Rethinking the Safavid Iran (907–1148/1501–1736)
Cultural and Political Identity of Iranian Society during the Safavid Period

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The history of Iran during the Safavid era, has been studied by many scholars Iranian and others. Many aspects of the political and social life of Iranian society during this period has been studied and a significant number of new research appeared in recent decades. Since the rise and rule of the Safavid in Iran had strong influences on the Iranian society during their rule and after, it seems that there is controversy about the nature of the Safavid state and the changes they made in Iran.

With regard to the new approaches to the history of Iran, the established ideas on the results of the rise and rule of the Safavid dynasty face many changes gradually. There is no doubt that the rule of the Safavids caused changes in all aspects of Iranian society. The two significant changes which occurred during this period were the emergence of a centralized government and introduction of the Imami Shi‘i as the official religion in Iran. The Safavid scholars usually refer to the pre-Safavid period as a period in which a central government did not exist. Therefore, according the established ideas, for the first time after the invasions of the Arabs, and a long period of foreign rule, an Iranian house, restored the Iranian crown.

On the other hand, according to the established school of Safavid studies, the most important event in which occurred by the coronation of the Shah Esma‘il I, was the introduction of the Imami or Twelver Shi‘ism as the official state religion in Iran. Therefore, scholars usually emphasize on these two main results of the Safavid rule in Iran and believe that they shaped the political and cultural nature of Iranian society.

It seems that a deep and true analysis of the all kinds of the Safavid source materials and its comparison to the pre-Safavid social and political structure of Iranian society shows us the similarities between the two periods. The aim of this paper is to examine the controversy about the nature and function of the Safavid state and society by investigating the Iranian source materials as well as foreign materials and also documents. The analysis of the Safavid sources shows that the Safavids completed a process which began in the context of the Iranian society before them, they inherited a political and cultural system, added new elements to it, changed and continued it

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Introduction

The rise and rule of the Safavids in Iran caused changes in all aspects of Iranian society. The two main changes which occurred during this period were the emergence of a centralized government and above all, the introduction of the Shi’i faith as the official religion in Iran. These two significant events shaped the structure of the new political and cultural system in Iran from the Safavid period onward. On the other hand, the establishment of the Safavid dynasty coincided with other important political and economic events, not only in the region such as the rise of the Mughals in India and the expansion and consolidation of the Ottoman empire, but also in the West, in which, during that period, the main new European states emerged and began their military and economic activities in the East.

With regard to the importance of the establishment of the Safavid state to Iranian society, Safavid rule has been considered “an important turning point in Persian history”.1) Safavid scholars usually emphasize that the emergence of a new central government based on the Shi’ism was the main indication of that turning point. They also usually refer to the pre-Safavid period as a period in which central Iranian state did not exist, there were merely the local dynasties or foreign invaders who took power in Iran by conquering it. In this regard the Safavids have been considered to be an Iranian family which, after a long period of foreign rule, restored the Iranian crown and for the first time in the history of Iran during the Islamic period, established an Iranian government. Contrary to this established idea, some scholars point out that Safavid rule was a continuation of pre-Safavid Turkeman dynasties, especially the Aqqoyunlu dynasty from which the Safavids had inherited their political structure. Therefore, they do not believe there to be any specifically Iranian characteristic in the Safavid rule. The aim of this study is to examine the controversy about the nature and function of the Safavid state by investigating the Iranian source materials as well as foreign materials and documents.

The Safavid Empire

Safavid origins go back to a Sufi order, which derived its name from the founder of the order, Shaykh Safi al-Din Ardabili (1252–1334).2) During his life, the Khwanganh (Monastery) of Ardabil3) became the center of the Safavi Sufi order activity and many followers from different parts of Iran and Anatolia, the eastern part of Ottoman

2) The main source for study the life of Shaykh Safi al-Din and the early development of the Safavids is: Ebn Bazzaz.
3) The city of Ardabil now is the center of Ardabil province located in North West of Iran.
Empire, gathered there. After the death of Shaykh Safi al-Din and during the leadership of his successors the Order played an important role in the cultural and political life of Iranian society. Apparently during the last two Sufi leaders of Ardabil, Shaykh Joneyd and Shaykh Heydar (d. 893/1488), the order adopted Shi‘ism as its main ideology. This was a turning point for the Safavi order because by the time of Esma‘il I, the founder of the Safavid Empire, he, during his coronation in Tabriz (1501/907) declared Shi‘ism the official state religion.

