

SHIR MOHAMMAD KERBALI:
A TRADER IN THE VILLAGE MARKETS OF MAZANDARAN¹

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ABSTRACT

The article is a brief sketch of some of the activities of a trader, Shir Mohammad Kerbali, in the weekly market cycle in the province of Mazandaran in northern Iran. The markets are all near the city of Babol located in the central part of the province. Some attempt is made to provide historical depth to the trader's activities in order to show the nature of the role of the small trader; namely, that his activities are based upon long experience, that there is a stated reluctance to change while at the same time evidence of the unique ability to adapt to outside influences. The role of the petty trader as "pawn" or victim is also explored and questioned.

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The bazaar marketing system (cf Thompson and Huies 1968) is one which has long been established in Iran and one which has shown little inclination to change (cf Thompson 1981). While traders exhibit a variety of methods and entrepreneurial skills in maintaining themselves and their families, those working within the system have little leeway to introduce change or to otherwise influence that system. In many respects they seem to be pawns. However, within the restrictions that must be endured, the role of the petty trader who is able to not only manipulate the system at times but to continually provide a service to a low-income clientele can be neither underestimated nor undervalued.

Accounts of the activities of the traders and merchants in the Middle East and elsewhere (Meillassouz, 1972; Bohannon and Dalton, 1965, et al) focusing upon traders and bazaar merchants usually give us a general picture of activities such as credit and social networks (Geertz, 1963; Potter, 1955, et al), and types of traders including entrepreneurs, petty traders, and itinerant pedlars (Dewey, 1962; Fogg, 1932, et al), among others. The types vary from those who are quite wealthy to those who make only a minimum subsistence living. And concomitantly, from those who have significant social and political power to those on the fringes of the bazaar economic system who have no access to the sources of power at all. As a group, bazaar merchants who are organized into guilds or other fraternal groups can wield considerable power both economically and politically. Petty traders and itinerant pedlars on the fringe of the bazaar marketing system, on the other hand, tend to be more individualistic and lack the economic and political clout which would align them with other merchants. The position of petty trader is oft times a two-edged sword. Although the traders lack access to the sources of power, economic and political, they feel they have a freedom of action which is denied their more permanently located brethren. Moreover, while some professions suffer setbacks during political crises, trading, especially on the part of small entrepreneurs, often escapes the more severe consequences.

In this paper, rather than generalize about the role of the petty trader (which I have done elsewhere (Thompson, 1981), I intend to offer an intimate account of one petty trader's activities in the markets of Mazandaran. By following trading

ventures over a period of years, we can observe how an entrepreneur on the fringes of the market system adapts to changing circumstances. In addition, we can perhaps understand that while outside observers might consider him a "victim" of that system because he lacks access to the centers of economic and political power, he himself considers his freedom from control by that same system an advantage that he is very unwilling to relinquish.

A PETTY TRADER IN THE RURAL MARKETING SYSTEM

Weekly markets in the rural areas near the city of Babol, Mazandaran (see Map) probably began sometime during the 19th century (Rabino, 1928). Initially, these markets served as places where urban-based traders could buy village handcrafts and other products in exchange for retail merchandise and/or foodstuffs which they brought from the urban bazaars. Today, cash is the basis of exchange in these weekly markets and the products handled by traders are almost exclusively retail items from Tehran. Only a few traders have continued to buy and sell locally-made handcrafts in the various weekly markets. Shir Mohammed Afghani, more commonly known simply as Kerbali², was one of the latter.

Although the traders claim that their numbers have been greatly reduced in recent years, some of them at least, have continued to make a reasonably good living. Shir Mohammad Afghani began his activities in the rural marketing system sometime during the 1940s³. He began as a teenager by hauling merchants to the weekly markets by bicycle when his father had a bicycle repair shop in Babol. During the late 1940s, Kerbali slowly entered the marketing system as a trader himself by buying various items in Babol such as clothing, raisins, sugar, salt, and the like which he would take to one of the weekly village markets. He would exchange these items for village-produced crafts, primarily the village-woven cloths called Chador Shab and Shabad⁴. He sold the village-produced items in other weekly markets and, occasionally, in Babol.

