say that culture influences the ‘articulation of consciousness’ is to suggest not only that culture shapes the symbols and metaphors through which individuals and groups interpret reality, but also that it determines how the latter perceive how they imagine or envision their collective futures within this re-constructed reality. In other words, *culture shapes agency*. Far from a free and unfettered agent, “the self maneuvers within constraints and possibilities given by an institutionalized set of collective practices and codes.”<sup>11</sup> This perspective further reaffirms the importance of culture as a tool for societal control.

In order to fulfill its function of societal control, the dominant cultural paradigm operates in a way that is at once “hegemonic and disciplinary.”<sup>12</sup> Discipline refers to the importance of firmly supporting one legitimate system of authority founded on fixed and “stable orders of collective meaning,”<sup>13</sup> while hegemony refers to the need to de-legitimize, exclude or repress any creative sources of alternatives or unexpected contestation. In its dominating mode, a cultural paradigm is therefore closely aligned with and reinforcing of existing structures and hierarchies, it functions mostly through officially sanctioned channels, and it favors mechanic replication, standardization, formality and predictability in such a way that suppresses spontaneity, divergence and alternative possibilities.

Meanwhile, the oppositional or subversive cultural mode is one that operates at the margins, or in the interstices, of the dominant cultural paradigm. This other mode of culture is informal and unofficial, unstable and ad hoc, disruptive and creative. It therefore tends to be destabilizing and radical vis-a-vis established power structures and forms of authority. Unlike the dominant cultural mode often associated

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<sup>9</sup> This concept of systematic denigration and prohibition is not without reminding us of Philip Rieff’s definition of culture. In *Triumph of the Therapeutic*, Rieff likens culture to “the organization of permissions and restraints upon action” and refers to “the dialectic expressions of Yes and No the interplay of which constitutes culture, transforming motive into conduct.” (2006: 3) He also compares the dominant culture as a force that works “from earliest infancy (...) [as] a censor, governing the opportunity of recognizing and responding to novel stimuli. That governor, inclined always to be censorious about novelty, we may call ‘faith’. Faith is the compulsive dynamic of culture, channeling obedience to, trust in, and dependence upon authority.” (2006: 9)

<sup>10</sup> Clifford, 1988: 129

<sup>11</sup> Clifford, 1988: 94

<sup>12</sup> Clifford, 1988: 263

<sup>13</sup> Clifford, 1988: 117

with negation and suppression, the oppositional or subversive mode of culture is usually associated with “a pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities,”<sup>14</sup> and populated with images of fluidity, renewal and rejuvenation, growth and fertility, degradation followed by regeneration,<sup>15</sup> “living fermentation,”<sup>16</sup> de-familiarization and disorientation.

The importance of culture as a tool for both domination and resistance was one of the central claims advanced by Frantz Fanon, an early and highly influential postcolonial theorist. As already mentioned (see footnote 2), Fanon not only demonstrated that colonial systems had been built through the ‘obliteration’ of pre-existing cultures, he also believed that “national culture in the underdeveloped countries must lie at the very heart of the liberation struggle these countries are waging.” Moreover, Fanon’s description of ‘négritude’, a cultural movement that arose out of Africa in resistance against colonial oppression, is highly reminiscent of the descriptions offered above:

Generally speaking the bards of négritude would contrast old Europe versus young Africa, dull reason versus poetry, and stifling logic versus exuberant Nature; on the one side there stood rigidity, ceremony, protocol, and skepticism, and on the other, naiveté, petulance, freedom, and, indeed, luxuriance. But also irresponsibility.<sup>17</sup>

Our second example is drawn from the work of Ashis Nandy. In ‘The Psychology of Colonialism’, Nandy talks about the cultural reconfiguration that occurred during the encounter between British colonizers and the Indians they sought to dominate:

Colonialism is a psychological state rooted in earlier forms of social consciousness in both the colonizers and the colonized. (...) First, it [colonialism] includes codes which both the rulers and the ruled can share. The main function of these codes is to alter the original cultural priorities on both sides and bring to the center of the colonial culture subcultures previously recessive or subordinate in the two confronting cultures. Concurrently, codes remove from the center of each of the cultures subcultures previously salient in them.<sup>18</sup>

After describing this process of cultural re-ordering, or ‘re-construction’, unleashed in both the colonizer and the colonized by the bidirectional pressures of the colonial encounter, Nandy explains that the very function of this process was to create a ‘cultural consensus’ whereby both parties came to perceive the colonial system as somewhat legitimate.

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<sup>14</sup> Bakhtin, 1984: 11

<sup>15</sup> Bakhtin, 1984: 21

<sup>16</sup> Clifford, 1988: 135

<sup>17</sup> Fanon, 2005: 151

<sup>18</sup> Nandy, 2013: 2 For an interesting insight into the cultural processes that occurred on the British side, see not only Nandy (34-35) but also Hannah Arendt’s section on ‘The Imperialist Character’ in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: “Those whose were confronted with the accomplished fact [of a British Empire acquired almost absent-mindedly] and the job of keeping what had become theirs through an accident, had to find an interpretation that could change the accident into a kind of willed act. Such historical changes of fact have been carried through by legends since ancient times, and legends dreamed up by the British intelligentsia have played a decisive role in the formation of the bureaucrat and the secret agent of the British services.” (1966: 208)

Finally, our last example is intended to show that, beyond colonialism and beyond politics, the process of power accumulation through cultural reconfiguration and reification can play out at any scale. In order to illustrate this versatility of manifestations let us take two examples. First, in a discussion on the tendency to establish clearly delineated and regimented academic disciplines, James Clifford remarks:

The coalescence of a research paradigm creates the possibility of an accumulation of knowledge and thus the phenomenon of scholarly progress. What is less often recognized, for the human sciences at least, is that any consolidation of a paradigm depends on the exclusion or relegation to the status of ‘art’ of those elements of the changing discipline that call the credentials of the discipline itself into question, those research practices that (...) work at the edges of disorder.<sup>19</sup>

While it exposes the relations of power and exclusion that lie behind the rigid rules and standards of research disciplines, Clifford’s passage has the added advantage of reminding us that the processes in question do not necessarily have only negative outcomes.