The process of the rise of the Safavid state from the early activities of the Safavi order to the coronation of Esma‘il I took two centuries. It began in 1301AD, when Shaykh Safi al-Din Eshagh, whose name given to the dynasty founded by his descendant Shah Esma‘il I in 1501, assumed the position of head and spiritual director of a local Sufi order in Azerbaijan. The origins of the Safavid family are still obscure, but it may be said with some certainty that Safi al-Din’s ancestors moved to Azerbaijan, probably from Kurdistan—a province located at western Iran, during the eleventh century and settled in the Ardabil district.

When Safi al-Din became head of the order, henceforth named the Safaviya Order after him, he adopted a policy of active proselytism that transformed a Sufi Order of purely local significance into a religious movement with numerous adherents throughout Iran, Syria and Anatolia. Regular contact was maintained with the disciples of the Safavid Shaykhs in those regions through a network of agents termed Khalifas, who periodically visited the headquarters of the movement at Ardabil.4)

From the beginning of the fourteenth century, the leaders of the Safavid movement gave clear signs of an ambition to achieve temporal power as well as religious authority, and this ambition aroused first the apprehension and then the active hostility of contemporary rulers of western Iran. Despite the fact that three successive Safavid leaders were killed in battle (Jonayd, 1460; Heydar, 1488; and ‘Ali, 1494), the momentum of the movement was still sufficient to bring the revolution to a successful conclusion and establish the Safavid dynasty in 1501.5)

At the time of its establishment, the Safavid Empire inherited the particular situation in the Iranian territory. From ancient times, the land of Iran was a target of eastern nomadic invaders and also westerners. During the Safavid period another foreign element was to appear, the presence of Europeans mostly in Persian Gulf.6)

From the political perspective, the Safavid Empire inherited the well-organized system of Iranian administration and the idea of kingship. Since the establishment of the Safavid dynasty to the fall of their rule in 1736, the main steps of the Safavid Empire can be classified as:

The 1st: The consolidation of the empire (1501–1587)
The 2nd: The age of its flourishing (1587–1666)
The 3rd: Decline and collapse (1666–1736)

The study of these three periods makes the main reasons for the development of the

4) *Ebn Bazzaz* 1114–1127.
5) Savory 1978: xxi.
6) For the Europeans in Iran during the Safavid period see: Matthee 1999.
Safavid Empire clear, and also provides the reasons for the fall of Safavid dynasty. During the first period, Safavid government was formed as an Iranian state the process of which began after the coronation of Shah Esma'il I (in 1501)\(^7\) and lasted until the rise of Shah 'Abbas I (in 1587). The nature of the Safavid Empire during this period is still a controversial point. While some scholars point out that it was a continuation of Turkish rule and the Turkish nomadic population were the major forces of the Safavid state,\(^8\) others describe it as an Iranian state which was based on the theory of Iranian kingship.

There is no doubt that there were a considerable number of nomadic groups which functioned as the military forces of the Safavid state, but the fact is that according the contemporary sources, Iranian groups played an important role in the process of the rise of the state.\(^9\) The major problem during this period was the transformation of the Safavi order to an administrative system, which aimed to control all political activity. Therefore another problem was the position of the Safavid king, which before the coronation was the head of the order. The result was a conflict between Iranian bureaucrats and nomadic followers of the Safavi order. It was during the next period that the problem was solved by the Shah 'Abbas I.

