

## Ta'zie (Religious Theatre) vs. Noruz (the New Year and its Rituals)

### The Politics of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in Iran

Christian Bromberger

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Résumé de l'article

Au-dessus et au-delà du souci légitime de sauvegarder les « trésors » et les « chefs-d'oeuvre » culturels immatériels, qu'en est-il des autres questions patrimoniales qui tendent à échapper aux candidatures présentées à l'UNESCO pour obtenir reconnaissance et inscription sur les listes ? En examinant de récents projets présentés par l'Iran, l'auteur se propose d'entreprendre une modeste ethnographie portant sur la signification de ces candidatures, l'ethnographie étant, comme le dit Clifford Geertz (Geertz 1983 : 152) « une entreprise [...] visant à rendre intelligibles des phénomènes obscurs en procurant des informations sur leur contexte ».

# TA'ZIE (RELIGIOUS THEATRE) VS. NORUZ (THE NEW YEAR AND ITS RITUALS)

*The Politics of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in Iran*

**Christian Bromberger**

*Université de Provence*

Above and beyond a legitimate concern with preserving intangible cultural “treasures” and “masterpieces,” what are the extra-heritage issues that tend to slip beneath UNESCO’S applications for recognition and listing? Through an examination of recent projects presented by Iran, I propose to carry out a modest ethnography that addresses the meaning of these applications, ethnography being in the words of Clifford Geertz (1983: 152), “an enterprise [...] whose aim is to render obscure matters intelligible by providing them with an informing context.”

In 2005, Iran submitted two files supporting masterpiece-of-the-intangible-heritage applications, one on behalf of *ta'zie* or *shabikhani* (a form of religious tragedy unique to Shiite Islam) and the second concerning the rituals of *Noruz* (the New Year coinciding with the spring equinox). I will first provide a brief presentation of these two candidacies before examining what behind-the-scenes machinations underlie them.

## **Ta'zie**

The first file, prepared by Tehran’s Center of Dramatic Arts, included a series of documents concerning theatre performances of the “history-myth” of Kerbala and the events associated with it. In October 680, on *Ashura* (the 10<sup>th</sup> day of Muharram, which is the first month of the Muslim calendar), Hussein, the son of Ali and grandson of the Prophet Mohammed, was massacred, along with all of his followers and all but two male members of his family, by troops loyal to Yazid, the Umayyad caliph, on the site of Kerbala, near the Euphrates River, in present-day Iraq. The painful passion

and martyrdom of Hussein, the third Shiite Imam,<sup>1</sup> constitutes the major horizon, the paradigm of grassroots religiosity, and the wellspring of the current division between Shiites and Sunnis. The commemoration of the torment of the “prince of the martyrs” (*seyyed al-shohada*) is expressed through painful rituals during the first 10 days of *Muharram* that reach their peak on the 10<sup>th</sup> day of the month: processions of penitents flagellating themselves with the palms of their hands and/or with chains, or, in days gone by,<sup>2</sup> even wounding their own scalps with swords or sabres, while sermons, hymns and theatre performances commemorating the Kerbala drama give voice to these days of mourning and affliction. On the very day of Ashura, at the conclusion of the ceremonial cycle, the final scenes of the drama are repeated by the faithful in the courts of numerous shrines: the burning of the tents of members of the holy family, the murder of the Imam whose white horse is covered in blood, the abandoned cradles of the child martyrs, etc.

*Ta'zie* is therefore a sort of dramatized ritual, a theatre genre similar to the Christian mystery plays of the Middle Ages that represented the Passion of Christ. There are several hundred variations of *ta'zie*,<sup>3</sup> most of them of anonymous origin, written in simple language and performed by non-professional actors accompanied by a small orchestra (the texts are usually sung). Performances normally take place in public places or on premises (*tekie*) specially dedicated to the preparation of ceremonies and to these types of events. Whatever the theme, and *a fortiori* if the *ta'zie* in question directly evokes the drama of Kerbala, two categories of characters square off during performances: the good and virtuous (Hussein and his followers), emblems of justice and purity, dressed in green, solemnly chanting their complaints and praising the redemptive sacrifice of the Imam ; and the