#### **b. From History to myth: reclaiming agency**

Now we will delve deeper into one specific cultural space that lends itself particularly well to the types of struggle outlined above – history and historiography. After defining how historiography affects agency and therefore serves as a key strategy in cultural modes of domination, we will then look briefly at how this strategy was deployed by Western colonial powers in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and finally show how breaking with the West’s rigidly positivist approach to historiography was crucial to anti-colonial thought.

The logic behind the importance of history is altogether quite straightforward.<sup>20</sup> We have already touched on the idea that culture affects individual and collective agency by shaping the lens through which these social actors interpret reality. If one accepts that individuals and societies accord great importance to their ‘History’ in constructing their identity and their conception of self, then the ‘past’ becomes a crucial element in the process of “the symbolic assignment of meaning to an otherwise mute abundance of facticities.”<sup>21</sup> Moreover, if one also accepts that this ‘past’ is by nature an ambivalent and contested space, then it follows that through ‘historiography’ the past can function as vast expanse onto which competing actors can project narratives, themes, motifs, archetypes that will best serve their socio-

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<sup>19</sup> Clifford, 1988: 135

<sup>20</sup> The risks associated with historiography are widely accepted today. Most people even consider them as obvious, relying on sayings such as “History is written by the victors” and that attributed to George Orwell, ‘He who controls the past, controls the future; he who controls the present, controls the past.’ However, the simple fact that someone might be aware of the control functions of historiography does not necessarily diminish the effect or impact historical myths can potentially have on this same person. This absolutely critical nuance (that awareness does not imply immunity) is explored by Roland Barthes (2012: 241), who explains, “Myth essentially aims at causing an immediate impression – it does not matter if one is later allowed to see through the myth, its action is assumed to be stronger than the rational explanations which may later belie it.”

<sup>21</sup> Dabashi, 1993: 33



political interests.<sup>22</sup> Just as we have previously said that the dominant structures of power will elevate a cultural system that legitimizes their authority, one can assume that the same processes occur with interpretations of the past.<sup>23</sup>

Within the overarching cultural system that one might label ‘recent Western civilization’, most intellectual fields have, in recent centuries, increasingly become conditioned by the dictates of a distinctly rationalist, deterministic and materialist intellectual paradigm. The scientific methods that support this paradigm stress the importance of factualism, empiricism and replicability. Such scientific methods carry within them the epistemological assumption that their application allows to establish a reliable, objective, *authoritative*, body of knowledge. After originating in the natural sciences, these methodologies expanded into the social sciences under the guise of the positivist tradition of August Comte in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Inevitably, then, the same forces have come to heavily influence the Western approach to historiography. The practice of historiography has become a highly regimented, professionalized discipline pre-occupied with the goal of establishing the ‘truth’ about the past.<sup>24</sup>

This view of History and the role of historiography has become so firmly rooted in our overarching cultural system so as to be considered universal, a natural attributed to be found in any human society. In fact, there is nothing neutral or obvious about History as the West has come to know it: neither the methods through which it is studied, nor the very centrality of its place and role in our societies. In a book entitled *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries: The encounter between contemporary faiths and archaic realities*, Mircea Eliade stipulates that the West has a very particular conception of and approach to history:

(...) one of the most specific features of [Western] civilization [is] the modern man’s passionate, almost abnormal interest in History. This interest is manifested in two distinct ways, which are forever related: first, in what may be called a passion for historiography, the desire for an ever more complete and more exact knowledge of the past of humanity, above all the past of our Western world; secondly, this interest in history is manifested in contemporary Western philosophy, in the tendency to define man as above all a historical being conditioned, and in the end created, by History.<sup>25</sup>

According to Eliade, this specific relation to History dates back no further than the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Prior to that, Western cultures, like practically all other cultures, “knew and cultivated the writing of history”, but they did so with a distinctly different objective: not to authoritatively establish the veracity of one

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<sup>22</sup> Jenkins, 2003: 13

<sup>23</sup> Jenkins, 2003: 20. “History is never for itself; it is always for someone. (...) particular social formations want their historians to deliver particular things. It also seems plausible to say that the predominantly delivered positions will be in the interests of those stronger ruling blocs within social formations, not that such positions are automatically achieved, unchallenged or secured once and for all. The fact that history *per se* is an ideological construct means that it is constantly being re-worked and re-ordered by all those who are variously affected by power relationships.”

<sup>24</sup> Jenkins, 2003: 24-25

<sup>25</sup> Eliade, 1960: 234

historical narrative passed off as fact, but rather to “preserve examples and models and pass them on for our imitation.”<sup>26</sup> The critical importance of the distinction between these two different functions of historiography to our current discussion will be addressed next.

If Eliade situates the rise of contemporary Western historiography in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, then this rise just barely precedes the beginning of Western Europe’s imperialist (1870/1884-1914) and colonialist (post 1914) enterprises.<sup>27</sup> Looking at the ideas and knowledge produced by Western researchers of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries about colonized societies, many have found striking examples of how supposedly scientific, objective research in fact served as a tool for cultural and psychological oppression and domination.<sup>28</sup> However, our interest here lies not in broader cultural representation, but more specifically in the use of an authoritative and scientific historiography to rob societies of any control over those parts of their identity that relate to their past. In *Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon wrote that “colonialism is not content merely to impose its law on the colonized country’s present and future. (...) With a kind of perverted logic, it turns its attention to the past of the colonized people and distorts it, disfigures it, and destroys it.”<sup>29</sup> To this claim needs to be added the idea that the colonial system did not simply ‘re-define’ or ‘erase’ important elements from the past of colonized societies. Instead the new dominant cultural system went about imposing on other cultures its own conception of History as one human historical narrative. The new Western conception of History was linear and factual, pre-occupied with looking backwards in order to find a deterministic logic in the historical progression of past events. Non-Western cultures, on the other hand, if we are to believe Mircea Eliade and Ashis Nandy (on India), continued to “conceptualize the past as a possible means of reaffirming or altering the present.”<sup>30</sup> To the extent that only the colonizers, as the bearers of a mature, scientifically-advanced civilization, had the keys to this newly-defined yet authoritative History, the colonized were now paralyzed, dis-armed.