In the late 1950s, Kerbali gradually stopped exchanging urban products for the village materials and began paying cash to the villagers. As a result of a rising cash income during the 1960s, villagers began to buy more ready-made materials and the number of women weaving cloth gradually decreased. However, a demand for the hand woven materials persisted in the village markets and in order to ensure a supply of village-woven cloth, Kerbali increased his efforts

to make ties with many village weavers. He did this by supplying some weavers with raw materials (e.g., cotton, linen, silk, or jute thread) and paying them a wage for their work. He ensured supply from weavers who had their own materials by advancing them small amounts of cash. At the same time, he added some factory woven cloth pieces to his inventory.

In addition to village handcrafts, the villagers in the Babol hinterland were also known for silk production. Before World War II, most of the silk production was used for local weaving but later silk producers began to sell the raw silk to urban-based buyers. Kerbali began buying raw silk which he, in turn, sold to buyers from Kashan in central Iran where silk is used in carpet weaving. He worked to ensure a supply of raw silk by providing producers with silk worms and mulberry leaves. Kerbali divided the income from the sale of the raw silk equally with those producers whom he supplied.

THE SITUATION IN 1971-1974.

Kerbali's trading activities in the weekly markets did not change considerably during the 1960s. He continued traveling to the various markets in the company of the other traders; however, they now shared buses or taxis rather than traveling on foot or by bicycle. In addition to the village woven cloth, he began to sell materials which is woven in the textile factories in Yazd; hand towels, machine-made cotton prayer rugs from Turkey, village-woven silk headscarves from Azarbijan and woolen caps, neckscarves, gloves, and cummerbunds from mountain villages which he obtained from another trader. He also carried rough cloth bath mitts, and some trinkets - silver rings and other inexpensive jewelry. He continued to buy and sell raw silk.

Kerbali bought almost all his chador shabs and shabads from women in the Getap and Halidasht area (see Map). Since he had been buying cloths in this area for over 25 years, he had established good lines of supply. He went to Getap at least once a month to buy cloths, and, women coming to Babol often brought clothes to him there. If he contracted with a woman for cloth, he provided the raw materials and paid her a wage determined by the quality of the cloth he wanted to be woven and his own estimation of the woman's weaving ability. The wage for average weaving was 10 rials per meter but could go as high as 20-25 rials⁵ for good quality material. The raw materials for a seven-meter length of white cloth

(about 13 inches wide) cost about 200 rials for linen (less for cotton and synthetics). The seven meters of cloth made two shabads which he then sold for 140-200 rials each.

Women who had their own raw materials sold their cloths to Kerbali by the finished piece - there was no accounting for the number of meters. The price was determined by the quality of the weaving. Kerbali said that he knew weavers so well that he could estimate the quality of a piece before he even saw it. The women themselves were very aware of their own abilities and knew how much they could expect for their labor. Women would also weave for a specific amount of money. That is, if a weaver needed 300 rials she would offer a piece of cloth that she felt would bring that amount. If she needed more, then she would choose a higher quality piece. If Kerbali was unwilling to meet her estimation of what a particular piece was worth, the weaver would not sell it. There are other buyers of village cloth and the women felt under no obligation to sell only to Kerbali.

At times, Kerbali gave cash advances against work in progress to some of the better weavers. While the advance did place the weaver under some obligation to provide cloths to Kerbali, the price of each individual chador shab or shabad was reckoned in the usual manner. The weaver was under no obligation to accept a lower price for a piece she felt was of high quality, and Kerbali was under no obligation to accept every piece that the weaver offered.

