



Extreme heavy metal and blasphemy in Iran: the case of Confess

Pasqualina Eckerström¹

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Abstract

Since the revolution in 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran has imprisoned musicians, especially punk, hip-hop, and hard rock bands, as well as those playing heavy metal subgenres. Extreme heavy metal artists and fans emerged in the 1990s. The government soon targeted them as Satanists and began a systematic crackdown on metalheads. The metalcore band Confess is the most well-known case. The band was arrested in 2015 on counts of blasphemy, disturbing public opinion through the production of music, participating in interviews with the opposition media and propaganda against the Islamic Republic of Iran, among other charges. The majority of secular countries today do not consider extreme heavy metal to be transgressive. This is not the case in contexts where religious traditions have a significant influence on society. By analysing the narrative of the band Confess, the purpose of this paper is to provide an understanding of how Iranian extreme metal musicians resist religious oppression, challenge their government, religious precepts, and social values through their music.

Keywords Transgression · Resistance · Extreme heavy metal · Blasphemy · Islam · Iran

Introduction

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) arrested Nikan Khosravi and Arash Ilkhani, members of the Iranian extreme heavy metal band Confess, on November 9, 2015. The band faced severe charges on accounts of blasphemy and propaganda against the Islamic Republic of Iran, among other accounts. In July 2019, Khosravi was sentenced to 12 1/2 years in prison and 74 lashes, and Ilkhani to 2 years in prison. Both escaped and are now living in Norway as political refugees. Confess is not an anomaly. Heavy metal musicians and fans in conservative countries such as Iran, where religion

✉ Pasqualina Eckerström
pasqualina.eckerstrom@helsinki.fi

¹ Department of Culture, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

influences the legal system (Banakar & Ziaee, 2018; Strong, 1997; I.H.R.D.C Translation of the Islamic Penal Code of the Islamic Republic of Iran -Book One & Book Two, 2014.), perform and consume metal music even though it is controversial. In the Islamic Republic, extreme heavy metal music is considered *harām*, forbidden, according to the official interpretation of Islamic law in the Country. Thus, musicians and fans may consequently be persecuted as blasphemers. However, it is evident that Iranian metal-heads are unwilling to accept the government's condemnation of their music; instead, they challenge their government, religious precepts, and social values. Consequently, scholars need to re-evaluate the familiar premise in extreme metal research that most participants do not live transgressive lives today (Kahn-Harris, 2007). This applies to countries free from religious conflicts over music. In the following pages, I argue that in Iran, extreme heavy metal artists actively engage in transgression against political and religious authoritarianism. Using the case study of the band Confess, I aim to understand how extreme heavy metal musicians in the Islamic Republic of Iran purposefully use their music as a means of political and religious transgression. To begin, I provide a brief description of my methodology and a review of the key concepts and literature that inform my study. I then discuss music in Iran since the revolution. Finally, I analyse the case of Confess. The analysis consists of three parts in which I evaluate resistance as self-identity, resistance through images and lyrics, and resistance as social engagement. The case study indicates that popular culture is still a valid tool to understand the dynamics of religious and political transgression in contexts where the values and behaviours of artists differ greatly from those of mainstream society.

Methodology and data collection

For this study, I conducted both semi-structured interviews and multiple informal, conversational interviews (Boeije, 2009; Seidman, 2019) with the band Confess. The interviews were conducted face to face and remotely. I approached this dataset using narrative analysis, which enables me to focus on the stories told by the individuals and to study the impact of individual experiences on their daily lives. Since this study investigates transgression and its outcomes, narrative accounts can provide good evidence about the motivations of the interlocutors and the meanings they attach to their experiences (Elliott, 2005). In total, I conducted nine interviews with Confess, approximately 1 h and a half each. I coded the interviews using themes, coding significant sentences, paragraphs, and narratives. Furthermore, I collected a second data set by conducting semi-structured interviews with eight additional participants in the heavy metal scene in Iran (both fans and musicians) to gather knowledge about how this genre grew in the country despite the censorship and risks. Nikan Khosravi and Arash Ilkhani are public figures, and as such, they have decided to disclose their names for this research, whereas I introduce the quotes derived from the rest of the participants using pseudonyms. I did not edit the language of the transcripts to preserve the authenticity.¹

¹ Although this paper focuses on the band Confess, it is the first part of a doctoral research project for which I conducted interviews with additional fans and musicians from Iran and Saudi Arabia.

The study is based on one case study, so by its nature, it cannot provide a statistically representative indication of alternative musicians in Iran. My aim is to represent the extreme heavy metal community and what can happen to artists who transgress the system. I was unable to interview the other side of the coin, but the Iranian authorities' stance is clear. Mohammad Mehdi Esmaili, Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, describes rock 'n' roll as 'corrupt' in his eighty-three-page programme (Khoshhal, 2021).