If the transformation of historiography illustrates a process of gaining control over societies by imposing new mental, or imaginative, structures on them, then it follows that one path towards liberation would pass through the subversion or the dismantling of these imaginative structures. Indeed, in literature about post-colonialism and about cultural modes of power more generally, the conceptualization of the

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> These dates are taken from Hannah Arendt (1966: 123). The exact dates offered for our narrative are certainly flexible. It is well known that when Napoleon Bonaparte arrived on the north coast of Egypt in 1798, he was already accompanied by a team of scientists charged with producing an incredibly detailed study and catalogue of Egypt and its history.

<sup>28</sup> See James Clifford’s chapter ‘On Ethnographic Authority’ in which he describes “the development of a twentieth-century science of participant authority” and the underlying “strategy [that] has classically involved an unquestioned claim to appear as the purveyor of truth in text.” (1988: 25)

<sup>29</sup> Fanon, 2005: 149

<sup>30</sup> Nandy, 2013: 57

past and History is often referred to as a critical site of resistance from which competing cultures can start corroding the cognitive pillars of authority that legitimize the existing structures of power. Hamid Dabashi cites the following words from Paul Ricoeur: “the function of utopia [is] to expose the credibility gap wherein all systems of authority exceed...both our confidence in them and our belief in their legitimacy.”<sup>31</sup> Ashis Nandy warns that “time itself is an arena of contestation where plurality in general, and the openness of the past in particular, is under threat from a history becoming irreversible and linear and acquiring a new telos through the ideas of development and globalization.”<sup>32</sup> The solution that he seems to offer is not to restore some lost glorious past, but to resist “the ploy to use history to flatten the past into a uniform playing field for a clutch of nineteenth-century theories of progress” by emulating “those communities that refuse to historicize the mythopoetic accounts that keep open their past and serve as components of their self.”<sup>33</sup> The basic idea is that communities should seek to regain their agency through an embrace of myths. Nandy describes myths as “structured [fantasies]”<sup>34</sup> that can be seen as either ever-present or “future-oriented.”<sup>35</sup> Crucially, the very myths that the dominant Western cultural paradigm sought to de-legitimize as “flawed, irrational fairy tales produced by ‘unconscious’ history, meant for savages and children” are given by Nandy a very potent political function due to their capacity to “widen rather than [restrict] human choices” and to “allow one to remember in an anticipatory fashion and to concentrate on undoing aspects of the present rather than avenging the past.”<sup>36</sup>

What we find, then, is the importance of escaping a formal historiography that primes ‘scientifically-defined, factual narratives of the past’ in favor of energized and liberated myths and stories that promote utopias and fantasies, the creative imagination of alternatives and possibilities that can challenge rather than protect the present order. Fanon relies on exactly the same ideas in his description of the process through which national culture contributes to anti-colonial liberation struggles:

Oral literature, tales, epics, and popular songs, previously classified and frozen in time, begin to change. The storytellers who recited inert episodes revive them and introduce increasingly fundamental changes. There are attempts to update battles and modernize types of struggle, the heroes’ names, and the weapons used. The method of allusion is increasingly used. Instead of ‘a long time ago,’ they substitute the more ambiguous expression ‘What I am going to tell you happened somewhere else, but it could happen here today or perhaps tomorrow.’<sup>37</sup>

Once again, what we find is the logic of resistance associated with a reduced interest in a ‘mumified’ or ‘reified’ past in favor of a dedication to the immediate struggles of a present that is “inherently unstable

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<sup>31</sup> Dabashi, 1993: 18

<sup>32</sup> Nandy, 2013: 120

<sup>33</sup> Nandy, 2013: 117

<sup>34</sup> Nandy, 2013: 57

<sup>35</sup> Nandy, 2013: 58

<sup>36</sup> Nandy, 2013: 59

<sup>37</sup> Fanon, 2005: 174

and crisscrossed by centrifugal forces.” At the same time, the voices of dissent show an increased readiness to discard the burden of any pretense to realism, rigor or factual accuracy, opting instead to resort to fantasies and myths that allow more ambivalence towards notions of time. “Fantasy makes meaning possible; and meaning, interpreted in revolutionary terms, prompts political action.”<sup>38</sup>

### c. The semiological mechanics of mythology

Given the importance that our previous section has lent to myths as an essential component in a context of resistance against colonialism and Western cultural hegemony more generally, in this section we will take a brief moment to further explore what exactly can be meant by the term ‘myth.’ It should be noted that ‘myth’ has been recognized as a particularly fluid and malleable term.<sup>39</sup> In this sense, our discussion, which will be almost entirely limited to the theory of mythology developed by Roland Barthes, should not be seen to imply a direct equivalence between myth as conceived of by Barthes and as intended in Nandy’s ‘Psychology of Colonialism’ cited above. Neither will we attempt to offer a comprehensive representation of Barthes’ theory, seeking rather to draw from his work those elements that will be relevant for our analysis in the subsequent section on ‘Ali Shari’ati.

Barthes approaches myths from the perspective of semiology, which means the study of signs and symbols. A semiological system is a specific set of *signs*, each of which has acquired a specific meaning through a process of signification. Signification, in turn, refers to the process of attributing a specific meaning (the *signified*) to an initially neutral form, character or symbol (the *signifier*) [see explanatory diagrams at end of sub-section]. The cumulative total of the *signifier* and the *signified* is referred to as a *sign*. As a result, a semiological system can be compared to a language, because different combinations of *signs* can serve to convey messages.<sup>40</sup>

According to Barthes, what has just been described is to be understood as a first-order semiological system, primarily because the *signifier* on which the *sign* was constructed was initially neutral – it was devoid of any meaning and therefore could therefore simply be filled with meaning. It is from this first construct that Barthes establishes the myth as a second-order semiological system: a *sign* which is the outcome of a first process of signification is then taken as the basic unit (the signifier) for a new process of signification. The critical difference with the second chain of signification is that the basic unit on which on it is constructed is not neutral, it already carries a very specific *meaning* lent to it by the first chain of signification. Therefore, there is an inevitable tension between the new intended meaning (the *concept*) and the previous *meaning*. During the second chain of signification (the making of the

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<sup>38</sup> Dabashi, 1993: 19

<sup>39</sup> Strenski, 1987: 1-2.