As Savory pointed out, the reign of Shah 'Abbas I marks the highest point of Safavid achievement.\(^10\) The Safavi dynasty reached its apogee under Shah 'Abbas (1587–1629).\(^11\) Shah 'Abbas bequeathed to his successors a centralized administrative system, a standing army, and a state with well-defined boundaries.\(^12\) The reign of Shah 'Abbas also was a time of a dramatic increase in diplomatic and commercial contacts with the West. The Portuguese, Dutch, and English tried to establish trading posts in the Persian Gulf with a view to gaining control of trade with India and Southeast Asia, and the English explored the possibilities of overland trade. The tolerant climate of Iran under Shah 'Abbas led foreign merchants to establish colonies in various parts of the country, and foreign religious orders to founded convents in Isfahan and elsewhere.\(^13\)

Under Shah 'Abbas's successors, the progressive breakdown of the central administration was marked by increasing inefficiency and corruption at all levels of government. The result was the fall of Isfahan to Afghan rebels in 1722. The breakdown and collapse of Safavid dynasty has caused many debates amongst scholars. V. Minorsky in his excellent work on Safavid administration system, classified the reasons for the collapse as follows:

1. The complete disappearance of the basic theocratic nucleus around which

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\(^7\) See: *Rumlu* 86; *Abdi Beg* 41; *Qomi* 73; *Khwandamir* vol.4, 467–8.

\(^8\) Súmer 1377: 1.

\(^9\) For instance see: *Khánji* 267.


\(^11\) Lockhart 1958: 16. That is noticeable that the work of Lockhart contains some misunderstandings of the nature of the invasion of Isfahan, the Safavid capital, by the Afghan rebels. Contrary to the Lockhart, the Afghans did not occupy Persia. In fact they were subjects of the Safavid empire and their rebellion can be considered to be like other rebellions by other Iranian groups during the Safavid age.

\(^12\) Savory 1978: xxii. For a contemporary source which explain Shah 'Abbas's achievements see *Eskandar Beg* 1099–1116.

\(^13\) Savory 1978: xxiii.
Shah Esma’il had built up his state, without the substitution of some other dynamic ideology.

2. Great opposition between the old and the new elements in the Persian military class.

3. The disturbance of the equilibrium between the *Mamalik* [non state lands] and *Khassa* [state lands]; the expansion of the latter having diminished the interest of the service classes in the cause they were supporting.

4. The irresponsible character of the “shadow government” represented by the harem, the Queen Mother and the eunuchs.

5. The degeneration of the dynasty whose scions were brought up in the atmosphere of the harem, in complete ignorance of the outside world.14)

Therefore, the Safavid Empire collapsed. Perhaps the reason for the collapse of the empire was, ironically, the considerable victories of the dynasty. Although the Safavid army had achieved great things, conquering the whole territory of Iran, and including new areas to it, the expansion of the empire needed a huge amounts of monetary and human resources. Apart from the increased taxes which were the result of the establishment of a new army during the Shah ‘Abbas I, the autocratic and strong centralized government and also the conservative nature of the Safavid bureaucrats, and the economic crisis (especially during the last Safavids) were the main reasons of the fall of the empire. In fact the reasons for the collapse of the Safavids were internal rather than from beyond the Safavid borders.

The Nature of Empire

Despite the collapse of the Safavid empire, the achievements of the dynasty were most significant. Safavid rule not also influenced all aspects of the life of Iranian society but introduced a new order in the region which was now called Middle East. In early modern history, the Safavid Empire was not a gunpowder one, like contemporary newly-emerged European empires. The era of gunpowder empires represents a new phase in the development of Middle Eastern and Islamic societies. The term “gunpowder empire” imputes a great importance to the innovative military technology of infantry, armed with muskets and operating in conjunction with the siege and battlefield artillery that allowed the new empires to sweep away their rivals and to establish a dominion that would last until the eve of the modern era. Yet the achievements of the Safavid Empire were not merely technological or tactical. Their endurance and their success in deploying new technologies was based on a deeper structure of political institutions.

