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The Image of Arabs and the Arabic Language in Contemporary Persian Jokes

ABSTRACT

Stereotypes concerning a nation, its culture, including language are often reflected in ethnic jokes. The image of Arabs and Arabic language in Iran is by no means an exception here and the sacralization of the language of Quran does not seem to be an effective obstacle in this case. This phenomenon is not consistent, of course, with the official propaganda of the pan-Islamic brotherhood. Stereotypes appearing in such jokes are a serious matter especially if analyzed within the contexts of the situation of ethnic minorities in the Islamic Republic of Iran. There are examples showing that this type of humour may be perceived as a kind of linguistic violence and provoke a counter-action.

KEY WORDS

Persian language, Persian humour, stereotypes, Arabs

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In the Iran of today, officially, Arabs are respected together with other Muslim peoples. Article 11 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran says that, in accordance with the Quran, all Muslims form a single community (Persian¹ *ommat*) and the state is obliged to carry out all its policies basing on the principles of alliance (*e'telāf*) and unity (*ettehād*) with other Muslim nations. Moreover, the authorities have to perform constant efforts

¹ All the terms cited from the Iranian constitution are of Arabic origin. In fact, Modern Persian language is full of Arabic loanwords, which adds an additional dimension to the problem of cultural relations between the Iranian and Arab worlds.

to make the political, economical and cultural unity (*vahdat*) of the Muslim world real. Article 19 declares that all people of Iran, in spite of different ethnic affiliations, are equal according to the law of the state and that race or language must not be a reason for privileges. To this we may add declarations of fraternity with Arab countries at the very beginning of the Islamic Republic and the constant, unconditional support for Palestinians in their conflict with the State of Israel.

As far as the Arabic language is concerned, the Iranian constitution recognizes its special position (beside Persian, which is given the status of the national language), saying in the 16th article that “As the language of Quran, Islamic science and teaching is Arabic, and the Persian literature is profoundly mixed with it, therefore this language has to be taught in all the classes, in all fields of study from above the elementary grade to the end of the secondary school.”²

However, one cannot forget that the relations between Persians and Arabs have always been quite complicated and one cannot expect that the difficult history has left no trace on the mutual relations between the two peoples and on the common Iranian stereotypical image of Arabs and their language. The description of Perso-Arabic relations could be started with the period of the Achaemenid empire, which comprised within its borders lands inhabited by Arabic tribes,³ including even some territories in the Arabian Peninsula.⁴ This political dominance of Iranians over parts of the Arab tribes continued until the rise of Islam, with one sole interlude of the Alexander the Great’s invasion and his successors, i.e. the Diadochi. This political subordination must have been accompanied by the cultural influences, though evidence of these is to be found mostly in the sphere of the language.⁵ Some Persian loanwords were introduced into Arabic in that period, e.g. Arabic *jund* from the Middle Persian *gund* ‘army,’⁶ *fālūdaj* ‘sweetmeat of flour, water and honey’ from the

² Qānun-e asāsi-ye Jomhuri-ye Eslāmi-ye Irān, [online], http://rc.majlis.ir/fa/content/iran_constitution [2.01.2013] (author’s own translation).

³ See M. Dandamayev, *Arabia i. The Achaemenid Province Arābaya*, [in:] *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Vol. 2, Fasc. 3, [online], <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/arabaya-arabia-a-province-of-the-achaemenid-empire> published 1986 updated 2011 [4.01.2014].

⁴ D. T. Potts, *The Archaeology and Early History of the Persian Gulf*, [in:] *The Persian Gulf in History*, ed. L. G. Potter, London 2009, p. 38–39.

⁵ A. Tafazzoli, *Arabic Language ii. Iranian Loanwords in Arabic*, [in:] *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Vol. 2, Fasc. 3, [online], <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/arabic-ii>, December 1986, updated August 2011 [6.01.2014].

⁶ Versteegh K., *The Arabic Language*, Edinburgh 2001, p. 60.

Middle Persian *pālūdāg*.⁷ After the Islamic conquest of the 7th century the situation changed drastically. Even if the Iranian cultural influences were still quite present and strong,⁸ the Arabs started to exert enormous influence on Persia, the most important aspect of which was islamization of the country. The Arab conquest is an important historic event for most Iranians. The Iranian nationalists of modern times see this invasion of 'barbarous hordes' against the ideal, unspoilt Iranian state as the greatest tragedy in their history and the cause of all the calamities that have troubled their fatherland since then.⁹

Another important cultural effect of the Islamic conquest of Iran was introduction of the Arabic not only as the sacred language of the new religion, but also as the language of literature and science. In fact, for about two centuries after the Arab invasion, Persian was hardly used in writing, except by those remaining faithful to the Zoroastrian creed.¹⁰ However, at the same time, Arabic was (and remains) the language of savage invaders (v. sup.) and its allegedly uncivilized speakers of today (see the examples discussed below). Although anti-nationalism and promoting pan-Islamic unity was important factor in the agenda of the religious opposition¹¹, nationalist sentiments might have been ascribed to at least some part of Iranian clergy as early as in the beginning of the 20th century.¹² Even today, under the rule of the clergy, Iranian authorities often present nationalistic views (including language nationalism).¹³

Having a closer look at the problem of modern Persian-Arab interaction, we need to take into consideration two different aspects of it: the situation of the Arab minority in Iran and the interstate relations between the Islamic

⁷ A. Tafazzoli, op. cit.

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ D. Motadel, *Iran and the Aryan Myth*, [in:] *Perceptions of Iran, History, Myths and Nationalism from Medieval Persia to the Islamic Republic*, ed. A. M. Ansari, London 2014, p. 131.

¹⁰ L. P. Elwell-Sutton, *Arabic Language iii. Arabic influences in Persian literature*, [in:] *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Vol. 2, Fasc. 3, [online], <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/arabic-iii>, December 1986, updated August 2011 [6.01.2014].