<sup>40</sup> The information in this paragraph is from Barthes, 2011: 221-222

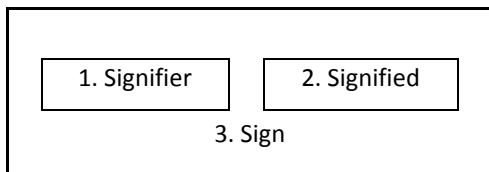
myth), the symbol that needs to act as the signifier loses its original *meaning* in order to then be invested with the *concept*. Barthes writes:

The meaning contained a whole system of values: a history, a geography, a morality, a zoology, a Literature. The form has put all this richness at a distance: its newly acquired penury calls for a signification to fill it. (...)  
 There is a paradoxical permutation in the reading operations, an abnormal regression from meaning to form, from the linguistic sign to the mythical signifier.<sup>41</sup>

In the above citation, Barthes uses ‘linguistic sign’ to express the idea mentioned above that a first-order semiological system can be seen as a language. Myths, on the other hand, he refers to as a meta-language.<sup>42</sup>

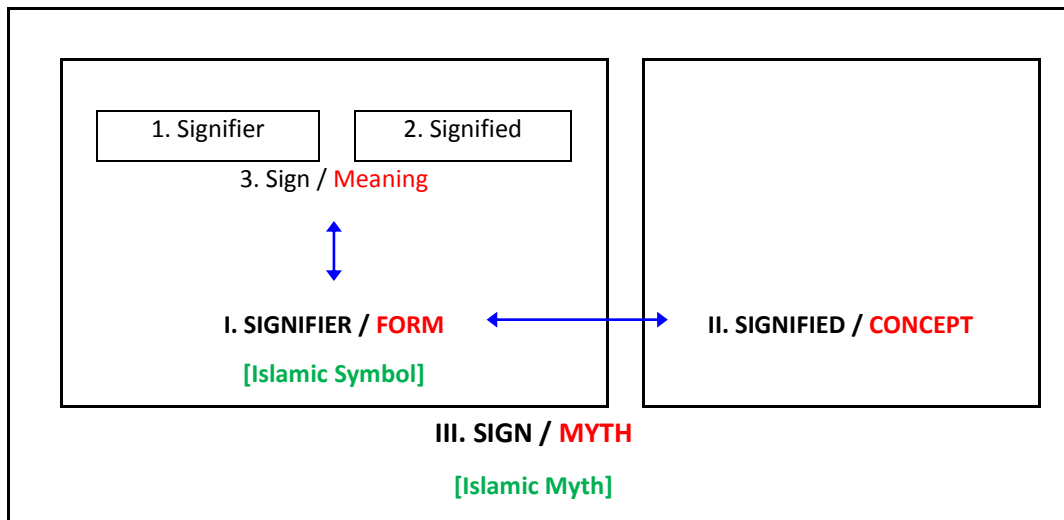
Having established the basic mechanics of Barthes’ theory of mythology, we will be able to further explore the implications of his theory in sociology of ideas and culture

**A. First-order semiological system:**



**B. Second-order semiological system:**

(Terms in red are used to describe the mythological components & process; those in green refer to section III.b)



<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Barthes, 2011: 227

### III. ‘Ali Shari’ati’s discourse in pre-revolutionary Iran

#### a. Context

‘Ali Shari’ati was a prominent and influential Iranian intellectual and Shi’ite preacher during the 1960’s and 1970’s. These are, of course, the two decades that preceded the 1979 Iranian revolution, and Shari’ati was one of the powerful voices that contributed to the broad popular mobilization that would eventually topple the Pahlavi regime (1925-1979). The social unrest in the lead up to the 1979 revolution was not an unprecedented event in Iran’s contemporary history; the country had witnessed recurring waves of popular protest and anti-colonial revolt since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Tobacco protests of 1892-94; Constitutional Revolution, *Inqilab-e ashroteh*, of 1906; Tudeh party and Mosaddeq’s National Front Movement of the late 1940s and early 50s).<sup>43</sup> However, on these previous occasions, broad popular protest had generally been articulated through Iran’s rich history of socialist, anti-imperialist and mostly secular ideologies. Up until the 1960’s, Iran’s powerful Twelver (Imami) Shi’ite clerics (the *ulema*) had, as an establishment, generally adhered to the apolitical or conservative stance that had defined their relation to Iran’s temporal political powers almost continuously since the early 16<sup>th</sup> century and the rise of the Safavid Empire (1501-1722). To be sure, numerous thinkers have pointed to the importance of material (structural) forces in creating the socio-economic circumstances that contributed to social unrest, including “the social dislocation that accompanied Iran’s encounter with modernization in the twentieth century.”<sup>44</sup> However, there is little doubt that the radical shift in the stance of what had traditionally been a stable pillar of support or legitimization for Iran’s ruling orders would play a decisive role in the success of the 1979 revolution.<sup>45</sup>

It is on the role of Islamic ideas that our analysis will focus. Hence the importance of the sociology of ideas outlined in the first half of this paper. The theoretical framework developed to explain the potential socio-political functions of cultural/symbolic systems will be crucial in helping us to better understand the role that Islamic forces played in the shift in Iran’s “collective spirit and social conscience”<sup>46</sup> in the 1960’s and 70’s. Moreover, as already explained we will use an analysis of ‘Ali Shari’ati’s discourse as an illustration of the broader changes that gradually took place in the major ‘myths’ traditionally celebrated throughout Iranian society in Imami Shi’ite sermons, rituals and ceremonies.

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<sup>43</sup> Chatterjee, 2011: 21-22; 35

<sup>44</sup> Chatterjee, 2011: 6-7. Chatterjee goes on to offer a brief overview of the more ‘materialist’ explanatory models offered by theorists such as Nikkie Keddie, Ervand Abrahamian, Homa Katouzian, and Misagh Parsa.

