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The Confrontation between the Discourses of State-Sponsored Archaism and Islamism during the Pahlavi Era: A Genealogy of Formation, Hegemony, and the Crisis of Legitimacy

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ABSTRACT

The question of national identity and its relationship with historical and religious components has been among the most contentious issues in the process of modern state formation in contemporary Iranian history. The emergence of the Pahlavi regime was intertwined with an extensive top-down nation-building project whose ideological and identity-related backbone rested on the revival, reconstruction, and selective reproduction of the symbols, myths, and grandeur of pre-Islamic Iran (Ancient Iran). Employing a descriptive-analytical approach and drawing on the theoretical frameworks of critical discourse analysis and historical sociology, the present study examines the roots, manifestations, transformations, and consequences of the structural confrontation between archaist and Islamist ideas during the First and Second Pahlavi periods. The central problem addressed in this article concerns the process through which romantic and archaist nationalism was transformed into the dominant and exclusive ideology of the state, as well as the responses of Islamist sub-discourses to this exclusionary hegemonization. The findings indicate that, during the First Pahlavi period, archaism was manifested through authoritarian modernization, administrative and legal reforms, changes in dress, linguistic purification, and the curtailment of religious institutions, thereby generating a profound conflict between the ruling discourse and the traditional-religious lifeworld of society. During the Second Pahlavi period, this confrontation moved beyond the symbolic sphere and intensified through costly state rituals such as the 2,500-Year Celebration of the Persian Empire, the elevation of the monarchy to the status of the supreme ideological signifier, the replacement of the Hijri calendar with the Imperial calendar, and the promotion of cultural secularism. These developments transformed Islamist discourse from a traditional and defensive force of resistance into a dynamic, revolutionary, and politically mobilizing ideology. The ultimate outcome of this discursive conflict was the Pahlavi regime's inability to construct an "identity synthesis" between Iranian identity and Islamic identity, which produced a profound state-society cleavage, progressively eroded the regime's political legitimacy, and ultimately contributed to the formation of revolutionary cohesion in 1979.

Keywords: *state-sponsored archaism; political Islamism; Pahlavi era; national identity; discourse analysis; crisis of legitimacy*



Introduction

One of the most fundamental epistemological and political challenges facing Iran in recent centuries has been the contentious transition from traditional society to modernity and the formation of the modern nation-state. With the encounter of Iranian thought with Western civilization beginning in the Qajar era, followed by Iran's military defeats in the Russo-Persian wars, the central problematic confronting intellectuals and statesmen came to revolve around the causes of "historical decline" and the means of attaining "progress and advancement" (1). In this context, the component of "national identity" underwent fundamental conceptual transformations. For centuries, this identity had experienced a relatively dynamic equilibrium through the intertwined coexistence of Iranshahri elements, the epic heritage and Persian literature, on the one hand, and Islamic-Shi'i teachings, rituals, and worldview, on the other (2, 3).

Following the Constitutional Revolution and its subsequent failures in establishing a stable political order, the disorder resulting from the consequences of World War I, and the threat to Iran's territorial integrity, the inclination toward establishing a "powerful state" capable of simultaneously ensuring security, economic modernization, and national cohesion reached its height among Iran's intellectual and political elites (4). Under these historical circumstances, Reza Shah, who emerged from the 1921 coup, succeeded, with the support of a group of technocrats and nationalist intellectuals, in establishing the foundations of the modern absolutist state in Iran. However, the establishment of this modern state was not confined to bureaucratic reform, the creation of a unified army, and infrastructural development; rather, it became inseparably linked to the vital project of "cultural engineering and the redefinition of national identity" (5). In this process, the ruling elites, seeking to overcome ethnic and linguistic diversity and local traditions and to create a homogeneous civic identity, made an ideological choice: they selected "archaism" as the essential substance of national identity while excluding or diminishing the "Islamic element" as a traditional, reactionary force alien to the grandeur of ancient Iran. This ideological choice inaugurated a prolonged and turbulent period of fundamental conflict between two powerful discourses in Iran's public and political spheres, a conflict that continued until the end of the Pahlavi era (6).

The principal problem addressed in the present study is the genealogy and critical examination of the paradigmatic and discursive conflict between "state-sponsored archaism" and "socio-political Islamism" during the First Pahlavi period (1925–1941) and the Second Pahlavi period (1941–1979). In the history of contemporary Iranian political thought, Pahlavi nationalism was not an abruptly created phenomenon; rather, it was rooted in an intellectual current that had been formulated from the late Qajar era through the ideas of Mirza Fath Ali Akhundzadeh, Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani, and Jalal al-Din Mirza Qajar (7). Influenced by European Orientalism and nineteenth-century racial theories, these intellectuals divided Iranian history into a pre-Islamic golden age, corresponding to the grandeur of the Achaemenid and Sasanian empires, and a subsequent era of decline and darkness following the Arab conquest and the arrival of Islam. They attributed Iran's contemporary problems and backwardness to the imposition of Arab culture and language and sought the path to emancipation in a return to allegedly authentic Aryan roots (8).