¹¹ M. T. Davari, *Political Thought of Ayatollah Murtaza Mutahhari, An Iranian theoretician of the Islamic state*, New York 2004, p. 57ff; Sh. Hunter, *The Future of Islam and the West: Clash of Civilizations Or Peaceful Coexistence?*, Westport (CT) 1998, p. 89.

¹² R. Ch. Elling, *Minorities in Iran: Nationalism and Ethnicity After Khomeini*, New York 2013, p. 81.

¹³ M. Mashayekhi, *The Politics of Nationalism and Political Culture*, [in] *Iran: Political Culture in the Islamic Republic*, eds. S. K. Farsoun, M. Mashayekhi, London–New York 1992, p. 76.

Republic of Iran and Arab states. The first question is much more important for the creation of stereotypes, so we will discuss it in details.

Most of the Arabs in Iran live in the province of Xuzestān and they form 70% of its population.¹⁴ In the Pahlavi era, the policy of the state towards the ethnic and religious minorities in Iran aimed at homogenizing the society, ascribing the 'Iranian' identity to the whole population.¹⁵ Arabs of Xuzestān were forbidden to wear local clothes and Persian language was imposed in all schools.¹⁶ This was probably one of the factors why they supported the Islamic Revolution¹⁷ of 1979 and remained faithful to Iran during the bloody conflict with the neighbouring Iraq, quite contrary to the expectations of Saddam Hussain.¹⁸ This created a better atmosphere between the Iranian state and the Iranian Arabs for a while.

However, although the new regime substituted the notion of 'compatriot' (*hamvatan*) with '[Muslim] sister/brother' (*xāhar/barādar*),¹⁹ the attitude towards ethnic minorities has not changed decisively. Today, in fact, both the followers of the Islamic Republic and nationalists (esp. monarchists) reject any discussion on minority issues treating it as an assault on national or state unity.²⁰ It is so, even if most ethnic rights activists in Iran reject separatism.²¹ If we were to look for the causes of these over-sensitive reactions, we could point at the fact that half of the population of the Islamic Republic of Iran is formed of non-Persian ethnic groups.²² Thus, even the faintest possibility of secession of some of them could lead to the total dissolution of the state. As Saleh puts it sharply, "Since the establishment of the modern nation-state of Iran in 1925, ethnic conflict has emerged as the principle source of threat to Iran's territorial integrity and as the main challenge to the security of the state."²³

¹⁴ A. Saleh, *Ethnic Identity and the State in Iran*, New York 2013, p. 70.

¹⁵ S. A. Arjomand, *Politics*, [in:] A. Gheissari, *Contemporary Iran: Economy, Society, Politics*, Oxford 2009, p. 301.

¹⁶ A. Saleh, op. cit., p. 70.

¹⁷ There are various estimates as far as the proportion of Sunni and Shi'i Muslims among the Arabs living in Iran is concerned. Nevertheless, the Shi'is form at least half of this community (see S. A. Arjomand, op. cit., p. 311) and that made possible such a wide support for Khomeini's vision among them.

¹⁸ A. Saleh, op. cit., p. 70.

¹⁹ S. A. Arjomand, op. cit., p. 304.

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 304, 306.

²¹ Ibidem, p. 308.

²² Ibidem.

²³ S. Saleh, op. cit., p. 147.

Thus, it is not surprising that in spite of the good start of new relations between the Iranian state and the Arab minority, the situation deteriorated with the course of time and the time of unrest in 1990's was particularly significant here.²⁴ At the beginning of the new century the situation did not improve; rather the opposite. In 2005 the so-called *Ahwāzi intifada* took place. A number of Arabic inhabitants of the province were killed during anti-state demonstrations and the violence that followed. Many more were wounded and detained.²⁵

The complete description of the history of the Arab-Iranian relations certainly exceeds the scope of this article. However, we should note that in the modern times the declarations of solidarity with the Arab brothers in Islam of the first days of the revolution were soon compromised by the bloody war against Iraq.

Summing up, the ethnic minorities do exist in Iran and Arabs are one of them. All these minorities more or less openly (depending on the current political situation) demand more freedom and justice in the attitude of the state towards these minorities.²⁶ The situation in Xuzestān, where most Iranian Arabs dwell, has been tense for many years and various factors easily provoke violent clashes between protesting members of the minority and the police.²⁷

Taking all that into consideration, one becomes curious what is the stereotypical image of Arabs and their language in the Iranian society. In the present article, we are going to pay some attention to only one aspect of this problem, namely to the vision of Arabs and the Arabic language emerging from contemporary Iranian jokes. We will see that this is in most cases an example of linguistic violence directed towards 'the Others' and their ethnolect. The primary source of the material for this work is the Internet, as a medium free (in most cases) from any censorship, both political and moral. This is where the most vulgar, obscene and chauvinist anecdotes are published with no constraints.

Obviously, in most cases ethnic jokes (the so-called Arabic jokes are classical examples of this category of humour) are based on stereotypical clichés about 'the Others.' Between Persians and Arabs, as F. Halliday noted,

²⁴ Ibidem, p. 70.

²⁵ J. Castellino, K. A. Cavanaugh, *Minority Rights in the Middle East*, Oxford 2013, p. 176.

²⁶ S. A. Arjomand, op. cit., p. 306ff.

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 313ff.

there is a ‘psychological gap’²⁸ preventing people on both sides from learning more about the other and breaking stereotypes. And we must remember that the notion of ‘the Others’ and the difference between them and the Iranians was always present in Persian culture, cf. the division of the world into Iran and non-Iran in the times of the Sasanian dynasty (224 CE–650 CE²⁹).