<sup>45</sup> Chatterjee, 2011: 9-10. Again, Chatterjee works through the ideas and models put forward by a few prominent theorists, this time with a focus on models that lent important to Islamic factors: Sharough Akhavi, Said Amir Arjomand, Mansoor Moaddel, Hamid Dabashi, Mehrzad Bojjourdi, Ali Mirsepassi, Vanessa Martin.

<sup>46</sup> Shari’ati, 1986: 197

## b. Defining Islamic myths and symbolism

Our analysis will be based on a conception of “Islam” as at once a system of myths and a corpus of symbols. Therefore, building on Barthes’ theory of mythology, we will assume that Islam cannot be limited to a first-order semiological system, whereby initially neutral symbols would be infused with a codified meaning and then used by ‘Islamic’ agents to convey meaning in the same way that one would use a language.<sup>47</sup> This is because Islamic symbols are far from being neutral or meaningless; whether we talk about concepts such as the *ummah* (community of the faithful), or *tawheed* (oneness of God and the universe), or archetypes such as Imam Hussein or his oppressor, Yazid, these symbols are drawn from rich foundational sources (the *Qur’an*, the *sunnah*) that already lend them specific meanings. Consequently, in order to convey an Islamic message, one must construct Islamic myths by manipulating pre-existing Islamic symbols that are already themselves laden with a meaning and even “a whole system of values: a history, a geography, a morality, (...) a Literature.”<sup>48</sup> The construction of the myth is undertaken with a certain motivation<sup>49</sup>, the intention to convey a new meaning, referred to by Barthes as the concept.

Our interest in the construction of Islamic myths then revolves around the relationship between Islamic symbols and the concepts that are imposed on them during the manufacturing of the myth. Looking at diagram B. above, we can see that the relationship is designated by the blue arrows: in order for the Islamic symbol to be sublimated into a myth, the meaning and values carried in the concept need to interact with (suppress, or distort, or amplify) the meaning and value already carried in the symbol (this interaction turns the symbol in the form.) It is important here to cite Barthes’ description of the relationship between form (the effect of the concept on the symbol) and meaning (the original meaning of the symbol):

The essential point is that the form does not suppress the meaning, it only impoverishes it, it puts it at a distance, it holds it at one’s disposal. One believes that the meaning is going to die, but it is a death with reprieve; the meaning loses value, but keeps its life, from which the form of the myth will draw its nourishment. *The meaning will be for the form like an instantaneous reserve of history, a timed richness, which it is possible to call and dismiss in a sort of rapid alternation: the form must constantly be able to be rooted in the meaning and to get there what it nature it needs for its nutriment; above all, it must be able to hide there.*<sup>50</sup>

The critical point is the versatility and flexibility implied in the very semiological structure of the myth: by allowing for the interaction between the intended concept and original meaning of the symbol, the

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<sup>47</sup> “Cette théorie du langage comme mode de connaissance que Cassirer a étendue à toutes les formes symboliques et, en particulier, aux symboles du rite et du mythe, c’est-à-dire à la religion conçue comme langage (...)” Bourdieu, 1971: 295 [I have the text in English somewhere, need to find it and will replace with English citation]

<sup>48</sup> Barthes, 2011: 227

<sup>49</sup> Barthes, 2011: 236

<sup>50</sup> Barthes, 2011: 236 (italics added)

myth allows for the design of a message that is shaped by contemporary factors (through the concept) but can also harness the potential power of the original symbol (by tapping into the historical depth of its initial meaning).

The implications of the relationship just described are very important when viewed in the context of our earlier discussion on the socio-political functions of myths. We had established that myths have been described as crucial tools of resistance that can serve to ‘open up the past’ and escape the imaginative structures imposed through an insistence on a linear, objective and rules-based conception of history. Now we are able to better understand one of the ways in which myths can be understood to accomplish this function.

While Barthes in his book, *Mythologies*, is preoccupied with the stabilizing, depoliticizing function of myths in a bourgeois society,<sup>51</sup> our interest here is to use his theory to study how Shari’ati used Islamic myths to stimulate dissent and political revolt.

### **c. Structures of power in pre-1979 Iran**

Before describing how Shari’ati dissented, we need to first identify the two primary structures of power he sought to challenge: the Pahlavi regime and the Twelver clerical establishment.<sup>52</sup> The Pahlavi regime, as the rulers of Iran between 1925 and 1979, represented a centralized state apparatus that had gradually grown increasingly coercive and repressive as it lost legitimacy and popular support due to its governmental policies. Culturally and politically, the regime and state elites were highly compromised due to their relationship of imitation and dependency with Western (imperial) powers that were very unpopular among Iranians. Economically, the regime was seen as representing a class of wealthy elites that profited from their privileged relations with a corrupt state at a time when huge numbers of Iranians were forced to move to Iran’s urban areas just in the hope of finding decent work. From a police perspective, the regime and the state were feared and resented for the size and the oppressive techniques of their security apparatus, most prominently represented by the notorious SAVAK agency.

This description of the nature of state’s declining authority is clearly simplified, but let us take a closer look at the clerical establishment. The institutional history of the Twelver Shiite clerical establishment will offer some interesting parallels with our earlier section on the relations between culture and power, reminding us once more that these processes are not in any way limited to colonialism. In order to do this we will rely on *The Mantle of the Prophet*, a novel in which Roy Mottahedeh offers an account of the first few decades of his character Ali Hashemi’s life in Iran, from his birth in 1943 up to

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<sup>51</sup> Barthes, 2011: 255 and 258

<sup>52</sup> Chatterjee, 2011: 101



the revolution in 1979. Roy Mottahedeh is a respected Iranian intellectual and, despite its fictional narrative, it is understood that the book maintains a close correspondence with the realities of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Iran. As such the book can be relied on for insights into the social, political and cultural dynamics that prevailed pre-1979.

