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RECLAIMING THE FARAVAHAR

ZOROASTRIAN SURVIVAL IN CONTEMPORARY TEHRAN

NAVID FOZI

LEIDEN UNIVERSITY PRESS

Reclaiming the Faravahar

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Navid Fozi

Leiden University Press

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To the Zoroastrian Community of Iran

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CHAPTER 1

Background, Questions, and Theory

> Stain your prayer rug with wine if the
> Zoroastrian Elder [magus or priest]
> tells you to.[1] Hāfez (1315–1390)

Zoroastrian traditions shaped the main type of Iranian religiosity from about 600 BCE to 1000 CE. Albeit transformed in the face of more than a millennium of persecutions, migrations, and conversions, these have survived as distinct pre-Islamic priestly and sociocultural traditions. This book examines the reasons for such resilience by addressing Zoroastrian categories of identity and identification in contemporary Tehran. Thus, this is an ethnographic account of the economy of Zoroastrian religious knowledge, that is, complex configurations of sociocultural categories through which believers understand and present themselves while producing and disseminating them under the regnant Shiʿi order.

During two years of research in Iran,[2] I attended Zoroastrian rituals, ceremonies, and exhibitions in Tehran, and interviewed members of the hierarchy, including the *mobeds* or priests, acolytes or learned individuals, and laities. Contemporary Zoroastrian socio-discursive practices evidence a historically conscious community that is deeply cognizant of its status under the long Islamic rule. Juxtaposing ethnographic findings to archival research,[3] and informed by the anthropology of knowledge and of history and also by performance, performativity,[4] and discourse analyses,[5] I approach Zoroastrian modes of historical evocation in terms of cultures of Zoroastrian history. That is, ways in which social actors remember, reconfigure, and exhibit, hence as discussed below "perform,"[6] their past and establish the product as social reality in the present in order to negotiate and sustain a distinct and modern identity and culture. As Michael Lambek argues:

> Historical consciousness entails the continuous, creative bringing into being and crafting of the past in the present and of the present in respect

> to the past (poiesis), and judicious interventions in the present that are thickly informed by dispositions cultivated in, and with respect to, the past, including understandings of temporal passage and human agency (phronesis). (2002:17)

The economy of this knowledge tradition of the past holds the key to Zoroastrians' resilience, providing them with a means of defining and defending Zoroastrian identity and values.

Modern Iranian identity is closely bound to the rupture that resulted from the Arab invasion of seventh-century Iran. This "critical event," to use Veena Das' phrase (1995), has continued to be an active part of Iranian consciousness.[7] The dynamic scope of this historical moment proves to be even more critical when one explores the complexity of religious minorities' identity construction in Iran, particularly that of the Zoroastrians. In fact, in addition to the Arab invasion, Iranian history chronicles invasions of the Greeks, Turks, and Mongols, each of which devastated the country. For Zoroastrian historical awareness, the main index of Iranian devastation is nevertheless marked by the Arab invasion and the subsequent Islamization of Iran, a historical consciousness largely rooted in the more recent Pahlavi nationalistic project discussed further below. Whereas the former tribes have come and gone and treated all Iranians equally as enemies, the Arabs suceeded in deracinating the Iranian-Zoroastrian Kingdom, converted most of the country to Islam, and even treated the new converts as unequal.[8] Subsequently, many Zoroastrians left Iran.

Zoroastrians' awareness of this historical episode and its modes of articulation in the present reveal how a religious configuration of historical knowledge hones the *social* and *cultural imaginaries* of a community. Philosopher Candace Vogler defines "imaginaries" in terms of "complex systems of presumptions—patterns of forgetfulness and attentiveness—that enter subjective experience as the expectation that things will make sense generally" (2002:625). The "social imaginary," then, as Charles Taylor defines it, "is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society," collective self-understanding that is constitutive of a society (2002:91).[9] Discussing how Zoroastrians imagine their social surroundings, I address "the deeper normative notions and images"[10] that underlie ways in which they fit together, in particular, with the expectations of the dominant Shiʿa. Another theme that I explore, which culminates in the final chapter, is the constellation of Zoroastrian and Iranian historical consciousnesses in Iranian nationalism, understood in terms of Iranian "cultural imaginaries."[11]

My guiding questions include: how do Iranian Zoroastrians create, recognize, and identify with their historical past and "perform" it in the present? How do their deep textual histories interact with their daily life to shape the values of their modern identities? How do they maintain consistency with the past in the context of modernity? What are the local and global contexts in which their past becomes especially salient, constituting not only their own social imaginaries but also infiltrating Iranian national/cultural imaginaries? That is, how do Zoroastrians imagine their historical insertion into Iranian society in order to adapt to the expectations of the dominant Shiʿa? Also, how do Iranians perceive Zoroastrians in relation to the ideals and symbolism of Iranian nationalism?

Preoccupied with their historical past as a legitimizing link in the present to imagine religious self, a kerygmatic mode of religious experience,[12] Zoroastrians that I worked with formulate and perform both an ancient and a modern genealogy of their identity. Drawing on Zoroastrian tenor of historical consciousness, this genealogy vaunts the status of the followers as the original Iranians, emphasizes historical and spiritual connections with distant Iranian history, and hearks back to the glorious past of the Iranian-Zoroastrian state. Ensconced in this "imagined continuity,"[13] Zoroastrian utterances presented here, on the one hand, portray the Arab invasion of Iran and the Islamization process thereafter in terms of shared Iranian heritage and stand against the invaders. In this regard, they understand Shiʿi tradition as a form of resistance against the Sunni Arabs, hence emphasizing their own similarity with Shiʿa as an "Iranicized" religion. On the other, they emphasize the Arab roots of Shiʿi tradition and denounce some of its religious and cultural practices as opposing the "authentic" Iranian culture, thus stressing difference, authentic origin, and the maintenance of distinctiveness. The product is a constantly performed discursive oscillation between Zoroastrians' relatedness to and difference from the Shiʿa.

As an ethnographic study it is not the aim of this book to evaluate the validity of the historical accounts and communal myths presented. Rather I draw on John Austin's analyses of speech acts to present such subjective presentations as performative utterances to establish links with the past. As Austin puts it, they are acts *in* saying, rather than acts *of* saying that are truth-evaluable and constative (1962). They are performative since they entail, to use Judith Butler's definition, "that reiterative power of discourse [that] produce[s] the phenomena that it regulates and constrains" (1993b:2). The discourses outlined here are therefore considered as part of the performative architecture of Zoroastrian distinct universe. The goal

is to explicate how these "invented traditions," to use Eric Hobsbawm's phrase (1993), albeit closely linked to the emergence of Iranian modern nationalism, are presented and inculcated as time immemorial in order to produce the contemporary community.

1.1 – The Zoroastrians of Iran

The estimated worldwide Zoroastrian population according to the latest report in 2012 is about 111,201 depicting a decline of about 13,752 since the previous survey in 2004.[14] About 61,000 live in the Indian subcontinent; they are known as Parsis and Iranis and are the descendants of two major waves of emigrants from Iran, corresponding to the escalated persecutions in the eighth/ninth and late eighteenth/and nineteenth centuries.[15] As a result of the latest and ongoing phase of migration, mostly under the Islamic Republic, a North American Zoroastrian community was also established. According to the same report some 14,000 Zoroastrians live in the U.S. and an additional 6,421 live in Canada, 5,000 in England, 2,577 in Australia, and 2,030 in the Persian Gulf states.[16]

In Iran they number about 14,000[17] to 25,271[18] mostly concentrated in Tehran and villages around the cities of Yazd and Kerman,[19] "on the edge of marginal salt deserts" (Bekhradnia 1991:118). The latter were two "thinly populated regions" to which Zoroastrians moved after the Arab invasion and "withdrew from all major forms of interaction with Muslims" (Choksy 1987:30). Yazd and the surrounding villages—where, as Michael Fischer points out, a strong sense of religious commitment seems to be a general characteristic, which is shared by Zoroastrians (1973)—are considered to be the stronghold city of Iranian Zoroastrians (Boyce 1977). Nevertheless, due to the increased rate of internal migration to Tehran,[20] which is noticeable among all minorities, Tehran is said to have the largest Zoroastrian population, consisting nonetheless mostly of Yazdi and Kermani descendants.

The Islamic Republic's Constitution permits Zoroastrians to follow their religious Personal Status, Family Law, and education.[21] The community sends an internally elected representative to the Islamic Parliament,[22] and each local Zoroastrian community is organized around an elected administrative Council or Association (*Anjoman*), a system introduced to the community by the emissary of the Parsis of India, Maneckji Limji Hataria, who, with the aim of improving the conditions for less fortunate co-religionists, visited the Iranian community in 1854. The Tehran Association has twenty-

one members who are vetted by the Islamic Republic's State Ministry (*Vezārat-e Keshvar*). There is also a Mobeds' Council; comprised of all mobeds, it is charged with administering religious laws and is headed by the high mobed. Tehran has one functioning fire-temple, wherein some of the religious ceremonies are held. There are several other centres in Tehran, those of central Tehran's *Narges* building for the migrants from city of Taft and its surrounding villages, and *Tehrānpārs Marker*[23] *Centre* and *Rostam Bāq* in east Tehran. Zoroastrians also have primary and secondary schools (Firuz-Bahram boys' high school was established in 1923), and several other minor establishments.[24]

Repressive policies of the Islamic Republic have presented political, cultural, and demographic challenges for the community. For example, in 2005 the Guardian Council that oversees elections disqualified the Zoroastrian Member of Parliament from running for reelection. It happened again during my fieldwork. The government also imposes tight controls on their religious ceremonies and celebrations. As a result of these and other policies more Zoroastrians have left their villages to migrate to Tehran, many of whom eventually migrate to the West. A Zoroastrian authority told me, "The Islamic Republic gives us so much trouble that most of the Zoroastrian villages of Yazd are uninhabited now." Emigration, therefore, remains a concern and a total absence of Zoroastrians in the land they are indigenous to and that is sacred to them is not beyond imagination.

In the face of all these continuous difficulties, the surviving, albeit irreplaceably diminishing, Iranian Zoroastrian community shows remarkable resilience. Even though as a result of emigration to Tehran, for instance, "most traditions that were markedly Zoroastrian stopped being practiced," as Shahin Bekhradnia points out, "a distinct social identity did not necessarily diminish" (1991:124). In chapter 6, I discuss that cognizant of the renewed physical and cultural threats, and subject to the changing political circumstances, the community has taken some preventative measures.

1.2 – "De-Zoroastrianization" and Shi'a Domination

Following successive bloody wars, the Arab victory of 651 CE devastated Zoroastrians and marked the end of the Sasanian Empire in the Persianate world—a vast territory stretching from Western China and Central Asia to Mesopotamia, the Caucasus, Anatolia, and beyond.[25] At the time of the invasion, Sasanians were facing a welter of internal challenges, at their core

the succession to the throne. They had also suffered from the exhaustive wars with Byzantium and, as a result of the concentration of Iranian military forces on the frontiers, the Arabs did not find massive fortifications in the central part of the Empire. Moreover, the defeat of the Persian Empire is understood by historians to be a result of the overly confident Iranian Army and its disparaging image of the once-scattered Bedouin Arab tribes who were now unified under prophet Mohammad's message of a Muslim brotherhood, which transcended tribal boundaries.

Another reason for such defeat was the disenchantment of the dominant Iranains who practised varieties of religions and sects with the minority Zoroastrian orthodoxy that had close ties with the Sasanian monarchs and pursued harsh religious policies. Since the third century this minority had persecuted Manichaeans, Christians, the Zurvanite and Mazdakite sects.[26] Hence, even before the Arab invasion the Church was suffering due to the conversion of its members, especially to Christianity and Manichaeism. This religious disenchantment continued into the post-Arab conquest and was particularly reinforced under a new economic condition that included the non-Muslim poll-tax as well as the Islamic inheritance laws.[27]

Jamsheed Choksy argues that during the post-conquest period both Muslim and Zoroastrian communities' contact with the other "aimed at strictly maintaining rigid religious codes of conduct while trying to accommodate socio-economic realities" (1987:29). Zoroastrian laws of purity and pollution prohibited interactions with Muslims, and tax collection was at the heart of their relations. Conversions to Islam had been both forcible, in particular for women who were forced to marry Muslims, and voluntary, partially to protect assets and belongings. Coupled with the Abbasid policy that converts achieved equal status, as described below, the incentive for conversion was (and still is) great, as a convert to Islam becomes the sole heir to the non-Muslim family. Yet, the initial harsh treatment of converts by Muslim officials hindered the process.

Jonathan Berkey points out that the uneven and nuanced Islamization process "bound both Zoroastrianism and Islam in a complicated dialectic of interlocking identities" (2003:171). The relationship evolved into "one of interdependent acculturation into Islam and Islamic society through political conquest, cohabitation, gradual cooperation, production of myths, religious conversion, and institutional modification" (Choksy 1997:142). Iranian society nonetheless was not "subsumed into an Arabian-style society. Rather, as Iranian social mores ceased to be valid in Zoroastrian settings, many were reconciled with Islamic values and, in some cases, even prevailed over

previously established Muslim practices" (Ibid:141). The emergence of Shiʿi tradition as the dominant cultural and religious force in Iran is indebted to this dialectic, as well as to the incessant Iranian/Zoroastrian struggle against the Islamization process outlined in the following cursory historical sketch.