To the authors best knowledge, we have no records of ethnic humour from the times of the first great conflict between Persians and Arabs, that is from the period of the Islamic conquest of Iran. However, there are references to Arabs in late (i.e. of the time after the invasion) Zoroastrian writings that do have some traits in common with the material we are going to analyse in the present article. Namely, Arabs are described there as violent and savage descendants of the demon *Xēšm* (Wrath, Avestan *aēšma*-³⁰) – as it is in the case of the late Middle Persian apocalyptic text entitled *Zand-ī Wāhmān Yasn (Yašt)*.

It is, however, already in the context of the Muslim culture of Iran, when a kind of satire seems to be employed for the first time. The supporters of the Iranian cultural revival and the followers of the *šo’ubiyye* movement referred to Arabs as lizard-eaters and stressed their tribal and uncivilized (from the point of view of urban societies) customs,³¹ see for instance the famous verse by the author of the national epic of Iran Abolqāsem Ferdowsi,

| | |
|---|--|
| From drinking milk of camels and eating lizards | The status of Arabs became such |
| That they started to desire the throne of Iran | Curse be upon the Wheel of Fortune, curse! ³² |

Moreover, the followers of *šo’ubiyye* stressed the role of non-Arabs (Iranian) in the formation of Islam at the expense of Arabs.³³

The vision of uncivilized Bedouins appears here and there throughout classical Persian literature³⁴ and the motive of lizard eaters is popular among

²⁸ F. Halliday, *Arabs and Persians beyond the Geopolitics of the Gulf*, [in:] *Cahiers d’Études sur la Méditerranée Orientale et le Monde Turco-Iranien*, [online], <http://cemoti.revues.org/document143.html> [14.08.2007].

²⁹ A. Sh. Shahbazi, *Sasanian Dynasty*, [in:] *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, [online], <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/sasanian-dynasty> [27.12.2013].

³⁰ Ch. Bartholomae, *Altiranisches Wörterbuch*, Berlin 1961, p. 35–36.

³¹ P. Crone, *The Rise of Islam in the World*, [in:] *The Cambridge Illustrated History of the Islamic World*, ed. F. Robinson, Cambridge 1996, p. 23.

³² Author’s own translation based on *Firdousī. Šāh-nāme. Kritičeskij*, eds. A. E. Bertels, A. Nushina, Vol. 9, Moskva 1971, p. 322.

³³ A. H. Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, London 2002, p. 87.

³⁴ J. T. P. De Bruijn, *Humor*, [in:] *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, ed. E. Yarshater, Vol. 12,

Iranians even in the modern times.³⁵ In fact the vision of the civilized pre-Islamic Iran invaded by barbaric Muslims formed an important element of the official propaganda of the Pahlavi era.³⁶

To avoid bias one has to admit that such a negative picture of Arabs was – even if prevalent – not the only one existing. Some Muslim authors of Iranian origin, like Ibn Qutayba (a theologian, philosopher and poet living in the 9th) century, refuted *šo'ubiyye*.³⁷

What is interesting is that as far as the Arabic language is concerned, we find no negative images in early sources. Gilbert Lazard explains this in his article *On the Raise of the New Persian Language*, saying that the national identity of Iranians “did not, however, manifest itself in the sphere of the language; linguistic nationalism is a modern invention and did not exist in those days.”³⁸ Moreover, at that period, it was Arabic that played the role of the language of Iranian elites, and the supporters of the *šo'ubiyye* used it themselves in their arguments.³⁹ Thus, we do not expect to find examples of aggression or satire against the Arabic language at these times, maybe only some indifference, as in the case of the local princes in the province of *Tabarestān* or the class of small landowners or *dehqāns* in eastern Iran.⁴⁰ It was probably this indifference (and the lack of knowledge of Arabic resulting from it) that made possible the rebirth of Persian as a cultural and literary medium.⁴¹

The literature of the 20th century introduces new ideas into Iranian culture, among them is the modern understanding of nationalism. Writers such as

New York 2004.

³⁵ See eg. the website <http://www.persianpetition.com/signs.aspx?id=492782fa-6824-4b32-b123-d5146248815a&f=356> [28.08.2007], where a member of the forum has written: “Death to the savage, lizard-eating Arabic race” (transl. by the author from the Persian original) etc.

³⁶ M. Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran*, Berkeley–Los Angeles–London 2005, p. 53.

³⁷ R. Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands: The Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis*, Albany (NY) 1990, p. 164.

³⁸ G. Lazard, *The Rise of the New Persian Language*, [in:] *The Cambridge History of Iran*, Vol. 4, ed. R. N. Frye, Cambridge 1975, p. 603.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 602–603; A. H. Hourani, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

⁴⁰ G. Lazard, *op. cit.*, p. 603, 609.

⁴¹ A different vision is presented by Šāhroḡ Maskub, who sees the strife to revitalize the Persian language in the centuries immediately after the Arab conquest as one of the ways (purposely?) chosen by Persians to defend their national identity (Š. Maskub, *Hov-iyyat-e irāni va zabān-e fārsi*, Tehrān 1373 HŠ, chapter: mellīyyat-e irān va rābete-ye ān bā zabān va tārix).

Mohammad Ali Jamāl-zāde, Sādeq Hedāyat, Sādeq Čubak or Nāder Nāderpur presented Iranian national consciousness in opposition to the Others (the Others being at first Arabs, but also Mongols etc.). Hedāyat, Čubak and Nāderpur present the vision of the Iranian Golden Age of the Sasanian times interrupted by the Arab conquest. Some of them use satire, and a work we should mention here is the short story by Sādeq Hedāyat entitled *Al-ba'sato-l-eslāmiye elāl-belād-ol-afranjiye*. Its title is modelled to look like an Arabic one and it may be translated as follows “A Muslim Campaign into the Western Countries.”) The text is a satirical description of an imagined Muslim religious mission in France. From the title itself to the last line, Arabs, their language and even the religion of Islam (or, at least, a certain vision of it) are mocked in many ways. Arabs are presented as uncivilized (See the passage on the representative of Zanzibar below), stupid, greedy creatures (“Duties like *xarāj* are to be imposed on the infidels”),⁴² knowing nothing or very little about the world outside of their own lands (“We will kill the men of the infidels [of France] with our swords and we will divide their women and camels (sic!) among the Muslims.”)⁴³ At the same time they are very eager to impose their life style on the others. Their meeting is a parody of a democratic council (“If anyone raises any doubts [about the project], women will be forbidden to enter his house and it will be allowed to spill his blood!”)⁴⁴