The Safavid Empire represented novel military tactics, the consolidation of political institutions, and the restoration of imperial political control over vast territories after centuries of near anarchy. They also fostered important economic and urban developments, new forms of religious organization, and a fresh phase in the history of Middle Eastern and Islamic culture.15)

In the context of Iran, some scholars

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believe that the most important result of the rule of the Safavids, was the emergence of a national state in Iran. It is clear that the term, national state for a political system during early modern history, before the French revolution and the emergence of nation-state in early 20th century, is hard to use with any accuracy. With regard to Safavid Iran, perhaps it was, according to E. G. Browne, the time, of the emergence of the Iranian nation. Browne himself did not use the term national state for Safavid rule, referring to the work of his contemporary author, R. G. Watson 160, Browne says that the period "marks the transition from mediaeval to the contemporary modern times".

Browne’s analysis of the importance of the establishment of the Safavid state starts with some references to the political conditions of Iran before the rise of the Safavids. According to Browne, the Arab conquest in the middle of the seventh century (AD) overthrew the Zoroastrian religious and the Sassanian empire, and reduced Persia to the position of a mere province of the Caliphate, until the Caliphate itself was destroyed by the Mongols or Tartars in the middle of the thirteenth century. Both before and after this momentous event there were, it is true, independent or quasi-independent dynasties ruling in Persia, but these were generally of Turkish or Tartar origin, like the Ghaznavids, Seljuqs, Khawrazmshahs, and the House of Chingiz and Timur (Tamerlane) or, if Persian, like Buwayhids, exercising control over a portion only of the old Persian empire. To the Safavid dynasty belongs the credit of making Persia “a nation once again” self-contained, centripetal, powerful and respected, within borders practically identical in the time of Shah Abbas I with those of the Sassanian Empire.17)

In fact, the main focus of Browne is the re-emergence of the Iranian nation rather than a national state. To him, the nation which was formed by Safavid policy, was based on religion rather than language or ethnic identity. Brown was aware of the differences between the concept of the modern and exclusive term of “nation” and the Safavid period. In Islamic terminology, and before the introduction of the new concept of “nation” which was influenced by the Western concept, the term nation always meant the religion rather than a group of people.18 It seems that in his opinion, the new religious policy of the Safavids i.e Shi’a Islam, was so powerful that it acted as an umbrella and under this, many different populations became a nation. Therefore, the achievement of the juxtaposition of the new religious policy and the Iranian royal institution and culture gave rise to the modern Iranian nation.

Following Browne’s opinion, W. Hinz, the leading German Iranologist, who was inspired by Browne, described the Safavid state as national state. Describing the collapse of the Turkman dynasty of Aqqoyunlu 19) and the first activities of Esma’il, the founder of the Safavid empire, Hinz pointed out that the period of the spiritual rule of the Ardabil monastery ended and the age of the Iranian

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16) Watson 1866.
18) The Arabic word in this regard is: Mellat. In Persian or Iranian contemporary language, this word means Nation.
19) The Aqqoyunlu was a Turkman nomadic “house” which ruled central and western Iran in the second half of the 15th century. The dynasty finally fell to Shah Esma’il, founder of the Safavid Empire. See: Woods 1976.
national state began. In his later work, Hinz added that under the rule of the Safavids, Iranian society introduced a new concept of nation which was based on Shi'ism rather than an ethnic distinct. According to Hinz, the expansion of the Shi'i faith during the Safavid period, led to population development in Iran and unified various ethnic groups like the majority of Iranians, and the other small groups such as Turks, Georgians, and even Arab immigrants as a Persianate people. Other scholars such as Lambton agree with these opinions and states that during the Safavid era, in the political sphere, Iran became a national state according to the modern concept. The use of the concept of the national state of the Safavid government, explained by these leading scholars, caused some discussions amongst Iranologists. Perhaps the first scholar who paid attention to Hinz's opinion was V. Minorsky. Minorsky in his review of Hinz's work refers only occasionally and without any word of criticism to the general theories of ethnicity that are to be found in Hinz's book, which was published during the time of Germany's nationalist socialist terror regime. It seems that Minorsky aimed to find connections between the idea of national state in Iran and the political sphere of the Germany within the propaganda of the Nationalist Socialist party.