1.2.1 – *A Historical Sketch*

An important step in the "de-Zoroastrianization"[28] of Iran was taken by the Arab Umayyad dynasty in 698 CE when the caliph changed the language of the defeated administration from Persian to Arabic and dismissed the Zoroastrian official remnant of the Sasanians.[29] During the next two centuries, Iranians attempted several socio-religious uprisings against the Arabs,[30] employing an apocalyptic eschatology based on a Zoroastrian "sense of cyclical renewal in time […] and the moral struggle that it arrogates to humankind" (Amanat 2002:xiii). Some of the uprisings were headed by Zoroastrians, and some by descendants of Abu Muslim, an Iranian Muslim from Khurasan[31] who led a rebellion against the Umayyad in 758 CE and was perceived by some of his followers as a restorer of Mazdean [Zoroastrian] rule. He brought two groups together: the Iranian Khurasan army that was dissatisfied with the Umayyad, and those Muslims whose impression of the movement was that the house of Ali, Prophet Mohammad's son-in-law, would eventually reclaim its long-ignored divine right to authority. It was the Zoroastrian "messianic promise enunciated by Abu Muslim and embodied in the Abbasid Caliph" (Lindholm 2002:103) that mobilized the masses. Two centuries later, his revolt and appearance with the famous black banners entered into "Zoroastrian eschatological texts as an apocalyptic sign of the coming of *Saoshyant* [the Zoroastrian savior]" (Babayan 2002:82). This movement reflects the bitter feelings that had survived in Iran against the Arab invaders and their continuous rule. Thereafter, Patricia Crone writes,

> [A] new sequence of revolts started when Sunbadh rebelled at Rayy in response to Abu Muslim's death, repudiating Islam. In the west we soon hear of Khurrami risings in the Jibal, upper Mesopotamia, and Armenia, culminating in the revolt of Babak in Azerbaijan. In the east we hear of Khurrami risings in Jurjan and obscure activities by a certain Ishaq in Transoxania, culminating in the revolt of al-Muqannaʿ in Sogdia.
>
> (2012:27)

Almost all of these uprisings attempted to address cultural concerns by synthesizing Islamic and Zoroastrian beliefs and local customs. Thus, there remained a sharp distinction between them, on the one hand, and Zoroastrian and Islamic orthodoxy, on the other. Aptin Khanbaghi argues, "the uprisings played a major role in transforming the Iranians' religious identity" (2009:202). Although both the Muslim and Zoroastrian orthodox core harshly suppressed syncretism as heretical, these movements further weakened the Zoroastrian Church, which provided the incentive to join forces against the heterodox beliefes and movements. This helped an Islamization process that ultimately led to the emergence of Shi'i tradition.[32] The last major movement of Khurrami in the early ninth century was both anti-Islamic and detached from Zoroastrian religion. Its leader *Bābak*, executed in 838 CE, is still celebrated in his hometown in west Iran, an anniversary cracked down upon by the Islamic Republic.[33]

While Abu Muslim's movement failed to dismantle the Arab Caliphate's rule in Iran, the Abbasids' ensuing victory ushered in a marked decline in the influence of the Arab tribes in Khurasan.[34] For instance, under the Abbasids, there were officially only two classes of people: Muslims and non-Muslims. As the old invidious distinction between Arab Muslims and non-Arab Muslims became blurred, Iranian converts achieved (at least in theory) the same status as Arab Muslims; in contrast, all non-Muslims had to pay the religious poll-tax of *jaziyeh*. It is in this period that Zoroastrians converted to Islam in huge numbers, and by the end of the Abbasids in 1258 CE, many cities such as Merv and Nishapur had become overwhelmingly Muslim, while others not on the strategic road to the east, such as Isfahan and Kerman, although governed by Muslims, still contained large numbers of Zoroastrians, Jews, and others.[35]

In the early sixteenth century, an Iranian tribe mobilized the masses and founded the first entirely Iranian-Islamic dynasty of the Safavids (1502–1722). It secured its legitimacy to rule both on an Islamic basis and on the "traditional motifs of Iranian monarchical grandeur" (Lapidus 1988:240). Its founder, Shah Ismail, declared himself the savior, as articulated within the Shi'i tradition,[36] and *Shah*, the pre-Islamic Persian term for king. Reminiscent of the Sasanian grandeur, the manifestation of this blend is seen in the Safavids' 1666 CE capital city Isfahan with its 162 mosques, 48 colleges, 182 caravansaries, and 273 public baths.[37]

While in the Abbasid era Arab authority was fundamentally articulated through a genealogical link with the Prophet, Safavids claimed a direct link to the Shi'i Imams. This distinction, nonetheless, did not eliminate the Arabs

from the government, since the lack of Shi'i believers in Iran resulted in the importing of Shi'a scholars from Syria, Bahrain, Northeastern Arabia, and Iraq[38] who were gradually brought into the government as judges, administrators, and even as military commanders.[39] Henceforth these scholars were organized into a state-controlled bureaucracy and their power in the court intensified—the Sufi movement of the Safavids thus gradually moved towards the Shi'atization of Iran that was completed in the seventeenth century. This period witnessed "a wave of persecutions leading to forced conversion directed first against Armenian Christians, and then against Jews and Zoroastrians" (Moreen 1986:217). As Choksy observes, "[I]n 1658, mass expulsion of Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians from Esfahan's city center took place—on account of their presence being deemed detrimental to the orthodox beliefs, ritual purity, and day-to-day safety of Muslims" (2006a:138). Thus, "[a] highly pluralistic society was forcefully moved toward creation of a coherent Shi'a Twelver," even "Sufis were massacred, their sacred tombs as those of Sunnis were desecrated, other minorities also were forced to conversion to Shi'a Islam" (Lapidus 1988:243).[40]

It is as a result of such continuous harassments that "[r]eligion in the minds of minorities (and others) [in Iran] is intimately connected with past persecution" (Fischer 1973:ix). Ways in which Zoroastrians remember this period are versions of what Dr. Jahanian said at the 7th World Zoroastrian Congress in Houston, Texas in December 2000:

> Despite all the adversities, the population of the Zoroastrians at the turn of the 18th century was nearly one million. But the worst blow was delivered by the last Safavid king, Shah Sultan Hosein (1694–1722), a fanatic and superstitious man profoundly influenced by the clergy. Soon after his accession to the throne to popularize himself, he issued a decree that all the Zoroastrians should convert to Islam or face the consequences. Nearly all were slaughtered or coercively converted, few fled the blood bath and took refuge in Yazd and Kerman. By the French estimate a total of 80,000 Zoroastrians lost their lives, and the entire population of Isfahan's Gabrabad [Zoroastrian neighborhood] was massacred. The Zoroastrian sources estimate the number of victims at hundreds of thousands.[41]

He added that "[t]oday the people of Nain and Anar near Isfahan speak *Dari* but they are Moslems."[42] Dari, called *Gabri* by the Muslims, is a local dialect spoken, but almost never written, by Zoroastrians among themselves.[43] It

is "the most common language still spoken among Zoroastrians in Yazd […] a language unintelligible to Muslim Yazdis and thought to be closer to Middle Persian" (Bekhradnia 1991:123–124). Since it is "incomprehensible to speakers of standard Persian," Mary Boyce argues that it was a "linguistic barrier that Zoroastrians had raised in self-protection" (1979:178). The Safavids' increasing intolerance and forceful conversion of non-Shi'a communities to Islam, however, made this language an ineffective barrier. It is nonetheless a testimonial to a pervasive tradition of resistance in Zoroastrian history.

Choksy writes, "[I]t is unclear how significant the population decline actually was for Zoroastrians especially as their numbers were at least around 100,000 in the middle of the eighteenth century" (2006a:138). Later, during the Shi'i Qajar dynasty (1794–1925) when at "a nadir" (Ibid:141), they were considered unclean (*najes*), forced to build houses with lower walls, were not allowed to four-legged animals in the presence of a Muslim, yet they still had to pay poll-tax (*jaziyeh*), and sumptuary laws forced them to wear special insignia in public. In Kerman a location was designated for the "infidels" (*gabr-mahaleh*) wherein Zoroastrians lived outside the protective walls of the city. During the Afghan invasion of 1719–1724 CE Mahmud Khan Ghilzai massacred them and those living in villages for being non-Muslims.[44] Pogroms against Zoroastrians were rampant and "in response to persecution and segregation policies, the Zoroastrian community became closed, introverted and static" (Price 2005:111). Those who left Iran for the Indian subcontinent, mostly Bombay and Karachi, formed the second group of Zoroastrian migrants known as Iranis, as distinct from Parsis.

During this period the aforementioned Maneckji Limji Hataria, emissary of the Indian Parsis, appointed by the Persian Zoroastrian Amelioration Fund in Bombay, visited the Iranian community whose members were being persecuted by the Qajars—Parsi agents were subjects of the British Raj and hence were not governed by the Qajar regulations but by Iran's treaties with Britain.[45] Hataria reported his findings to the Parsi Panchayet as follows:

> Dear Sir: This noble group has suffered in the hands of cruel and evil people, so much that they are alien to knowledge and science. For them even black and white, and good and evil are equal. Their men have been forcefully doing menial works in the construction and as slaves received no payments. As some evil and immoral men have been looking after their women and daughters, this sector of the community stays in

> door during the daytime. Despite all the poverty, heavy taxes under the pretext of land, space, pastureland, inheritance and religious tax (Jizya) are imposed on them. The local rulers have been cruel to them and have plundered their possessions. They have forced the men to do the menial construction work for them. Vagrants have kidnapped their women and daughters, worse than all the community is disunited. (Hataria 1865)[46]

He continued, "Their only hope is for the future savior (Shah Bahram Varjavand) to come. Because of extreme misery, belief in the savior[47] is so strong that 35 years earlier when an astrologer forecasted the birth of the savior, many men left the town to search for him and were lost in the desert and never returned" (Ibid.). For Zoroastrians who were deep in the state of disarray, Hataria's visit was the cusp of an era. As a result of his assiduous work and correspondence with the Qajar King, and also due to pressure from the British Raj on behalf of prominent Parsis,[48] the religious poll-tax was eventually lifted in 1882 and Zoroastrian schools were built. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, his work resulted in the formation of the elected administrative Association and the Council of the mobeds.

Zoroastrian mobeds are traced through the male line within priestly families who have religious knowledge and the authority to officiate at religious ceremonies. After the Arab conquest, they suffered enormously, in particular in the 9th century following the mass conversion of their base to Islam. Mobeds turned to farming or trade, and were unable to discharge their religious roles. Bekhradnia (1992) writes that in 1891, 63 mobed families lived in Yazd but only 35 individuals served as officiants for the total population of 6,908 that lived in Yazd and its 23 outlying villages. Due to economic hardship the community was unable to pay for its officiations and mobeds were the poorest members of it. They found better opportunities among the Parsis of Bombay, where Iranian mobeds were considered more authentic; hence many migrated. Beset by years of hardship, they were also among the most illiterate—only 65 % of adult mobeds in Yazd were literate. Due to the importance of education as a way out of poverty, this condition however changed among their sons—58 % compared to 23 % of laymen.[49]

The Mobeds' Council, *Kankosh-e Mobedān*, was originally established in 1916 in Yazd. However, the emigration to Tehran of most of the 83 mobed families in search of better education and careers forced the Council to dissolve in 1944 and to reconvene in 1952 in Tehran. From the mid-1950s, the decline in number of practising mobeds changed the agnatic rule of male

descent and opened the Council up to all *dasturzādeh*, men or women who could claim paternal or even maternal descent from the families of mobeds. In addition, *mobedyars* are trained to discharge *all* the responsibilities of a mobed. During his fieldwork in 1971, Fischer counted about fifteen active priests in Iran (1973:66). In 1978, only five practising mobeds resided in Yazd and eight in Tehran, paid by the Anjuman. In 1991, there were three in Yazd, one in Isfahan and five in Tehran (Bekhradnia 1992:40). Table 1 contains the breakdown by city and gender of the number of mobeds and mobedyars as of 2013:

TABLE 1 Number of Mobeds and Mobedyars Breakdown by City and Gender[50]

Year 2013	**Mobeds**	**Mobedyar Male**	**Mobedyar Female**
Tehran	8 (1 full time)	11	4
Karaj	-	1	2
Yazd	2	21	1
Kerman	1	4	1
Shiraz	1	1	-
Isfahan	-	1	-
Ahvaz	1 uninitiated mobedborn	-	-

The decline in numbers of mobed families has not necessarily hampered the transmission of religious knowledge. The most important contributing factor to this continuity is the traditional role of the parents in religious education, a strategy adopted by minorities to keep religious tradition alive in the privacy of homes in which the role of mothers by far supersedes that of the fathers. Moreover, this recent priestly decline has been accompanied by the twentieth century opening of Zoroastrian schools that shared the burden of knowledge transmission with the parents and continued to be significant institutional additions in the maintenance of the community, yet another contribution of the Parsis of India—by the 1920s each of the 26 villages around Yazd had schools for Zoroastrian girls and boys paid for by the Parsis.[51]

In the last two decades of the Qajars, during the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1911, some Iranian intellectuals such as Hasan Taqizadeh, promoted a national discourse that was based on Iran's pre-Islamic era,

within which standards of progress and modernity were to be understood. There was a nascent movement to purge Arabic words from the Persian vocabulary, further entrenching the pre- and post-Islamic gap.[52] Thus, in the wake of the surge of national sentiment, Iranian nationalism became progressively interwoven with the ancient religion of Iran, such that during the secularist Pahlavi rule Zoroastrians were recognized as the last vestiges of the pre-Islamic Iranian religion and were officially elevated to become symbols of a new Iranian nationalism. Despite the positive changes, the Shiʿi monopolizing ambition continued to grow and shape the condition of religious minorities. Even though after the Constitutionalism Zoroastrians, along with the Christian and Jewish communities, earned representation in the Parliament, this constitution "institutionalized the second-class status of non-Jafari Shiʿates [who believe in twelve Imams, hence called Twelver] by prohibiting them from holding positions as judges or cabinet ministers" (Writer 1994:86).

It was only during the short-lived secular nationalism of the Pahlavi dynasty that Zoroastrians eventually gained a respite from a prolonged turbulent past. From 1925 to 1979, "the long-lived history of the Persian monarchy" was portrayed as "both more glorious and noble than the recent [Islamic] past" (Bekhradnia 1991:124). For instance, in order to buttress his rule and to undermine the authority of the Shiʿa clergy Reza Shah (1925–1941) regularly blamed Muslim religious institutions for the backwardness of a once-great civilization and stressed the superiority, ethnic and cultural inclusiveness, and continuity of Iran's pre-Islamic history and culture. He revived historical links to pre-Islamic Iran, "imagining" an authentic continuity with the past, thus creating an "official national" memory.[53] One way to establish this was to promote archaeological excavations to recapture the "splendour" of the Iranian past to advocate a nationalist agenda.[54] Reza Shah ordered the (re)construction of the memorials of many celebrated poets, including Hāfez, Khayyām (1048–1131), Saʿdi and Ferdowsi, transforming individual mortality into historical continuity. This provided spiritual competition for Islamic pilgrimage sites, similar phenomena according to Benedict Anderson would signal "not only the dawn of the age of nationalism but the dusk of religious modes of thought" (1983:11).

Critical to our discussin is that this secular national emphasis was accompanied by the elevation of Zoroastrian tradition to become the Iranian religious national symbol further to belittle the Islamic religious establishment as a relic of the Arab invasion.[55] As Fischer points out, part of this project that continued into the reign of Reza Shah's son Mohammad Reza

was the attempt to "elevate Zoroastrianism into a symbol of the Iranian genius which was able to withstand and absorb the Greek, Arab, Turk, and European incursions" (1973:xv).

> Glorification of Iran's pre-Islamic past for sociopolitical reasons by the state—including introduction into the official calendar, in 1925, of Zoroastrian names for the months—also raised the status of Zoroastrians in the eyes of many other Iranians by seeking to establish a bond between all confessional groups based on nationalism and history. As a consequence, Zoroastrians were promoted and elected to positions of authority within the state. (Choksy 2006a:155)

Thus, the ways in which the Zoroastrian religion is equated in the discourse of the community leaders with Iranian culture is the result of Zoroastian historical consciousness having been filtered through the Pahlavis' nationalist project. So the Pahlavi period is integral to the formation of conemporary Zoroastrian identity in Iran. Fariborz Shazadi recounts that "[i]n a short span of sixty years, the Zarthushtis began to excel in all walks of life spanning government, business, industry, including the arts and the sciences" (Choksy 2006a:132). Nonetheless, Shi'i Islam remained the state's official religion.

With the Islamic Republic, Shi'i ideology became the foundation of the state with a new political force, and the religious institution of *Velayat-e Faqih*—a concept inherited from Sheykh Fazl Allah Nuri, who was hanged during the Constitutional Revolution[56]—presided over the state. Even though the religious minorities whose names were mentioned in the Quran continued to be recognized in the Constitution, their treatment suffered significant changes. The founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1902–1989), was worried about the revival of pre-Islamic values, a revival he had observed during the Pahlavi era; he therefore prevented Zoroastrians from reaching high status. Regardless, Zoroastrians' *public* narration of their hardships as part of their discursive negotiations with the state always concluded by vindicating the Islamic Republic through statements such as "[n]ow we are free, and it would be unkind of us not to fulfill our religious duties to keep our tradition alive."