As far as the language is concerned, Hedāyat plays with Arabic onomastic habits, construing personal names such as: *Andalib-ol-eslām*⁴⁵ (modelled on Ar. *'andalību-l-'islāmi* “The Nightingale of Islam”), *Sokkān-oš-šar 'iyye*⁴⁶ (Ar. *Sukkānu-š-šar 'iyyati* “The Rudder of Sharia”) or *Tāj-ol-motakallemin*⁴⁷ (Ar. *Tāju-l-mutakallimīna* “Crown of the Speaking (pl.)”). Those forms may be interpreted as simple mocking of bombastic personal names, other types of satire, however, do appear in the text as well. The host-newspaper of the narrator of the story is titled *al-Manjalāb*⁴⁸ “sump, swill, mud.” Moreover, the whole story is written with an extensive use of words of Arabic origin, some of which are frequently used in Persian, some are quite rare and old-fashioned, and some

⁴² S. Hedāyat, *Al-ba'sato-l-eslāmiye elal-belād-ol-afranjiye*, an electronic edition by Bahrām Čubine, 1381 HŠ, [online], <http://www.alefbc.com/hedayat.pdf>, based on the printed edition: Paris 1361 HŠ, p. 9 (translation of selected passages by the author).

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 8ff.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

even have to be explained to a Persian reader. A good example is presented by utterance of the representative of Zanzibar, Mr *Tābu-nānā*, “lahm-e ādami xeyli lazid (ladid?), afranji abyad (faranji sefid), man ruzi do tā ādam boxor”⁴⁹ which may be translated as follows: “Human meat very nice, a Westerner white, I daily two men eat.” Now, let us pay attention to the fact that instead of the typical Persian word for “meat”, i.e. *gušt*, the Arabic borrowing *lahm* is used, which is quite rare in Persian texts. The situation of the form *abyad* is similar and the phrase *afranji abyad* has to be explained for the Persian readers as *faranji sefid* (Both meaning “A Westerner (lit.: ‘A Frank’) [is] white”). In this way, the Arabic language becomes associated with the image of cruelty and savagery.

In this context we are going to analyze a phenomenon of the Iranian popular culture, i.e. the so-called Arabic jokes (*jok-hā-ye arabi*) and the highly negative and offensive image of the Arabs and Arabic language presented in them.

We have to remember that Arabs are not the only object of ethnic jokes in modern Iran. Turks or Azeris are probably even more popular in this role,⁵⁰ which is quite striking as they form a substantial part of Iranian population – between 16% and 24%, depending on a source⁵¹ – and they are not referred to as ‘a minority’ in Iran.⁵² At the same time, Arabs are a minority below 5% of the society,⁵³ which makes joking on Arabs much safer than on Turks (Āzeris) (see Conclusions – p. 18). Apart from Arabs and Turks, also Lurs, Mazandarans and inhabitants of Rasht and Esfahān quite often become an object of anecdotes.

The negative and offensive image of Arabs and their language may be treated as a kind of linguistic violence. As we have already said, ethnic jokes may be seen as such. It is true that – as La Fave and Mannell note – this type of humour is not always and automatically harmful to the target group and they mention a number of situations where an ethnic joke seems to be deprived of violence (e.g. some ethnic jokes may be compliments in disguise or ‘left-handed’ insults).⁵⁴ The author of the present article has not conducted

⁴⁹ Ibidem, p. 9; the sentence is grammatically incorrect and the orthography used (ديدل) for (ديدل) suggests an awkward pronunciation.

⁵⁰ The Persian word *Tork* is used in everyday language referring to members of various Turkic peoples living in Iran, esp. Azeris. The form *Āzeri* is used only in the formal language, c.f. R. Ch. Elling, *Minorities in Iran*, op. cit., p. 64–65.

⁵¹ Ibidem, p. 18.

⁵² Ibidem, p. 63.

⁵³ Ibidem, p. 18.

⁵⁴ L. La Fave, R. Mannell, *Does Ethnic Humor Serve Prejudice?*, “Journal of Communication” 1976, Vol. 26 Issue 3.

any research that could prove that such a discharging of Arab jokes takes place or not. Let us simply keep in mind that in some cases it may happen. On the other hand, the fact that the ethnic jokes may be perceived as harmful and violent is supported by the events mentioned in the conclusion.

Before moving to the analysis of particular examples, I would like to express my deep gratitude to my colleagues: Karolina Rakowiecka, who, with her thorough understanding of spoken Modern Persian, has helped me a lot in the interpretation of some of the jokes and to Arkadiusz Płonka, whose help regarding the Arabic forms has been very precious as well.

Having analysed over 200 examples of contemporary Iranian ‘Arabic jokes,’ the author of the present article believes that the most typical element of the image of an Arab is his⁵⁵ alleged stupidity. In many cases this stupidity may be understood simply as lack of intelligence, e.g.:

Example No. 1

They tell an Arab to construct a sentence with [the word] *ajr* (“brick”). He says, “Oh dear! You don’t construct sentences with bricks! You construct walls with them!”⁵⁶

This lack of intelligence may be disastrous to the protagonist in some cases,

Example No. 2

An Arab was involved in a [car] accident with some other driver. A [police] officer asks him: “Who’s fault was it?” The Arab says, “By God, ask HIM! I was asleep and I saw nothing!”⁵⁷

Often an Arab is the stupid one who fails in a kind of competition with a more clever inhabitant of Tehrān or Esfahān, e.g.:

Example No. 3

An Esfahāni said to an Arab, “How much will you give me, if I bite my eye with my teeth?” The Arab said, “I bet a hundred tomans”⁵⁸ and the Esfahāni took out one of his eyes, which was artificial, and bit it with his teeth. A few minutes later the Esfahāni

⁵⁵ “His,” as despite the fact that the modern Persian language does not possess the category of grammatical gender, it is in most cases obvious that the protagonists of the jokes in question are in most cases Arab men. Exceptions will be discussed below.