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1. Ali is the first Imam, with the second being Hussein's brother Hasan. Iranian Shiites recognize 12 Imams, all of whom perished in tragic circumstances, with the exception of the 12<sup>th</sup> who disappeared in 874, whose “occultation” persists to this day, and whose followers await the second coming.
  2. This practice was outlawed by religious authorities in 1994 and has remained so ever since.
  3. Among the most celebrated are the *ta'zie* of Muslim (sent by Hussein and killed along with his children by Ibn Ziyad, the commander of Yazid's troops); of Horr (a brave soldier who repents and rallies to the cause of the Imam); of the death of Zeynab (the Imam's brave sister); of Mokhtar (who made sure that those responsible for the Kerbala massacre were put to death five years later); and of the Four Birds and the Jewish girl (in which a blind girl recovers her sight after a drop of Imam Hussein's blood, transported by birds, miraculously falls on her eyes).

evildoers (Yazid and his soldiers, as well as Shemr, the perpetrator of the monstrous crime, i.e. the murder of Hussein); symbolizing tyranny and oppression, these villains are dressed in red and mauve and declaim or chant their text in a staccato tone, their eyes bulging and threatening. The performers (*ta' ziekhan*) are all males, even those playing female characters. They do not, literally speaking, identify with their roles; they are simple imitators who, when playing the “bad guys,” occasionally display the disgust that their roles inspire them to express.

*Ta' zie* is firmly anchored in Iran's national and religious traditions. It was codified under the great Safavid Dynasty (1501-1722), which elevated Shia Islam to the status of a state religion; it subsequently developed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century under the Afshars and Zands, and reached its zenith in the 19<sup>th</sup> century under the Qajar. In that era, splendid *tekie* were constructed, including the celebrated *tekie dowlat* (“government *tekie*”) in Tehran, which was destroyed during the Pahlavi Dynasty (1925-1979). Whereas the Qajar had encouraged and sponsored *ta' zie* performances as a means of consolidating their power on a cultural level, the Pahlavi rulers (Reza and his son Mohammed Reza), the creators of a modern, Western-oriented state that prioritized the grandiose, pre-Islamic past of their empire, outlawed this theatre genre, which was not rehabilitated until the end of the dynasty, when the last Shah and his wife implemented a policy designed to showcase popular Iranian arts and traditions by way of sumptuous international festivals. This rehabilitation movement was encouraged by nationalist intellectuals who were eager to underline, rightly or wrongly, the pre-Islamic origins of the character of Hussein, a hero directly descended, in their view, from Siyavosh, an innocent victim of human hatred, whose legend and martyrdom is recounted in Ferdowsi's 10<sup>th</sup> century *Book of the Kings*.

In a general context of iconophobia and theatrophobia (much less pronounced than in Sunni Islam however), the Shiite clergy has adopted various positions over the centuries, sometimes condemning and sometimes accepting this performance genre in which actors playing holy characters appear on stage and fantastic and occasionally comical episodes intersect. In spite of their misgivings concerning the orthodox nature of this type of entertainment, Islamic Republic officials have authorized it, considering that these performances provide the faithful with an opportunity to strengthen and demonstrate their faith. Spectators do not in fact remain passive when confronted with these dramas; instead they insult and upbraid the “villains,” while lamenting by beating their chests during the most tragic episodes. *Ta' zie* is definitely a major symbol of the Shiite world, as

proven not only in Iran but also in Iraq, the emirates, Lebanon, India, etc., to such an extent that the entire region sharing these points of reference could be qualified as *Ta'zestan*.