On another but related note, in post-conquest Iran pejorative and condescending terms such as *Ātash-parast* or fire-worshiper, *Majus*, and *Gabr* were popularly adopted in referring to Zoroastrians. *Majus* is a term originally used for priests of pre-Zoroastrian Persia (Eng., magi, magus). Et-

ymologically, Gabr is the Persian form of the Arabic *Kāfar*[57] or infidel. In the calling of a Zoroastrian *Gabrak* and his religion *Gabraki*, the addition of the humiliating suffix *-ak* increased the disdain of the term.[58] It is more significant that these derogatory terms entered the Persian literature of the Islamic period, almost entirely replacing any other names. For instance, in his celebrated *Vis and Râmin*, Fakhr al-Din Asad Gorgâni of the 11th century writes, "If a Gabr lights fire for hundred years [referring to the Zoroastrian ritual practice of lighting and revering fire in fire-temples], eventually the same fire [of Hell] burns him."[59] I address the Zoroastrian response to the fire-worship accusation in chapter 6. Nonetheless, one of the harshest references to Zoroastrians, along with Christians, is when they are characterized as "enemies of God" by Sa'di (1183–1284/1291), one of the major Persian classical writers, particularly known for his social thought, whose poem on the oneness of Mankind is even inscribed in the entrance to the *Hall of Nations* of the United Nations' New York building.[60] Sa'di's celebrated *The Rose Garden* (1258) begins with the following invocation, "O bountiful One, who from thy invisible treasury, Suppliest the Guebre and the Christian with food, How could'st thou disappoint thy friends, Whilst having regard for thy enemies?" (1258:2).[61] Even though more of a complaint against God, it is formulated at the expense of non-Muslims.

1.3 – A Continuous Struggle

Zoroastrians' suffering is part of a protracted history in the annals of the Iranian past, a history lost due to the devastating effects of repeated invasions of Persia and the destruction of Persian libraries. Even the recovered and recorded remains, in particular the religious texts and scripts, were destroyed during the Islamic periods. Ibn Battuta relays the story of a Sa'd ibn Abi Vaqqâs' inquiry into Caliph Omar ibn Khattâb regarding Iranians' books as booty, to which he replied, "Throw them all in water. If they are books of truth we have been blessed with a greater one [the Quran] and if they are of infidels God has made us needless of them—Ibn Battuta identified this event as the root cause for the loss of Iranian's science" (Cf. Rajabi 2001:383–384). Similar events occurred whenever orthodoxy reigned. For instance, in his *Tazkarat al-sho'arâ*, Dowlatshâh Samarqandi writes that Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi (reigned 998–1030) burned all the 114,000 scientific, philosophical, and astronomical books of the Rey library (Cf. Rajabi 2001:384). Regarding the loss of Iranian written histories, the following ob-

servation by Persian scholar Birouni, "one of the very greatest scientists of Islam, and, all considered, one of the greatest of all times" (Sarton 1948:707), is more directly related to my discussion:

> The reason we [Iranians] do not know our history is that Qatiba ibn Moslem Baheli killed writers and Zoroastrian religious teachers (*Hirbodān*) of Kharaz and burned all their books and writings (90 Hejri). Since that time Kharazmis remained illiterate and the only unifying elements in matters of history among them was memory. Through the passage of time discrepancies were forgotten and only what all were agreed upon survived. (Cf. Rajabi 2001:384)

In spite of a dearth of recorded historical accounts, two images continue to be critically significant to Iranians and, even more so, to Zoroastrians' living memory of the past: a romanticized pre-Islamic period and a dramatized post-Arab era. These images are most effectively mediated and expressed through the medium of poetry, as other artistic forms were not sanctioned under Islamic rule. Moreover, due to the relative ease of memorization and speed of dissemination, poems were generally better preserved than other texts. The most important and earliest of these literary works is the Persian classical Book of Kings, *Shāhnāme* of Ferdowsi. This national epic of Persian-speaking peoples, composed during the Ghaznavid dynasty in 1010 CE, is still performed in the oral traditions called *naqqāli*, and recited aloud from memory in Iranian coffee houses also among Zoroastrians.

Ferdowsi hoped, Kathryn Babayan reminds us, that the *Shāhnāme* would recall the particularities of Iranian past throughout time:

> In the *Shāhnāme*, the late tenth-century poet Ferdowsi crystallized an image of an Iranian past that lived on in the imaginations of those who came to embrace Persianate culture, from the rulers and courtiers of Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal courts, to the Turk or Iranian (Tajik) perfume seller who participated in the culture of storytelling in the coffee houses of larger cities and towns in central and eastern Islamdom. The *Shāhnāme* narrates Iranian myth history as a cosmic battle between the forces of good, embodied in Iran, and those of evil, personified by their Turanain (non-Iranian) enemies. (2002:xxix)

Shāhnāme's very last verse reads, "Henceforth, I cannot die for I live having broadcast the seeds of my verse" (Ibid:22). What is more closely related

to our discussion is that, regardless of the contradictory reports about Ferdowsi's religion, "the *Shāhnāme* continued to be associated in the Muslim era with Zoroastrians (Gabr) because it embodied Mazdean [Zoroastrian] ethics and cosmology" (Ibid). It is noteworthy that while, during the early years of the Islamic Revolution, copies of *Shāhnāme* were removed from bookshops and omitted from university curricula, Zoroastrians have annually celebrated a Ferdowsi day.

Themes of the Arab invasions have also regularly been expressed by contemporary poets. For instance, in an autobiographical ode, one of the greatest contemporary Persian poets Ahmad Shamlou (1925–2000) writes, "My first name [Ahmad] is Arabic, my tribal name [Shamlou] is Turkish, and my nickname [Bāmdād] is Persian. My tribal name is ashamed of history, and I do not like my first name." (2002:827–876). In another insightful poetic rendering of Iranians' shared struggle against the Arabs, Shamlou inveighs that "I was not born today from my mother. No, I have been through the ages of time. My closest memory is the memory of centuries. They slew us many times" (Ibid.:882–884). Recounting that this memory started when "the Arabs swindled me," he laments the brutality with which the Iranicization of Islam was stifled and the polarization of Iranians spiritualized:

> I prayed and I was massacred: They found me a *Rāfezi* [an unorthodox Islamic sect]. I prayed and I was massacred: They found me a *Qarmati* [another unorthodox Islamic sect]. Then they decided that we and our brothers should kill each other; and this was the shortest way to Heaven. Remember, and all that the massacre gave us was the worthless cover of our genitals. (Ibid)

In the end he concludes, "Remember the strange migration, from one alienation to another, so that the search for Faith would be our sole virtue. Remember, *our history was of restlessness. Not of belief. Not of hometown*."[62]

The following account further illustrates the anti-Arab sentiment and its lingering effects on the consciousness of Iranian posterity. In the 2009 contested Iranian presidential election, many bloggers, also on Twitter, speculated that the establishment's plainclothes vigilantes of Basij and revolutionary forces that mercilessly attacked supporters of the reformist candidates were Arabs, brought from Lebanon. Later, the victims of torture and sexual abuse claimed that they had heard some of the torturers converse in Arabic.

Moreover, support that the Islamic Republic offers the Shiʿa of Lebanon has bolstered accusations such as that the regime loves the Arabs, and abhors pre-Islamic Persian culture.

Thus, the pathological historical legacy of Iranian struggle, framed by Shamlou in terms of "a history of restlessness," is crystallized in moments of the Arab invasion—a pathology percolated and sustained in the Iranian consciousness through various sociocultural means. Within this general context, I am concerned with the lingering effects of the Arab invasion as manifested through Zoroastrian socio-discursive practices that inhabit their affects and sensibilities and form their imaginaries. Not to violate this "historical interdict," for instance, accepting new members into the Zoroastrian fold, if possible at all,[63] would be through an exclusion process that meant "non-conversion of Arabs" (Writer 1994:217).[64] This stance is at the extreme end of an exclusion/inclusion spectrum along which the rigid exclusion of the Arabs takes an amorphous and situational position toward the Iranian Shiʿa.

1.4 – Theoretical Framework

Before discussing my theoretical approach, let me address Janet Amighi's invaluable study of the Zoroastrian communities in Yazd and Kerman during 1972–1973. As my study does, she engages traditions developed in the face of perceived threats of either persecution or assimilation; she frames the formation of these traditions in terms of "developing symbols of resistance" (1990:334). Her model correlates the persistence measure of Zoroastrian membership with the integration level within the community, or the lack thereof. Accordingly, she finds an uneven and segmented persistence, linked to "long term patterns of selective social interaction and cultural syncretism with Moslems, high levels of internal stratification and segmentation, and a predominance of centrifugal forces within Zoroastrian communities" (1990:359). She argues that Zoroastrian resilience in the face of historical problems, particularly in the past one hundred years, has been achieved through interplay between centrifugal and centripetal forces. While the centrifugal forces of a poorly integrated socioreligious system "often drove Zoroastrians to the boundaries of the community" and thus "some Zoroastrians abandoned their ethnic affiliation […] centripetal forces such as kinship, occupational or institutional networks based on generalized reciprocity and trust relationships" helped those who were repelled by incom-

patibilities with Moslem society to re-engage with Zoroastrian affiliation (1990:359).

My study situates Zoroastrian aubaltern experience, which is produced outside the dominant power structure, within the larger social and longer historical abovementioned struggle of Iranians—problematics of Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāme* due to its Zoroastrian links and glorification of pre-Islamic Iran, the dislike of Shamlou due to his anti-Arab and anti-Islam sentiments, the alleged Arab involvements in the suppression of dissidents, and the Zoroastrian interdict against Arab conversion to Zoroastrian religion—all of these exhibit the continuity of a struggle with the legacy of the Arab invasion of seventh-century Iran. Thus, after fourteen hundred years the Arab 'other' has remained not just relevant, but central to the discursive dynamics of Iranian identity negotiations. Engaging these negotiations, I focus on Zoroastrian-specific semiotics of resistance, the socio-discursive conventions, tenors, forms, practices, and artifacts against the legacy of the Arab invasion that Zoroastrians perceive has been survived in Shi'i-saturated Iranianness. Through shifting messages of similarity with and distinction from the dominant Shi'a the discursive regularity of Zoroastrians' historical and cultural genealogy that I collected seeks to position them both as religious and cultural fathers of present Shi'i tradition and as its rival as well, fashioning a habitable niche in the hostile religious and cultural order of the Iranian public. As such, although Zoroastrians understand the development of Shi'i tradition in terms of Iranians' battle against the Arabs, they nonetheless adamantly maintain distinctiveness. The articulation of such complicated relationship vis-à-vis Shi'a through performatives that reconstruct and circulate historical narratives of entanglement and distinctiveness, embed the explicit, implicit, and abstract imaginaries of Zoroastrian identity.[65]

Anthropologists have long found ways in which history could be approached and understood in conjunction with ethnographic research (Ohnuki-Tierney 1990; Biersack 1991; Sahlins 1981, 1985; Comaroff and Comaroff 1992; Dirks 1996). Neil Whitehead articulates an ethnographic approach to history that affords room for performance analyses, a model in which textual sources could be used in conjunction with ethnographic study of historical consciousness. He defines histories as those "culturally constructed texts, visual and aural representations, verbal representations, verbal narratives, and oral and somatic performances that are the discrete tales that make specific histories," and historicities as "the cultural proclivities that lead to certain kinds of historical consciousness within which

such histories are meaningful" (2003:xi). For example, each period in which Zoroastrian prophet, priests, and kings have served is narrated within the sacred and non-sacred texts, but social roles and cultural meanings of that narration are not uniform—they reflect both the historical experience of Zoroastrians and the cultural significance of recalling the past.

Zoroastrian performatives that I recorded, by which priests, acolytes, and laities, recollected and recalled discrete tales of histories and awareness of the past, manifested a superior and transcendent Zoroastrian identity. Through myths, narratives, and images, in addition to finding a niche in Shi'i Iran they sought to find a respected place among the world's monotheistic and intellectual traditions as well. They integrated scholarly materials when these complemented their discourses of originality and relevance. For instance, a textual ambiguity surrounds the time and place of residence of Zoroaster, the eponymous founder of the religion. Exploiting this ambiguity, Zoroastrians validated their claim to a world religion by citing scholarship that suggests Zoroaster's period to be prior to Moses, and by scholarly literature by Mary Boyce who states that Parthian Jews adopted and developed their eschatology and theodicy while under the protection of a Zoroastrian state. For them, belief in the day of resurrection and the tradition that, eight centuries before Christ, Amos predicted the presence of three magi during the birth of the Messiah proved the influence of Zoroastrian religion over Christianity.[66]

Another tenor of Zoroastrian historicities corresponded with the discursive and structural impacts of universal ideas and ideals. They claimed a significant contribution to modern philosophy through *the Gāthās*, the oldest recorded religious text. The *Gāthās*' influence through diffusion to the West on Phithaghoreth, and on mystical and ethical traditions of the West, was evident to believers. They also progressively reevaluated and rearranged present-day religious rituals and beliefs to stress principles of universality, modernity, and equality, especially in terms of the scientific achievements of their religion, their exact calendric calculations, and their egalitarian gender relations, as we will see in Chapter 5.

Analyses of the ways in which the community approached and understood both universal and particular histories in order to construct its own historical knowledge help to explicate how cultural proclivities make histories meaningful. This historical consciousness should not however be understood in monolithic terms, as it would obscure individual variations and the discontinuity that existed between the specialized and popular religious knowledge. My three most important sources include the high mobed, a

mobedyar, and the community poetess, each with modes of address closely linked to their positions within the community and connections to the outside world, as well as to their personal penchants. Additionally, there existed a discontinuity of religious experience in a more institutionalized way. Priests and acolytes respectively possessed the requisite religious and intellectual capital—the former officiated at the rituals where they recited the sacred texts; the latter assisted and some of them were conversant in history and theology. It was the laities' practical knowledge that enabled socialization, produced the social capital, and helped members to realize that the priestly religion was theirs too. This kind of "division of ritual labour," to draw on Hefner's analysis, "effectively create[d] a parallel segregation of experience" that nonetheless was not absolute (1985:175).

Regardless of such internal diversity and discontinuity, I observed a level of uniformity, and in order to understand such consistency it is important to address how historical consciousness, the equivalent of Fredrik Barth's knowledge concept (2002a), transforms into that of the cultural. With the intention of distinguishing between the two, I refer to an exchange between Fredrik Barth and Clifford Geertz in which Geertz contends that Barth's view of knowledge and its role in human life "did not seem to distinguish it much from what anthropologists have been calling 'culture'" (2002a:1). In response, Barth clarifies that knowledge *provides* material for reflection and premises for action, but culture *includes* reflections and actions. Moreover, actions become knowledge for others only *after* the fact; thus knowledge's relationship with action, events, and social relations differs from that of culture. Also, knowledge is *distributed* in a population while culture makes us think in terms of *diffuse* sharing.