With the consolidation of Reza Shah's monarchy, this idea, previously confined largely to unofficial intellectual circles, was transformed into the official ideology of the state and reproduced through governmental administrative and educational institutions such as the High Council of Education, the Academy of Iran, the Organization for the Cultivation of Public Thought, and newly established military and educational institutions (9). This state-sponsored

archaism possessed several essential characteristics: first, “militant secularism,” which regarded religion as an obstacle to progress by denying the historical authority of the clergy and restricting jurisprudence to individual affairs; second, “Aryanism and genealogical essentialism,” which mythologized the Aryan race and defined nationality in racial and blood-based terms; and third, “monarchical centrality,” which represented the institution of kingship as the embodiment of Iran’s twenty-five-century continuity and survival (7, 10).

Confronted with this large-scale state project, broad sectors of Iranian society, whose individual and collective identities had for centuries been intertwined with Islamic law and Shi’i religious belief, perceived this model as an assault on the foundations of their identity, morality, and faith (11). The clergy and Islamist currents reinterpreted Pahlavi archaism as a form of “innovation in religion, blind imitation of the West, modern jahiliyyah, and a colonial attempt to detach the Iranian nation from its religious foundations” (12). This identity polarization generated a structural cleavage within Iranian society that, in the terminology of Hossein Bashiriyeh, contributed to a “crisis of national identity” and a profound rupture between the modernizing state and traditional society (13).

During the Second Pahlavi period, particularly after the August 19, 1953 coup and the consolidation of the Shah’s personal authoritarian rule, this project acquired more spectacular and radical dimensions through increasing oil revenues and the discourse of the “White Revolution” and the “Great Civilization.” The celebration of the 2,500th anniversary of the Persian monarchy in 1971, the replacement of the Solar Hijri calendar with the Imperial calendar in 1976, and the gradual removal of Islamic symbols from textbooks and public media indicated that the regime showed little inclination toward synthesizing or reconciling itself with the Islamic component of national identity (5). Conversely, Islamist currents also underwent a fundamental transformation. Islamism no longer merely adopted traditional or conservative defensive positions; rather, through its reformulation by thinkers such as Ayatollah Motahhari, Dr. Ali Shariati, Ayatollah Taleghani, and, above all, Imam Khomeini, it developed into a revolutionary, structurally transformative, and hegemonic ideology that challenged archaism, Pahlavi authoritarianism, and Western imperialism and declared the ruling discourse illegitimate and taghuti, or tyrannical and illegitimate in Islamic terms (14, 15). Thus, the confrontation between the two intellectual currents expanded from the cultural domain into a direct struggle over “political power and legitimacy.”

Conceptual Foundations and Theoretical Framework of the Study

To provide a systematic and multilayered explanation of this intellectual confrontation, the present study employs Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s discourse theory as its theoretical framework. In this approach, social and political phenomena are not objective and pre-given entities; rather, they are constructed within “discourses” through an endless process of “signification” and the “articulation” of signifiers around one or more “nodal points” (16). Discourses constantly seek to hegemonize their systems of meaning, stabilize the meanings of other floating signifiers, and constitute their identities through processes of “othering” and the exclusion of competing discourses (17).

Within this theoretical framework:

1. **The Pahlavi discourse of archaism:** Its nodal points were constructed around “imperial nationalism,” the “Aryan race,” and “secular modernization.” By linking floating signifiers such as progress, advancement, the national army, modern discipline, and the heritage of Cyrus and Darius, this discourse sought to construct a system of meaning within which Islamic identity was represented as the “Other,” an imposed element, and a source of Iranian backwardness that had to be marginalized.

2. **The Islamist discourse:** By contrast, its central signifiers were constructed around the concepts of the “ummah,” “Sharia,” “Alavid justice,” “Imamate,” and “resistance to domination.” By emphasizing concepts such as martyrdom, a return to an authentic religious self, and the rejection of taghut, this discourse articulated archaism as “ancient jahiliyyah,” “monarchical idolatry,” and an “imperialist conspiracy aimed at secularizing society” (18).