Most importantly, Mottahedeh offers some interesting background on the origins of *madresehs*, the educational institutions that produce the *'ulema* and are at the heart of the clerical establishment. Originating in the late 11<sup>th</sup> century under the Abbasid caliphate, the *madresehs* constituted a new form of education that sought to institutionalize, formalize and structure what had previously 'traditionally' been an informal, and personalized (tutor-tutee) transmission of scientific and historical knowledge.<sup>53</sup> These schools, Mottahedeh clearly explains, were closely tied to power and politics: the schools were generally funded by powerful members of society, mostly viziers and sultans, and offered a systematic and regimented curriculum which generally ideologically supported the existing rulers and produced graduates (*mullahs*) who staffed the government's bureaucracy. At the basis of this entire system of education is "the living technique of the many scholastic traditions that came under the protection of the Islamic government,"<sup>54</sup> the harnessing of human reason and logic in order to create fixed and systematic interpretations of Islamic sources (Qur'an and *sunnah*). The end goal was to derive a reliable and commonly accepted legal code firmly rooted in religious sources. "A set of systematic principles for deriving the law from its sources was also needed, a science that would sharpen the ability to make strict and consistent use of such instruments of reasoning as the syllogism and the argument *a fortiori*."<sup>55</sup>

It is important to note that underlying the very purpose of the *madresehs* was the idea that human reason could contribute to formulating religious law – an idea which has been the basis of much theological controversy throughout Islamic history. Seeing how closely tied to political power the *madreseh* system was from its origins, we now see how the system relied on institutionalization in order to elevate a disputed rationalist legal tradition to the status of socially dominant norm. The resulting structure of power would serve to support and stabilize the ruling class in Iran throughout the Safavid (1501-1722) and the Qajari (1785-1925). By the time a constitution was written in 1909 following the Constitutional Revolution, the clerics were still powerful enough to secure the guarantee that Twelver Shiism remained the official religion of the state, that a committee of Shi'i *'ulema* was authorized to approve all legislation passed by the parliament (*Majlis*), and that the *'ulema* retained their authority over certain spheres of civilian law.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, Mottahedeh shows that the resulting tradition of intellectual

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<sup>53</sup> Mottahedeh, 1985 : 89-91

<sup>54</sup> Mottahedeh, 1985: 80

<sup>55</sup> Mottahedeh, 1985: 90

<sup>56</sup> Chatterjee, 2011: 24

methods and techniques established under the Safavids was so powerful that it changed very little over the long centuries until his character Ali's experiences in 1960's Qom.

Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Pahlavi regime's efforts to introduce sweeping 'modernizing' social and cultural reforms would increasingly place them at odds with a clerical establishment whose privileged position as the custodian of Iranian society was inevitably threatened. The increasing tension and discord between these two dominant structures of power would play a leading role in the chain of events that would lead to the revolution.

#### **d. Shari'ati's discourse**

##### **i. General characteristics**

As we have said, Shari'ati achieve a high level of prominence and exerted significant influence over Iranian society during the 1960's and 70's. In one sense, his was one of the most prominent articulations of a dissent that was able to simultaneously challenge the Iranian state and the traditions of the country's Shi'ite clerical establishment. In fact, Shari'ati's discourse was so well crafted that he was able to play one side against the other, alternatively supported and opposed by one and the other as his nuanced themes and symbolism shifted to attack either the state or the *'ulema*.<sup>57</sup> Compared to other discourses, such as the one advanced by revolutionary clerics (Ayatullah Khomeini or Ayatullah Murtada Mutahhari) or leftists-Marxists, Shari'ati's engaged with foreign voices of 'modernity' while remaining within a framework that many Iranians could consider 'authentic'. Shari'ati relied on the use of myths that allowed him to manufacture a discourse that remained rooted in Islamic symbols while also adopting motifs and themes that would have popular appeal within the specific historical context of pre-1979 Iran.<sup>58</sup> We will see a specific example of this in the following sub-section with a focused analysis of the Karbala narrative.

More generally, though, Shari'ati's discourse is rich because it reflects the many different ideologies and worldviews that were converging in Iran and leading the country towards its 1979 revolution. The fact that Shari'ati's life brought him into contact with so many different intellectual spheres and cultural traditions (rural Iran, Tehran, Paris) helps to understand the syncretic nature of his discourse. Crucially, the way in which he adapted his strategy of socio-cultural resistance to the obstacles of the Iranian context makes Shari'ati a powerful model for the leader of a cultural resistance movement.

In fact we find uncanny parallels between Shari'ati's cultural logic of resistance and Frantz Fanon's nuanced and complex description of the dynamic and conflictual relationship between Third-

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<sup>57</sup> Chatterjee, 2011: 101

<sup>58</sup> This idea is expressed by Hamid Dabashi (1993: 120)

world intellectuals, the evolving national cultures of their home countries, and the powers of foreign cultural and political domination. One aspect of his account is the importance of “national culture [as] the collective thought process of a people to describe, justify, and extol the actions whereby they have joined forces and remained strong”<sup>59</sup> Fanon adds that this role for culture means that “when the colonized intellectual writing for his people uses the past he must do so with the intention of opening up the future, of spurring them into action and fostering hope.”<sup>60</sup>

The strategies and techniques on which Shari’ati relied to undertake this cultural resistance are clearly and eloquently expressed in Dabashi’s *Theology of Discontent* and will therefore not be the object of our focus. Suffice it to say that his discourse employs many of the means of symbolic struggle and subversion detailed in our theoretical framework, especially as relates to conceptions of time, history, and factual accuracy:

(...) Shari’ati assumes such a universal language that when he, Shari’ati himself, talks, history talks. Not having the authorial voice of God behind his tone, as did the clerics, Shari’ati settled, as he saw it more fit, for the perhaps equally compelling voice of history: not ‘history’ as the cumulative measures of actual shared experiences, but ‘history’ as the ideological reconstruction of a revolutionary ‘self’ around which every other experience is forced to redefine itself.<sup>61</sup>

## ii. ‘Ashura and the Karbala Paradigm

A brief look at the narrative of Husayn at Karbala will provide a concrete and useful illustration of how this process can play out. We will base ourselves on two texts. The first is a famous lecture entitled *Shahadat*, delivered by Shari’ati in 1971 during a commemoration of ‘Ashura (the anniversary of the death of Husaun). Our other text is an analysis by Kamran Scot Aghaie of the shifts in the dominant Karbala Paradigm in Iran during the 1960’s and 1970’s. Aghaie’s arguments are very interesting because they echo closely what we have written in our theoretical framework about the myths and symbolism.