Influenced by Austin's performative acts (1962), Walter Ong's orality and technologizing words (1967), Jack Goody's dialogical flexibility of oral tradition (1968), Talal Asad's notion of disciplinary practices (1993), and Charles Hirschkind's study of the cultural organization of sensory experience and his discussion of absorptive listening (2001a, 2001b, 2006), I frame Zoroastrian socio-discursive acts, including all types of performance and also commentary by participants within the religious space of rituals, as the technical apparatus of religious conventions by which historical consciousness was mediated, manifested, and passed on to the next generation. Zoroastrian performatives resonated within Zoroastrians' historically disposed affects and sensibilities and those of the sensitive Iranians within reach who harboured nationalist sentiments and, in doing so, to use Hirschkind's model, "[t]hey create[d] the sensory conditions of an emergent ethical and political

lifeworld, with its specific patterns of behavior, sensibility, and practical reasoning" (2006:8). As such, to draw on Michael Warner's analysis of public discourse, these performatives were poetic. Not just because the religious space is self-organizing, "a kind of entity created by its own discourse, or even that this space of circulation is taken to be a social entity"; rather, that all discourse and performance addressed characterize the world in which they attempt to circulate, "projecting for that world a concrete and livable shape, and attempting to realize that world through address" (Warner 2002:81).

The creation of Zoroastrian world through address was partially sustained by the economy of oral knowledge. Oral transmission was the norm among the proto Indo-Iranian in Bronze Age Central Asia.[67] Due to the devastation of Zoroastrian libraries after Alexander's invasion of Iran, oral transmission of religious knowledge assumed a new prominence. Thus, "orality," to use Ong's term (1988), had been a part of the cultural practices when the Arabs invaded Iran. As Fischer points out, "orality is said to be more embedded in multiplex social relations, in reason that plays on rich analogies and similitudes, and in parables that weave a subjectivity disciplined by and concerned with the common good" (2004:7). In contrast to fixed written traditions, Jack Goody argues that the dialectical quality of oral traditions makes them more disposed to internal social influences (1968). In addition to the social embeddedness, flexibility, and adaptability as a result of the dialectical quality of oral traditions, "orality" as a variety of "noetic economy" (Ong 1988:70) renders knowledge more sustainable. Noetic economy refers to the variety of technologies, disciplines, and organizations involved in the production and reproduction of knowledge over time. Qualities such as aggressive rather than analytical, additive as opposed to subordinative, situational and not abstract, participatory rather than objectively distanced,[68] all heighten the salience, and hence memorability, of oral narratives. While these qualities are characteristics of the Zoroastrian performatives presented here, unlike Ong I do not situate orality in opposition to literacy. Rather, I consider it as the linguistic capital of oratory that contains figurative language, proverbs, metaphors, allegory, and allusion, enacted in the Zoroastrian circulative sphere, in particular within the oral narrations of myths, life histories, and tales.

Moreover, these Zoroastrian fragmented tales of histories were religiously configured, and as such brought together via authoritative oral and somatic performances of the sacred texts, visual and aural representations of calendric cycles, cosmological constructs, moral and ethical orientations,

and symbolic and numerical items. Speakers derived further authority from mobeds' traditional agnatic and genealogical ties and/or acolytes' modern education. As opposed to history that speaks from the position of a disembodied and disinterested subject, the linguistic markers (deixis) helped to situate these performatives in the text, to draw on Emile Benveniste's linguistic studies (1971); and the narration of histories through literary images rendered them a "chronotopic" representation of time and space, and thus concretized their representation, to use Mikhail Bakhtin's study of historical poetics (1981:251). The authoritative force of the performatives also stemmed from "the repetition or citation of a prior and authoritative set of practices," to apply Butler's analysis of performatives (1997:51). The discourses that cited Zoroastrians' ancestors, for instance, claimed the position of the original creator of Iranian culture for the contemporary community by invoking their own genealogical ties.

In addition to the authoritative power anchored in the past that we shall see in chapter 3, Zoroastrian performatives elicit a dialectical force from a continuous and contentious dialogue with the regnant Shiʿa in the present. The temporality of Zoroastrian collective religious space operated in a constant contradistinctive positioning to that of the Shiʿa, embedded in the calendric life to which the members were routinely exposed. To extend Marshall Sahlins' analyses of the heroic societies to Zoroastrians,[69] "the coherence of the members or subgroups is not so much due to their similarity (mechanical solidarity) or to their complementarily (organic solidarity) as to their common submission to the ruling power" (1985:45). Zoroastrians' affective dispositions were nonetheless cultivated in and with respect to a shared past—a disposition the contours of which were historically shaped and its edges effectively attenuated in a continuous juxtaposition of Zoroastrians' own religious space and ideology with those of the imposing Shiʿa—hence these performatives resonated within their sensorium.

There was yet another homogenizing source from which Zoroastrian performatives derived their authority. Detached from the past and the present, this one was concerned with cosmologies. Zoroastrian teleological theodicy and apocalyptical eschatology as articulated in the sacred histories delineate a principle of historical practice tantamount to Sahlins' "mythopraxis" (1985). These cosmic theologies afford a scheme of life-possibilities that ranges from the mythical creative interventions of the divinities to the glorious religious past and contemporary memory of a subaltern community that expects the saviour to come:

> The present years thought to be filled with evil, pollution, and suffering will, in established Zoroastrian belief, be followed by two millennia during which three male saviors will be born, one every thousand years, to purify the world. Finally, in the glorious year 11,973, the last savior, Saoshyant or Soshans, would resurrect the dead. Thereafter, Ahura Mazda will descend to earth with the other divinities, and the last savior will separate the righteousness human souls from the evil ones. Each sinner, having already suffered after death, will be purified of his or her transgressions and impurities by means of an ordeal involving molten metal. Immortality of body and soul supposedly will be granted to all humans. Ahura Mazda, the beneficent immortals, and other divine beings will then annihilate all the demons and demonesses. Angra Mainyu himself will be forced to scuttle back into hell. Finally, hell will be sealed shut with molten metal, safeguarding the spiritual and material worlds from evil forever—or so Zoroastrians believe. Once the separation of evil from good has been accomplished, Ahura Mazda would renovate the universe in the religious year 12,000. Human history will end, eternity would recommence in absolute perfection, and humanity should begin dwelling in happiness upon a refurbished earth according to Zoroastrian eschatological doctrine. (Bundahishn 34:1–32; Zand i Wahman Yasn 9:1–32) (Choksy 2002:21)

In this eschatology, "[i]f in every age each individual fulfilled her or his particular role within a case of human characters, if she or he fought for truth and conquered lies, thought good thoughts, spoke good words, and performed good deeds, the world would gradually regain its original purity" (Babayan 2002:35). Accordingly, Zoroastrian historicities are informed by a sacred history that engages divine action through human agents. Passing through a series of epochs, this history sequentially changes in content from the archangels to the human, from the abstract and universal to the concrete and individual.[70] The calendric rituals that I address in chapter 3 embody this sacred history, a tradition of knowledge that sustains a vision of Man and Cosmos in Zoroastrian theology.

Thus, Zoroastrian performatives that I encountered derived their force and authority from a variety of sources and through various means: invocation of a glorious past, citation of religious texts, embeddedness in a sacred history, priestly genealogical lineages, academic and devotional standing, opposition to the dominant Shiʿa, and adaptation to the performatives of modern rational-critical discourse. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's *The Sto-*

ryteller (1969) and his notion of a "naïve relationship" between speaker and listener, Hirschkind suggests a necessary "subordination to the authority of the storyteller and thus, in some sense, a heeding to the story itself" (2006:27). I argue that the accumulated authority of the Zoroastrian performatives afforded the requisite condition for what Hirschkind frames as "effective audition, an act that enables the integration of the narrative into the listener's own experience" (2006:27). These performatives accordingly foregrounded the same affective dynamics that underlay the distinctive Zoroastrian tradition in a hegemonic Shi'i context, thus embodying believers' prediscursive sensibilities. These prediscursive modes of appraisal entailed deep emotional connections to Zoroaster and his teachings, and also towards Iran and the pre-Islamic grandeur of Iranian/Zoroastrian culture. They involved a sense of precedence, preeminence, and authenticity and a ubiquitous sense of distinction from and priority to Shi'i Islam, accompanied by the resentment of the Arabs.

Through reiteration and the citational power of the past, Zoroastrian performative utterances that resonated with the community's evaluative dispositions acquired an authoritative agency in the present. The invocation of specific spaciotemporalities transformed the socio-discursive acts from the mundane of the present to evocation of the authoritative statements of the tradition. This summoning of spatial ties and temporal relations afforded Zoroastrian performatives the power to affect and invent realities of the members' lifeworld to position them as the original and authentic Iranians. This is to say that these performatives, mostly addressed by Zoroastrians to Zoroastrians, specified "in advance, in countless highly condensed ways, the lifeworld of its circulation" (Warner 2002b:81–82).

Zoroastrian poiesis and phronesis—the adaptation of the past to the present and creation of the present with respect to the past—constituted the cultures of histories that objectified Zoroastrians' past, appropriated and made specific changes meaningful, and constituted their contemporary identity and the identity of other subjects in its reach. Zoroastrian historical consciousness that imagined them as the origin of Iranian culture, and the current substitutes and transmitters of the past via the present to the future of Iran, to extend Lambeck's study of historicity, suffused and emerged "from production and practice, rather than simply that objectified knowledge of the past" (2002:17). The line of argument in the notion of historicity that I pursue is concerned less with how the past mediated new events, than with the articulating modes of the past with the present that shaped the Zoroastrian imageries and imaginaries. As such, this is an "ethnography of

[Zoroastrian] historical imagination,"[71] an "imagined continuity"[72] that creates the Zoroastrian "imagined community" (Lambek 2002:13). It explores realities of a world invented through the effects of speech genres, idioms, citational fields, and lexicons that are embodied in historical narrations, literary parables, and edifying addresses, and also in auditions and recitals of the sacred texts, visual spectacles and mise-en-scène of ceremonies, rituals, and exhibitions. These were transformed into cultural consciousness as circulated Zoroastrian religiously-facilitated spaces of collective discipline, inhabited sociocultural imaginaries, and cultivated religious sensibilities.

CHAPTER 2

The Preterrain of Fieldwork in Iran

2.1 – The Preterrain

Mohammad Shahbazi notes that due to the late Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's (reign 1941–1979) emphasis on the modern sciences and technology, the social sciences were ignored, which "prepared the ground for the general notion among the public that educated people, especially social scientists, opposed the government and were subversive and untrustworthy" (2004:595). Framed in terms of a modernizing demand, at the core of the Shah's policy was intolerance of criticism of the state by social scientists. An example of official intolerance is the experience of Sekandar Amanolahi, a western-educated anthropologist based in Iran, whose work that documented the government's failure to improve the Qashqâ'i tribes' lives was censored before the Revolution (2004:621). My conversation with a Zoroastrian informant exhibits what could be characterized as the trickle-down impact of the state's negative attitude to the Iranian education system: "[i]n schools, we have to memorize subjects without comprehension and make it our goal to become physicians; we don't know why not sociologists."

Although one might think that enemies of the Shah's regime would appreciate the social sciences, suspicion of social scientists continued into the Islamic Republic. Most recently, Ayatollah Khamenei blamed the expansion of the social sciences in universities for the 2009 protests against the alleged mass electoral fraud in the presidential elections. He argued that this expansion was fed by the imported materialist theories that perceive the human as an animal without responsibilities. "We do not have enough experts, thus have failed to indigenize this western knowledge," he added.[73] Consequently, he asked for an overhaul, a complete review of the programmes, which immediately started in universities. This recent attempt shows the failure of a much earlier agenda to "Islamize" universities: For a period of two years immediately after the Revolution, universities were shut down

under the slogan of Cultural Revolution; programmes were reassessed, and "Islamized."

2.1.1 – *My Fieldwork in Iran*

In summer 2004, after ten years away, I returned to Iran for two months. As a Baha'i who had illegally left Iran in 1994 and was now a U.S. citizen, I was able to obtain an Iranian passport only due to the changes brought about during the presidency of reformist Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005). I visited Tehran University, but despite all my endeavours I was able to meet with only one faculty member in the anthropology department and also with an enthusiastic young official in the Cultural Heritage Centre. Under the assumption, rather the illusion, of positive changes and freedom that the youth was being offered, I flew confidently to Orumieh in western Iran, planning to hitchhike for the rest of my trip to the Kurdistan region and visit several Sufi lodges (*khānqāh*) on my way. In my mind, this perambulation, which had an element of randomness in it, was the ideal way of finding the field site. Soon I learned that fieldwork should be approached as an adjustable method based on the preterrain, which James Clifford defines as "all those places you have to go through and be in relation with just to get to your village or to that place of work you will call your field" (1992:100).

When I first became familiar with ethnographic methods, I found them particularly attractive because of the parallel connections I could draw between these and the principal practice of Persian mysticism. I had become familiar with ideas such as purity of mind and heart as necessary conditions for a first-hand encounter with Reality. My personal take on fieldwork epistemological soundness and philosophical underpinning had convinced me that, like a mystic wayfarer on a spiritual path, a fieldworker had to be *immersed* in the culture of study (Malinowski 1922:1–25; Geertz 1988:73–101). More related to the process of finding the field site, I reviewed, over and over again, the following edifying verse by Sheikh Farid al-Din Attār (1145–1221) one of the most influential Iranian mystical theoreticians:[74] "You step in the path and ask naught; the path itself tells you how to traverse." As I understood this, unyielding decision and genuine intention were necessary precondition to step in the path. From the moment I entered the University of Wisconsin-Madison graduate program in anthropology until I transferred to Boston University, I was hoping to be able to undertake such a fieldwork project. As my knowledge of, and attraction towards, Per-

sian mysticism informed my ideal ethnographic method, I also decided to focus my field site on a Sufi group.

The immediate hurdle hindering the fulfillment of my ideal method emerged when I was arrested during the first few hours of my arrival in Orumieh. I was interrogated at the Ministry of Intelligence and Security from noon until the evening; I answered truthfully all their concerns about my trip to the area, my religion, and family, why ten years earlier I had left Iran illegally and my consequent life in Pakistan and Austria as an asylum seeker. When the last of the four interrogators, the highest ranking one, questioned me, I was put in a corner, facing the wall so as not to look at him. He told me, "You are lucky that *we* arrested you, who knows what could have happened to you had you continued on going to Kurdistan." So, after all, it was a blessing in disguise; as we couch it in Persian, "[t]he enemy becomes the source of Good, if God willeth." After this scary event, I modified my ideal field search method, and instead of wandering round in search of a mystic group, I decided to identify a community first and go directly to it, which I attempted during the next summer.

In addition to the domestic preterrain of the social sciences, there is an international politics that shapes the possibility of fieldwork in Iran. Upon returning to Boston, I formulated my proposal and received funding from the Fulbright-Hays.[75] The release of my funds however was contingent upon permission from the U.S. Department of Treasury. After six months of correspondence, finally involving the Boston University legal team, on 31 October 2006, I was informed that the Department of Treasury had issued a permission letter for my work. The letter, nevertheless, prohibited me from taking my laptop to Iran, stating that "[t]he exportation to and importation from Iran of a laptop computer are prohibited," but that my "other personal effects" were authorized "by general license."[76] Furthermore, I had planned to share my findings with Tehran University and the Cultural Heritage Centre in Iran. Since the Department categorized these institutions as "agencies of Iranian government," citing "the Iranian Transactions Regulations, 31 C.F.R. Part 560," it did not approve this academic exchange. I was also informed that after the issue of this "authorization" by the Treasury Department, the Department of State raised "no objection" regarding the legality of conducting fieldwork in Iran.