The application of this theoretical framework makes it possible to demonstrate that the Pahlavi confrontation with Islamism was not merely a political dispute between the monarch and his opponents; rather, it constituted a “fundamental struggle over the ultimate meaning of Iranian identity,” the occupation of the symbolic space, and the acquisition of legitimacy for the exercise of power. Because of the rigidity of the authoritarian structure and the Pahlavi state’s refusal to incorporate Islamic signifiers, this conflict ultimately resulted in political closure and the collapse of the regime’s system of meaning.

Valuable studies have been conducted on Iranian nationalism and the relationship between state and religion during the Pahlavi era. Among them, Ervand Abrahamian, in *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (2010), examines the social structure, class divisions, and cultural policies of Reza Shah and Mohammad Reza Shah; however, his analytical focus lies primarily on political economy and the sociology of social forces, with less emphasis on the profound linguistic and semiotic transformations underlying the intellectual conflict over archaism. Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, in his seminal work *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism: Race and the Politics of Dislocation* (2017), traces the genealogy of archaism during the Qajar and early Pahlavi periods through the concept of “dislocative nationalism,” but does not comprehensively analyze the Second Pahlavi period or the internal transformation of Islamist discourse in response to this phenomenon. Likewise, Hatem Ghaderi in *Iran during the Pahlavi Era* (2003) and Alireza Azghandi in *History of Political and Social Developments in Iran* (2005) have elucidated the historical contexts of the cultural policies adopted by the Pahlavi governments.

Despite this body of scholarship, the necessity of the present study lies in its examination of the confrontation between archaism and Islamism over a continuous historical period from 1925 to 1979 and across two analytical levels: the “objective” level, encompassing cultural policies, education, rituals, calendars, and symbols, and the “epistemic-discursive” level, involving the articulation of systems of meaning and the reproduction of power. The distinctive contribution of this article lies in moving beyond reductionist approaches and demonstrating how excessive forms of religion-denying archaism themselves became mechanisms for the reproduction and radical dynamism of Islamism, thereby generating an unresolved contradiction within national identity.

Based on the foregoing issues, the fundamental research questions are formulated as follows:

Main Question: What manifestations, mechanisms, and dimensions of conflict did archaist and Islamist ideas generate within Iran’s political, cultural, and identity structures during the First and Second Pahlavi periods, and what consequences did this confrontation have for the crisis of legitimacy of the Pahlavi regime?

Sub-questions:

1. On what assumptions, myths, and identity signifiers was Pahlavi-era archaism based, and how was it transformed by the apparatus of power into the official ideology of the state?
2. What defensive and offensive mechanisms did Islamist discourse adopt in response to the symbolic, legal, and cultural measures of the First and Second Pahlavi regimes, and how did it move from traditional resistance to revolutionary action?

3. How can the genealogy of the Pahlavi regime's crisis of legitimacy in its final years be explained in terms of its inability to integrate the Iranian and Islamic dimensions of identity?

Research Hypothesis:

It appears that the authoritarian insistence of the Pahlavi regime in both periods on articulating national identity around secular archaism and denying society's historical-religious bonds through the exclusion of Islamic signifiers from the public and political spheres not only failed to produce an integrated national identity, but also deepened the cleavage between the state's official discourse and the lifeworld of the masses. In turn, this process transformed Islamist discourse into a comprehensive emancipatory, anti-authoritarian, and revolutionary mobilizing ideology that ultimately led to the complete erosion of the hegemony and legitimacy of the Pahlavi monarchical system.

The present study employs a "descriptive-analytical method with an approach grounded in historical sociology and discursive genealogy." Data were collected through library and documentary research, and the texts, laws, discourses, rituals, and key events of both Pahlavi periods were critically reexamined.

Historical Analysis and Discursive Genealogy

Historical and Theoretical Roots of the Emergence of Archaism: From Qajar Intellectualism to Reza Shah's Nationalism

To understand the nature of "archaism" during the Pahlavi era, it must be analyzed not as a sudden phenomenon but as the product of an "epistemic rupture" during the Qajar period. During this period, intellectual elites influenced by European Orientalism constructed an image of Iranian history centered on the "desacralization of the post-Islamic era" and the "sacralization of the pre-Islamic era."

In traditional Iranian thought, history had been defined on the basis of "justice," "good and evil," and the continuity between Iranian culture and Islamic Sharia. However, with the penetration of European nationalist discourses, intellectuals such as Mirza Fath Ali Akhundzadeh and Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani redefined the "nation-state" not on the basis of religion but on the basis of "race and blood" (19). They represented Islamic history not as part of national identity but as a source of "decline" and "alienation." As Zia-Ebrahimi argues, this intellectual current represented a form of "dislocative nationalism" that sought to detach Iranian identity from its Islamic contexts and confine it within an "Aryan box" (7).