This is not to imply that all transactions with weavers were straightforward; haggling and bargaining over price did take place with each party trying to maximize her or his own position. At each buying session in the villages, the weavers brought their cloths to the house where Kerbali was staying. The women examined one another's work for quality and design and discussed prices other women had received - both from Kerbali and from other buyers. Kerbali examined each weaver's estimates of the resale value of the cloths. The whole process could take several hours with some weavers finally agreeing to a price while others took their cloths home with them. The buying sessions were an example of group consensus; the women acted in unison to restrain too high a price demand on the part of fellow weavers and too low price offer on the part of Kerbali.

The factory-made cloth that Kerbali carried was from the textile mills of Yazd (central Iran). The cloth is usually

of cotton and has a large plaid design somewhat similar to the traditional design of the village chador shabs. There are, however, two differences: first, the village material is woven on narrow looms producing a length of material approximately 13 inches wide and several meters long while the factory material is much wider. The village chador shabs require about five 3 meter pieces to make one whole cloth while the factory type requires only two pieces for the same size chador shab. Kerbali bought 30 to 50 meter bolts of the factory cloth, cut it to size and hemmed the cut edges. Factory woven linens were bought already sized and usually one-half meter long and one meter wide. Kerbali paid about 130 rials for the linen cloth and between 100 to 200 rials per meter for the cotton chador shab material.

Hand towels were carried by Kerbali more as a "convenience" item than a profit-making one. The towels cost him about 30 rials. He bought them anywhere he found them at a low price and sold them for a 50 or 10 rial mark-up. He said that "people always need hand towels and maybe they'll buy something else as well."

Machine-made cotton prayer rugs were added to his inventory after Kerbali had taken a tour of several Middle Eastern countries, including Turkey (see footnote 2). He bought some of the rugs there and then later discovered that the same items were available in the Tehran bazaar. The rugs usually have a picture of the religious sites in Saudi Arabia as the design and are used by the villagers more for wall hangings and decorations than as prayer rugs. He sold the rugs for 270-480 rials each at about a 20% mark-up. Pairs of prayer rugs were sold for between 420 and 700 rials.

Silk headscarves were once woven in Mazandaran but the practice has generally died out. However, some women still prefer to use them and Kerbali bought the scarves, which are from Azarbaijan, in the Tehran bazaar. The scarf material, either in black or orange, is about 30 inches square and cost Kerbali about 300-400 rials each. His mark-up was 8-12%.

The villagers in the Caspian lowlands of Mazandaran use only cotton, linen, jute, silk, or more recently, synthetic fibers ("American silk") in weaving. Similar kinds of weaving only of wool, are found in the mountain village areas. In order to have some of the woolen material but especially to have caps, neck scarves, cummerbunds, and socks and mittens

of knitted wool, Kerbali had an exchange relationship with a trader who buys the woolen goods in the mountain areas. In exchange for the woolen items, Kerbali gave the other trader chador shabs and shabads from the villages in the Babol area. Although cash values were put on the items exchanged, very little, if any cash exchanged hands.

Small pieces of rough woolen material are sewn into bath mitts by village women. These mitts are used for scrubbing the body during the weekly visit to the hamman (bathhouse). Kerbali paid about 15 rials for the bath mitts and sold them for 20-25 rials. Sometimes he provided their material to women who did the sewing but usually sewers provided their own materials.

Collecting pieces of old silver jewelry and trinkets was something of a hobby for Kerbali. "I buy them from villages who know I have an interest", he explained. Kerbali did not display the small pieces of jewelry and would bring them out for inspection only if someone asked him to. He sold the jewelry and silver pieces to buyers in Babol and Ghaemshahr (formerly Shahi) who wanted them primarily for their content. Kerbali said, "I have some things which I got 20 to 30 years ago when they were very common. Nowadays, these things are not so common and I keep them for that reason. Occasionally, I have something that is a little valuable but most of the things are broken or not of good quality so their only value lies in their scarcity."