Extreme heavy metal music and transgression in new contexts

When it comes to extreme heavy metal and transgression, most academics rely on undoubtedly the most influential study in the field: *Extreme metal music and culture on the edge* (2007) by Keith Kahn-Harris. He analyses bands that use fascist and racist aesthetics and notes that the prevailing attitude among the scene is to provoke. Still, when questioned about their ideologies, metalheads refute the implications of their actions. Kahn-Harris refers to this behaviour as *reflexive anti-reflexivity*. Specifically, reflexive anti-reflexivity denotes the reticence of individuals that belong to the black metal scene to acknowledge any connection of the genre with far-right politics. By denying the involvement of the scene in such politics, these bands engage in the active suppression of reflexivity. In other words, *reflexive anti-reflexivity* is an act of denial and not wanting to know their political implications (Kahn-Harris, 2007: 145). Although far-right views are an infamous part of black metal, extreme metal music includes a multitude of styles that translate into many subcultures and occasionally countercultures. Thus, there are other transgressive attitudes to consider. Riches (2016) responds to Khan-Harris in his analysis of grindcore, whose bands owe their success especially to its political and social undertones. Another contribution to Kahn-Harris's theories comes from Scott (2016), who analysed musical resistance in contexts in which the government and other regulatory bodies censor heavy metal.

Much of the field of metal music studies has focused on European and North American scenes. However, as many scholars have argued, metal is now a genuinely global experience (Brown et al., 2016; Crowcroft, 2017; LeVine, 2008; Wallach et al., 2011). In most of the Western world, heavy metal is not considered transgressive any longer (Hjelm et al., 2013: 2); yet, it is elsewhere. Therefore, when it comes to transgression and metal musicians, the *context* in which this music is performed or consumed and the *societal perception* of this art form are critical. Extreme music and resistance have found recognition, especially in studies that consider bands and audiences outside Western countries. Greene (2011) discusses the resistance of heavy metal artists in Nepal. He argues that Nepalese metalheads realised what justice meant to them during the 2000s when their country suffered a violent civil war. Moreover, the participants in his study expressed that heavy metal is a means for catalysing their opposition to religious traditions and societal norms.

The discussion moved to the Middle East with Mark LeVine, who broke new ground with *Heavy Metal Islam* in 2008. LeVine's study describes how young Muslims struggle to come to terms with their religion and governments' politics while

identifying with a genre of music that is often considered blasphemous and illegal. As LeVine notes, in MENA (the Middle East and North Africa), young people are drawn to aggressive sounds such as rap, rock, and heavy metal. He likens them to the young metalheads who listened to Ozzy Osbourne singing *War Pigs* during the anti-Vietnam war protest era. Early heavy metal bands resonated with their fans because of the social and economic problems that young people faced. Today, MENA's metalheads are finding a community through music where they can experience autonomy, express their wish for change, and find the courage to protest against their oppressive societies. Furthermore, LeVine finds heavy metal musicians in MENA to be more socially active and aware than their Western counterparts (LeVine, 2008: 11–12). While LeVine's work is the most comprehensive research on this topic, to date, there are only a few studies that look at this phenomenon in specific Middle Eastern countries. Hecker's *Turkish Metal* (2012) analyses the social implications of the Turkish metal scene. His study gives a new perspective on musical transgression and the significance of extreme heavy metal in one's life when one is in conflict with their cultural background. Otterbeck et al. (2018) further contribute to the study of anti-Islamic music in Turkey and Saudi Arabia. However, there are no exhaustive studies on the Iranian extreme metal scene. In 2019, Iran was ranked the seventh most censored country in the world ('10 most censored countries', 2019). Iranian extreme heavy metal artists do not simply face the judgement of a few conservative minds. This music genre, especially in its most aggressive forms, is outlawed because it is considered blasphemous, and its practice can result in severe punishments ranging from years in jail to the death penalty. Thus, it is vivid ground for scholars interested in the dynamics of disobedience.

Transgression as a tool of resistance

Transgression means challenging or violating the limits set by a law, divine rules, or social norms. Furthermore, while breaking the limit might seem to be an antithesis to the norm, transgression is a component of the rule as regulation itself involves the impulse to disobey (Jenks, 2003). Thus, there is a correlation between the limit and the transgressive act as defiance is already foreseen in the request to conform (Monceri, 2012: 28). The French philosopher Charles Bataille famously theorised this close correlation between limit and transgression. He proposed that every prohibition prescribes transgression, as the appeal for transgression is stimulated by the existence of the limit itself. For Bataille, limits are paradoxically strengthened by acts of dissent, as 'concern over a rule is sometimes at its most acute when that rule is being broken (Bataille, 1986: 65). In his essay, *A Preface to Transgression* (1977), Michel Foucault echoes Bataille. To Foucault, the very existence of limits depends on the possibility for people to cross and re-cross them. The French tradition drew from Durkheim (1984), who theorised transgression has a function in society. It is constructed by society, and it affirms the sanctity of rules that maintain order and obedience. Theorists have identified these limits under the concept of sacred. In the context of this study, sacred becomes visible when an act transgression exposes it, especially in Muslim majority countries where the legal system and religious norms

converge. This is in many ways a self-perpetuating process, because as Rivetti (2017) argues, when authoritarian constraints are strengthened, activism and subjectivity flourish. The Islamic Republic provokes politically charged arts, and metal musicians are adept at treading the line between activism and art. By challenging rules and limitations, Iranian metalheads draw attention to the censorship and persecution suffered in Iran. Many of them take part in social activism. This involves promoting their music online, appearing in foreign media interviews, and creating online communities that advocate for a different lifestyle. Iranian metal musicians living abroad often participate in human rights initiatives and conferences, as I will explain later.