During Reza Shah's rule, this intellectual current became "official state policy." The First Pahlavi regime required an ideology that could simultaneously perform two functions in consolidating central authority: first, eliminating the authority of the clergy as a political rival; and second, creating an artificial form of cohesion in a country marked by extensive ethnic and cultural diversity. At this point, archaism became the nodal point of "authoritarian modernization" (4).

Through the establishment of institutions such as the "Academy of Iran," intended to purify Persian of Arabic vocabulary, the "High Council of Education," responsible for developing textbooks centered on ancient history, and the "Organization for the Cultivation of Public Thought," Reza Shah's government sought to institutionalize this ideology within the deeper layers of society. During this period, Iranian history was effectively reduced to a "chronicle of kings," while national identity became synonymous with Cyrus and Darius. This endeavor was not merely a reinterpretation of history but a form of "identity engineering" in which "Iranian identity" was placed in inherent opposition to "Islamic identity" (13).

Objective Manifestations of Archaism and the Islamist Response during the First Pahlavi Era

During this period, the discursive confrontation shifted from the theoretical domain to that of “concrete measures” and “hard policy interventions.” The First Pahlavi state believed that the path to modernity required transforming both the “body” and the “public space” of Iranian society.

Policies such as “compulsory unveiling,” “uniformization of dress,” and the compulsory adoption of the “Pahlavi hat” represented outward manifestations of a broader strategy: militant secularism. The state sought, through the elimination of visible signs of religiosity, to transform the “Iranian individual” into the “modern secular citizen” (5).

In this confrontation, the state educational apparatus promoted archaism not merely as a lifestyle but as a “national creed.” In textbooks, the Sasanians and Achaemenids were represented as civilization-building heroes, while the post-Islamic period was depicted as an era of scientific and cultural stagnation. Consequently, Islamist discourse came to function as a “defensive force” against the state. Clerics and Islamic thinkers, including Modarres and other religious scholars of the period, characterized Pahlavi archaism as a “return to jahiliyyah” and a “conspiracy to weaken the people’s faith” (20).

Despite its outward appearance of modernization, the First Pahlavi regime’s archaist policies embodied a strategic error in governance: the neglect of the people’s “lifeworld.” Iranian society, which defined its identity through mosques, religious associations, and traditional social relations, was confronted by a state that failed to recognize its language and culture.

This confrontation produced a form of “identity duality”: ancient symbols predominated in the official sphere, while religious symbols remained dominant in the informal and popular sphere. This division demonstrated that state-sponsored archaism had failed to establish genuine “hegemony” in the Gramscian sense and had instead produced only “domination.” Because this domination lacked religious and popular legitimacy, it rapidly weakened when the structure of political power was shaken, particularly during the events of September 1941, thereby opening the way for the reentry of religious discourse into the public sphere (12).

The Second Pahlavi Era: The Imperial Personality Cult, Spectacular Rituals, and Identity Rupture

With the beginning of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi’s reign following the crisis of September 1941, the regime’s approach toward religion and archaism underwent a period of “tactical accommodation and political expediency.” During the first two decades, because of the weakness of central authority and the court’s need for support from traditional and religious forces in confronting the growing threat of leftism and the Tudeh Party, the harsh anti-religious policies of Reza Shah’s period were partially moderated (4). Nevertheless, after the August 19, 1953 coup, and especially with the onset of the 1960s and the influx of vast oil revenues, the power structure increasingly evolved toward an “absolutist rentier state.” In this new phase, Mohammad Reza Shah no longer felt compelled to derive legitimacy from traditional and religious institutions and elevated archaism from a program of cultural modernization into a “state religion and imperial personality cult” (13).

The most conspicuous manifestation of spectacular archaism during the Second Pahlavi period was the “2,500th Anniversary Celebration of the Founding of the Persian Empire” in October 1971. More than a historical commemoration, this event constituted a “massive semiotic project” designed to reconstruct Iran’s historical identity. Within this discourse, by standing before the tomb of Cyrus the Great and delivering his well-known statement, “Cyrus, rest in peace, for we are awake,” the Shah represented himself as the direct continuation of a twenty-five-

century monarchical tradition, the embodiment of national unity, and the sole incarnation of Iran's historical spirit (7).

A discourse analysis of the 2,500th Anniversary Celebrations reveals several key signifiers:

1. **The historical erasure of fourteen centuries of Islamic history:** Within this event, the Islamic period of Iranian history was represented as an “unfortunate interruption” or a marginal era, while all civilizational grandeur and glory were associated with the Achaemenid and Sasanian periods.
2. **Othoring the Islamic world and alignment with the West:** The extensive presence of Western monarchs and heads of state, combined with the absence of meaningful organic ties with Muslim nations, indicated that the regime sought to define Iran as a European island in the heart of the Middle East, geographically situated among Muslim countries merely by accident (5).
3. **Mythologizing the monarch as the embodiment of divine glory:** Although the Shah superficially displayed certain religious beliefs, within the formal ideological apparatus he was represented as the bearer of a “divine mission” and as the mediator of an ancient source of blessing and legitimacy. This conception was irreconcilable with Islamic political thought, which regards unconditional personal power as illegitimate and as a manifestation of despotism and taghut (8).