When Kerbali began buying raw silk (about 20 years ago), he either bought from producers or he provided silk worm eggs and/or mulberry leaves to producers. He and the producer split the income equally from the sale of the raw silk. In 1972, Kerbali continued to buy raw silk but he did not operate on a shared income basis. Instead, he bought silkworm eggs⁶ which he sold to producers at a small profit. Kerbali felt that he had the right of first refusal for the production of those villagers who had bought eggs from him. In 1974, Kerbali was paying about 300 rials for 100 grams of raw silk. When he accumulated 25-30 kilograms of raw silk, he sold it to a buyer from Kashan at about a 21% profit.

ATTENDANCE AT MARKETS

In 1971-1974, Kerbali went to five markets each week: Kiakola, Halidasht, Ghaemshahr, Banamir, and Juibar (see Map). On the two days he did not to to market, Kerbali went to

the Getap area to buy cloth and/or raw silk. Kerbali rated the markets of Juibar and Banamir as excellent, Halidasht and Kiakola as good, and Ghaemshahr as fair. He varied the amount and kinds of merchandise he carried to each market according to his estimate of what he could sell there (see Exhibit One for an estimate of goods carried to each market). Kerbali surmised that the markets of Juibar and Banamir had an average of 1,000 villagers visiting and purchasing; Halidasht and Kiakola averaged about one-half that. The urban market of Ghaemshahr undoubtedly had the highest attendance but the permanent shops there provided keen competition to traders such as Kerbali and his sales were lower in the Ghaemshahr bazaar than at the strictly rural markets. With the exception of Kiakola, the other weekly markets have no permanent shops and the market place is deserted except on the market day. Kiakola has one paved street with about 20 shops but these are, as yet, no serious threat to the traders in the weekly market. The town of Juibar does have about 50 shops but the weekly market site is about two kilometers outside the town and there is no real competition on market day from the permanent shops. In fact, some of the shopkeepers in Juibar go out to the weekly market site on market day.

In 1974 Kerbali felt that his activities as a trader in the weekly markets were profitable. He estimated that on very good days he grossed as much as 10,000 rials (1974, 70 rials = U.S \$1.00); however, his average net profit was much lower, probably nearer 600-1000 rials per day on the five market days.

Buying and selling in the rural areas is, however, a time consuming job and Kerbali sometimes talked of the possibility of opening a small shop in Babol. To do so would require a great deal of cash. For example, a location outside the bazaar area would have required about 300,000 rials for a 20 square meter building, land, and key - or goodwill - money, and guild licenses and membership (cf Thompson 1981). A smaller shop and land in the bazaar area would have cost between 50,000 and 100,000 rials. The key money could run as much as 1,000,000 rials in capital goods investment. In contrast, Kerbali rationalized, "With a capital of about 50,000-60,000 rials, I can make as good a living selling in the rural markets as I can with a shop in Babol."

In addition to the costs of opening a shop, Kerbali felt that a great deal of risk would be involved. "If I open a shop, I will have to add to or change the kinds of things I sell. Of course, I would probably sell cloth because it is

something I know, but a person has to be very careful in choosing what he is going to sell. I would have to add the new cloth very slowly while I was learning who the best suppliers are, establishing credit, and building up a clientele. The village women would still come to me to sell their cloth but I wouldn't have as many customers buying the village material."

Despite the risks involved, Kerbali still occasionally talked about the possibilities of opening a shop. "I have a wife and three children to consider and I'm thinking about buying a 600,000 rial house. By selling in the weekly markets, I am able to make a good enough living for now; however, the weekly markets might become less important. Two markets nearby which used to be good have more-or-less closed and my sons will probably never want to sell in the weekly markets the way I do. I have to think of some other options and opening a shop is, of course, one of them." He continued, "I could, of course, try to become more of a middleman for things like raw silk or other village products. This would require a lot of money - at least 1,000,000 rials, and would be risky. I like my present work because I have a lot of freedom and I don't want to get into anything that would take that away. My business is very good now and, God willing, I won't have to change.