This study considers transgressive acts as tools of *intentional resistance* in which resistance is understood as a concrete everyday achievement, or as stated by Bonnin (2017, 4), ‘resistance does not foresee an end. Even if the resisters’ goals are achieved, their practices continue because they build up a community over time. Intertwined with history and each participant’s biography, resistance becomes part of their life’. Bonnin’s definition of resistance particularly captures how many of the actors from the Iranian extreme heavy metal scene practice transgression: it is a constant and deliberate choice that is implemented through day-to-day transgressions, from the way the participants dress, the beverages they consume, the way they socialise, and especially the music they write, perform, and listen to. The transgressions that Iranian metalheads commit, however, are subject to a number of nuances and variables. As some of my participants were raised in westernised families, their transgressions are against the government. Others had to also transgress their families’ values and beliefs. The act of transgression will also depend on the current state of politics, the power and influence of the *basiji*, who controls the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, and the general mood of the country.

To comprehend Confess’s experience, I refer to Williams’s conceptualisation of resistance as *multidimensional*, rather than a fixed and universal concept (2009; 2013). Williams transcends the conventional typological notion of resistance by focusing on three dimensions that can be used to map the concept: passive-active; micro–macro; and overt-covert. Passive engages in a deviant lifestyle without aiming to change the larger system, while active denotes actions to confront the status quo. In other words, passive resistance is subcultural, while active is counter-cultural and potentially revolutionary. Micro resistance refers to engaging in defiant acts on a personal level. In contrast, on a macro level, a rebellious person organises a group of people who share an ideology and direct their defiance towards politicians and legislators. Overt is obvious resistance, as opposed to covert, which is subtle. In this study, I interpret Nikan and Arash’s actions as active resistance, the band’s art as overt, and their social engagement as macro resistance. As the case study shows, Nikan and Arash were aware of the risk they were facing. Nevertheless, they decided to be a voice for freedom of expression, and in the process, they developed a rebellious identity. Moreover, since Confess relocated to Norway, their resistance has not ceased to exist as they are now an active voice for freedom of artistic expression globally. This is not to say that in the Iranian context, intentional micro resistance is not any less significant. Metalheads in Iran are part of a unique

underground subculture, just like Iranian rappers and hip-hop musicians. Some use micro resistance until they reach a sizeable following and recognition to move from micro to macro.

Blasphemy and apostasy in Iran

The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran was adopted in 1979 through a referendum, and it reflects a hybrid system that incorporates secular and clerical principles (Abdolmohammadi & Cama, 2015). The constitution defines the country as an Islamic republic and Ja'afari (Twelver) Shia Islam as the official state religion. In Iran, apostasy and blasphemy are criminalised based on Islamic law. The Islamic legal tradition is a complex system built upon the Qur'an (the Holy Book), the Sunnah (the practices of the Prophet Muhammad), *ijma'* (Consensus of jurists), and *qiyas* (Analogy). Iran handles blasphemy and apostasy through the penal code 2013, the press law 1986, and juristic rulings from the Jafari School. The penal code differentiates between *ḥadd* (limits), *qiṣāṣ* (accountability), *diyya* (blood money), and *ta'zir* (Discretionary Penalties). Book Two of the penal code is devoted to *hudud* (plural for *ḥadd*)² crimes as defined in the Qur'an, such as alcohol consumption, theft, fornication, slander, and insulting the Prophet (*sabb-e nabi*, Ar. *sabb al-nabī*), although the latter is not explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an. Furthermore, insults against Islam, the founder of the Islamic Republic and the Prophet are addressed in articles 513, 514, 206, and 263. Insulting God or the Prophet Mohammad and other revered figures in Islam can be further considered proof of abandoning one's Muslim faith. Thus, if blasphemy can be proven, it may lead to apostasy. However, there are no articles that prohibit apostasy in the new penal code. The combination of articles 220 and 167 authorises judges to adjudicate cases according to traditional uncoded religious laws (Masud et al., 2021).

Music in Iran since the revolution

In Islamic textual tradition, there is a mix of views on music. Qur'an verses do not mention or prohibit music directly. On the other hand, Muhammad's recorded tradition contains narrations which indicate that he approved of music and listened to it together with his wife, as well as narrations which depict music and singing as corrupting and distracting from the pursuit of piety.³ Otterbeck and Ackfeldt (2012) identify three perspectives on music in modern Islamic discourse: one perspective sees that production and consumption of music is permissible but excludes from this category certain forms of music that are seen

² *Hudud* crimes are violations of 'natural law'. They are identified in the following Qur'anic verses that also stipulate the corporal punishment for these crimes: 5:33; 2:178; 5:8; 2:42; 5:90–91.