One of the most radical and politically costly ideological decisions undertaken by the Pahlavi regime in the sphere of symbolic engineering was the “replacement of the Solar Hijri calendar with the Imperial calendar” in March 1976. Under this measure, the year 1355 Solar Hijri was redesignated as the year 2535 of the Imperial calendar. This decision transferred the foundational point of Iran's collective identity and historical time from a religious event—the Prophet Muhammad's migration—to the presumed coronation of Cyrus the Great (6).

From the perspective of political sociology, this measure constituted a form of “discursive suicide,” because the calendar represented one of the deepest layers of the collective unconscious and regulated the ritual rhythms of the popular lifeworld, including Ramadan, Muharram, and religious festivals. Its alteration indicated that the regime was pursuing a “comprehensive secularization of national time.” The decision generated criticism even among moderate and nationalist forces, which viewed it as artificial, affected, and indicative of the court's complete detachment from Iranian social realities (14). This symbolic manipulation further strengthened the Islamist conviction that the Pahlavi regime was not merely a secular modernizing state but an essentially anti-Islamic government whose continued existence was incompatible with the religious identity of the people.

Transformation of Islamist Discourse: From Traditional Jurisprudential Resistance to Revolutionary Ideology

One of the unintended consequences of excessive archaism and Pahlavi state secularism was that they compelled Islamic thought to undergo a “profound paradigmatic transformation.” Islamism, which during the First Pahlavi era had adopted a defensive and jurisprudential orientation concerned primarily with preserving seminaries and religious institutions, developed during the 1960s and 1970s into an “affirmative, theorized, and hegemonic discourse” capable of reconstructing modern concepts within a religious framework (11).

Theoretical Formulation of the Relationship between Iranian and Islamic Identity: Critique of Artificial Archaism

In response to the attempt to divide Iranian and Islamic identity, prominent Islamic thinkers undertook an interpretive and historical reconsideration of this relationship. Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari's seminal work *Mutual*

Services of Islam and Iran (1970) represented a turning point in this intellectual reconstruction. Using historical and argumentative reasoning, Motahhari maintained that the arrival of Islam in Iran was not merely an imposition by the sword but represented a response to the spiritual and egalitarian aspirations of a stratified and oppressed Sasanian society. Iranian culture after Islam was not destroyed; rather, through its interaction with Islamic monotheism it flourished, and many of the greatest scholars, philosophers, and literary figures of Islamic civilization were Iranians. Pahlavi archaism, in this reading, did not constitute authentic nationalism but rather an “imported and chauvinistic nationalism” aimed at severing the people from their religious roots in the interests of Western cultural influence (11).

This theoretical interpretation undermined the ideological foundation of state-sponsored archaism and demonstrated to educated and younger social groups that adherence to Islam was not incompatible with progress or national identity but could instead serve as a foundation for emancipation from colonialism and authoritarianism.

Dr. Ali Shariati, in turn, articulated the concept of a “return to the self” as a critique of both “Westoxication” and “mummified archaism.” By distinguishing between a “living and conscious nationality” and “racial and monarchical nationalism,” Shariati argued that a return to the ancient and mythologized past of Cyrus and Darius amounted to a return to dead tombs and class-based despotism, whereas the “living historical and social self of the Iranian people” was intertwined with Shi’i culture, Ashura, justice, and resistance to oppression (21). This interpretation elevated religion from the sphere of traditional ritual alone into an “ideology of protest and consciousness” capable of linking urban masses, university students, and the traditional middle class.

The decisive factor in this confrontation was the leadership of Imam Khomeini, who elevated the conflict with the regime from demands for political reform to the level of a “fundamental rejection of the legitimacy of monarchy as an institution.” Through his forceful criticism of the 2,500th Anniversary Celebrations, the calendar change, and capitulation, he characterized monarchy as an inhumane and anti-Islamic institution and as an instrument for the exploitation of the nation:

“Monarchy has been wrong from the very beginning... monarchy means coercion and dictatorship... Islam has opposed monarchy from the outset” (22).

By newly articulating concepts such as “taghut,” “the oppressed versus the arrogant powers,” “Ashura,” and “social justice,” Imam Khomeini transformed Islamist discourse into the dominant discourse of resistance to domination. Within this framework, Pahlavi archaism was exposed as part of a broader project of “cultural imperialism and hostility toward Islam,” a development that intensified revolutionary mobilization within society (12).