*Ta'zie* fully meets all six UNESCO criteria that define a masterpiece of the intangible heritage. It is an original genre, rooted in a cultural tradition, a symbol of identity, bringing together literary texts, instrumental music and high quality stage design; although in decline, *ta'zie* remains a living tradition, appreciated differently by different categories of spectators (men or women, young or old, the educated elite or the masses – each group is more sensitive to one particular aspect of the drama or another: the tyranny and injustice of the “villains,” the mother-child relationships, the literary quality of the texts, the actors’ performances, etc.); but it is also a genre that is on the verge of disappearing or of being rendered aesthetically artificial; it finds itself challenged in the marketplace by modern entertainment (television series, etc.), threatened by a loss of knowledge of its roots and traditions, and without any measure of protection having been enacted in its defence. There is why *ta'zie* is an ideal candidate for UNESCO recognition.

## Noruz

However, while it was on the road to being recognized as a masterpiece of the intangible heritage and a major symbol of Iranian identity, *ta'zie* encountered a formidable rival, *Noruz* (“the new day”), which inaugurates the beginning of the year at the spring equinox.<sup>4</sup> The solar calendar to which the *Noruz* festival belongs sharply contrasts with the Muslim lunar calendar and is one of the powerful symbols of the specificity of the Iranian world, going all the way back to antiquity. According to tradition, *Noruz* perpetuates and commemorates the day of the creation of the world by Ahura Mazda. Numerous rites and rituals, similar to those which inaugurated spring in many societies of the ancient world, extol and celebrate the New Year: major spring cleaning (*khane tekani*); buying new clothes; decorating eggs; the germination of wheat, barley or lentil seeds, which are left to grow in a plate and which provide *sabze* (greens); and preparing a pastry (*samanu*) made from wheat sap and sugar. The last two preparations are among the *haft sin* (the seven “s”), i.e. the seven foods whose names begin with an “s,” which are placed on a tablecloth spread on the floor during this inaugural time. The evening before the last Wednesday of the year (called “red Wednesday,” *chahar shanbe suri*), a fire is lit, over which members of the household or community jump while repeating “*Zardi*

4. On *Noruz*, among other sources, see Bromberger (2013a and 2013b).

*o ranjuri-ye man be to, sorxi o xarami-ye to be man* (“My pallor and my sorrow for you; your flush and your gaiety for me”); other practices punctuate this transition period: masquerades, songs (*noruzkhani*), divination sessions, ritual flights, the matching of wishes carried out by young boys, etc. This new year cycle ends on the 13<sup>th</sup> of the first month, the *sizdah bedar* (“the 13<sup>th</sup> out!”). In order to exorcize the bad luck associated with the number 13, families leave their houses and picnic in a green space. To mark the end of the *Noruz* period, the *sabze* is thrown in the sea or in a watercourse and the *haft sin* tablecloth is put away.

Whereas, as stated earlier, *ta'zie* is willingly presented by nationalists as a genre whose origins are rooted in pre-Islamic mythology, *Noruz*, a custom already sanctioned in antiquity, has been Islamized over the course of the centuries: this inaugural day supposedly coincides with Gabriel's descending to the prophet Mohammed, with the nomination of Ali by Mohammed as his legitimate successor, and even with the second coming of the Hidden Imam (see note 1). Leaving aside these more subtle distinctions, *ta'zie* and *Noruz* clearly have conflicting profiles and could be described in terms of structural oppositions: *ta'zie* is basically a religious genre arousing pain and evoking suffering, as opposed to *Noruz*, which is fundamentally a lay celebration and a symbol of rejoicing. The two rites may overlap some years, since *ta'zie* is part of the lunar calendar and *Noruz*, the solar calendar. When this occurs, expressions of jubilation are reduced to a minimum and disappear behind a commemoration of mourning. In 2006, for example, the 40<sup>th</sup> day following *Ashura*, which is also commemorated by an affliction ritual, coincided with *Noruz*. Official posters proposed a compromise for the benefit of the prince of martyrs: “*Noruz-e man bar Hoseyn ast*” (“My *Noruz* is for Hussein”). This compromise did, at the same time, testify to an easing off on the part of Islamic officials, as compared to the first decade following the 1979 Revolution: concerned with propagating a revolutionary Shiite ideology during these first 10 years, they fought against and attempted to reduce to a minimum the “specifically Iranian” customs that had been promoted by the Pahlavi dynasty in the name of cultural nationalism. Starting in the 1990s, when a period of relative liberalization was ushered in by the Islamic regime, a renewed national pride reasserted its claims, and “specifically Iranian” folklore was even partially rehabilitated to fight against “the Western cultural invasion” (“*tahajom-e farhangi-ye qarb*”). Ethnologists and, more generally, nationalist intellectuals rushed into this breach to such an extent that seminars, conferences and books about *Noruz* abounded. A sort of “*Noruzmania*” seemed to have taken hold of cultural