³ See for example Sahih al-Bukhari, Book 13, Hadith 74, and Book 33, Hadith 786.

as morally corrupting or hindering one's religiosity. Another approach adopts liberal interpretations. A third is the hard-line position, adopted by the Iranian government.

Iran has long had a tradition of political music, even before the revolution. Maghazei (2014) explains the Shah limited public performances of political songs from 1925 to 1941. Though, songs that addressed social injustice were still performed. This changed in the aftermath of the revolution as public concerts were restricted, lyrics were rigorously censored, and musicians faced administrative process in order to release albums. Music schools were closed, and women were prohibited from singing. Popular music was forbidden, viewed as un-Islamic and *musiqi-e mobtazal*, that is 'cheap'. What was an icon of the Shah's modernization, post 1979 became a symbol of Western cultural hegemony (Randall, 2005: 238). With the revolution came a shift in culture that created a gap between mainstream discourse and unofficial underground culture lurking beneath the surface of society, revealing a profound conflict between the official public arena and any unofficial public. Rap, hip-hop, as well as metal music, all express emotions, frustration, and forbidden topics such as drugs and sex (Shahabi & Golpoush-Nezhad, 2016). Thus, the authorities have attempted to restrict cultural activities within Islamic boundaries. In doing so, the government instigated an identity rift between the power and the people who refused to leave their pre-Islamic culture behind (Randall, 2005; Youssefzadeh, 2000). Interestingly, this attitude is reflected in the conversations I had with musicians belonging to the Iranian metal scene, who often use pre-Islamic themes in their lyrics to affirm their roots and resist the Islamic Republic. Western media have reported on some of them, including the story of Sina, leader of the band from the Wasteland, whose lyrics features pre-Islamic themes. He was forced to leave Iran as he reached a certain level of popularity and came under the scrutiny of Iranian authorities. Similarly, Iranian black metal musician Magus Fautsoos was arrested and tortured for his pagan lyrical themes and strong anti-religious messages; he now lives as a refugee in Germany. Similarly, the death metal band Arsames left Iran due to blasphemy charges. Other stories never reached the western media; yet, the participants in this study state that they spent some time in jail and are subjected to various forms of torture or harassment by the police, specifically for not complying with The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance that has played an important role in the life of musicians. The limits imposed over the years have varied depending on whether the government is conservative or reformist. Currently, the government does not support the alternative music scene. The cabinet formed by Ebrahim Raisi is very conservative and includes Mohammad Mahdi Esmaili as Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance. The government has criticised not only the Iranian alternative music but also theatre and cinema for its deviance and vulgarity and for promoting homosexuality (Khoshhal, 2021). As a result of the current situation, the Iranian musicians I met in the past few years have planned to leave Iran.

Extreme heavy metal in Iran

Extreme heavy metal originated in the early 1980s. It includes, among others, the genres of death metal, doom metal, black metal, and thrash metal (Morris, 2015). The themes of Satan, death, extreme violence, and fringe political views reached a new dimension in the 1990s with the Norwegian ‘second wave’ of black metal (Partridge & Moberg, 2017). As previously noted, the consumption and production of art drastically changed in the Islamic Republic after the revolution of 1979. The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance became the main bureaucratic entity in charge of the censorship of art, cinema, print, music, theatre, mass media, and numerous other cultural activities (Rahimi, 2015). Different Iranian presidents adopted different attitudes towards popular culture. However, heavy metal artists and fans have constantly been in conflict with authorities because the Islamic Republic considers metalheads to be devil worshippers and has regularly arrested them.

The Iranian heavy metal scene is mainly comprised of men. They grew up as children that were left to deal with the effects of the revolution and the war with Iraq. They have adopted what the Iranian media calls ‘degenerate behaviour’, building clandestine subcultures that defy morals and political authority (Bayat & Herrera, 2010: 33–34). The societal control that has been implemented during the years has eventually conjured an equally aggressive response through death, grindcore, thrash, and black metal. Despite the censorship, the participants in my study describe how, since the 1980s, heavy metal albums and merchandise have been smuggled into the country and circulated secretly in high schools. Iranian musicians describe heavy metal music as treasure hunting and a cause for popularity among friends. The Iranian musician Farhad explains: ‘People would bring music from abroad. One of my family members came back from a trip abroad, I asked him to bring me some metal music, and he brought ten cassettes, different heavy metal genres, and after that, I was king among my friends’. Iranian metalheads who were as lucky as Farhad would then make copies of the music and resell it, a rare commodity that could generate a good income. In the 1990s, satellites facilitated access to western popular music. In the 2000s, with the internet, metalheads found a more accessible, but no less banned, tool to access metal music and claim new virtual spaces to develop their independence. In democratic countries, public spaces represent an autonomous area that young people can use to resist adult power (Valentine, 1996: 7). In Iran, however, public spaces have been substituted by virtual spaces, which young metalheads inhabit until the police block them. While one cannot find an infinite number of parks in a city, the internet can always provide new settings and doors through VPNs. Thus, social media pages and websites are claimed as spaces for liberation, and when shut down, new ones are created. Some might argue that Confess and bands like them are simply ‘online bands’. However, they use internet as part of their promotion as any other musicians. In the era of streaming platforms and the internet, it seems obsolete to classify bands as ‘online groups’. Iranian metal musicians produce physical albums and perform live, usually at private parties. The fact that they are mostly online and only perform at private parties proves the transgressive nature of the bands.