I was lucky that Fulbright-Hays did not ask for a research permit from the host country. The Iranian government requires that researchers present their projects and apply for permits. But for a resident, more specifically the holder of an Iranian passport, this was not a major practical obstacle. For

a foreigner, however, acquiring a long-term fieldwork permit is the main problem. That is why little long-term fieldwork has taken place in Iran. Among foreigners themselves the challenge of obtaining the permit varies. For instance, born in India, raised in Sri Lanka, and now a U.S. citizen, Jamsheed Choksy offers a unique case. He told me that the Iranian government had never asked him to obtain a permit, "so long as I worked on Zardoshtis, Achemenians, Sasanians, Muslim dynasties and not on the present." Yuko Suzuki faced many challenges but eventually obtained permission for long-term fieldwork (2004). Beyond the general difficulties foreigners face, her experience as a Japanese citizen shows that Asians receive more cooperation than westerners like Mary Hegland who was granted only a two-week permit (2004).

Regarding challenges of anthropological research in Iran, Amanolahi refers to the "lack of international exchanges that would facilitate keeping in touch with colleagues and international developments" in the field (2004:621). He blames both the Iranian government that makes it difficult for the foreign anthropologists to come to Iran as well as the American government that does not allow Iranian scholars to travel to the United States to participate in the wider academic community, a limitation that spills across its borders. For example, during the 2008 International Society for Iranian Studies biennial conference in Toronto many Iranian scholars were denied visas. Addressing these hurdles, Shahnaz Nadjmabadi and the aforementioned Shahbazi call for collaboration between foreign and Iranian anthropologists. As Nadjmabadi puts it, this is necessary in order to make a viable academic community and for Iranians to become familiar with new methods and theories and begin the huge amount of fieldwork that needs to be done (2004). This problem is also created by the Islamic Republic. In a gathering in Tehran where several students of Persian language and history from Germany, Venezuela, and Switzerland, as well as some Iranian documentary filmmakers and artists were gathered, I was fascinated by the visceral reactions of the foreign guests when late into the night the doorbell rang. One rushed to the computer to turned down the music, another one hid the alcoholic drinks, and all the girls put on their headscarves.

I eventually flew to Tehran on 10 November 2006, and to the town of Gahwāreh soon afterwards, to start my fieldwork with the Kurdish Ahl-e Haqq that I was put in touch with. Everything was going well until two months into my fieldwork when I left Gahwāreh for Tehran to fetch the rest of my belongings. Upon my return, in a phone conversation with my host,

to my surprise he told me to visit the Ahl-e Haqq religious leader before returning to Gahwāreh and to ask his permission for my research. But I had already obtained his permission and my host knew it, which is how I had been able to rent a place there in the first place, as the followers did his biding. On my way to Gahwāreh, I went to Kermanshah, a couple of hours distant from Gahwāreh, and met the religious leader in his home. He told me that for the fear of the new government people would not cooperate. Also, he said that soon I would be identified by the Secret Service and that they would stop my research. In light of this, he also told me to stop my fieldwork. I knew this was the end of it. I went to Gahwāreh, surrendered my lease, paid a penalty, gave away some of my belongings, and returned to Tehran.

2.1.1.1 – Choices and Challenges of Working with Zoroastrians

After ceasing to conduct fieldwork with the Ahl-e Haqq, I further modified my methods and avoided politically charged cultural groups in small towns. As a member of the Baha'i community myself, I knew that I could conduct fieldwork among the Baha'is, but this was not my ideal choice for two reasons. One was that publishing on this persecuted religious minority in Iran would have left them even more susceptible to repression. As a last resort nonetheless I met with two of the seven Baha'i leaders, and they sanctioned my work. It is worth noting that these seven were arrested the same year and as of August 2014 they are still imprisoned. The other concern that I had was academic, going back to Bronislow Malinowski's (1922) continued disciplinary influence on anthropology. He famously outlined that in order to gain the most complete understanding of "the native's point of view," fieldworkers must emphasize their role as participants. The immediate supposition of Malinowski's statement is that works of "native" or "indigenous" anthropologists are by default different from those of "regular" anthropologists. While the latter groups study "Others," the former "are believed to write about their own cultures from a position of intimate affinity" (Narayan 1993:671). Ignoring education, gender, religion, and life experience in general, the idea that "nativity" affords privileges assumes, moreover, the homogeneity of an entire cultural group, hence works of "native" anthropologists are imagined to have an unproblematic and authentic insider status. A logical extension of this assumption is to devalue the "native's" works, not just due to the assumed *easy* access, but rather due to the familiarity that causes the researcher to take for granted and omit valuable nuances of the field. This disciplinary assumption that equates nativity with insider could easily be extended to my fieldwork even among Zoroastrians.

After spending some time assessing my options, I decided to work with the Tehrani Zoroastrian community. To start with, I visited one of their establishments and participated in some public gatherings. The first encounter was in Iraj Hall, one of the two Zoroastrian gathering places in the Zoroastrian Hill (*Ku-ye Zartoshtiyân*) adjacent to the community's fire-temple. It was decorated for a wedding ceremony. There I gathered some information from a man and a woman who were in their mid-sixties; the woman spoke with a *Yazdi* accent. They immediately recognized that I did not belong there; she asked, "Where are you from, here or there (West)?" I replied, "I am a student of anthropology in America." "Why have you left such a nice place and come here?" she inquired. "People like me belong to *nowhere*, but I grew up *here*," I answered. Long before, during my first trip to Iran after being away for ten years, I had purchased a *faravahar* necklace that I have worn since then. She noticed it and asked, rhetorically, "Are you a Zoroastrian? Why are you wearing the faravahar?" The man interposed, "He is *interested*." I replied, "Many Iranians wear the faravahar nowadays; it has become a symbol of Iranianness."

FIGURE 1 Faravahar

In Zoroastrian modern theological interpretation, the faravahar represents an effulgence of the light of Ahura Mazda that is implanted in every person. The faravahar's symbolic representation encodes Zoroastrian cosmology and teachings. It is in the form of an open-winged bird with the head of an Achaemenid (Persian Empire, 550–330 B.C.E) person. Corresponding to the Zoroastrian cosmology of a constant battle between good and bad, a ring divides the upper body, which stands for the former, from the lower limbs,

depicting the latter. As I gathered, the ring itself corresponds to a continuous notion of time, without a beginning or an end. The figure's right hand leads forward, meaning there is only one path: that of progress; and his left hand holds the ring of covenant with the triad adage of good thoughts, good words, and good deeds. The adage itself is manifested in the wings, divided into three parts. The tail represents the opposite, a triad of bad thoughts, bad words, and bad deeds.

Like many other pre-Islamic Iranian symbols that are now fashionable, the faravahar could be found everywhere in Iran in forms including pendants, paintings, and decorative materials. Although these images may be divested of their Zoroastrian links and whittled down to a secular national object for many, and although Zoroastrians criticize this "fashionization" of religious symbols,[77] the Zoroastrian religion has nevertheless been shown in a positive light through its connections to these symbols. As the scenery of Iranian nationalism is increasingly permeated with images linked to the Zoroastrian tradition—including celebrations of *Sadeh*, *Mehregān*, and *Nowruz* that I discuss in the next chapter—Zoroastrians acquire new forms of visibility. Their own efforts to highlight their past and its contribution to the Iranian present have also bolstered this new-found visibility. Many Iranians, in particular the young, are aware of the connections. I was surprised when the thirty-year-old son of my Ahl-e Haqq host became excited at seeing my necklace, showed me a nicely framed faravahar in their home, and expressed the Ahl-e Haqq's deep deference for Zoroaster. As we shall see further in the last chapter, when Zoroastrian tradition is enacted in a charged political context, images of the past do not just become a source of pride for the followers, but also penetrate Iranian national imaginaries.[78] Notwithstanding, although my necklace represented more than a general statement of nationalism, it never gave me insider status. My presence in the Zoroastrian space and my expressed desire to do a study of their tradition provided the exegetical condition for it to be interpreted at best as a declaration of *interest*.

I was hoping to stay for the wedding ceremony that day and explained my research project, but they said that I needed an invitation. It was justified; I totally understood that attending a wedding without an invitation is problematic. Now, however, I understand this exclusion not merely as a matter of cultural propriety. Like other minorities in Iran, Zoroastrians are exclusive, in particular when the private sphere is at stake. This exclusivity was demonstrated at all levels, by priests as well by the laities. My effort to access private gatherings was an academic urge for more in-depth fieldwork. However, I

soon learned that there was no lack of rituals and ceremonies which I could attend. A great number of these were based in the Zoroastrian calendar, which outlines a ritualized and ceremonial tradition, and others were occasional gatherings, both of which I address fully in the next chapter. However, another reason for the increase in the number and importance of these gatherings was a direct result of minorities' condition in post-revolutionary Iran. As Bekhradnia points out, "There are far fewer social gatherings in private homes, explained partly by the expense and difficulty of purchasing good quality food, meeting in the temple on socially neutral ground is convenient" (1991:130). She also refers to "increase in attendance at temples to celebrate the various festivals and holy days: In Iran this can be understood in terms of a communal desire to increase the opportunities for social interaction and solidarity within a community of like-minded people as well as a manifestation of religious persuasion" (Ibid)—it is in one of these public rituals, discussed in the following chapter, that I return to the discussion of Zoroastrian exclusivity. Therefore, after the revolution public rituals, mostly held in the complex premises of the fire-temple or other religious buildings temporarily transformed into places of collective discipline, have emerged as the privileged social medium for passing on Zoroastrian religious knowledge.

Here I provide several examples of my ethnographic encounters throughout which I had to further modify my method. This is (1) further to outline the preterrain of this ethnography, (2) to show how my academic training had made me obsessed with accessing the private sphere, (3) to make a point that being a persecuted minority helped me to identify with and to respect and appreciate Zoroastrians' exclusivity, (4) but, most importantly, I outline this in order to demonstrate how I positioned myself and the kind of data I was able to access. At the beginning, in a phone conversation with my initial Zoroastrian contact, he gave me the address of the Zoroastrian Hill (*Ku-ye Zartoshtiyân*) and also of a Zoroastrian bookshop. When I told him about my desire to observe religious rituals and ceremonies, he told me that rituals were organized only for families to supervise their children so they would not waste time on the streets. He also said, "Ceremonies are very laic nowadays, and religious ordinances are not much observed." He also told me that the youth were totally disinterested in religious affairs—as we shall see in chapter 6, steps are being taken to change this new generation's disregard—and that their parents listened to the B.B.C. Persian Service and Voice of America, waiting for the regime to change. After several phone conversations, when I

requested a meeting with him, he declined and said that we could talk over the phone, saving time in traffic. He promised to look into the possibility of putting me in touch with a mobed who held a Ph.D. in Theology from Tehran University and another *farhikhteh* (lit., an educated or a cultured person) who was knowledgeable about details of the ceremonies and meanings of the symbols. I followed up, but none of these promises materialized. After several months he and his family of four migrated to the U.S.

On 28 January 2007, in order to acquire a research permit from the Zoroastrian Association, I met with a Zoroastrian authority, an active organizer of the community—it was here that I first noticed distinct Zoroastrian greetings, such as *ruz khosh* (good day), that differ from the Muslims' *salâm*. He told me that I would have access to public and semi-public gatherings, but not to private homes. He downplayed the importance of rituals, and said that Zoroaster believed that Iran was a vast country and rituals were matters of local customs. Soon however I discovered that Zoroastrian tradition is in fact highly ritualized.

This time, through a friend of a friend who had a notary's office (*mahzar*) round the corner from the Zoroastrian Hill that offered services to Zoroastrians, I managed to meet with the Chair of the Zoroastrian Association on 8 March 2007. We spent about an hour in the Association's building, which was a busy place. Referring to the amount of work they did, he told me that "the Association should be elevated to a ministry (*vezârat-khâneh*) by the state and all the people that worked there voluntarily should get paid by the government." He showed interest in my project and promised that "in the fire-temple (*ātashkadeh*) and other public places, we can arrange so you can observe." When I asked if he could help me attend private ceremonies, he said, "We do not have access to what happens in people's homes and some people would not like to have a stranger (*qaribeh*) in their ceremonies and our pilgrimages are tightly controlled by the government."

We walked from the office to the fire-temple which was located at the centre of this Zoroastrian block. He introduced me to the mobed who was in charge of the fire-temple, who in turn, as a customary expression of hospitality, told me, "We are at your service; whatever we can do [we won't hesitate]." The gesture of hospitality was flawless: he gave me three phone numbers, those of the temple, his home, and his mobile phone, and received mine "to keep me informed." He asked the Chair if I had permission to film. I said I had no intention of doing so, but might take some photos. He reacted, "I just asked so if you do it and people object to it, I tell them

you are permitted by the Association." I was ecstatic; it could not be better than this. He basically lived in the fire-temple and was well informed about what was going on in the community. When I contacted him after a couple of days, he said that there were no programmes to attend. When I asked about future events, he replied, "Who knows?" His answer was the same the next several times; he did not even mention the public ceremonies that I had obtained information about through the bulletin boards placed in various Zoroastrian establishments.

In another attempt to access private spheres, through a friend who knew a Baha'i family from a Zoroastrian background, I was put in touch with another mobed, one of the main ritual officiants. Talking to him, I expressed my desire to attend private events in addition to the public ones. With hesitation and consternation he invited me to the House of Narges, another Zoroastrian centre. In the ceremony, he introduced me to others as "[o]ne of my very best friends." I phoned him at least once a week, but the answer was always a variation of "[y]ou called late"; "[y]ou should have called earlier"; "[w]e had several programmes, but they are all over"; "I did not have your number to call you." Once he said, "I had several programmes, but you did not call … I had some wedding ceremonies I wanted you to see." I asked his permission to call him more often. "It would be fine," he replied, "but I won't be having any programmes scheduled for the next two months." Then, referring to the unpredictability of his job, he added, "It is like a business (*kâsebi*)." I asked, "So, if I call you tomorrow something might unexpectedly come up?" He answered, "I don't think so; if there would be a ceremony they request my services a couple of months in advance." During the second part of my fieldwork, when I called him on 18 January 2008, he sounded excited at hearing my voice. Knowing my work, he said that he would not have any programmes until 9 February. I asked if I could participate then. He apologized and said that it was a small one, at a home. Soon I learned that, as with Agnes Loeffler's experience in Iran, even though I am an Iranian, my identity was "double edged," since "at all times and in all situations I was at once welcome and suspect, a source of pride and danger, someone to seek out and to avoid" (2004:642).

As I was pushing for access to private spheres, a friend introduced me to a Muslim eye doctor. He in turn wrote me an introduction letter to take to a Zoroastrian eye specialist, who turned out to be the head of the Mobeds' Council (henceforth, the high mobed). I gave the sealed envelope to his secretary and after calling him several times, I finally arranged a conversation. He welcomed my research, asked about my own religion, and

in the end said that as far as attending private ceremonies was concerned he could not be of any help.