circles. Strong echoes of the phenomenon were felt – and I will return to this matter later – in those countries of central Asia and the Caucasus that are encompassed by the extended historical reach of Iranian civilization and share the same calendar. This is the so-called *sar-zamin-e Iran* (Iranian world) and what could equally be dubbed, given this common point of reference, the *Noruzestan*.

Like *ta'zieh*, *Noruz* presents all the qualities of a solid candidate for the list of the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity: it is rooted in tradition, original, a symbol of identity, and is of historical and aesthetic interest. Indeed all of UNESCO's requisite qualifications can easily be applied to this renewal rite which, unlike *ta'zieh*, is not on the verge of disappearing.

### **A candidacy and the issues it encounters**

In 2005, Iran therefore applied to have these two indisputable “masterpieces” included in the list of the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity: *ta'zieh* was submitted as a strictly national event, and *Noruz* was put forth in conjunction with nine other countries which share this custom to a lesser or greater extent: Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, India (where the Zoroastrian community is of Iranian origin), Azerbaijan, and Turkey. Iran ultimately withdrew the candidacy of *ta'zieh*, maintaining only the *Noruz* application, which was rejected by the UNESCO jury on the basis that the file was incomplete, a decision provoking a great deal of bitterness and controversy.

As this factual presentation draws to an end, three questions arise: Why was the candidacy of *ta'zieh* withdrawn *in extremis*? Why does *Noruz* stir up such insistence and so much consternation? Why do so many Iranians put such importance on including a cultural asset of this sort on the list of masterpieces of the intangible cultural heritage, whereas this type of measure arouses at best lukewarm interest in other countries (for instance, the mayor of Tarascon, a small community in the south of France, was not even aware of the candidacy of his community's local celebration of the Tarasque or of its being included, along with other Belgian ceremonies celebrating giants, on the prestigious “masterpiece” list).

In the final analysis, don't these candidacies, and the steps accompanying them, teach us as much about the politico-cultural debates shaking a country as about what actually constitutes a “masterpiece” of the

intangible cultural heritage?

These applications were prepared in the context of the first few years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, during the reformist presidency of Mohammad Khatami, when officials in charge of the nation's culture and heritage files were moved by a concern with openness combined with a national pride that served to highlight Iranian specificities and minimize the bonds of Islamic solidarity, even those of a Shiite nature. (Anti-Arabism is a major component of this nationalist current.) In a significant manner, the *ta'zieh* file, which could have included comparisons with other Shiite nations where the genre is also recognized, was exclusively centred on Iran. Nevertheless *Noruz* file was given priority, thus serving as a reminder, in the context of a struggle for influence with Russia and China in central Asia, of the historic importance of the Iranian civilization and empire. It is true that "greater Iran" (*Iran-e bozorg*) has left a powerful mark all the way from Mesopotamia to western China. In addition to Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan also recognize Persian as a national language, and an important minority in Uzbekistan speaks it as well. Most states in the Caucasus were part of the Iranian empire until the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The insistence on this shared history and common heritage has been reflected in a vast array of cultural initiatives. In 2004, under the auspices of Iran's UNESCO commission, a workshop concerning the role of women in the transmission and protection of the intangible heritage was held in Tehran ; it brought together participants from the aforementioned "parent" countries (with the exception of India), as well as representatives of Armenia and Georgia. In Iran, a number of books and conferences were recently dedicated to *Noruz*, with the first convention focusing explicitly on the theme held in March 2000 in Persepolis, the sentimental capital of the Achaemenid emperors. "Brother countries" participated in many of these events, such as the April 2006 celebrations in Sari, located in northern Iran, where the impressive "First International Festival of Common Heritage of Caspian Sea Regional Countries and Central Asia" was held, with *Noruz* as its glorified symbol. During these various symposiums, the officials in charge of Iran's heritage file present their country as the "father's house" (*khane-ye pedari*), while taking all sorts of rhetorical precautions in order to avoid ruffling their neighbours' feathers. For example, they will upon occasion mention that the centres of Iranian civilization have not always been situated in Iran. Aren't Bukhara and Samarcand located in present-day Uzbekistan? To a significant extent, this map of *Noruzsestan* corresponds to that of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) founded in 1985 by Iran,