In this regard, as Marchinkowski explains, it seems more meaningful, to focus the discussion of the Safavids significance in the context of Iranian history. To him, however, frequently and quite inaccurately their rulers had been referred to as "revivers of traditional Persian kingship" and "national feeling" or similar expressions. Recently, Mazzaoui challenged these ideas saying: "yet some of these ideas and interpretations seems to conflict with each other, especially as several modern historians see in the rise of the Safavid state a manifestation of Persian national consciousness. This Vahdat-e Milli or nationalism did not exist in Iran or, for that matter, anywhere else in the world circa A.D. 1500. The concept took shape in Europe, grew dramatically during the age of Enlightenment, and ultimately matured toward the end of eighteenth century with the French Revolution in 1789. Only after 1800, when Europe overwhelmed the Islamic countries of the Middle East (usually dated from the French naval expedition against Egypt under Bonaparte in 1792), did ideas of nationalism start to influence the course of events in Iran and elsewhere in region."

There is other explanation of the Safavid empire from the economic point of view which belongs to the Rudi Matthee. Describing the situation of trade during the

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20) Hinz 1361: 126.
22) Lambton 1371: 212.
24) Apparently W. Hinz had connections with National-Socialist party during Hitler's time. But I do not think his idea on the process of Iranian history during the Safavid was merely based on his tendency toward nationalist ideas. I discuss this subject latter.
25) Marchinkowski 2002: 21. Marchinkowski gives us a detailed bibliography of the idea of the Safavid period as the era of the emergence of the nation state. See: Ibid. 21–23. But he does not mention the deeper roots of Iranian culture and political theory which the Safavids inherited from the previous dynasties, a culture which re-emerged during the Safavid period along with new ideas and changes.
Safavid era especially the reign of Shah 'Abbas I, he argued that the "image of Shah 'Abbas as an eastern variant of a mercantilist evoked by the latter sources has had the effect of creating an impression of Iran as a "merchant empire". This picture easily distorts reality, however. To judge by the concerns of the court chroniclers, military matters dominated the affairs of state, so much so, in fact that the term "warrior state" would be more applicable to Safavid Iran than merchant state, even in its second century, when conquest and expansion gave way to territorial consolidation, and military matters became overshadowed by administrative concerns."

The review of these scholars opinion on the nature of the Safavid empire, from the political and cultural point of view, make it clear that there is a debate about this subject. While some of them accept the idea of the "nation state" of the Safavids, other disagrees and argues that the differences between it and the situation of the Safavid system are enough to consider it as a pre-modern government. The other problem is the description of the Safavid regime as an empire. The term of empire, understood generally as a political system, is still awaiting a clear definition that will satisfy all historians. Short of such a basic definition, each historian or political scientists defines Empire within the conceptual framework of his or her discipline. It seems that the Latin word of Emperor does not bear a specific meaning. Contrary to the title of emperor, the Empire has been defined as a political system which consists of nations, subjects, and various groups of people. Also an empire was a system with a strong and powerful maritime network. In world history, empires like that were very few in number. In the ancient period the best examples were the Persian, Greek and Roman empires. By the early modern period, the Ottoman and then European empires can be considered to qualify as such. In addition, the Safavid and Mughal governments can be included in this list with some reservations. Therefore it would be better to explain the nature of the Safavid system in two categories. First, as an "inland empire" — from the internal point of view. Secondly as a global empire according to the role it played in international affairs.