While there were many other similar instances, I would like to end this section with the most revealing story when I tried to establish another line through a Zoroastrian uncle of my childhood friend's wife. The uncle immediately asked me to provide a letter from my university so he could "persuade the mobeds to cooperate." In two weeks my friend told me that the uncle had complained that since I had not followed up I did not have an important project. The truth of the matter was that as soon as my letter was ready—I received it from Boston University Anthropology Department only two days after he demanded it—I had called him several times but my calls never went through, and once it sounded as if he had hung up the phone. After this conversation with my friend, I called again. He immediately recognized my voice and sounded as if he was expecting my call. He asked me to call him the next day to make an appointment then. When I called, a man who introduced himself as "his driver" told me that "[h]e is in the garrison (*pâdegân*) but will return your call." Since he did not, I called him in the afternoon, but the phone was hung up. The day after I called, the "driver" answered again and told me the uncle was in the garrison. When I shared the story with my friend, he said *they are* like that. The uncle had asked my friend, "Why are you looking for trouble?," to which my friend had responded, "If you call it a trouble, please do not bother, but I will do much more for a friend." Then the uncle had replied, "Well, we do help as well." From the rest of their conversation, my friend had gathered that the uncle was afraid that I was a spy on behalf of the state (Iran) with ulterior motives.

The last time that I called and the "driver" told me that the uncle was in garrison I pressed my demand further and asked, "Where is this garrison? Can I come and visit him there?" He replied, "This is the garrison of the *Sepâh-e Pâsdârân* [The Islamic Republic Revolutionary Guard]." To his surprise, I asked the address so that I could visit him there, but he refused to give it to me. Later I learned that the uncle had told my friend, "Your friend called several times; either I gave the phone to some friends or *pichundamesh* myself," which is a slang word that in this context means *getting rid of someone*.[79]

Most of the scholars who have done fieldwork with Iranian Zoroastrians are foreigners and did it before the Revolution. The famous Orientalist Mary Boyce spent a year in the village of Sharif-Abad of Yazd in 1963–1964. Anthropologist Michael Fischer did his Ph.D. dissertation fieldwork in Yazd in

1970–1971. Similarly, Janet Amighi, who was mentioned earlier, did hers in Yazd and Kerman in 1972–1973. After reading my work, she told me that she "had easier access as the wife of a Zoroastrian in Iran and an Iranian citizen [herself] through marriage." They enjoyed great access to individuals and to ceremonies, producing rich ethnographies. Jamsheed Choksy—born in India as a Zoroastrian, raised in Sri Lanka, and now a U.S. citizen—told me that he has "the aura of being an 'ancient Iranian,' and a foreign scholar of ancient Iran and of Zoroastrians." "So the Zoroastrians accept me and I can go into any of their ceremonies; also the Iranian government tolerates me even though I criticize them, and Muslim Iranians, Jewish Iranians, and Baha'i Iranians are delighted to show me their rites and Iranian national sites."

Reinhold Loeffler's fieldwork in Iran convinced him that "Iranians frequently take foreigners to be spies" (2004:589). The distrust of foreigners is not limited to the perception of espionage. In a commemorative ceremony (*porseh*), the community's parliamentary representative (henceforth, the mobedyar) recalled a memory conveying that "foreigners have always come to Iran and stolen our cultural heritage." The following story had reached him via someone who had heard it from the owner of a caravanserai in the Zein-Abad village on the outskirts of Yazd, going back about a hundred years.

> In front of the caravanserai there was a sacred two-storey building where all the three villages of *Zein-Abad*, *Mobarake* and *Cham* came for pilgrimage and to light candles. Two foreigners with their horses came and stayed in the caravanserai. They rested during the day and in the night would leave with their torches. Once they asked the caravanserai owner to go to the city and buy some fruit, meat, and other necessities for them, as they said they would have guests. The walking distance was about three to four hours from the village to the city of Yazd. When the owner returned, they were gone. In the morning people gathered in front of the sacred building and were angry as the foreigners had moved the main stone and removed whatever was hidden under it. It was customary in the past to hide valuables in such places. These two knew the secret and had done their research and had succeeded in stealing whatever was there.

As my experience shows, this distrustful belief that foreign scholars are spies or cultural thieves does not mean that Iranian researchers are to be trusted. Nadjmabadi, who is also an Iranian anthropologist, uses the term "conceiveability" to capture her experience regarding the dichotomy of a native and

foreign researcher. She states that Iranians worry that foreigners may disappear without a trace as opposed to the native who always is traceable. She also states, "The native anthropologist inevitably will be associated with government authorities," and concludes that "even for a native anthropologist, fieldwork does not necessarily imply being 'at home' " (2004:604). Her conclusion is based on work in rural areas, where, as she says, "people are guided by experiences they have had with government officials coming to rural areas" (2004:604).

Whereas officially I had full access to public and semi-private gatherings, the semiotics of Zoroastrian resistance to outsiders occasionally surfaced even in these ceremonies. For instance, when I attended celebrations of Zoroaster birth and rise to prophethood, which in fact required the Association's permission to attend, a woman angrily inquired, "Are you a Muslim?" I responded, "I have permission to be here." She retorted, "Why? Do you want to destroy us?" Perfunctorily, as if comforting in a belief that Zoroastrians are protected and could not be destroyed by people like me, she pointed to Zoroaster's large framed portrayal and said, "He is the Super Human (*abar-mard*)." Zoroastrians' exclusivity is a characteristic that the community members themselves acknowledge. My informant in the fire-temple told me that, "as you will come to notice, we only feel comfortable around Zoroastrians and do not like to bring others in." On another occasion she told me, "The media and researchers attend all of our ceremonies and the community is unhappy with it." She added, "Thus, you might experience some resistance to your research." In a conversation with a Kermani Zoroastrian, I told her about my difficulties in accessing private gatherings even though I had the Association's permission. She believed that "since many Zoroastrians are leaving Iran nowadays, the community is not closed anymore," but added that "[t]he old generations are like fossils." I had only heard non-Zoroastrians anachronistically use such a term in their reference to Zoroastrians' myopic commitment to the past, characterizing them as besotted with superstition.

2.2 – Conclusion

Mary Boyce writes, "Zoroastrianism is the most difficult of living faiths to study, because of its antiquity, the vicissitudes which it has undergone, and the loss, through them, of many of its holy texts" (2001:1). To these I would like to add the difficulties of conducting anthropological fieldwork. On the

surface, the mobeds and laypeople promised cooperation, but when it came to it they ducked out. They used strategies that included framing their rituals as private and out of reach, downplaying the significance of rituals as a whole, providing misleading information, citing the government's tight controls, or even, in an extreme case, trying to frighten me by mentioning the Islamic Republics' Revolutionary Guard. A mobed helped me to understand this behavior and told me, "The Zoroastrian community has suffered enormously and has been in a defensive mode too long. This has pushed the community to come together, to innovate and to find different ways to solidify, hence survive."

Being initially perceived as a Muslim was an important factor in the construction of my outsider status with Zoroastrians. But my multiple identities even further complicated this picture. I was an Iranian Baha'i who had illegally fled the Islamic Republic's persecution of the Baha'is and naturalized as a U.S. citizen, and now returned to Iran to do fieldwork with minorities. I experienced additional resistance from those who learned of my affiliation with the Baha'i faith. Zoroastrians have developed suspicion towards Baha'is that through their proselytizing efforts furthered the Zoroastrians' loss of membership in nineteenth century Iran.[80] Many Zoroastrians have observed conversions of their family members to the Baha'i faith, leading to major fractures within families and the community. Cultivated in and with respect to such a historical episode, this disposition overshadowed my claim to conduct neutral research. Let me give an example.

I was lucky to participate in a private ritual along with a Baha'i friend from a Zoroastrian background who was also participating in it for the first time. She was invited along with her aunt, also a Baha'i, who had returned from the U.S. after two decades away—it seems the temporal distance had transmuted her standing. So they had extended the invitation to my friend as well. Knowing about my work, she was kind enough to take me along. In the ceremony, an older lady asked my friend, "Where is your mother now? We used to go to school together and were inseparable forty years ago; I have not heard from her since." Later, I learned that a family rift had separated my friend's mother from the Zoroastrian community as she had converted to become a Baha'i. So, in addition to being born to Zoroastrian parents, steadfastness in religion is an imperative qualification for being considered an insider. In another example, a mobed who initially was open to me cut contacts after learning that I was a Baha'i. In addition to the bitter memory of losing members due to conversion to the Baha'i faith, this resistance was also due to the fear of association with Baha'is, an association that could be

punished by the state. This is because Baha'is who claim to be starting a new religious epoch and hence the abrogation of the Islamic laws, are framed as the new reviled enemy of Shi'a.

The question of my identity was unavoidable and I was committed to do the "right thing" and not lie about my heritage. All of this put me in an awkward position throughout my research. To avoid answering would not have helped; as a fieldworker I was supposed to improve access by reciprocating. My only strategy seemed to be not to put myself in such a position, but the result was the loss of even more trust and cooperation. My Muslim friends used to tell me that I "had to go after my informants and *demand* cooperation." But as a member of a minority community myself in a highly policed state, I could totally identify with Zoroastrians and respect their caution.

I understand Zoroastrians' resistance to outsiders to reflect a historically cultivated disposition. The extreme exclusivity that I faced was informed by a uniquely Zoroastrian history thatgoes beyond the generality of the Iranian fieldwork proviso discussed above. This specificity that conditioned my fieldwork constituted the unique preterrain of this project. Accordingly, my ethnographic method, and hence knowledge, was generated at the shifting junction of the informants' preterrain and ethnographers' positioning. As Alison Griffith writes, "different knowledges are imbedded in both the researcher's biography and the social relations of power and privilege in which the researcher is located" (1998:363).

My access and sensibilities to cultural materials were closely tied to my "multiple insider and outsider" positions to the subjects, to use Cynthia Deutsch's phrase (1981), or, to put it differently, to my "shifting identifications amid a field of interpenetrating communities and power relations," to use Kirin Narayan's (1993). As a citizen of the U.S.A., I was perceived as critical of the Islamic Republic, and in this sense an ally of the community, a trustworthy confidante. Being a Baha'i gave me the status of a proselytizing threat as well as a magnet for trouble from the Islamic Republic. At the same time, I had a first-hand encounter with Zoroastrians' sentiments towards the Baha'is that might remain hidden from non-Baha'is and, as mentioned earlier, growing up as one of a persecuted minority made me understand and then respect this reservations of the Zoroastrians in accepting me. As Diane Tober puts it, each of the challenges "can be viewed as a type of 'cultural artifacts' that provides … a view of Iranian culture …" (2004:653).[81]

My native command of the language, if I draw on Ohnuki-Tierney, made me able to understand "the emotive dimensions of behavior," but being an

Iranian did not constitute "a definite advantage" of an insider over an outsider in gaining access to the community (1984:584–586). Having been away from Iran for over ten years in general, and not being a member of the Zoroastrian community in particular, made me keen to be absorbed into the taken for granted daily life. As Borneman and Hammoudi write, fieldwork experience is "engagement with both Being There and with forms of distancing that help make cultural difference visible" (2009:19). My insider or outsider status was neither achieved nor ascribed; it was not a fixed position. Rather it was continuously evaluated (De Andrade 2000), in flux between the two extremes (Griffith, 1998).

In such a restricted fieldwork setting, I learned that whenever I pushed for information and persisted, I deprived myself of the opportunity to obtain any cooperation at all. I learned that not asking, not demanding, not requesting and just participating was the most effective and promising method for me. Being respectful, and attentive, showing interest and dressing appropriately all contributed positively to the level of cooperation I received. Like Shahbazi, "[t]hrough trial and error I found that I aroused the least suspicion and got the best results when I started a conversation casually and only gradually led the discussion to the topic about which I needed information" (2004:596). This discipline of enforced self-abnegation was another and possibly better way to reach the kind of knowledge I sought in the first place. I could terminate my research as I was not able to conduct my ideal fieldwork, or I could just try to make the best out of this situation. I chose the latter and followed Rumi's (1207–1273) advice that, "[e]ven though we are unable to capture the sea-water, we should taste it in order to quench thirst."[82] Gradually I revised my ideal fieldwork method of wandering round in search of a mystic group, which I could penetrate in order to learn its deepest secrets, to studying Zoroastrian's public and semi-private rituals, ceremonies, and celebrations. These are what I discuss in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

The Ritual Construction of an Alternative Religious Space

Zoroastrian rituals facilitate an alternative atmosphere to that of the dominant Shi'a. They are organized by the Zoroastrian Association and Mobeds' Council. Some of the major events are documented by the state media and, in addition to the community itself, reporters, scholars, and non-Zoroastrians attend. The editor of *Amordâd*, a Zoroastrian news agency, told me that "[i]n past years, celebrations focused mostly on informing the community about philosophical and theological significance of the occasions, but these last years the administration added various, mostly entertaining, activities to them." He believed this change aimed to engage and attract the youth to reduce migration. In addition to the time that organizers spent on the mise-en-scène and decorations with colourful cardboard, flowers, images of ancient Iran, and Zoroastrian historical and revered sites that corresponded with the theme of each celebration, considerable effort went into preparing the youngsters for their performances, which included recitation of the religious script, poetry informed by Zoroastrian teachings, and music and group dances based on Zoroastrian principles. Moreover, the young enacted Zoroastrian rites, such as marriage ceremonies or parables about gossip, lying, or equality. These activities engaged the youngsters and thus taught them the tradition, its moral universe, and ritual propriety, cultivating Zoroastrian religious identity.

This chapter looks at these religious gatherings, ritually-facilitated spacio-temporalities of collective discipline, which are contradistinctively constructed vis-à-vis those of the Shi'a. These events are in two main categories. First is the calendric, which I discuss in the first part of this chapter and argue that the calendric scaffoldings of time are crucial aspects of the technical apparatus of Zoroastrian religious conventions. In the second part of the chapter, I explore occasional ceremonies. Whereas there are overlaps, the former mostly re-actualize a religiously proscribed temporality, and the latter explore rituals as constant adjustment, adapted to the exigencies of modern life. In both instances we could recognize what Amighi addressed

as "an ongoing effort" by Zoroastrians of late twentieth century Tehran "to develop a Great Tradition of Zoroastrianism which would be appropriate to urban industrial ideologies, be competitive with Western influences, and be differentiated from Moslem society" (1990:333). This effort is part of Zoroastrian historical consciousness that within the Lambek model of historicity could entail "judicious interventions in the present that are thickly informed by dispositions cultivated in, and with respect to, the past, including understandings of temporal passage and human agency (phronesis)" (2002:17). What these calendric and occasional rituals share is Zoroastrians' performance of their difference from the Shi'a through spatial and corporeal practices. This is apparent from, for instance, Zoroastrian time sequencing, which is different from that of the Shi'a, or from emphasis on jubilation in opposition to the culture of mourning enjoined by the Shi'a. Accordingly, in my ritual model, the Zoroastrian community constructed an alternative religious space, informed by Zoroastrian tradition, and operated in dialectical opposition to that of the dominant Shi'a.

3.1 – Zoroastrian Calendric Cycles of Ritual Life

The calendric events included monthly, bimonthly, and annual events. In addition to differing from the Iranian Islamic seven-day rhythmic week by naming instead of numbering the days, the Zoroastrian calendar delineates a meticulous schedule of socio-religious life through jubilant monthly, devotional bimonthly, and celebratory seasonal ceremonies. There are also annual events like collective commemorative rituals of the Arab invasion—discussing this ritual, I wish to show that Zoroastrian exclusivity and distrust of outsiders in general and me in particular that I addressed in the previous chapter is an affective disposition moored in the past. I also discuss the annual celebration of Zoroaster's birth and the discovery of fire. As an expression of a proud attitude towards the Zoroastrian traditional heritage of calendric celebrations. The high mobed often repeated a version of the following statement, which emphasizes Zoroastrians' claim to the intellectual priority of their ancient calendar:

> Iranians were the first to discover the exact relations between the sun and the earth. On the first day of the Nowruz [Spring Equinox, the Persian New Year] the length of day and night are exactly equal; similarly, other celebrations are accurately calculated. For instance, *Tirgān* celebration

> is that of the longest day in the northern hemisphere, and *Mehregān* marks the beginning of winter, *Daygān* is the shortest day, followed by *Yaldā* celebration, which is the longest night of the year in the northern hemisphere.