⁵⁶ [Online], <http://esy4030.blogfa.com/8509.aspx> [14.08.2007].

⁵⁷ [Online], <http://www.proxyforyou.info/index.php?q=aHR0cDovL3d3dy5jaG9vYy-2hvb3BhcGUuYmxvZ2ZhLmNvbS8%3D> [14.08.2007].

⁵⁸ *Toman* was a monetary currency of the 1930s. The term remains in use in Iran as an informal unit equal usually to either 1000 or 1000000 riyāls.

said, "How much will you give me, if I bite the other one of my eyes?" The Arab bets two hundred tomans. Then the Esfahāni took out his artificial teeth and bit his eye with them. The Arab decided to take his revenge. A few minutes later the Esfahāni said, "Well, now, how much will you give me, if I piss on your trousers and they remain dry?" The Arab said, "Five tomans." The Esfahāni agreed and pissed on the Arab's trousers. However, the trousers got wet. The Arab took five tomans and went away.⁵⁹

The author has heard a version of this joke in Poland in 2006. In place of the Arab there was a university professor, and the role of Esfahāni was played by a cunning student. The fact that jokes (just like fables and literary motives) wander from land to land has been proven.⁶⁰ What seems, however, to be a new phenomenon is the speed of spreading of particular jokes in the era of the Internet.

The role of an Arab in jokes like the one cited above is conventional in the sense that he may be replaced with a member of some other ethnic (or even not necessarily ethnic) group, e.g. a Turk, see for instance,

Example No. 4

An Arab wanted to go by plane to see Tehrān. He goes to buy a ticket and asks, "How long does it take to get [there]?" They tell him, "Half an hour." The Turk (sic!) says, "If it's only half an hour, I'll go on foot."⁶¹

It is quite obvious that the person submitting the joke cited above made a mistake, starting it with an Arab as a main hero and changing him into a Turk later on. Note, however, that the Arab's questions start with the form *jeqadr*, which is an arabisation of the standard Persian *čeqadr* "how much."⁶²

Another example is particularly interesting as it touches on the problem of acceptability of Arabic jokes, and thus we have got here a kind of a meta-textual content:

Example No. 5

A chap enters a café and says to the manager, "Hey man (lit.: 'brother'), do you want me to tell you an Arabic joke?" The manager says, "Well, you see, I'm an Arab myself, the chap by your side is an Arab, too and, moreover, he's a wrestling champion. And the one sitting by the table to your left is an Arab as well and, besides, he usu-

⁵⁹ [Online], <http://www.shaghayegh200sh.blogfa.com> [15.08.2007].

⁶⁰ Cf. J. R. Perry, *Monty Python and the Mathnavī: The Parrot in Indian, Persian and English Humor*, "Iranian Studies" 2003, Vol. 36, Issue 1.

⁶¹ [Online], <http://jokestan.20m.com> [15.08.2007].

⁶² The sound *č* is absent from standard Arabic, and thus it is replaced with *j*.

ally has got his two daggers with him. Now, do you really want to present an Arabic joke?” The chap says, “No, by God, I’ve got no patience to explain it three times!”⁶³

Apart from the mentioned metatextuality, the example given above is interesting, as the alleged stupidity is not to be deduced from the point of the joke, but it is alluded to by a character playing one of the main roles in it.

Stupidity may often be accompanied by some other traits, such as for example language ignorance (of course the Persian language is referred to in this case):

Example No. 6

An Arab goes into the grocer’s shop with two cucumbers (*xiyār*) in his hands. He asks, “Sir, have you got *xiyār-šur* (‘pickled cucumber’ or – but only potentially – also ‘a device to wash cucumbers’⁶⁴). The manager says, “Yes, I do.” The Arab says, “So, could you please wash these two cucumbers?”⁶⁵

Among the features that happen to be paired with stupidity we also find the ignorance in the sphere of religion, e.g.:

Example No. 7

They say to an Arab, “Give a name of a prophet that conversed with animals”. He says, “Hazrat-e (here: ~ saint) Tarzan.”⁶⁶

On another joke about a saint conversing with animals see Example No. 23.

Stupidity may also be ascribed to Arabs together with their alleged lack of experience in the sphere of sex. In such a case obscenity is often employed as another source of comic effect (cf. De Bruijn’s opinion that “Obscenity has always been a favourite comic effect in all kinds of classical Persian humor.”⁶⁷ Let us see an example:

Example No. 8

An Arab did not know what he has to do in *hejle* (here: a special room for a newly married couple). So [his friend] Abud gives him a mobile [phone] so that he may guide him with the use of it. In short, when the time came, the Arab calls [his friend] and asks him, “What do I do?” Abud tells him: “First make her naked, then go and kiss her and move

⁶³ [Online], <http://www.riseh.com/content/blogcategory/0/29/50/250/> [10.08.2007].

⁶⁴ Cf. *šiše-šur* lit.: ‘a bottle washer’, a kind of brush used to wash bottles.

⁶⁵ [Online], <http://www.iranjoke.4t.com/arab.htm> [12.08.2007].

⁶⁶ [Online], <http://joksmsbazy.blogfa.com/85064.aspx> [8.08.2007].