Does the Safavid empire need to utilize a 19th century Western term, i.e. "nation state", to explain its nature? It seems there is no need to explain it with such modern terms because there was not an idea of "Iranian identity" as such. But there was an indigenous concept of "Iranian culture". A deeper investigation of the Iranian source materials and also the views of Europeans contemporary to the Safavids, makes it clear that there was an idea of "Iranian culture" during the Safavid rule in their realm. Compared to many modern nations, Iran had several pre-modern features favorable to the development of a kind of national identity. When Esma'il I, the founder of the Safavid state began his military activities, he set out to conquer the world. Conquer he did, not the whole world but a sizeable empire that stretched from the shores of the Oxus River to the Persian Gulf, Mesopotamia, and Anatolia. These territories were the same as the historical understanding of the ancient Iranian realm. The concept of a territorial Iran which Iranian

28) Soudavar 2002: 89.
sources called *Iransahr*, went back to ancient times.²⁹)

During the Safavid rule, the territorial concept of Iran was alive amongst the Iranians. J. Chardin, a famous French merchant who spent about twelve years in Iran during Safavid period, says that: “according to the Iranian notables and geographers, their country is the greatest empire on the globe”. This vast empire located between the Black Sea, Red Sea, Caspian Sea, Persian Gulf and Oman Sea.³⁰) Chardin pointed out that although during his visit to Iran during the Safavid period, the above mentioned territory was not the real realm of the Iran, but (he says) the Iranians emphasize that Iran had lost parts of its vast territory, but will re-conquer them and extend its boundaries to what it was during the ancient period.³¹)

The other feature of the Iranian cultural and political idea was the royal structure. Many Safavid sources frequently refer to the Safavid king as the king of Iran. .³²) Chardin says that the Iranian call their king as *Padeshah-e Iran* or king of Iran.³³) It is noticeable that during the seventeenth century particularly during the reign of Shah ‘Abbas and his successors, terms like Iran, *Iranzamin* and *Iransahr* (The Iranian territory), were used by the authors, poets and foreigners who visited Iran. Even in the official documents produced by the court scribes, they usually used these terms. Therefore it make it clear that Safavid Iran had an idea of Iran and the Safavid state had a knowledge about its position as the government which was a continuation of a long lived idea of kingship. This idea of kingship, during Safavid rule, was combined with the religious elements of Shi’a doctrine which resulted in the new idea of Iranian kingship as a Shi’i Sultanate. In this Shi’i Sultanate, the most important concept was the idea of *Ferq-e Najyye* or, the “Saved Sect”, as it appears in the Safavid period. It led to the emergence of Safavid Iran as a sacred territory in which the Safavid ruler was its defender on behalf of the God will.³⁴)

There was also a widespread identification with Persian language and literature, even though this was not coterminous with Iran’s borders.³⁵) One of the most significant features of this kind of identification was the famous work of the late tenth century Iranian poet, Abu al-Qasem Ferdowsi’s *Shahname*, or “the Book of the King”. The *Shahname* can be considered as the greatest source of historical memory of Iranian society during the Safavid period. As M. Hodgson pointed out, “The Persian classical epic of kings, the *Shahname* of Ferdowsi, one of the earliest recorded voices of Iranian culture in its Islamicate mode, preserves for future generations a core of Persianate views on humanity and ethics, as well as a particular sense of history and cosmology.”³⁶) In the *Shahname*, the late tenth—century poet Ferdowsi crystallized an image of an Iranian past that lived on in

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²⁹) Marquart 1373.
³⁰) *Chardin* 684.
³¹) *Chardin* 685.
³²) For example see *Shamlu* 215, 246, 257, 270–71; *Qazvini* 8.
³³) *Chardin* 686.
³⁴) For an analysis of this idea see Sefatgol 1381.
³⁶) Babayan 2002: xxix.
the imaginations of those came to embrace Persianate culture, from the rulers and courtiers of the Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal courts, to the Turk or Iranian (Tajik) perfume sellers who participated in the culture of storytelling in the coffee houses of large cities and towns in Central and Eastern Islamdom."