Today, Iranian musicians need to ask permission to practice their trade from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, which requires that bands provide a translation of their lyrics into Farsi. The Ministry can decide to grant permission with restrictions, such as playing only instrumentally. As Crowcroft (2017, 83) notes, the religious police in Iran nowadays have become experts in the different heavy metal genres. They can correctly differentiate between black metal and death metal. Thus, most heavy metal bands, especially representatives of the most aggressive genres, do not get permission. If permission is granted, it implies that the band plays a genre closer to rock than metal, it must play instrumentally, or their lyrics are not provocative. Despite the authorisation, the police can still show up and stop their shows. In Iran, metal musicians, therefore, come in two types: those who try to acquire permission from the authorities or try to play it safe, and those who refuse to conform. The band Confess belongs to the latter.

Confess: the guiltiest of sinners

Nikan founded Confess in 2009, finding like-minded people who would stand behind his controversial anti-religious and political lyrics. The band's music is metalcore, a subgenre that often stands against oppression and fosters the rejection of norms (Wallach et al., 2011: 282). The band began to gain popularity with the publication of the single 'You Will Pay Back' in 2014. That same year, Iranian national TV featured the band, and the host of the show incited the government to pay attention to the controversial music produced by underground musicians. The police targeted the band from that moment on, as Nikan explains: 'We were like a suicide quad. This music is my suicidal vest. Every investigation about us started at that point. In prison, the investigator told me they started bugging our phones when we published this song ['You Will Pay Back']'. On November 9th, the band was arrested and taken blindfolded to Evin. The prison is well known for detaining people accused of crimes involving National Security, mostly human rights advocates, academics, and artists. At the time of his arrest, Nikan was sleeping in his bedroom, surrounded by heavy metal music albums and books by authors such as Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Leon Trotsky. The police later confiscated these books as, according to Nikan, they are controversial in Iran since they promote freethinking. Arash was arrested on the street of Tehran. He was in a car with a friend trying to get rid of what in Iran constitutes illegal materials, such as books, albums, heavy metal merchandise, and musical instruments. The two musicians spent 1 year and a half in prison, partially in solitary confinement, and they shared cells with cartoonists and terrorists. During the interrogations, they were both threatened with the possibility of a death sentence. Such interrogations occurred twice a day, and each lasted for hours. Arash describes the experience as a mind game since the interrogators asked questions but would tear the paper with the answers and ask the same questions repeatedly if he was not cooperating. They also found out that the police had been following them for months as their files were filled with photos of them, of their friends and of the places they had visited. The interrogators

believed that the band was part of satanic groups with relations to enemy countries. The prosecution used interviews with international media and innocent details in photos taken with friends to support these claims. Nikan recalls how one investigator pointed at a photo with a British flag in a friend's bedroom. This was a common pop culture symbol for teenagers, but the interrogators suspected something more sinister. The list of accusations included charges related to religion, such as blasphemy, as well as politics, such as promoting propaganda against the system and insulting the supreme leader and the president. The judge assigned to their trial, Mohammad Moghiseh, who is responsible for prosecuting many political prisoners and has issued numerous death sentences (Iran Prison Atlas [IPA], 2021), stressed the seriousness of their charges. In addition, they were not given the right to legal representation. Nevertheless, they never confessed or admitted that they were guilty.

To understand the band's experience, it is essential to contextualise the arrest in a particular historical moment. Confess was arrested in 2015, during Hassan Rouhani's presidency. The leader was harshly criticised for his 'throwback to less liberal leaderships' (Guthrie, 2015). Furthermore, 2015 was a pivotal year in the history of Iran, and some suspect the band's arrest was a warning: the nuclear deal could open Iran's economy to the world, but strict Islamic rule was to remain (Crowcroft, 2017). Confess was caught up in a net of fragile diplomatic relationships. Iran, the USA, and other countries signed a historic nuclear agreement over the summer of 2015 (Sterio, 2016). However, many human rights watchers and journalists felt that the deal was overshadowed by many cases of abuse in Iran (Nossel, 2015). Thus, while the country was in the process of signing this agreement, Confess, among other vocal artists and human rights advocates, unveiled the truth about abuses of censorship and freedom of speech in the country. The band believes that this explains why the prosecutors pushed for a precedent-setting sentence as harsh such as capital punishment. It is worth noting that while many heavy metal artists in Iran had been subject to intimidation and had been arrested before, Confess' trial remains the most serious attempt to silence a heavy metal band in the Islamic Republic. Thus, the transgressive art and actions of the band exposed the limits imposed by the Islamic republic. At the same time, the nuclear weapons agreement was the initiator of Iranian political tolerance and a decrease of human rights abuses (Xiyue, 2021).