⁶⁷ J. T. P. De Bruijn, op. cit.

down until you reach the chest. Having sucked what is there (lit.: ‘having sucked this place’), you go a bit (lit.: ‘a span’) lower than the navel. There’s a hole there, isn’t it?” The [first] Arab answers, “Yes, there is.” [Abud] says, “Now put into that hole, what we both have and Xadije does not.” So the Arab puts the mobile phone into the hole.⁶⁸

Apart from stupidity (with or without additional traits), an extremely popular motive is that of reputedly enormous dimensions of the sexual organs of Arab men. Different levels of obscenity and explicitness appear. This type of jokes is strongly connected with the stereotypical image of Arabs shared by Iranians, so the protagonists of such jokes may not be easily exchanged for representatives of another ethnic group.

Example No. 9

They catch a sea snake in Bandar-e Abbās. An Arab in Dubai falls into the water!!!⁶⁹

Example No. 10

An Arab boy (lit.: ‘an Arab pup’) weighing 20 kilos is born. After the circumcision, the boy weighs 2 kilos.⁷⁰

or

Example No. 11

An Arab boy goes to a household appliances shop and says [to the manager], “Sir, what will you give me, if I manage to lift this iron with my penis?” The manager starts to laugh and declares, “Take the iron itself, [if you are able to do that]!” The boy lifts the iron with his penis and takes it home. The next day he comes with his father and says to the manager, “I’ve come with my dad to take a fridge.”⁷¹

In some cases the point of the joke is not so much in the situation in which the huge dimensions of sexual organs are revealed, but in reducing a person’s value (humiliation), by saying that somebody is no more than his organ, e.g.:

Example No. 12

They ask an Arab, “Why is your penis so gigantic?” He says, “Sir, we (the plural of self-humiliation) came to this world as a penis, only later we sprouted our hands and legs.”⁷²

⁶⁸ [Online], <http://www.iranjoke.4t> [30.07.2007].

⁶⁹ [Online], <http://www.riseh.com/content/blogcategory/0/29/50/250/> [13.08.2007].

⁷⁰ [Online], <http://jokebox.blogspot.com/?Date=1385-03> [13.08.2007].

⁷¹ [Online], <http://www.1radostdaram.mihanblog.com/Cat/10.aspx> [14.08.2007].

⁷² [Online], <http://sabernejad.blogfa.com/8604.aspx> [14.08.2007].

This leads us to another category of extremely offensive jokes, i.e. the ones where a person is compared to excrements. Many examples of them may be found as well, for instance

Example No. 13

An Arab faints in a toilet. As he regains consciousness he says [to himself], “Who am I? Where am I? Who has excreted me?”⁷³

Certain social features of Arab societies become an object of jokes as well, such as predilection for early (esp. in case of women) marriages. In this case a joke reflects not only some stereotype but – to certain extent – reality.⁷⁴ Of course, in the case of these jokes it is hardly possible to change a main hero (an Arab) into a person of some other nationality. Example:

Example No. 14

An Arab is going to get married. They ask him, “Where is your wedding party going to be?” He says, “In some school.” They ask, “Why school?” The Arab says, “Well, after all she’s got a lot of classes! (but also ‘she is so classy’ – Pers. *xeyli kelās dāre*)”⁷⁵

In the example above, we have an additional comic effect emerging from the ambiguity of the expression: *kelās dāštan*, which may be understood either as “to have classes, lessons” or “to have class, to be classy.”

In general, the attitude of Arab men towards women is mocked, too. There are a considerable number of Arabic jokes where male Arabs are presented as rude to the opposite sex and the ones who reduce women to an object of sexual desires, etc., for instance:

Example No. 15

An Arab went to court a girl. Her name was Parvāne (lit.: ‘a butterfly’), but he made a mistake and referred to her as ‘Miss Āhu (lit.: ‘a gazelle’).’ The girl brought tea and the Arab said, “Thank you, very much, Miss Āhu.” The girl starts protesting and says, “[But] my name is Parvāne.” The Arab (in the text: a Turk!) says, “Oh dear! What’s the difference? An animal is an animal, after all.”⁷⁶

⁷³ [Online], <http://jokebox.blogspot.com/?Date=1385-03> [10.05.2007].

⁷⁴ See e.g. S. Shawky, W. Milaat, *Early Teenage Marriage and Subsequent Pregnancy Outcome*, “Eastern Mediterranean Health Journal” 2000, Vol. 6, Issue 1.

⁷⁵ [Online], <http://www.yahoo20.blogspot.com/?Date=1385-01> [10.05.2007].

⁷⁶ [Online], http://www.jonoobiha.com/rha/joke_list.php?startlimit=31&id=3 [14.08.2007].

or

Example No. 16

An Arab goes to his beloved and says, “My dear Sakine! Jāsem lies when he says that he loves you. He only wants to fuck your ass!” Sakine flirtatiously asks [him], “And what about you, Abud?” The Arab says, “Well, I love [you] and I would like to fuck your ass, too!” (or “I’d love to and I want to...”).⁷⁷

Moreover, a stereotypical Arab of a contemporary Persian joke is often impolite, unable to behave in accordance with the situation and social context, not knowing the rules of *ta’ārof* or etiquette, thus – generally – uncivilized, e.g.:

Example No. 17

The wife of an Arab makes a complaint that he does not fulfil his marital duties (lit.: ‘does not fuck her’). The qāzi (a Muslim law judge) asks [the Arab], “Why don’t you have sexual intercourses with her?” The Arab [says], “M’lord, I leave for work at 6 in the morning and I come back at 12 at night... Put yourself in place of my dick. You would not be able to stand up [in that situation].”⁷⁸

Apart from his own bad manners, he is also unable to find out whether something is said for real or in the frame of *ta’ārof*, even in quite obvious situations:

Example No. 18

A doctor gives an Arab a small container [and says,] “Put a little of your excrements for an analysis.” The next day the Arab comes to see the doctor with a bucket full [of excrements]. The doctor says, “I told you ,a little’! Why [have] you brought so much?” The Arab says, “Well, I thought you were acting according to the *ta’ārof*” (i.e. pretending he needs or deserves less than he actually does).⁷⁹

As we see, the Arab thinks the doctor said “a little” to show that he is modest, but in fact he meant “a lot” or even “as much as possible”.