THE SITUATION IN 1978

In 1974, many of the traders in the circulating markets felt that their years were numbered and that theirs was a slowly dying profession. However, in 1978 the markets were not only still thriving, they had grown and the traders who had looked forward to a bleak future felt that "business had never been better." Double digit inflation throughout the country for several years had made village products competitive again and, at least temporarily, had put more expendable income in the hands of villagers. While they continued to do a major portion of their buying in the urban bazaars of Ghaemshahr and Babol, villagers retained their ties with the merchants who had for years come to the villages to serve them.

Kerbali indicated that not only had his business increased, he had dropped all plans to open a shop in Babol and had gone ahead with the purchase of a house instead. He had also acquired a small mo-ped in 1977 which freed him

from total dependence upon public transportation to and from the village markets. The only change in the market routine was the weekly trip to Ghaemshahr. He had never felt that bazaar very profitable and had decided that he no longer need go there. This allowed him an extra day to go to the Getap and Halidasht areas to buy village cloth. The weavers in those two areas had continued producing and he still had close ties with many women in those villages. Prices had increased to keep abreast of inflation but the hand woven items were still in demand and the prices were still competitive with the factory-made cloths from Yazd.

Although the markets were crowded and the traders all agreed that they were making more money than ever, it was difficult to tell if new traders were joining their ranks. While some men had entered the market, at least temporarily, to take advantage of the surge in business, there was no way to assess what the long-term effects might be. Itinerant traders who traveled through the villages (but not necessarily attending the weekly village markets) also indicated that their business had been improving. However, the five or six men that were interviewed were elderly and had been itinerant traders all their lives; no young men seemed to be taking up the trade. Handcrafts, especially pottery and hand-woven cloths, seemed to remain an important aspect of the itinerant traders' products for sale.

Kerbali had maintained his ties with the trader from the mountain villages and was still serving as a middleman between the silk growers and the rug weavers from Kashan. Between 1971 and 1978 the only significant changes in his routine were the purchase of the mo-ped and abandonment of the Ghaemshahr market (probably due as much to local harrassment of weekly traders by city officials as to the lack of business); otherwise, he practiced his trade much the same. Accounts were still largely carried in his head and slack time during the marketing day was spent going over the number of items sold and how much he had gotten for each one. He was continually counting the number of different items he had brought to the market and memorizing which pieces he had sold. When he reached home in the late afternoon or early evening, he would again go over his mental records. Although Kerbali had a modicum of literacy and did make certain types of entries in a small notebook he carried, very little of his financial transactions were ever recorded. He occasionally made cryptic notes concerning which weavers had received materials or money but these too were usually carried in his head. Oral contracts were generally made in the presence of several people and each person's word was considered to be binding in any case.