In 2016, the hashtag #freeconfess went viral on social platforms such as Twitter. Both big music and traditional media, such as Fox News, wrote about the band facing execution (Chiaromonte, 2016). Consequently, important names in the heavy metal scene, such as Corey Taylor of Slipknot, started tweeting the news and supporting petitions pleading for the release of the band. Suddenly, Iran and human rights issues became a popular topic among the young western heavy metal audience. Soon after, both musicians paid the bail of 30.000 USD each, and once out, they fled the country during their wait for trial. In 2018, Nikan was assisted by The International Cities of Refuge Network (ICORN) and found refuge in Norway. Arash followed him soon after. The two artists have reformed the band with Norwegian musicians and continue to publish antiauthoritarian music.

The outsider as identity: active resistance

Resistance is not only a concept portrayed in Confess' transgressive music. Both Nikan and Arash explain how defiance has been a critical factor in building their identities. Resistance has been an ongoing essential theme in their lives, both on the personal and the artistic front. Nikan describes his formative years as being surrounded by other non-religious people. His life changed when a friend made a CD for him and smuggled it into school: 'I did not know that my life was going to be ruined forever. I just opened up the book, and I saw that there is this white CD, marked simply as "metal", I know that metal means... *metal*'. Nikan knew this music was considered forbidden in Iran as the government approved only popular and traditional music. As a young teenager, Nikan recalls how he began questioning why bands such as Metallica could express their music freely while this kind of artistic expression was immoral in his country. The soundtracks to his formative years were rap bands from Iran and international heavy metal bands such as Rage Against the Machine, which he describes as a four-piece demonstration: 'The song "Killing in the Name" is a five sentences slogan. You could see people using these lyrics in the street. It is not a just song; it is a demonstration soundtrack'. When he founded Confess, he included these revolutionary teachings in his music.

Arash's defiant character was also formed during his adolescence when he realised his thoughts did not align with the status quo:

You are using religion to kill people, to execute people. And if you are even a religious person, a pure one, you lose your religion because you are under oppression. So, this happened also to me as a teenager. The system uses religion for oppression. You better obey them if you want to go to heaven. It is not a system for people. It's a system for sheep.

Bands such as Slayer and Megadeth inspired Arash as they did not conform to religion. He also accepted the label of an outsider: 'I understood that they [the Iranian authorities and conservative people] are against me too because I am an antireligious person, an outsider; because the whole society is a traditional society'. Nikan notes: 'being a metal musician in Iran means being rejected by the society and government, an outsider'. Once identified as a lawbreaker, Confess began using their music as an intentional and open affront to the status quo. Moreover, they incorporated a formerly negative label into their self-conception to reclaim it. They narrate their story not from the perspective of victims but of fighters, warriors, and soldiers who wear their persecution as a badge of honour. In other words, the band transformed the negative stigmatising label and re-appropriated it, perceiving it as powerful (Galinsky et al., 2013).

Their songs demonstrate awareness of the reality in which they lived and of the danger they could face. The vast majority of their songs contain verses that declare the artists' intentions and willingness to die for their principles. In addition, prison, prisoners, torture, control, and power are common motifs in the lyrics. In other words, the musicians embraced the label attached to them, to the point that it became a self-fulfilling prophecy (Becker, 1991), as shown in the verse 'I'm Unleashed Prisoner; Guiltiest Sinner', contained in the song *I'm Your God Now*. This is the first

single track of *In Pursuit Of Dreams* released in 2014, 1 year prior to their arrest. As Nikan notes: ‘I knew my path, I knew what I was doing. I am not a dude who picks up the guitar and says, “uh girls will like me”. I don’t write political because it makes me look tough. I know what I am doing. I was born this way’. In other words, resistance has become an integral part of their lives and a critical factor in their identities. They implemented defiance in their quotidian actions as well as in their transgressive art, as they both constantly emphasise during our conversations, knowing they would probably suffer repercussions.

Overt and macro resistance: testing limits with transgressive images and lyrics

We can identify resistance as active and overt when all participants agree on the meaning of their action (Williams, 2013: 102). In this sense, Confess has engaged in active and overt resistance since its early years, pushed by the same intent: to be heard and to resist the suppression of freedom of expression through their art. As Nikan explains: ‘I knew every step on the way what I was writing, it was intentional. We knew what could happen because we know where we live [sic]. Arash and the other musician in the band were on my same page’. In 2014, the band again recorded the single ‘You Will Pay Back’, an open and bold statement against the Iranian government and the imprisonment and killing of its critics. This was a pivotal moment for the band as the song constituted both active and overt resistance. While some may miss its antiauthoritarian or antireligious lyrical content because of the vocal style, growling, the artwork did not go unnoticed. Overt resistance, as argued by Williams, is hard to miss (Williams, 2013: 103). Confess’ explicitly transgressive artwork has been strategized by the group and aimed also to be understood by people that do not belong to the extreme metal scene. The artwork for ‘You will Pay back’ was intentionally blasphemous. It depicts a man dressed half as an Imam and half as a businessman wearing a tie⁴ (Fig. 1). Nikan explains that this was a representation of how politics and religious power overlap in Iran. Nikan recalls that they knew what this would mean: a decisive step that the group was not going to be able to take back:

I can remember when we made this artwork, we shut down the computers, we went out with my friend, and we could not really talk. We were like: ‘dude, are we really going to do this?’. We thought about it for two weeks! ‘Cause at the time we were bigger, we were on the map, and this artwork was bold! Seeing myself as a 19-year-old boy doing something like that...you know what can happen; I was totally aware of it. We made the artwork, the song, and it was ready to go. I sent it to websites to release it. We just did it. My friend was, ‘dude, you [sic] gonna kill us’.

The fear of being persecuted was justified since the band took a definitive step into macro resistance. Overt resistance exists at a macro level when it targets governments and people outside the defiant scene (Haenfler, 2014: 49). Similarly,

⁴ Ties have been a social taboo for the past four decades following the Iranian revolution as government leaders consider the necktie to be a symbol of the west and a perversion of religious culture.

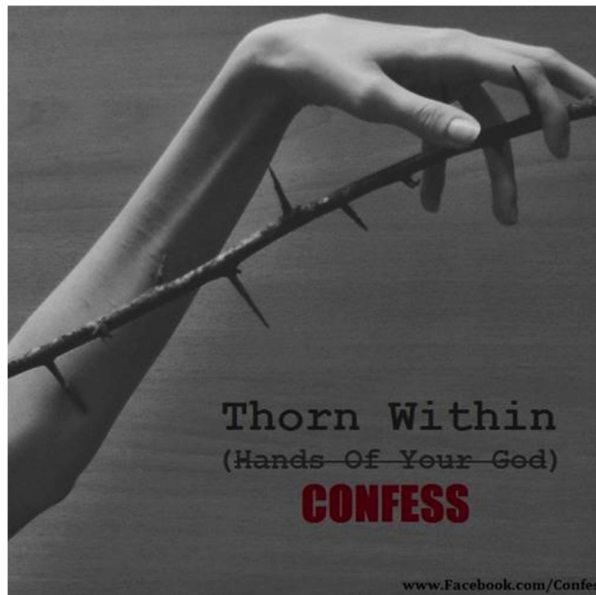
Fig. 1 ‘You Will Pay Back’ artwork



bands that are targeted in Iran are groups that exit the hidden subscene and cross the line into popularity or employ a clear, unequivocal act of transgression that is perceived as an act of defiance. Confess’s actions became macro resistance as the band opposed the social system together. As Williams (2013) points out, resistance does not require formal demonstrations by a large group of people to be macro-oriented. Nikan organised a small group of people, formed a band, and established a label to help other artists adopt the same attitude in their music. Confess’ aimed macro resistance was fulfilled when the single was showed on national TV. Nikan was satisfied: ‘I just put my flag on national TV. It was like getting a Grammy. This song was about the system, and they heard it, I did my job’. Thus, their defiance reached people outside the underground community. The artwork became part of their tools to reinforce the antireligious and political message of their songs.

During their trial, this was not the only artwork considered a proof of their blasphemy. The persecution also used the album cover for the single ‘Thorn within’. The image (Fig. 2) depicts a hand caressing some thorns. The artwork for the song featured the subtitle ‘Hands of Your God’. During the trial, this image was understood to be the hand of God. The Islamic tradition prohibits any depiction of God (Al-Qardawi, 1999:109). Therefore, this would constitute blasphemy according to Iranian Law. In addition, the prosecutors analysed promotional posters, of which one depicted an eye in a triangle (Fig. 3). Both Nikan and Arash state that this image symbolises awareness, but to the prosecutors, it shares affiliations with satanic and masonic groups. Additionally, Confess uses growling, a singing style that makes it hard to understand the lyrical content without printed lyrics (Otterbeck et al., 2018: 269). Thus, bands that want to make their message clear publish their lyrics and talk about their meaning in interviews. This would turn a resistance that is covert into overt resistance. Confess went a step further to ensure that their lyrics, which

Fig. 2 ‘Thorn Within’ artwork



they hold to be the core of their expression, would be read and understood. They published their lyrics in three formats: in English, in Farsi translation, and verse by verse in both languages. In addition, Nikan also programmed the mp3 files in Media Player to show the lyrics in English and Farsi. Thus, the lyrical content, in this case, became overt. In court, one of the questions posed to Nikan was ‘how long have you been writing satanic music?’ As Nikan emphasises, the question was for *how long*, not *if* he considers his music to be satanic. To the judge, the satanic character of their music was not in question. The prosecution especially concentrated on two songs: ‘Thorn within’ and ‘I Am Your God’. In particular, ‘Thorn Within’ features a clear antireligious message. Both Nikan and Arash recall that they did not attempt to justify these lyrics. As Nikan states, he meant for that song to be clearly anti-religious. The prosecutor scrutinised the lyrics to verify whether the band had insulted the Prophet since this offence carries capital punishment. As Nikan states, ‘They could not pin the Prophet offence, because there wasn’t any. But if they could have found one line, if I desired to write one line against the Prophet, I wouldn’t be here’.