Extending Henry Rutz' discussion on the exercise of power through the control of time by the state (1992), Zoroastrian calendric schedules are major religious disciplinary instruments. As Rutz states, schedules that "confine activity by delimiting goals" routinize short durations through endless repetitions (Ibid:5). The argument is that the social construction of temporal order that is established according to convention is not easily changed.[83] Following this line of analysis, the Zoroastrian calendar constitutes a "technology of time,"[84] an effective religious instrument that sustains the community over long periods. It is Zoroastrians' religious duty to honour these occasions. Moreover, they are encouraged by the mobeds and acolytes to take part and to bring their children with them. Thus at the internal organizational level these religious schedules penetrate power relations by requiring agents to honour and implement them.

3.1.1 – *The Monthly Celebrations*

3.1.1.1 – A Spiritually-Infused Temporality

The Zoroastrian practice of naming the days of the month instead of numbering them[85] is similar to that of the ancient Persians.[86] Terminologies of the months in the Zoroastrian calendar are modelled on and informed by Zoroastrian theogony, a genealogical account of divinities, as well by its cosmogony or model of creation. Creating a hierarchical calendar,[87] Ahura Mazda, his six Amshaspands or Holy Immortal archangels,[88] and four purifying elements *ākhshij* of water, wind, earth, and fire have a constant and conspicuous presence, and their spiritual attributes are extended to each and every day as well as to months of the year.[89] At high levels of conception, the precise identities of the spirits included in these categories are vague. Extending Hefner's account of the Hindu Javanese minority among the dominant Muslims, this very vagueness "allows them to accommodate what is in fact a wide variety of beliefs at lower, or less ideological, levels of conception" (1985:184).

Since some of these day-names are shared with the systems of month-names, one day in every month nominally coincides with the name of that month. This homonymous day is a reason for celebration (*jashn*), a cel-

ebration associated with one of Zoroastrian archangels or divinities. For instance, the celebration of *Ardibeheshtegān* is dedicated to fire, which occupies a unique place in Zoroastrian religiosity. *Esfand* day in the month of Esfand is celebrated as *Esfandegān*, and since Esfand is linked to the protective angel of women (*Sepāndar-maz*), this juncture is marked by the celebration of Women's Day. This occasion also provides an opportunity for Zoroastrians to mark their distinctiveness from the Shiʿa, articulated in terms of gender equality in the Zoroastrian religion (see chapter 5). Another is the monthly celebration of *Farvardingān* that remembers the ancestors. Thus, by extending the spiritual significance to the management of time and by infusing the temporal with the spiritual, these monthly celebrations transform Zoroastrian divinities from abstract concepts into ritual resources, and into symbolic markers of social and spiritual power. This mode of reckoning time, linking the day-names with divinities, moreover, embeds the Zoroastrian calendar in an ecclesiastical time as a succession of epochs from creation to the apocalyptic coming of the Zoroastrian saviour (Saoshyant). Accordingly the eschatological promise of the ultimate victory of good over evil—a theodicy that helps to make the present-day suffering of this subaltern community bearable—permeates Zoroastrians' historical consciousness through the ritualization of calendric cycles.

During my fieldwork, some of these events were celebrated indoors and some outdoors, corresponding to the weather or the nature of the ritual. Indoor celebrations were more stereotyped and ritualized, while the outdoor ones were more spontaneous, resembling a picnic. My informant from the fire-temple told me that the exigencies of the day and not a preordained routine determine how the celebrations are observed. For instance, on any of these occasions the community may hold an initiation ceremony, observe other religious rites, or go to the temple. However, on the eve of the celebration a festival was routine.

In general, two or three women wearing colourful traditional dresses ushered participants in, pouring rosewater from a goblet on everybody's hands. They also offered almonds coated in a layer of fine sugar (*noql*). In addition, they held up mirrors for those attending so that they could arrange their hair and dress. Of course, for Zoroastrians, the mirror also symbolizes light, while noql and rosewater emphasize the sweetness of life. The Iranian official National Anthem was routinely followed by the song *I am a Zartoshti* and everyone stood to show respect. This marked the start of the programmes; and the recitation of Avesta, which "consists of hymns, formulas, narratives, and laws" (Nigosian 1993:48),[90] mostly from

the *Gāthās*, considered to be Zoroaster's surviving hymns, was usually the next part of the ceremonies. Each occasion also had a special incantation, preferably performed by the oldest mobed. For instance, in the celebration of Ardibeheshtegān he recited the *ātash-nyāyesh* or fire-prayer. During the recitations, out of respect for *manthrā* or Avestan words, everyone was asked to stand up.

As the ritual words are in the Pahlavi language or Avestani and thus not intelligible to the congregation, their efficacy is partially linked to the position and authority of the priests, which emanates from priestly lineage (if it exists), long training and thus religious knowledge, and paraphernalia like white vestments consisting of a robe and hat. This efficacy is also linked to the historical authority of the ritual space. To draw on Hefner one more time, in this case it is "the larger setting of authority and social position" and not merely "the propositional meaning of prayer language" that determines why ritual language is a vehicle of sacred power (Hefner 1985:212–213). Thus, "[t]he efficacy of ritual speech depends in turn not on people's understanding of what is being said, but on the prayers being performed by the right person in the right fashion under the right circumstances" (Ibid:213).

The rest of the programmes consisted of speeches, entertainments, and performances including plays and music. Moreover, the achievements and participation of the youth in the programmes were publicly recognized and rewarded. Such rewards became more frequent during my fieldwork, as the community attempted to deal with the problem of dwindling numbers by creating a more attractive space for the youth so that they would not migrate. Speakers customarily started by sending salutations to Zoroaster and to the ravān[91] (the faculty responsible for human decision and choice) of the deceased. The specificity of the occasion was always worked into the salutation. For instance, in the Esfandegān celebration of women, one saluted the pure spirit of Zoroaster who "pronounced men and women equal" and also paid respect to Cyrus the Great, an important secular hero among Zoroastrians, "who made the world's first declaration of Human Rights and pronounced all equal."

In one of her addresses to the congregation a young Zoroastrian woman said, "We are one of the most important living religions in the world. Our religion is cryptically deep and we have to decipher it." Aligned with this demand, in each celebration, a religious expert, a mobed, or some other knowledgeable individuals explicated the event's esoteric meanings. These explanations generally emphasized that through these monthly celebrations Ahura Mazda acts as the operating agent in the creation to maintain and

renew the world, an operation mediated through his archangels, whose names and attributes were frequently outlined and explained. Thus, during each celebration, the laities were provided with exegeses and elaborations of the complex Zoroastrian teleological theodicy. As mentioned, this theodicy delineates a progression towards the final victory of good over evil, a victory that culminates in the coming of the Zoroastrian saviour (Saoshyant). The exegetes aimed to offset Zoroastrians' historical consciousness as a subordinated minority by instilling a firm belief in the ultimate justice of Ahura Mazda, whose final triumph would reconcile the community to its present-day suffering within an oppressive state. Furthermore, the speakers explained to the community that the final victory could not be attained unless individual believers attuned themselves to the divine attributes embodied in the Zoroastrian calendar, including purity, self-control, happiness, truthfulness, justice, and equality. In this way, these edifying addresses entwined the quotidian with the sacred. To extend Hirschkind's study of cultural organization of sensory experience, all these attempted to "create the sensory conditions of an emergent ethical and political lifeworld, with its specific patterns of behavior, sensibility, and practical reasoning" (2006:8).

3.1.1.2 – A Jubilant Spatio-Temporality in a Mournful Shi'i Public

The Zoroastrian calendric programmes for these celebrations were not immune from interference by the ruling Shi'a whose calendar is oriented towards rituals of grief and sorrow. Therefore the constitution of Iranian Zoroastrians' religious comportment through theological exegeses and historical ties was partly due to the production of a Zoroastrian spatio-temporality distinct from that of the Shi'a. Zoroastrians use the words *jashn* and *jashan* in reference to their monthly celebrations (i.e. jashn-e Ardibeheshtegān). For Iranians jashn denotes jubilation, and in Shi'i Iran this usage by Zoroastrians could translate into disregard or insensitivity towards Shi'a, in particular on Shi'i mourning occasions. Moreover, it could detract from the spiritual weight of the ritual performance. In order to address these issues, some of the speakers usually included the spiritual etymology of the term jashn in their exegeses. According to one mobed, "Jashn is derived from the Pahlavi root of *yasnā*,[92] which means 'to worship God.'" He emphasized that "supplication and worship are at the heart of these monthly celebrations, so they ought not to be confused and conflated with necessarily jubilation for the mere sake of happiness."

It is noteworthy that one of these monthly events of Farvardingān commemorates the deceased and takes place at the burial ground. While Far-

vardingān is not exactly a celebration, the emphasis on jubilation in monthly events cannot be ignored. Even during one Farvardingān address, the high mobed stated, "We believe when Ahura Mazda fashioned Human, he gave them the faculty to hearken to the sound of merriment that emanates from the nature, so they could be jubilant." Similarly, the head of the Zoroastrian Association asserted that "God has created jubilation and we have to be jubilant; therefore, we do our utmost to celebrate all of our festivals." Different versions of this perspective were often repeated by believers. This Zoroastrian merriment is bolstered through constant reiteration of a legend that Zoroaster was born laughing.

Several celebrations were cancelled during my fieldwork. For instance, when I asked about Bahmangān, which celebrates peace, right thoughts, and is labelled Fathers' Day by contemporary Zoroastrians, my informant told me that all the tents that they needed for this outdoor celebration had been rented by Muslims for Moharram, the commemoration of Imam Hoseyn's martyrdom. This illustrates Anne Lovell's suggestion that "analyzing the intersection of marginal sociotemporal orders with those of dominant groups should provide clues about relations of power—how groups are included or excluded from access to resources—in modern societies" (1992:86). That year Zoroastrians could not celebrate Mehregān either, a celebration "dedicated to the god Mitrā/Mehr,"[93] as it fell between the 19th and 21st of Ramazan, which commemorates Shi'i first Imam, Ali's stabbing and martyrdom. Moreover, when the Islamic and Zoroastrian occasions coincided, Zoroastrians were required by the government to send representatives to the state events, symbolizing their subordination. As Robert Rotenberg writes, "[W]hen the powerful are the timekeepers, time becomes symbolically elaborated through rituals that can control a greater number of activities. These compete for the limited time people can devote to any one of them. The experience of the schedule enters social consciousness. This is the power to time" (1992:19).

In the Iranian Shi'i calendar, Moharram is an entire month of mourning, Ramazan, the month of fasting and restriction, and fourteen days of the year are dedicated to commemorating the martyrdoms of the twelve Imams, and the passing of Prophet Mohammad and his daughter. Furthermore, ten days of mourning have been added to the calendar for the commemoration of the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic. The Shi'i culture of mourning culminates in *Āshurā*,[94] the observation of Imam Hoseyn's martyrdom during Moharram. This is "a peculiar phenomenon among world religions,"[95] and is an expression of intense public sorrow in

which Iranian Shiʿa beat their chests, strike their backs with swinging chains, and practise self-laceration by striking their skulls with a sharp sword. Although the theatrical re-enactment of the battle of Karbala, called *shabih* or *taʿziyeh* (passion play), has roots in the dramatic tradition of pre-Islamic Persian tragedies, some of which are associated with Zoroastrians and some with pre-Zoroastrian Iran, the extreme practices are a recent and exclusively Shiʿi development.[96] Roy Mottahedeh writes:

> The passion play of the Shiah world is the only indigenous theater of Muslims […] The passion constituted by the suffering and martyrdom of heroes was a resonant theme in the Iranian tradition long before the Safavis. Two of the heroes of the national epic, *The Book of Kings*, are killed treacherously and are bitterly lamented, and the death of one of these heroes was the focus of a cult of public mourning that Iranian minstrels ornamented with cycles of songs called 'the weeping of the magi' (the magi being the priests of Zoroastrianism) … In the Safavi period the narratives of Hosain's martyrdom and the processions of public mourning came together. (1985:170, 173–174)

Moreover, since the Islamic calendar is based on cycles of lunar phases, it takes several years for the Islamic events to pass, while cyclically affecting Zoroastrian events. Using Rotenberg's following analysis concluding that "[i]t is in the experience of the people constrained from action that the social consciousness of time is born" (1992:18), we can say that the Zoroastrian community is especially time conscious, since it is constrained not only by its own complex calendric order, but also by the severe restrictions placed on that order by the dominant Shiʿa.

Additionally, while the Shiʿi calendar, like the Zoroastrian, is highly interwoven with religion, it contains a fundamental difference. As mentioned earlier, the Zoroastrian calendar is infused with religious *divinities* and their involvement in creation; the ritualized manifestations of these divinities instruct believers *joyously* to express their spiritual attributes. In contrast, the Shiʿi calendar is filled with commemorations of *worldly* religious leaders who are instrumental in the divine plan, whose associated ritualistic manifestations invite believers to revive and relive their sufferings through *mourning* and flagellation. This contradistinction in mood sustains the continual differentiation between the two religions.

The oppositional dialectic of Zoroastrian/Shiʿi performed within the space of ritual produced an encompassing socialization that surpassed and

subsumed internal dynamics and variations of the Zoroastrian community, producing both a communal and an individual identity imagined in contradistinction with those of the Shiʿa. Zoroastrians' socialization, the shaping of the senses and subjectivity of actors, in a way consonant with the discursive ideals and conventions embedded in the performance allowed them to bring a shared resonance-seeking evaluative quality to their ritual experience. This quality was shared, for it was whittled away in a continuous friction between Zoroastrians' own religious time and ideology and those of the imposing Shiʿa. As Henry Rutz states, "Two propositions follow from the view that time is integral to the constitution of society and the social construction of reality. The first is that *different* cultures construct different times and the second is the probability that disparate times coexist in the *same* social formation" (1992:2).

Returning to the question of ritual efficacy discussed earlier, in addition to the religious authority of the exegeses and to the historically cultivated evaluative dispositions in opposition to that of the Shiʿa, the accumulated authority of the exegetes themselves due to their lineage, devotion, and knowledge helped to bring about the kind of "effective audition" of Hirschkind's model. In this model, subordination to the authority of the performance results in, "not simply a cognitive recognition … but the adoption of the dispositions—sensory as much as mental—that allow the absorptive process to unfold" (2006:27). Zoroastrian religious identity discussed here is not merely imprinted on the visible exterior of the ritual celebrations; it is inculcated in the believers' consciousnesses, albeit with different understandings and implications.