Comparative Analysis and Discursive Explanation of the Pahlavi State’s Failure to Create an Identity Synthesis

An accurate understanding of Iran’s political and social transformations during the Pahlavi era requires examination of the conflict between two competing horizons of meaning concerning the nature of “national identity” and the “model of legitimacy.” In both the First and Second Pahlavi periods, the regime constructed its modernization project upon Aryan-centered archaism and the promotion of formalistic modernity, a policy that inevitably marginalized or excluded the core of Iran’s historical-religious identity, namely Shi’ism. In contrast, Islamist discourse, through the rearticulation of religious concepts and their connection to contemporary social needs and anti-domination concerns, succeeded in challenging the regime’s cultural hegemony. The following table provides a strategic comparison of the components, signifiers, and functions of the two competing discourses based on the findings of the study.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of the Components and Mechanisms of State-Sponsored Archaist and Islamist Discourses during the Pahlavi Era

Analytical Component	Pahlavi State-Sponsored Archaist Discourse	Transformed Islamist Discourse
Nodal Point	Aryan monarchy and secular modernization	Sharia, Imamate, and social justice
Source of Identity	Myths of ancient Iran (Achaemenid-Sasanian)	Monotheistic culture, Ashura, and the Prophetic-Alavid heritage
Definition of the Nation	A homogeneous community based on race and obedience to the monarch	A unified ummah composed of the people and the oppressed
Approach to the Islamic Era	An era of decline, darkness, and civilizational rupture	An era of scientific and ethical maturation and the development of Iranian culture
Rituals and Symbols	The 2,500th Anniversary Celebrations, palaces, and the Imperial calendar	Muharram assemblies, mosques, religious associations, and the Hijri calendar
Approach to Western Modernity	Structural imitation and civilizational fascination with the West	Instrumental adoption combined with a fundamental critique of colonialism
Social Base	Court-affiliated elites, technocrats, and the military	Lower social strata, the bazaar, the clergy, and revolutionary university students

For a more precise explanation of the mechanisms underlying this confrontation, the conflict between the two discourses can be formulated and examined along three structural dimensions that reached their highest level of tension during the final years of the Pahlavi regime.

Within the discourse of state-sponsored archaism, “Iranian identity” was redefined almost exclusively in relation to pre-Islamic heritage and the monarchical order. Pahlavi cultural agents—from the early intellectual circles of the late Qajar and First Pahlavi periods to Second Pahlavi cultural institutions such as the Women’s Organization, National Iranian Radio and Television, and various state-sponsored cultural centers—attempted to equate the concept of Iran with the Aryan race, the imperial cult, and ancient Achaemenid and Sasanian myths. Within this epistemological framework, the arrival of Islam in Iran was represented as a “tragic rupture” and a source of civilizational decline that, according to Orientalist racial theories, had contaminated Iran’s cultural purity. This exclusionary formulation disregarded fourteen centuries of lived experience, religious belief, and literary and philosophical creativity within Iranian society.

In contrast, Islamist discourse, recognizing this identity threat, offered an affirmative interpretation of “Iranian identity.” In the thought of figures such as Ayatollah Motahhari, Iranians were represented not merely as peoples conquered by the sword but as a society that turned toward Islamic justice and monotheism. Within this approach, Islam was not an imposed and external element but the principal source of Iranian civilizational development in the post-Sasanian era, constituting a dynamic identity that combined a rich indigenous culture with a monotheistic worldview. Accordingly, Islamists regarded state-sponsored archaism as a form of “false, artificial, and socially alien identity construction” whose ultimate consequences were identity distortion and cultural alienation.

The identity conflict between the two discourses did not remain confined to theoretical debate; it was also enacted through symbols and social rituals. Using its extensive propaganda machinery and financial resources, the Pahlavi regime sacralized ancient symbols. The 2,500th Anniversary Celebrations of the founding of the Persian monarchy in October 1971 and the replacement of the Solar Hijri calendar with the Imperial calendar in March 1976 constituted radical attempts to “secularize the calendar and the symbolic memory of society.” Through the calendar reform, the government effectively removed the Prophet Muhammad’s migration from the starting point of Iranian collective historical time and replaced it with the presumed coronation of Cyrus the Great.

This accelerated manipulation of symbols provoked a forceful and organized response from religious networks. Traditional institutions of society, including mosques, husayniyyahs, religious associations, and the bazaar, not only

rejected state-sponsored symbols but transformed religious rituals—particularly Muharram and Safar commemorations, processions, and celebrations of the fifteenth of Sha‘ban—into “public spaces of political protest” and displays of social power against the regime. This symbolic confrontation maximized the divide between “lavish court rituals” and “deeply rooted popular rituals,” thereby severely undermining the regime’s symbolic legitimacy.