Socially engaged music as a form of macro-resistance

The macro aspect of Confess’ resistance became especially effective once they left Iran. They published ‘Phoenix Rises’ in 2018, as retribution against the system that jailed them. In 2019, the appeal case was concluded. Khosravi was sentenced to 12 1/2 years in prison and 74 lashes. The initial sentence of 6 years for Ilkhani was reduced to 2 years. The band responded with the song ‘Evin’, an open letter to the system that persecuted them. They also published ‘Army of Pigs’ during the



Fig. 3 Promotional poster

2019–2020 Iranian protests to raise awareness and send a message of solidarity to their fellow citizens. Furthermore, the two musicians became immediately involved in advocacy with Freemuse, SAFEmuse, and Icorn. As often happens in a band, one person is designated as the spokesperson, and Nikan has historically taken this role. He has communicated his and Arash's message in conferences, he has given interviews to the press and television, and he has played in front of politicians. Hence, while some participants in subcultures can be rather performative and do not engage in political discussions (Haenfler, 2014: 51), Confess is pursuing its cause on a bigger platform now. They are planning to play their catalogue and the upcoming album *Revenge at All Cost* in schools to educate teenagers on religious and political oppression. While their music does not break Norwegian law, it is still driven by transgression. As Nikan states:

I'm down with every demonstration all over the world against any government. If something happens, I'm going to be on the street. If those people have something to fight for. I'm just a spare hand. That's why I think that music is a weapon. I don't think I have the power to overthrow a government or a regime, but what I can do is talking [sic] about my story, and the result is that I am gonna put your name more in dirt day by day, that's what ... that's the mission, that's what we do.

No music alone can muster one's ability to invest effectively in the world, but one can note the powerful contributions of music to temporary emotional states (Christensen & Watson, 2015: 39). With this in mind, Confess is planning to play live in the Middle East in the future (although not in Iran). They know this would be a controversial move. Nevertheless, they plan to give a powerful message to the young generation in the Middle East. The band wants to encourage others to resist oppression, and they hope for a snowball effect that can generate change at some point. Confess considers their arrest as an accomplished mission: they have uncovered the limits imposed by the Iranian religious and political authorities, and their message was heard not only by their investigators but also, and especially, by young Iranians. The band has received many messages from Iranian fans and other outsiders around the world.

Conclusion

There is plenty of empirical data to support Kahn-Harris' conclusions on the lack of lived heavy metal transgression. Nevertheless, his case studies are limited to secular societies. The case of the band Confess shows that the perception of transgression and the form this resistance takes depends on the context in which it occurs. The Islamic Republic considers their songs to be criminal, while western countries protect extreme heavy metal under the principle of freedom of speech. By studying the type of resistance that the band has implemented, I have shown that Confess' transgression was functional and intentional. It exposed the religious limits in their country and triggered a harsh response. By demonstrating that extreme heavy metal music is transgressive in the Islamic Republic, this study sheds light on a small but growing

phenomenon in Muslim contexts. In April 2020, Freemuse (2020) published The State of Artistic Freedom 2020 report. The report found that 42% of attacks under religious rationale happen in MENA. Consequently, Confess is not an anomaly. Today in Iran, the young generation uses popular culture to defy religious censorship. Empirical data indicates that young Iranian artists resist religious oppression, and it shows that an oppressive system stimulates irreligiosity. Nikan's and Arash's identities have been affected by their country, and they are an example of a growing trend. Confess is now safe in Norway, but they are forced never to see their homeland again. Most of the participants who informed this study are still in Iran, playing what the government considers satanic music despite being daily harassed by the police and conservative individuals. These musicians are a clear example of a generation that is ready to pay a harsh price for their freedom, that does not identify as religious, and that believes that religion should be separated from the public sphere.

The number of Iranians who identify as non-religious is growing. In 2020, a study reported that while 32% of the Iranian population identifies as Shi'ite Muslim, around 9% identify as atheist despite the danger of this identification. The study also indicates that 51.8% of young adults, aged 20 to 29, have shifted from identifying as religious to non-religious (Maleki and Arab, 2020). These findings are interesting as they reflect the age group of the participants in this research. Even though the Iranian authority reinforces religion through politics, the result is the opposite as many embrace a rebellious attitude towards religion. Thus, in authoritarian contexts, resistance and limits feed one another, and popular culture reflects this wish for change. Iranian extreme metal musicians use this genre to break these religious and societal boundaries. Their acts are transgressive because of the strict religious context in which the artists live. Limits are not silencing Confess and other Iranian musicians. Quite the opposite: control encourages anti-authoritarian identities.

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