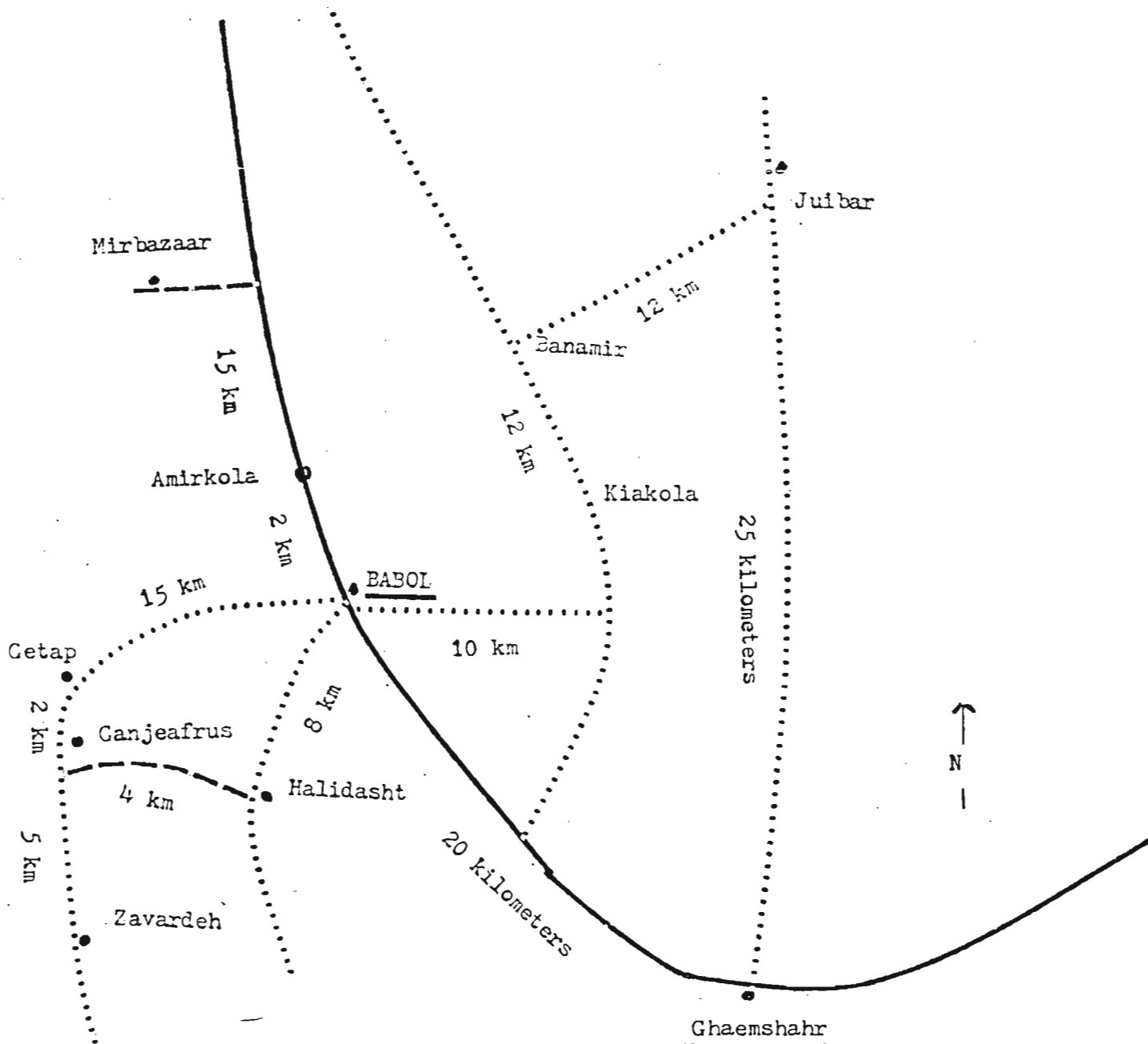
In October, 1978, Kerbali died. His eighteen year old son was, at least for a while, taking his father's place in the markets. He indicated that he wanted to clear out the inventory but was doubtful about whether or not he would continue selling in the markets because he wanted to finish high school. At that time, all school in the country were closed because of political unrest so he was able to take advantage of the unexpected holiday to conduct his father's business. The son may, like many other traders before him, be forced to continue in a role which is not really of his own choosing. He has become the head of a household and the role of trader (not totally unfamiliar to him) may prove to be the only avenue open during a period of political unrest and economic instability. As Kerbali's son, he has access to the broad network of suppliers developed by his father, and if he persists, other traders will offer encouragement and support.