The Shabname was the main source of historical memory of Iranian society in the pre-Safavid period. On the other hand, the kings which their history were described were the ideal types for the rulers during the post—Islamic period of Iranian history. So, it functioned in two spheres: First, it shaped the mind of the common people because its stories were popular amongst them in various parts of Iranian territory. Second, it functioned as a model for the rulers, Arabs, Turks, and the Mongols. It is not surprising that during the Mongol rule, there was a great attitude to the Shabname and some historians composed their history while using the Shabname as their model. It is noticeable that the very artistic version of Shabname produced during the reign of the Safavid king, Shah Tahmasp, who is well known as a religious extremist. During the Safavids, storytellers related the Shabname in the presence of the Safavid kings. Therefore, the Safavids had Shabname reciters at the court, and they were professional storytellers. Eskandar Beg, a Safavid court historian, for example, lists several Shabname reciters at Shah Tahmap's court in Qazvin, the Safavid second capital. He says, “of the class of professional storytellers, Shabname reciters, and the like, there was a considerable number, but I will just mention two or three.”

The Shabname reciters also played significant role in the society and were active in the coffeehouses of Isfahan, the third and final Safavid capital from the Shah 'Abbas I rule onward.

The Shabname also received a great reputation beyond the Safavid territory, in particular by the Ottomans and the Mughal courts. Even it became a model for the historians who based the history of their lords, on the style of Shabname. It is clear that writing Shabnames was an established “genre” of historical writing in the Ottoman Empire: “It is safe to say that Shabname-writing as an early type of court historiography was established in the fifteenth century (in Ottomans court). Its main function was to glorify in a high literary form the exploits of the reigning Sultan, but occasionally Shabname writers composed also general histories of the Ottoman house.”

Beside the Shabname as a significant symbol of the pre-Safavid culture, the famous Iranian ceremony i.e. Nowruz, and the religious ceremonies particularly those were introduced by the Safavid religious policy, can be considered as the main elements of the Iranian cultural Identity.

In addition to this, the Persian language was a strong element of Iranian identity during the Safavid period. Persian was even the court language through much of South Asia and an important cultural language in Caucasus, Central Asia and other primarily Turkish-speaking areas. On the other hand, half or more of Iranian population spoke other native languages, although many of them also knew Persian. Persian was however, both a major cultural language and the

38] Eskandar Beg 91.
most important language within Iran’s borders. The Persian language along with religious faith were two main factors of Iranian culture during the Safavid period.

Conclusion

The Safavid Empire, which was formed upon the strong bases of the Iranian traditional and historical administrative system and its political structure, at first was influenced by Iranian culture and then, later, became the introducer of a new kind of Iranian identity. Despite the strong desire to promote religious affairs, which the Safavid government itself introduced as the defender of new faith, i.e. Shi’ism, this religious policy functioned not as an independent institution. It was at the service of the Safavid state and an emphasis upon the religious behaviour led to a strong unity in Iranian society. The functions of this major culture were:

1. A definitive framework of the concept of the Iranian empire according to the ancient understanding of the royal institutions, above races, tribes and settled populations.

2. The continuation of the political structure via a widespread and well-centralized administration institution throughout the Empire. The language of this structure was Persian and its aim and function was to preserve the unity of empire. Most of the members of this institution were Iranian intellectuals, authors, poets and religious leaders.

3. Persian literature was the main source of the continuation of Iranian culture during the Safavid period. Despite previous opinions about the conditions of the Persian literature, Persian literature flourished during the Safavid period and was a strong element in Iranian identity. It also functioned as a political instrument for the Safavid empire.

4. During the Safavid period, the expansion of the Shi’a religion led to the emergence of an identity which distinguished Iran from its neighbours. Its effect was to unify the Empire.

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Shamlu: Vali Quli Shamlu. Qetas al-Khaqani, ed Hasan

41) For instance see Browne 1969.
42) As mentioned before, the Persian language was even widespread beyond the borders of the Safavid empire. Even in the Ottoman empire it was the language of the elites and Sultans, as well as in Central Asia and Mughal India. In these two latter it was the official language of the administration system. The Persian administrative institution was the basis of the Ottoman imperial system which they inherited through the Seljuqids. See Dorson 1381: 162, 218, 269.
Sadat Naseri, Tehran. 1371.