The story of Husayn’s death in 679 C.E is an account of when Husayn and 72 of his followers were massacred while heading from Medina to Kufah to lead an uprising against an Umayyad regime which had usurped the early Islamic system (one of justice and equality) to support an illegitimate and oppressive system.<sup>62</sup> While it has occupied a central place in the Islamic tradition (both Sunni and Shi’a) ever since, this story was only really first institutionalized and fully developed into a pervasive element of Shi’ite public life under the Safavid Empire starting in the early 1500s.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Fanon, 2005: 168

<sup>60</sup> Fanon, 2005: 167

<sup>61</sup> Dabashi, 1993: 104

<sup>62</sup> Aghaie, 2004: 8-9

<sup>63</sup> Aghaie, 2004: 10

As mentioned already, the Twelver/Imami branch of Shi'ite Islam remained for centuries predominantly apolitical or conservative. The result was therefore the gradual institutionalization and ritualization of a narrative of Husayn at Karbala that contributed to a perpetuation of the prevailing status quo – if not through active legitimization, at least through the encouragement of an apolitical and fatalistic outlook. Shari'ati writes:

Gradually questions concerning the soul, the body, matter, essence, attribution, emanation, etc., develop among them, but the problems of responsibility, commitment to society, the community, justice, equality, leadership, etc., have been entirely forgotten. The regime has begun to create its own schools of thought, and it supplies these schools with theosophies, rationalizations, philosophies and ideologies, and so that the roots of Islam can be changed and the regime can then justify its position.<sup>64</sup>

Both Kamran Scot Aghaie as well as Shari'ati explain that an important factor in achieving this was the 'classical' narrative's focus on the 'soteriological dimension of the Karbala paradigm.' This emphasis, which Shari'ati attributes partially to an influence from Christianity due to parallels with Jesus's crucifixion, means that Husayn's tragic death is framed as a self-sacrifice offered for the salvation of all Muslims.

The emphasis on this spiritual dimension serves to subtly defuse the potential symbolism of political radicalism incipient in the narrative of Husayn's martyrdom. Aghaie argues that the classical narratives "did not use the symbolism primarily as a symbolic set of political role models to be emulated literally"<sup>65</sup> but rather that "the key issue being reinforced (...) was that mourning for the imam leads to rewards in this world and the next"<sup>66</sup> and that "taking revenge for the tragedy of Karbala was the exclusive right and responsibility of the Mahdi (the last imam)."<sup>67</sup>

In stark contrast to the centuries-old tradition of political quietism or conservatism, the two decades prior to 1979 saw a significant shift in the symbols, narratives, and overall ideological stance of the religious message disseminated by powerful elements of the religious sphere in Iran. Indeed, leading Twelver thinkers and preachers were not only, as had surely happened in the past, aligning themselves with the 'people' in their struggle against colonial and domestic political oppression. Instead, these thinkers and preachers worked to make a radical break with tradition, and to actively transform the social and political role of the entire Shi'ite religious establishment in Iran. This shift would mean the dismantling of a coopted system of cultural production that either legitimized the regime or generated political fatalism by encouraging passive mourning, patience and perseverance. In its place would be created a powerful anti-hegemonic oppositional force that re-interpreted a rich corpus of symbols in order

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<sup>64</sup> Shari'ati, 1971: 174

<sup>65</sup> Aghaie, 2004: 90

<sup>66</sup> Aghaie, 2004: 91

<sup>67</sup> Aghaie, 2004: 90

to re-construct new myths designed to incite active popular resistance against a deeply unjust and oppressive political system and social order.

It is important to note that this process did not imply a complete change of the traditional Twelver stories and narratives. In fact, a significant portion of these fictions remained identical. It is very interesting to find that Aghaie calls the fixed elements the ‘core-narrative’ which he “[defines] as the basic narrative of Hoseyn and his movement (...) [and] includes the ideals of justice and piety that are embodied in the person of the imam.”<sup>68</sup> Instead what changes is the wider framework in which the narrative is presented, and which serves to generate its social and political meaning or significance. Again, Aghaie calls this the ‘meta-narrative.’ One example of how this element can change is through a shift in “the representation of the ‘self’ and the ‘other’.”<sup>69</sup> For example, it is believed that the classical Karbala narratives were influenced by the Safavid Empire’s long conflict against the Sunni Ottoman Empire, resulting in a strong emphasis on the Sunni character of the oppressors and the enemies. During the transition to new narratives, “this model shifted (...) more towards a model of the ‘just, Muslim self’ (i.e., Sunnis *and* Shi’is) versus the ‘unjust, imperialist other.’”<sup>70</sup>

It would be difficult not to appreciate how closely this analysis corresponds to our application of Barthes’ theory of mythology to Islamic symbols and myths. Aghaie’s ‘core-narrative’ can be seen as playing a role equivalent to Barthes’ first-order semiological system, while the effect of a shifting meta-narrative is very similar to the changing ‘concept’, that component of the second chain of signification which gives Barthes’ myth its full, historically contextualized meaning.