Now, let us try to describe the image of the Arabic language in the same material. For all Muslims it is first of all the language of the Quran and it happens to be presented also in popular Iranian humour, e.g.:

⁷⁷ [Online], <http://www.hadi219.blogfa.com> [15.08.2007].

⁷⁸ [Online], <http://jokebox.blogspot.com/?Date=1385-03> [10.05.2007].

⁷⁹ [Online], <http://jokebox.blogspot.com/?Date=1385-03> [10.05.2007].

Example No. 19

One day a car of a Turk hits a car of an Arab. The Turk leaves the car and starts to curse. The Arab, too, swears the Turk in Arabic, [which, the Turk has not understood]. So, the Turk says to himself, "I curse him and he recites the Quran."⁸⁰

The example given above is by the way much more a Turkish joke than an Arabic one. Nevertheless, the Arabic language plays an important role in it. Let us note that the image of the language itself is not negative in any sense. Another example is somewhat more offensive and – taking into consideration the policy of Iranian authorities towards authors of jokes touching religious figures and symbols – also quite risky. As the orthographic form is important for the understanding of this joke, the author would like to present the original in the Perso-Arabic script:

Example No. 20

تست کنکور عربی سال هشتاد و پنج:
مفهوم این آیه چیست؟ کونُوا قَوَّامِينَ بِالْقِسْطِ
الف) به اقوامت قسطی کون بده
ب) قسط کون اقوامت را بده
ج) به اقوامت به مساوات کون بده
د) کونی بیا [به]⁸¹ موسسه قوامین قسطنت رو بده

The Arabic [language] test of the [entrance] exams in the year [13]85⁸²:

What's the meaning of the following [Quranic] verse? (کونُوا...)

- Give your ass (= be a passive side in a sexual intercourse) to your kin in an instalments system
- Pay an instalment for your kin's ass
- Give your ass (cf. a) equally to your kin
- You faggot, go and pay your instalment to Mo'assese-ye Qavāmin [Financial Establishment].

Let us analyse this example closer. First of all, we see that what we have here is not a particular Quranic verse, but rather a phrase to be found in verse 135 of the surah النَّسَاءِ an-Nisā' (كُونُوا قَوَّامِينَ بِالْقِسْطِ) *kūnū qawwāmīna bi l-qisṭi* "Be supporters of the justice!" First of all let us note that the joke in question has got, apart from its meaning, a graphical dimension. The Arabic

⁸⁰ [Online], <http://www.iranvatan.com/services/jokes/more23.html> [27.01.2007].

⁸¹ An addition made on the basis of other available versions – see e.g. [online], <http://persianjokes.wordpress.com/tag/sms> [27.07.2007].

⁸² The year 1386 of the Iranian solar calendar equals to 2006/2007 of the Gregorian calendar.

script normally does not mark short vowels. However, wherever it is desirable, these sounds may be marked by the so-called vocalization, i.e. diacritic marks placed above and below the letters. This technique is used especially in the text of the Quran to ensure that it is recited with no mistake. Here, the text of the Quran is mocked by adding the vocalization signs in an absurd, meaningless manner (see line two).

Let us now analyze the text. All the four possible answers in this fictional contest constitute a certain linguistic game which is based on:

- a) an incidental similarity of the Arabic verbal form كُونُو (in fact كُونُوا *kūnū* 2 pl. imperat. masc. of the verb كَانَ *kāna* “to be”) to the Persian noun كُون *kun* “ass” with the postposition -و (a spoken form of the literary -رā), the latter indicating normally the direct object. In the variants a) and c) this word is a nominal part of a compound verb كُون دَادَن *kun dādan* “[to get laid to] give ass, to act as a passive side in a sexual intercourse,” while in the answer d) we have a substantivised adjectival derivative with the suffix -i, that is كُونِي *kun-i* with the sense “a male homosexual.” In the variant b) the word *kun* is to be understood as “one’s safety,” just as in the case of the English phrase “save your ass;”
- b) the false affinity between the form قَوَامِينَ *qavāmin* (< Ar. *qawwāmīna* Gen./ Acc. pl. of قَوَّامٌ *qawwām* “supervisor, protector”) and قَوْمٌ *qowm* (< Ar. *qawm* “people, nation; group; kin, etc.”);
- c) the fact that the arabism قَسَطٌ *qest* (< Ar. *qist*) appears in Persian first of all as “an instalment (payment),” although it retains the Quranic meaning of “justice” as well.

In some cases, as in the work of Hedāyat cited above, the onomastic practices of the Arabic language may be at the core of some jokes, as in the following example:

Example No. 21

A Turk goes to the WC and knocks at the door. An Arab says [from inside], “Hum...”. The Turk says, “Well now, what’s your name?” The Arab says, “Mohammad Hassan Xalil.” The Turk says, “You scoundrels! Three of you went to the toilet together?!⁸³”

The onomastics may become a particularly delicate matter when it comes to certain geographical names. The problem of the name of the Persian Gulf (or – in Arabic – Arabic Gulf) is a particularly sensitive matter. Let us consider the following example:

⁸³ [Online], <http://www.biya3.blogfa.com/8412.aspx> [24.07.2007].