Pakistan and Turkey, with its headquarters in Tehran, an organization that has expanded since 1992 to Afghanistan, the new states of central Asia, and Azerbaijan. The latter states proclaim this shared reference to *Noruz* even more strongly given that celebrating the festival was outlawed during the Soviet era and that the renewal of festivities symbolized the end of communism and the advent of national independence. From 1926 to 1988, the rites of *Noruz* were in fact practiced only secretly in a family context. One of the first measures taken by the new states upon becoming independent, or even earlier with perestroika, was to restore *Noruz*, which was quickly declared their national holiday. Such was the case in Uzbekistan where this rehabilitation was officially recognized by presidential decree in February 1989, followed by the creation of the *Navruz* Foundation and then the *Navruz* International Charity Foundation in 1992. In Afghanistan, the festival was banned by the Soviets, then by the Taliban, before being celebrated with great fervour after the overthrow of the latter regime. Turkey, another member of this chorus singing the praises of *Noruz*, and a nation with strong cultural and linguistic ties to a number of the new Caucasus and Central Asian republics, seems to be performing songs of glorification from a separate hymnal. Its representatives rarely participate in the shared projects or conferences celebrating *Noruz*. Today, while this file is being discussed elsewhere, integration into the European Union is clearly higher on the agenda in Ankara and Istanbul than is Pan-Turkism. Moreover, playing second fiddle in a cultural operation under the auspices of Iran is definitely not to the liking of Turkish leaders either. Does this mean that the Turkish government is indifferent to *Noruz* and its celebrations? No, it is not indifferent in the least, but for many other reasons besides the forming of an Iranian-dominated *Noruzestan*.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, celebrating *Neuroz* was a dying custom among the Kurds of Turkey (who are, it should be recalled, a people of Iranian origin) before nationalist intellectuals elevated it to the level of a national holiday at the end of the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>5</sup> During the 1960s, Kurdish militant seized upon this date and this symbol as a focal point for demonstrations and mass mobilization. For instance on *Neuroz* day in 1984, 34 militants set themselves ablaze in the Diyarbakir military prison. Moreover, the Alevi religious minority, firmly implanted in eastern Turkey, soon became another active participant in this pursuit of rallying symbols. A segment of the Alevis were undoubtedly accustomed

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5. Concerning the avatars of *Nevruz* in Turkey, see Massicard's excellent synthesis (2002: 410-414).

to celebrating *Nevruz*, but the revitalization<sup>6</sup> of the festival coincided with the political claims and protests of the Alevist movement during the 1990s. As is the case concerning the Iranian Shiite interpretation of this holiday, the date is henceforth supposed to correspond to Ali's birthday or his nomination by Mohammed. These reappropriations (to each his or her own *Noruz*!) have not left Turkish leaders indifferent. When a custom or rite becomes a symbol of opposition, the powers-that-be have two possible solutions: they can ban the offending activities, an approach which might lead to bitterness and rebellion, or they can appropriate them, by asserting patronage, even paternity. Like the Qajar monarchs who organized sumptuous *ta'zие* in order to consolidate their popularity and stem the tide of religious opposition, Turkish leaders have officially celebrated *Noruz* since the mid 1990s, thus attempting to take the wind out of Kurdish and Alevi sails. They unequivocally insist that *Noruz* is a tradition of Turkish origin, an interpretation obligingly confirmed by ethnologists and historians. Isn't the fact that the custom is officially celebrated in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, among the "Turks outside of Turkey," proof of its Turkish roots? (Although *Noruz* is in fact a contribution of Iranian civilization.)