The third dimension of the conflict was manifested in competing understandings of progress, development, and relations with Western civilization. Pahlavi discourse interpreted modernity through the framework of Western modernization theory, cultural Westernization, and institutional secularization. Within this model, progress and entry into the so-called Great Civilization were assumed to require the removal of religious beliefs and institutions from the public sphere. The instruments of this modernization included depriving the clergy of legal and educational authority, promoting modern consumerism, and transforming clothing and lifestyles according to European models.

In contrast, Islamist discourse, through a critical reinterpretation of development, characterized Pahlavi modernity as a form of “dependent and caricatured modernization” that, by disregarding social justice, national independence, and political freedoms, merely intensified Iran’s economic and cultural dependence on the Western bloc. Within this perspective, desirable development did not lie in blind imitation of the West or in archaism, but in economic independence, distributive justice, popular sovereignty, and the revival of the moral and spiritual values of Islam.

A fundamental question in the political sociology of contemporary Iran is why the Pahlavi government failed to achieve accommodation, sustainable integration, or an “identity synthesis” between the two constitutive elements of Iranian identity, namely ancient heritage and Islamic-Shi‘i heritage. An examination of historical evidence and the structure of the Pahlavi state reveals three structural factors underlying this failure.

In both Pahlavi periods, the state was centralized, authoritarian, and top-down in character. Under such a structure, archaism was designed and imposed not as the product of a free national dialogue in the public sphere but as an “administrative directive and governmental decree.” Identity synthesis within a historically complex society requires democratic interaction, dialogue among intellectual elites, and recognition of competing narratives; however, the Pahlavi regime suppressed reinterpretations of identity that departed from the court’s preferences by treating them as “subversion and opposition to national security.” Political monopolization thus prevented intellectual sectors of society from reconstructing Iranian and Islamic identity within a dialectical equilibrium.

Particularly during the Second Pahlavi era, and especially following the sudden rise in oil prices in the 1970s, the government acquired a degree of structural independence from civil society. Oil revenues enabled the Shah to disregard the need to obtain social consent and legitimacy from traditional and religious forces. Believing that extensive financial and military power could contain cultural dissatisfaction, the regime intensified policies perceived as anti-Islamic. This financial and security-based autonomy enclosed the court within a cognitive bubble and prevented it from appreciating the depth of popular attachment to religious values; consequently, meaningful efforts to reconcile official identity with the lived identity of society were largely abandoned.

In the official Pahlavi narrative, nationalism extended beyond civic and national loyalty and became directly equated with “loyalty to the person of the monarch.” By linking Iranian nationalism to the institution of monarchy through an exclusive equation—“Shah = Iran”—criticism of dictatorship or demands for the rule of law could be interpreted as national betrayal. Because both traditional and revolutionary Islamism opposed illegitimate concentration of power and taghut, the Pahlavi court increasingly viewed confrontation with religious forces as unavoidable. The reduction of nationalism to an ideological instrument against critics ultimately transformed

archaism in the eyes of broad social groups from a symbol of Iranian pride into a “mask legitimizing authoritarianism and court corruption.”

In summary, the Pahlavi state’s failure to establish a link between ancient Iranian elements and Shi’i beliefs produced one of the deepest “crises of hegemony and legitimacy” in contemporary Iranian history. The more the regime intensified extreme archaism and secularizing policies, the greater the mobilizing and protest potential of religion became. The logical outcome of this discursive rigidity and refusal of identity synthesis was that, as the political and economic legitimacy of the regime deteriorated in the late 1970s, Islamist discourse, drawing on its symbols, social networks, and deep religious foundations, succeeded in uniting diverse dissatisfied social classes within a revolutionary framework and ultimately dismantled both state-sponsored archaism and the political structure that sustained it.

Conclusion

The present study was designed to provide a genealogical and discursive analysis of the conflict between two major identity narratives in contemporary Iran: “state-sponsored archaist discourse” and “socio-political Islamist discourse” during the First and Second Pahlavi periods. This confrontation represents one of the most decisive and contentious themes in the history of political thought and the sociology of contemporary Iranian transformation, because beyond a simple rivalry between the ruling establishment and opposition groups, it reflected a fundamental struggle over control of the symbolic sphere, the redefinition of “the sacred,” the engineering of the collective unconscious, and the formulation of the ultimate meaning of “being Iranian.”