Example No. 22

An Arab was pissing into the Arab Gulf. Another Arab (and a fanatical one) came and said, ‘my brother – traitor, you are pissing into the Arab Gulf!’⁸⁴ The [first] Arab, shocked, says, ‘I’m sorry, I thought it was the Persian Gulf’.⁸⁵

There are jokes where the Arabic language is mocked openly, too. For instance, it happens to be called “a language of animals,” as in the following example:

Example No. 23

They ask a Turk, “Do you speak Arabic?” He says in reply, “Am I the prophet Suleyman to speak a language of every single animal?”⁸⁶

However, typically, the largest group of jokes where the Arabic language is laughed at openly seems to be that comparing the sounds typical of that language to the ones produced during physiological acts. Let us have a look at some examples:

Example No. 24

Abud and Jāsem go to a public WC. Abud farts in one cabin and Jāsem in another one. At one moment Abud shouts, “Jāsem have you come here to use the toilet or to argue with me?”⁸⁷

To that we may add an example heard by the author of the present article from a teacher of Persian, an Iranian himself,

Example No. 25

When you walk the streets of Ahvāz⁸⁸ and you hear some strange sound from behind the corner, you can never be sure whether it is an Arab speaking or a dog vomiting.

One may ask whether the comparison of the Arabic articulation to the sounds accompanying physiological acts is just an effort to humiliate its speakers to the highest possible extent or is there some motive apart from

⁸⁴ The utterances in this joke are composed in a way that they imitate the Arabic language.

⁸⁵ [Online], <http://farsdog.wordpress.com/feed> [19.07.2007]; by the way, this site is by no means dedicated to “Arab jokes.”

⁸⁶ [Online], <http://jokebox.blogspot.com/?Date=1385-03> [27.07.2007].

⁸⁷ [Online], <http://jokekhooneh.blogspot.com/?Cat=3> [7.01.2007].

⁸⁸ City in south-western Iran, the capital of the province of Khuzestān, where the Arab minority lives.

that behind such jokes? Well, there is a possibility that some of the specific Arabic phonemes (esp. the pharyngeal [ʕ] and [h], and possibly also emphatic consonants) which are not assimilated into the New Persian phonological system (as it is in the case of [q]) may induce such associations. This is especially true about the [ʕ], which is often described non-professionally as a kind of a spasm. There is some data which supports the view that the sound [ʕ] is perceived by the Persian-speaking Iranians as “particularly Arabic,” e.g.:

Example No. 26

An Arab enters a shop and asks with the dialect pronunciation: “Have you got tomato paste (ربيع)?”. The chap answers: “Yes, we have. But not of such density.”⁸⁹

The notation ربيع (with the letter ع repeated three times instead of the standard ربيع “tomato paste”) suggests an exaggerated articulation of [ʕ].

To the examples given above we may add a number of jokes the point of which is not focused on the Arabic language itself, but rather on the incapability of its speakers to pronounce Persian words in the correct way, e.g.

Example No. 27

They tell an Arab to say “gač” ... He hangs.

The point is that the word *gač* contains two consonants (*g* and *č*) unknown in the literary Arabic and many dialects and the Arab hangs, just as computer systems do (N.B. the loanword *heng kardan*).

CONCLUSIONS

Thus, as we have seen, an Arab – according to Iranian jokes – is a stupid, impolite, ignorant person with enormous sexual organs, married to a teenage girl, treating women badly. He speaks an animal language the articulation of which resembles the sounds of excreting, vomiting or other physiological acts. In other words, we see an image totally different from the official one.

Now, we should note the fact that jokes and satire may provoke serious political and even economical consequences on a global scale. The controversy around the cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad published first by the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* on 2005-09-30, as well as the subsequent contest for the best Holocaust caricatures which was opened officially on 2006-08-15 in

⁸⁹ [Online], <http://www.parsplanet.com/jok/gb.asp?DO=READ&skipp=819> [17.01.2014].

Tehrān by the Iranian authorities kept world's attention for a long time. These were rather jokes on the religion and painful history, rather than on the language.

The fact that joking in the Islamic Republic of Iran is a serious matter is proved by a number of lawsuits against satirists, in some cases – especially where religious values are allegedly compromised – even with death penalty perspectives. However, the jokes on the language may have serious consequences as well. On 2006-05-12, the Iranian state-run newspaper *Irān* published in the children's section a series of cartoons showing how to cope with cockroaches. The core of the controversy was a picture depicting a boy trying to communicate with an insect using various forms of the word *soosk* (Persian *susk* “cockroach”.) while his interlocutor responds with the phrase *namana?*, which is the Azerbaijani for “what?”. Despite the fact that in other cartoons the cockroach spoke Persian and that the cartoonist, Mr Mana Neyestani, is himself an ethnic Azeri, the publication provoked large scale riots among Iranian Azeris, during which the security forces killed at least 4 people (official reports) and arrested above 300.⁹⁰ To calm the protest, the *Iran* newspaper was temporarily shut down and its editor-in-chief arrested.

Although the author of the present article is unable to indicate a similar unrest provoked by satire or jokes on Iranian Arabs, yet it would be surprising were they not perceived by the population in question as yet another way of discrimination, a type of verbal violence, just like the mentioned anti-Arab motives in the Persian literature.⁹¹ However – being a significantly smaller minority – their protests may be easier to cope with for the central government comparing to that of Azeri Turks.

Just to end with, let us have a look at a theory on the sources of Arabic and Turkish jokes – it is a good joke to end this article with. As we learn from a post sent to the Iran United website by a certain *Jerk*:

According to one of my teachers back in high school, as well as a couple of my parent's high school teachers, the Turkish jokes were established by British and Russian agents during early 1900's to make people suspicious towards them. The British to incite ethnic hatred and disharmony. The Russians would do it because they wanted to badly take over Iran and make it a communist nation. Cities like Tabriz were very resistant to outside influence especially if it was forced.⁹²

⁹⁰ Amnesty International, in its Annual Report (2007) on Iran, gives much bigger figures.

⁹¹ See e.g. a passage on the anti-Arab motives in the works of Iranian writers, including Sādeq Hedāyat, in the article by Yusof Azizi Bani Torof available at http://www.iran-bulletin.org/IB_MEF_0/National%20inequality%20in%20Iran.doc [18.08.2007].

⁹² [Online], <http://www.iranunited.com/forums/showthread.php?t=2607> [18.08.2007].

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