*Noruz*, along with its associated rites, culinary customs, songs, narratives and beliefs, undoubtedly deserves to be officially recognized and showcased by UNESCO. The festival represents a set of original traditions that need to be preserved. But it would be naïve to think that cultural arguments alone are at the origin of this application for recognition as a masterpiece of the intangible heritage, a candidacy that is supposedly the product of expert consensus. Intentions reflecting hegemonic ambitions, nationalist and secessionist claims, and counter-offensives by various states have all played a key role in determining the dynamics and failures of the project. A number of countries have been keen to learn from their mistakes (Iran, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, for example); others appear to be less enthusiastic pupils, for instance Turkey, which is undoubtedly in no hurry to see the Kurds and Alevi avail themselves of a symbol recognized by UNESCO in order to support their claims. Of course some aspects of these failures cannot be explained by ulterior motives of a political nature. But the choice or ratification by one or several states of a masterpiece candidate leads us both to ask questions about the quality of a cultural asset and the file prepared to present its candidacy as well as the purpose and intentions underlying the project itself.

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6. Concerning the revival and revitalization of traditions, see Bromberger and Chevallier (2003).

We also need to take note of the special interest, even determination, of certain states in making sure that their national heritage benefits from the prestigious UNESCO label. Without a doubt, such recognition opens up all sorts of remarkable possibilities for tourist development, even at the risk of leading to a “folklorization” of the very practice one intends to protect. It is, for example, significant that in Iran matters of national heritage and tourism are grouped together within the same organization. However, above and beyond the latter point, it is a state’s desire to be recognized on the international stage, as much as the recognition of a given cultural asset, that accounts for the passionate atmosphere surrounding these candidacy files. This concern for distinction is all the stronger when the country making the application has a bad reputation. For opponents of such “delinquent” regimes, who often take refuge in NGOs, such recognition offers a means of proclaiming that the face of their nation is different from the one shown by their government. For the government in place, such recognition is an unexpected opportunity to have the country it heads spoken of positively, to refurbish its tarnished image, to give itself a little more “soul,” even to provide a distraction. The reactions in Iran after *Noruz* was rejected as a candidate for the list of masterpieces of the intangible cultural heritage testify to the intensity of these symbolic issues. The opaque nature of UNESCO procedures were roundly condemned; some saw in this refusal the result of an Israeli plot; others blamed the backwardness of “brother countries” who did not fulfill their commitments, etc.<sup>7</sup>

All in all, the recognition of a cultural asset as part of the “Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity” raises issues that go far beyond the area of mere ethnographic expertise. Or, rather, it provides the ethnographer with the fortunate opportunity to exercise his or her art in all its splendour, not only by evaluating the accuracy of so-called factual information, but also by questioning the conjunctural backdrop of the choices and decisions made. The processes which lead one “candidate” to be selected over another and the relationships between the organizations that establish and present the files of potential candidates (research centres, NGOs, UNESCO national commissions, states, etc.) constitute particularly fertile ground for ethnographic research. The questionable

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7. Finally, *Noruz* candidacy to Intangible Heritage of Humanity has been accepted in September-October 2009 during the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible heritage, held in Abu Dhabi. The candidacy was submitted by Iran, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Turkey. As for *ta’zije*, following a new candidacy, it has been inscribed on UNESCO’s list in November 2010, during the session held in Nairobi (Kenya).

distinction between the “intangible” and “tangible” heritage also stimulates ethnographic reflection and critical examination.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore UNESCO, by adopting the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003, has paved the way not only for wonderful opportunities to save threatened cultural assets, but also for a new area of anthropological research – and controversy.<sup>9</sup>

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8. On this controversial distinction, see Bromberger and Gélard (2012) and, more generally, Douglas and Isherwood (1978).

9. Other critical remarks on UNESCO’s policy and methods concerning the “Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity” are to be found in Bromberger (2014).

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