The findings of the study, considered within a historical-analytical continuum, demonstrate that the project of state-sponsored archaism underwent different stages of transformation and intensification during the fifty-three years of Pahlavi rule:

1. **During the First Pahlavi period (1925–1941):** Archaist nationalism functioned as the ideological arm of “authoritarian modernization and centralized state-building.” Confronted by regional fragmentation, ethnic cleavages, and the consequences of post-Constitutional disorder, Reza Shah sought to construct a homogeneous civic identity through the revival of symbols, architecture, clothing, and imperial myths associated with the Achaemenid and Sasanian periods. During this period, archaism possessed a form of “institutional and structural engineering” implemented through institutions such as the Academy of Iran and the High Council of Education, as well as through coercive secularizing policies such as compulsory unveiling, restrictions on clerical dress, and state control over religious endowments. In this phase, Islamist currents responded primarily in a “defensive, jurisprudential, and institution-preserving” manner, seeking to prevent the erosion of religious traditions and the institutional core of the seminaries.
2. **During the Second Pahlavi period (1941–1979):** Archaism moved beyond its role as an administrative instrument for national cohesion and developed into an “imperial personality cult and quasi-sacred state ritual.” Particularly after the consolidation of oil-based authoritarianism during the 1960s and 1970s, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi represented monarchy as the sole axis of Iran’s historical continuity. Costly and highly symbolic ceremonies, such as the 2,500th Anniversary Celebrations at Persepolis and the radical replacement of the Solar Hijri calendar with the Imperial calendar, demonstrated that the regime had taken the project of “secularizing collective time and space” to its most extensive form. This approach effectively

meant the symbolic exclusion of fourteen centuries of Islamic civilization from national memory and the positioning of Islam as an “imposed and alien element.”

The most significant theoretical contribution of the present article lies in its explanation of the mechanism of Islamism’s “discursive response.” Contrary to the expectations of Pahlavi policymakers, who assumed that archaist modernization would marginalize religion, structural pressure and perceived symbolic offenses against religious values instead became driving forces behind an “intellectual revival and paradigmatic transformation” within Islamic thought.

Prominent thinkers such as Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari, through his seminal work *Mutual Services of Islam and Iran*, challenged the argumentative foundations of race-centered archaism and demonstrated that the development of Iranian civilization and culture occurred not in opposition to Islam but through intellectual synergy and interaction with Islamic monotheism (23).

Dr. Ali Shariati, through his formulation of the “return to the self,” distinguished between tribal-imperial nationalism—which he regarded as a return to ancient aristocracy—and the “living social self,” imbued with the emancipatory ideals of Shi’ism, Alavid justice, and the epic of Ashura. In doing so, he directed university students and younger generations toward a religious yet modern conception of identity (21).

Imam Khomeini, through his radical criticism of imperial celebrations and his fundamental rejection of monarchy, transformed this cultural confrontation into a “total political struggle.” He rearticulated Islamist signifiers around concepts such as “Imamate,” “rejection of taghut,” “support for the oppressed,” and “guardianship of the jurist,” thereby helping mobilize broad sectors and social classes within a revolutionary hegemonic front against the regime (22).

From the perspective of Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory, the fall of the Pahlavi regime can be interpreted as the direct consequence of “discursive closure and the refusal to achieve an identity synthesis.” Throughout Iranian history, the historical identity of the Iranian people had been shaped by the coexistence and interaction of three identity layers: (1) the ancient Iranian heritage and pre-Islamic intellectual traditions, (2) the Islamic worldview, rituals, and Sharia, and (3) the functional requirements of modernity and the contemporary world (17).

Because of its authoritarianism, political monism, and excessive concentration of power, the Pahlavi regime sought to place the first two layers in an irreconcilable and mutually exclusionary relationship; in other words, in pursuit of modernization and nationalism, it attempted to negate the second layer, namely Islamic identity. This one-dimensional approach prevented state-sponsored archaism from developing into an “organic hegemony” embedded within the social consciousness and instead confined it to the status of an “imposed court-centered ideological superstructure.” When the regime’s functional legitimacy was undermined by economic crises and political authoritarianism, archaism was incapable of bridging the widening divide between state and society. Consequently, the masses, who perceived their religious lifeworld as being subjected to assault by the regime’s cultural apparatus, drew upon the comprehensive, justice-oriented, and socially rooted discourse of Islamism and brought the 2,500-year monarchical system to an end in February 1979.

Accordingly, the experience of the Pahlavi era demonstrated that any model of nation-building and development in Iran founded on the negation of one of society’s principal identity components—particularly the deeply rooted Islamic component—is likely to generate a crisis of legitimacy, social fragmentation, and the reproduction of fundamental political crises.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

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Ethical Considerations

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Transparency of Data

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