

A golden age of multiculturalism



Inside the Armenian Cathedral of the Holy Savior in Isfahan. Construction began in 1606 and was completed in the 1660s (Source: Wikipedia)

Last week I had the privilege of attending, virtually, a seminar devoted to “Mobilities, Language Practices and Identities” organized by the [CIEN Group](#) at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. The seminar brought together a small number of international scholars working in the sociolinguistics of mobility to discuss questions of method, theory and practices.

In my contribution I outlined a proposal for a global sociolinguistic ethnography and raised a number of challenges that contemporary sociolinguistics is facing in my view. One of these challenges is a relative lack of attention to historical linguistic diversity. Combined with a strong focus on English, on the North American and European experience, and on linguistic diversity as a problem, this results in significant gaps in our knowledge. Indeed, these biases potentially result in a distorted vision of the intersection between language and mobility.

One way to remedy such distortions, and an urgent research task in my view, is to focus on ‘real utopias’ where societal multilingualism actually works to the social, economic and cultural benefit of a community. We’ve previously showcased such examples here on *Language on the Move* in posts about [multiculturalism in the central library of Vienna](#) or about a [French-German bilingual school operating in Berlin since the 17th century](#). Another intriguing case is constituted by 17th century Isfahan.

In 1598, [Shah Abbas I, also known as Shah Abbas the Great](#), a king of the Safavid dynasty, moved the Persian capital to Isfahan and within less than a generation the city became a splendid cosmopolitan economic and political center; so impressive that it earned itself [the nickname “half the world.”](#) The German scholar [Adam Olearius](#), who visited Isfahan in 1637, described it as follows:

There is not any nation in all Asia, not indeed almost of Europe, who sends not its merchants to Isfahan [...]. There are ordinarily about twelve thousand Indians in the city [...]. Besides these Indians, there is at Isfahan a great number of Tartars from the provinces of Khurasan, Chattai, and Bukhar; Turks, Jews, Armenians, Georgians, English, Dutch, French, Italians and Spaniards. [...] The Armenian merchants, who are Christians, are the richest of any, by reason of the pains they take in making voyages themselves which is

more than the other Persians do; though both have an absolute freedom to traffic where they please themselves, as foreigners have the liberty to come into Persia and put off their commodities there, paying custom; [...]. ([Travels of Olearius in seventeenth-century Persia](#))

Of all of Isfahan's multilingual and multicultural inhabitants, it was the Armenians who stand out as having played a special role in Isfahan's success during its golden age. And their contribution was carefully orchestrated by Shah Abbas himself.

In 1603-04 Shah Abbas transferred all the Armenian inhabitants of the city of Jolfa, located in what is today Iran's far north-west, to Isfahan. They were re-settled in a new part of the city called New Jolfa and the original Jolfa was razed.

This may not sound like a particularly auspicious beginning to a multicultural golden age. However, one has to bear in mind the historical context: throughout the 16th century the Ottoman and Safavid empires had been waging war against each other and the battleground was usually their borderlands, i.e. territory that today comprises Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, north-western Iran, northern Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and eastern Turkey. In these borderlands, both empires repeatedly pursued a scorched earth policy, including mass killings and massive displacement of local populations into the heartlands of both empires.

Re-settling the inhabitants of Jolfa was thus scorched-earth policy with a twist: Shah Abbas pursued a long-term objective in addition to the short-term objective of military advantage. The long-term objective was to gain human capital.

He succeeded on both counts. As for the short-term military objective, Ottoman troops had to withdraw from the devastated lands for the winter giving the Safavid troops time to recuperate and the following year they won a decisive victory.

The long-term objective to gain human capital succeeded, too. What exactly was it that made the Armenians attractive to Shah Abbas? Well, Armenians brought a wealth of transnational connections: as Christians, they brought valuable connections to Europe and their trading networks extended to the far east of Asia.

[T]heir acquaintance with cultures of the region and their familiarity with the languages and traditions of the people of the East and West placed them in a position to perform well as the entrepreneurs of the Safavid dynasty and Shiite Persia. (Gregorian 1974, p. 662)

Gregorian (1974) provides a long list of the transnational connections of Armenians which ranged from serving as interpreters at the Moghul courts in India to being established traders in Poland, where a whole range of foreign goods came to be known as "Armenian goods."

In short, Shah Abbas wished to secure the national loyalty of a transnational group. The success of his plan benefitted both Armenians and the wider society, with Isfahan turning into a flourishing trade hub.

The implementation of the Shah's plan involved far-reaching concessions to the Armenians of New Jolfa in a concerted effort to gain their loyalty and even affection: religious freedom, full citizenship rights and their own

jurisdiction. One of the more intriguing rights they enjoyed was the right to curse and cuss during bazaar disputes in the same manner as Muslims.

Shah Abbas would often visit New Jolfa, even attend Christmas and Easter Mass, and take a deep interest in the new citizens' welfare. When challenged that he seemed to favour his new subjects, non-Muslims to boot, over the majority population, he would respond that the Armenians had given up their homeland to live in Isfahan and so should be treated as valued guests. Furthermore, he went on to say, their relocation had cost him 1,000 tomans per head, an investment he had made not for the Armenians but for Iran.

As a result of the Shah's practical and liberal approach both the minority and the wider society of which they were a part flourished.

In the 1630s, Armenians established their own bilingual university focusing on the liberal arts and metaphysics. This institute of higher learning produced many notable graduates including Hovhannes Vardapet, who later went to study printing in Italy and consequently introduced the printing press to Persia. The first book ever printed in Iran was an Armenian translation of the *Book of Psalms* in 1638.

Even today, more than four centuries on, Iranian Armenians maintain their own schools and churches and the levels of language maintenance of Armenians are very high. A recent study of Armenians in Tehran found that 100% of respondents claimed to know and use Armenian, i.e. the minority language, regularly and to value their bilingualism (Nercissians 2001).

For the study of language and mobility, it is not only instructive to study the golden age of cosmopolitan, multilingual and multicultural Isfahan, but also its decline. Not all rulers were as enlightened as Shah Abbas the Great. Some of his successors mostly saw the wealth of New Jolfa as a cash-cow from where they could extract taxes. However, even if no regime ever again went to such lengths to secure the loyalty of Armenians as Shah Abbas had done, their religious freedom and their full citizenship rights have been continuously upheld over more than four centuries.

The alliance between state and transnational minority for the benefit of both has thus never ceased. However, it ceased to be effective in the face of a new set of global forces that came from outside: with the expansion of the British Empire, the Iranian state was forced into a set of humiliating and debilitating capitulation treaties and Armenians lost much of their economic base in the overland trade between Asia and Europe as Britain opened up and controlled the sea route.



Gregorian, V. (1974). "Minorities of Isfahan: The Armenian Community of Isfahan 1587-1722." *Iranian Studies* 7 (3/4): 652-680.

Nercissians, E. (2001). Bilingualism and diglossia: patterns of language use by ethnic minorities in Tehran *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 2001 (148) DOI: [10.1515/ijsl.2001.014](https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl.2001.014)