This changing meta-narrative is very clearly visible in Ali Shari’ati’s work. As one part in the general transformation of the Karbala Paradigm, Ali Shari’ati put forward a version of the narrative of Karbala that combined Islamic elements with a Marxist-socialist perspective, resulting in a powerful call for the oppressed masses to engage in active revolt against domestic political and international colonial powers (‘the government’, ‘the aristocracy’, ‘the capitalists’). Shari’ati gives great importance to the relentless social and political struggles that have been at the core of almost all religious movements in human history, with a particular focus on Islam. He places an emphasis on the fact that the Prophet’s attempt to abolish the pre-Islamic *jahiliyya* was at its heart not simply to banish polytheism but crucially also to get rid of the divisive and deeply unjust tribal social structure and create a new social system based on justice and equality for all. Since the Prophet’s death, counter-revolutionary forces have been hard at work in order to not only restore the old system, but also to build a ‘*neo-jahiliyya*’ that finds itself reinforced by coopting Islamic clerics in order to dominate the new Islamic community. In light of the

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<sup>68</sup> Aghaie, 2004: 88

<sup>69</sup> Aghaie, 2004: 88

<sup>70</sup> Aghaie, 2004: 98

success of these dark forces, Shari'ati claims that "Islam has become 'the opiate of the masses,' a means of justification for the prosperous class, and a base of power and looting for the government."<sup>71</sup>

From this perspective, the very notion of Islam becomes "both a religion and mission", with every Muslim obligated to pursue the mission of "establishing an *'ummah* [community], which suggests the negation of aristocracy, class antagonism, and exploitation of labor by money, with a super-structure of the imamate, which suggests the negation of despotism, of individual rule, of aristocracy, of oligarchy, and of the dictatorship of an individual family, class, or race."<sup>72</sup>

The very essence of Shari'ati's inherently pro-active worldview (which is far more humanist than Islamic) is clearly displayed in the very last sections of his lecture entirely dedicated to the concept of '*Shahadat*', or martyrdom:

*Shahadat* is the only reason for existence, the only sign of being present, the only means of attack and defense and the only manner of resistance so that truth, right and justice can remain alive at a time and under a regime in which uselessness, falsity and oppression rule. (...)

In all ages and centuries, when followers of a faith and an idea have power, they guarantee their honor and lives with *jihad*. But when they are weakened and have no means whereby to struggle, they guarantee their lives, movement, faith, respect, honor, future and history with *shahadat*.

***Shahadat* is an invitation to all generations, in all ages, if you cannot kill your oppressor, then die.**<sup>73</sup>

#### IV. Conclusion

There is a common saying that expresses the idea that when resisting domination or injustice, one should "speak truth to power". What this paper has sought to demonstrate is that, in fact, there may be many occasions when the logic of resistance would seem to dictate that one should resort to everything *but* 'the truth'. Of course, this remark is offered slightly tongue-in-cheek, but the idea is the same nonetheless.

This paper has sought to explore the cultural and symbolic manifestations of the power struggles that structure and often define social systems. Working from a perspective largely influenced by, but not limited to, post-colonial theory and the lessons learned from the resistance and emancipation struggles of colonized societies throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we have taken a particular interest in the role that 'myth' can play as a strategy of resistance and subversion against established and institutionalized cultural orders that seek to bolster their authority by laying claims to 'the truth'.

The colonial encounter has proven a particularly compelling point of departure for this inquiry into the resistance functions of myths. This is because the 'fantasy' of myths found in societies labeled 'pre-modern' has so systematically been denigrated and devalued in comparison to

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<sup>71</sup> Shari'ati, 1971: 205

<sup>72</sup> Shari'ati, 1971: 201

<sup>73</sup> Shari'ati, 1971: 213-214 (emphasis added)

contemporary obsessions with objective and scientific approaches to History. But voices of dissent are increasingly denouncing the logic of domination and repression that lurks behind the Western Gods of science and progress. Ashis Nandy is one such powerful voice: “The ancient forces of human greed and violence have merely found a new legitimacy in anthropocentric doctrines of secular salvation, in the ideologies of progress, normality and hyper-masculinity, and in theories of cumulative growth of science and technology.”<sup>74</sup> Indeed, as we have discussed in this paper, it is becoming increasingly clear that Western conceptions of History and positivist methodologies of historiography were a central component in the process of the ‘colonization of the mind’ - process through which European colonial powers established cultural systems of domination through the imposition of rigid mental structures that reached deep in the individual psyches and collective consciousness of ‘subject’ societies.

Drawn to the idea that the very aspects of myths that were so persistently disparaged (their lack of accuracy, lack of historicity, lack of structure) might actually be the key to their power as tools of resistance and liberation, we have relied on Roland Barthes’ theory of mythology to gain a better understanding of the semiological structure and mechanics of myths.

We have then sought to take all these theoretical considerations and to apply them to a more concrete case by engaging in a closer study of the discourse of ‘Ali Shari’ati, one of the leading voices of dissent in one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s most exceptional manifestations of mass revolt against power, the Iranian revolution in 1979. This concrete application of a theoretical framework is always necessary, as articulated by Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault: “The notion of theory as a toolkit means (i) The theory to be constructed is not a system but an instrument, a *logic* of the specificity of power relations and the struggles around them; (ii) That this investigation can only be carried out step by step on the basis of reflection (which will necessarily be historical in some of its aspects) on given situations.”<sup>75</sup> And indeed, our analysis of ‘Ali Shari’ati’s role in the lead-up to the 1979 revolution has proven particularly fruitful. The national context in which he operated was tightly controlled by two deeply entrenched power structures (the state and the clerical establishment), reflections of both international and internal power hierarchies in such a way that reminds us that colonialism is only one of countless social manifestations of power and domination. Not only was Shari’ati’s discourse very close to the strategies and techniques of resistance and subversion described in our first section. More than that, our close study of the transformation and re-politicization of the Karbala Paradigm in the two decades preceding the Iranian revolution seems to have confirmed the crucial role that the embrace of ‘myth’ could play in a strategy of cultural resistance against institutionalized authority.

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<sup>74</sup> Nandy, 2013: x

<sup>75</sup> Cited in Clifford, 1988: 23

It is difficult to look at the remarkable events that transpired in Iran in the 1960's and 1970's without drawing parallels recent events in Western societies. Since 2011, these societies have witnessed a slow multiplication of attempts to mobilize mass resistance against a Western system that is proving increasingly socio-economically oppressive and culturally alienating. This reflection is especially important in light of Roland Barthes' observations about the powerful de-politicizing functions of myths in bourgeois society. In light of the failures of movements such as Occupy Wall Street, or *Los Indignados*, to gain traction and mobilize support, one is left to wonder if, when, or how a compelling narrative, myth, ideology will finally appear that will be able to re-capture the imagination of Western societies, and, perhaps, create a much-needed revolutionary movement.



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