CONCLUSIONS

As a small trader, Kerbali was fairly representative of that genre, at least in northern Iran. Personal observations in Tehran, Mashad, Shiraz, and data from elsewhere in Iran (Thorpe, 1974, et al), would indicate that Kerbali was probably typical for the country as a whole. While having the means to purchase a house for 600,000 rials might seem to make him a bit affluent, it must be remarked that he did not pay cash for the property and it took him over forty years to establish himself well enough in the community to be able to acquire a loan (which was secured through the aid of an older brother in any case). His untimely death has put his family into a very precarious position since he died without substantial property or wealth, certainly not in an amount which will sustain his widow and three teenaged sons until the latter are able to support themselves economically. While his family will undoubtedly survive, their standard of living (not high in any case) will be much more constrained.

Kerbali's reluctance to try his chances in the urban markets is typical of itinerant entrepreneurs who fear the controls they might come under if they operate in a less flexible situation. His very conscious decision to remain outside the power structure of the bazaar market system allowed him to make ad hoc changes and adaptations throughout his career as an entrepreneur. The vagueries of the

economic situation in Iran reinforced his prejudices. Inflation, an unstable government, and urban problems provided him with many reasons to continue in his virtually unchanging business. Kerbali considered it absolutely essential that he have the flexibility to supply the village markets with products they needed. While an outside observer might see Kerbali as a pawn in the over-all structure of the market system in Iran, he saw himself as an independent entrepreneur providing a basic service to the villagers. In that role, he succeeded admirably.



VILLAGE MARKETS NEAR BABOL

Saturday	Ganjeafrus	
Sunday	Zavardeh	Kiakola
Monday	Halidasht	
Tuesday		Mirbazaar
Wednesday		Ghaemshahr (Shahi)
Thursday	Babol	Banamir
Friday	Amirkola	Juibar

paved road

dirt road

rough dirt track

No Scale

EXHIBIT ONE
GOODS CARRIED TO MARKET BY KERBALI¹

	Banamir	Juibar	Kiakola	Halidasht	Ghaemshahr ²
Chador Shab	75	75	40	40	10
Shabad	35	35	15	15	5
Factory Chador Shab	50	50	20	20	10
Linen	15	15	10	10	5
Towels	20	20	20	20	0
Prayer Rugs	10	10	5	5	2
Scarves	10	10	5	5	0
Bath Mitts	40	40	40	40	0
Woolen Goods - 50 pieces (in season)					

¹. These are maximum numbers that Kerbali considered carrying at peak buying times in the Fall and just before the Persian New Year period (March 21). During inclement weather, Kerbali drastically reduced the amount of goods he carried to a market.

². Formerly Shahi

FOOTNOTES

1. Fieldwork for this paper was carried out in 1971-1974 while I was doing research in Iran first under an NIMH pre-doctoral grant and later while employed by the Iran Center for Management Studies. Fieldwork in 1978 was carried out while I was conducting special research for the University of the North, Babolsar, Iran.
2. Before his marriage (about 1960), Kerbali traveled to Kerbala, Iraq, a well-known shrine for Shia Muslims (hence the honorific Kerbali). In true trader fashion he traded as he traveled in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey.
3. This estimation is based upon Kerbali's assertion that he began his activities during the Russian occupation of northern Iran which ended in 1948.
4. Chador Shab - 1½ meter square used for covering bedding that is rolled against the walls in homes during the day. They are usually colored and woven in a plaid pattern. Materials used are cotton, jute, linen, or silk. Shabad lengths of cloth used for sheeting and dust covers. They are usually made of linen and are white; some of them have embroidery.
5. In 1971-73, 76 rials = U. S. \$1.00. In 1974, the exchange was 70 rials to U.S. \$1.00. In 1978, the official exchange was pegged at 70 rials to U.S. \$1.00 but the actual amount fluctuated widely on the open market.
6. In 1974, the government price for Iranian silkworm eggs was 160 rials for a 12 gram box (about 2,000 eggs) and 400 rials for a 12 gram box of Japanese silkworm eggs. The blackmarket price for Iranian eggs was as much as 900 rials for a 12 gram box and 1200 rials for Japanese silkworms.

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