3.1.2 – *The Bimonthly Gāhambār of Thanksgiving*

Distinctions from Shiʿa are also embedded in the specific content of the Zoroastrian calendar. For example, the major seasonal celebration of Zoroastrians is the bimonthly communal thanksgiving of *Gāhambār* (also *Gāhanbār*), and Zoroastrians are encouraged, although not obligated, to take part. A mobed told me, "Gāhambār is similar to the Westerners' thanksgiving; they have it once a year but we have ours six times, and each one lasts for five days." As a remnant of rural agrarian life, each Gāhambār celebrates a specific time. As I gathered during my fieldwork, they include mid-spring, hot weather, the end of summer, the beginning of the cold season, and time for relaxation, and finally five days of celebration at the end of the year:

1. Midiozarm-gah[97] celebrates the creation of Skies, held on the forty-fifth day of the year in month Ardibehesht, around the end of April.
2. Midiosham-gah[98] celebrates the creation of Waters, held on the one hundred and fifth day of the year in month Tir, around 10 June.
3. Paeteshahim-gah[99] celebrates the creation of the Earth, held on the one hundred and eightieth day of the year in month Shahrivar, around 12 September.
4. Ayasaram-gah[100] celebrates the creation of Plants, held on the two hundred and tenth day of the year in month Ābān, around 12 October.
5. Midiarim-gah[101] celebrates the creation of Animals, held on the two hundred and ninetieth day of the year in month Day, around the end of December.
6. Hamspatmadim-gah[102] celebrates the creation of Humans, held in the three hundred and sixty-fifth day of the year in month Esfand, around 15 March.

These festivals were the most religiously laden Zoroastrian rituals that I attended. The equivalent of Durkheimean "social facts," (1895) and even to some extent Maussian "total social facts," (1966), Gāhambārs are a realization of collectivity, have cosmological meanings, and economic significance. They combine the Zoroastrian emphasis on purity, worship, and generosity, as believers have to be ritually clean to take part, the presence of at least one mobed is central, and participants are generously fed.[103]

The main ceremony of the five days was always held in the fire-temple on the first day of the Gāhambār, and the Mobeds' Council was in charge. It was celebrated early in the morning, "so participants could get to work on time," as an informant explained to me. There are spiritual reasons as well. As the mobedyar once said, "There is energy in the morning before the sunrise and we can use that energy." He cited the following saying by poet Saʿdi: "[Like] animals with no insight into Human Kingdom, those who sleep late have no knowledge of the morning-bird's warbling [the time that the whole world wakes up to praise God]."[104] During the remaining four days of Gāhambār, families or other Zoroastrian associations held smaller, private ceremonies, mostly in the afternoons.

I attended five Gāhambārs, three in the morning of the first day[105] during which three to five mobeds performed together; one in the afternoon in the historical building of Shah Varahram-Izad where two mobeds performed;[106] and one in Zoroastrian Firuz-Bahram high school[107] that was arranged by a Youth Group in the afternoon,[108] at which only one mobed performed.

I received information about Gāhambārs either from my informant at the fire-temple or from the announcements posted on the board of Iraj Hall, and from the Association's website towards the end of my stay. In general, I did not have any problems attending, with the exception of the private Gāhambār held in Shah Varahram-Izad. When I called for the address and to inform the custodian that I planned to attend, he thought I wished to *visit* the historical building and explained that I could not do on that specific day. I explained that I had permission to *participate*. He asked if I had a letter, and after I told him that I had permission from the head of the Association, he provided the address.[109]

Shah Varahram-Izad is an old house where many private ceremonies were held. A woman told me that during the Qajars when the Zoroastrian community was under tremendous pressure, the owner donated his house so that the community could congregate and recite the holy Avesta. In the corner of the candle-lit hall a distinctively designed chamber led to the rectangular middle marble stall, the equivalent of the fire sanctum of the fire temple described below. Participants added to the oil of the burning candles even when the ceremonies were in progress and touched the wall and kissed their hands afterward. In *Gestures of Deference to Royalty in Ancient Iran*, Richard Frye writes, "It has been suggested that this gesture [hand raised to mouth, palm toward the face, standing before the great king] was the proper sign of *proskynesis* before the king, and it was essentially a kissing of one's own hand" (1972:106). As in the fire-temple, a bookshelf at the entrance was stocked with Khordeh-Avesta for the participants to use. Moreover, plastic boxes filled with hats were provided at the entrance so worshippers could cover their heads before entering the place.

My first attendance at the fire-temple's Gāhambār was on Monday, 30 April 2007. As always the first part of the five-day celebration started at six in the morning. When I arrived, some, mostly women, were sitting in the courtyard—during menstruation women are considered ritually unclean and cannot enter the temple.[110] Inside, the temple looked crowded, and at later celebrations I tried to arrive earlier to secure a seat. My informant at the fire-temple directed me inside the packed hall, lit by several chandeliers and covered with rugs. The simple wooden chairs, normally set around the wall, were now arranged in rows.

The exceptional architectural design of the temple provided a uniquely Zoroastrian space of worship. The abovementioned sanctum or *ātash-gāh* (lit., place of fire) with a fire-altar was built inside the hall. The sanctum's wall had a window, fenced with metal bars, and there was a door at its

opposite side that only the mobed resident of the temple could use to enter the sanctum. About a metre from the floor, the upper wall of the sanctum was covered with marble and the lower portion with brown cornice. An important aspect of this architecture was that the sanctum shared the hall's back wall; thus, the sanctum was open on only three sides. On different occasions, the high mobed used this characteristic to deflect fire-worshiping accusations hurled against Zoroastrians. He said, "Fire in the temple is limited to three sides so no one could circumambulate it as an act of worship. For instance, when brides are ceremonially brought to the temple they just walk back and forth." He emphasized, "Nowhere in the world is the fire open all around in fire-temples."[111]

Members approached the sanctum's window, touched its bars, and added offerings such as sweets to a bowl placed inside. Some said prayers and some made a gesture like grabbing its air with two hands or just one and directing it towards their faces—the *proskynesis* gesture described above. A young man told me, "Many people would commit to these religious gestures without knowing the meaning of fire, and an outsider might think they are worshiping the fire. When you ask them, they might reason that 'fire produces warmth and light.' But the philosophy behind it is more complicated." He went on to share his: "[i]n my opinion, fire is the symbol of the world of light, and since God is the standard of light we need to approach light to know him."[112]

Before this event, during my first visit to the fire-temple accompanied by the head of the Association, discussed earlier, I had learned the ritual propriety of entering the temple—he washed his hands and mouth using the tap and the sink in the corner of the yard. This ablution of ritual purity is performed several times every day and is called *pādyāb*.[113] I asked if I had to wash too. Casually he replied that I did. Then, from the plastic box at the door he took out and wore a white round cotton hat, and removed his shoes before entering. In the ceremony, with the exception of a few men who were wearing their own hats, all the men wore the hats provided. Women already had their hair covered mostly with white headscarves. During my second round of fieldwork in 2008, for hygiene purposes disposable hats were provided. This unisex head-covering principle before entering the building was observed both in the fire-temple and in Shah Varahram-Izad, both considered holy places. However, when the ceremony was held in the Firuz-Bahram high school, the hats were distributed only before the ceremony and not at the entrance, and shoes were not taken off at all, an indication of the levels of sacredness in different places.

FIGURE 2 Gāhambār, Tehran Fire-Temple

FIGURE 3 Gāhambār, Tehran Fire-Temple

By reciting the Avesta the mobeds had already begun the morning ceremony several hours earlier. I could hear their chanting and the occasional peals of the bell. At six o'clock, five mobeds fully dressed in white vestments came out and the participants rose to their feet. The mobeds sat behind the *sofreh*, literally a piece of cloth spread on the floor or table where foodstuffs are displayed and served,[114] to perform the ceremony. Gāhambār has its own sofreh rite which is simply a white tablecloth usually covered with a smaller green one, arranged with fruits, nuts, breads, and other edibles—I discuss sofreh rites fully in the next chapter. During the ceremony some participants brought offerings to add. The mobeds sat behind this sofreh, facing the participants, and performed the purification ritual before distributing the foodstuffs. In the end, breakfast was served. Personal donations covered the costs. Theoretically if nobody offered, the Association would pay; in practice however there were too many volunteers.

In the first morning of Gāhambār, most of the male participants were over fifty, but I saw more age differences among the women. In another ceremony during the summer, several sleepy youngsters also participated. In the ceremonies held in the afternoon, more young people participated. The seating arrangement in the fire-temple, where the occasion was more formal, seemed to be such that men and women would sit separately. Nonetheless, this arrangement was not fully observed. I sat in the left side of the mobeds where, as seen in figures 2 and 3, I had a good angle to see both the mobeds and the windows of the fire sanctum where people came to pray. In the Firuz-Bahram high school there was no separation of the sexes. This was the case also in Shah Varahram-Izad, where due to the limited seats, women mostly took the chairs and men either stood or sat on the floor.

At the very beginning of the ceremony the mobeds announced the name(s) of the generous donors or family covering the cost of that ceremony and asked the congregation to pray for the soul of the deceased in whose name the Gāhambār was being offered. I am not sure if contributions actually led to special recognition and spiritual precedence within the community; nonetheless, since there is a belief that prayer and generosity help to fulfill wishes such as marriage or the elevation of a deceased's soul, contributions certainly bring a sense of personal satisfaction to the contributors, hence the long list of volunteers. Afterwards, other announcements could be made or advice given. One mobed, in front of whom the microphone was placed, gave the main recitation. Most of the congregation participated, some by reciting loudly and others by murmuring. Once, the mobedyar ac-

tually asked the entire congregation to participate in the recitation, which induced a powerful sense of collectivity even in me.

As with other rituals, *hamāzury* (communal collectivity) was the concluding rite of Gāhambārs, which refers to the importance of unity in the community. During hamāzury a concave brazier was brought to the congregation and a sweet aroma of burning sandalwood was released that stayed with me for a long time. In the fire-temple, the resident mobed brought the brazier while covering his mouth and nose with a white mask so as not to defile the fire with his breath and saliva.[115] In Shah Varahrm a woman brought it without a mask and circulated among the participants. With the phrase '*hamāzur bim*' or 'let's come together,' the brazier was usually first taken to the mobed who would direct the air towards his face with his hands, accompanied by the gesture of rubbing his face. Then it was brought to the congregation and all performed the same proskynesis, and gradually left the building.

Hamāzury was also discussed as a concept. A mobed argued that during the last thousand years Gāhambārs had facilitated the survival of the community, reasoning that "[w]hen there was a Gāhambār all were obligated to take part. This created a bottom-up hamāzury starting from the family, locales, cities, and countries, which would eventually create hamāzury of our global community." On an occasion, a mobed said that "[i]t is very possible that in different Zoroastrian communities we witness some variations, what is important however is to respect different customs and to become hamāzur." Emphasizing hamāzury the high mobed said, "We have to transcend our differences and climb the seven steps of the Zoroastrian spiritual ladder [discussed later], then we can transform ourselves to *sepanteman* or perfection." Similarly another mobed said that "the most important necessity for our community today is hamāzury." This emphasis on congregational co-participation was always part of the discourses of hamāzury as an integral part of all rituals. An emphasis on collectivity sought the coherence of religious experience and its commonality. Thus, in addition to the different aspects regarding the production of a coherent community that I discussed above, specific expository notes associated with hamāzury, both as the performed concluding rites of every ritual and as a concept of communal unity, sought to enhance this collectivity as well. This collectivity lingered on into the after-ritual socializing over food, which was consecrated by priests as discussed earlier.[116]

During the post-ritual gathering in the fire-temple, children were given money by their mothers to drop in a donations box in the yard. Also, there

was a large bucket of water from which everyone received a half filled plastic glass. Later I learned that it was concoction based on a sacred plant called *hum*.[117] By the entrance to the back room, a small plastic plate containing two dates, a piece of feta cheese, *halvā* (fried flour cooked in syrup), and a bag with slices of thin bread were distributed and a huge samovar provided the hot water for tea. Inside the room mostly women sat and ate at tables. The food in Shah Varahram included stew, chicken and rice, sweets, tea and fruits; in Firuz-Bahram it was stew.

A mobed explained the five functions of Gāhambārs to me in this way:

> First it is a thanksgiving; we also remember the deaths, as we all have some lost loved ones. Then it is a merry gathering and we become jubilant from visiting each other. Moreover, generosity in these five days is much more accepted by Ahura Mazda, accruing special rewards. Thus, we thank God and take advantage of these opportunities to give and receive. We also treat everyone the same, statuses fade, as long as you are Zoroastrians all love you.

The high mobed told me that "during days of Gāhambār we have to give, take care of the poor, and visit the sick." After one Gāhambār another mobed informed me, "This is a ceremony for people to socialize. In the past it was the opportunity to give and receive. That is why what I recited encouraged people to both give and enjoy receiving. It is called *gāhan-bār*, similar to a Royal levee." I asked if the celebration had anything to do with farming and the seasons. "Of course," he said, "it is the *gāh* of *anbār* or 'time to store' the harvest."

While these explanations are about what used to be and the need to ignore differences within the community for the sake of a unity threatened by passing time and the scattering of the community, the mobedyar also provided a contemporary interpretation corresponding to the exigencies of modern life. First, he remarked that Iranian hospitality is known around the world and that Gāhambār is an expression of this indigenous tradition. It is "an event to which *all* are invited. Traditionally, white mud was used to color the door of the host house as a sign of public invitation, even for the unknown passersby, a practice which is rarely heard of in the world." Distancing himself from this idealized traditional setting and referring to the different circumstances of modern life, he then said that nowadays a family can exercise generosity in other ways. For example, "the old wealthy man whose gaze is at the door for someone to arrive and keep him company

has a different need." He concluded: "A well-wisher thinks about others. Gāhambār is for this reason and purpose."

3.1.3 – *The Annual Celebrations*

3.1.3.1 – Sadeh Celebration of the Discovery of Fire

Sadeh (lit., hundredth) is a pre-eminent Zoroastrian annual celebration, the occasion of historic creation of fire on day of *Mehr Izad* in the month *Bahman*, 29 January. Fire constitutes the focus of the Ardibeheshtegān monthly celebration as well. As the legend goes *Hushang* the *Pishdādi* king saw a black snake at which he threw a stone. The snake escaped, but the stone smashed another stone and a flame appeared and fire was discovered. Thus the king ordered a celebration that was called sadeh. The high mobed said, "We celebrate sadeh, the hundredth day of winter since on this coldest day of the year fire of the earth starts surfacing, heralding the spring." Through these celebrations, fire as an ideological core and symbolic representation of world of light is brought into the socio-religious center.

During my first year of fieldwork, the sadeh occasion coincided with Ashura, the Shi'i mourning of Imam Hoseyn's martyrdom. I pleaded with the Zoroastrian Association to attend the ceremony, but they explained that "out of respect for Ashura it would be held privately at the fire-temple and only Zoroastrians can attend." Luckily, I was able to attend the next year's celebration on Wednesday, 30 January 2008, a day of unprecedented snowfall in Tehran. It was exactly a hundred days and nights before Nowruz. Many non-Zoroastrians were also attending with written permission from the Association.[118] I had made a trip to the Association's office and received mine two days before the ceremony; it was a stamped paper, numbered 114, with my name on it. When I arrived at the Marker Centre (owned by the community, located in east Tehran[119]), the familiar doorkeeper was collecting the permits. He asked for no identification card from Zoroastrians, as they know each other, and after exchanging a few words with non-Zoroastrians who did not have permits, some of whom were accompanied by Zoroastrians, he even let them in. So the whole idea of issuing permits looked like protecting the community against accusations of religious propaganda, prohibited by Islamic law.

In front of the building, the throng was busy buying books, calendars, and religious paraphernalia set out on several tables. Renovation of the main hall was not yet completed and the walls were covered with scaffolding.

Several cooking ovens were burning in the faint hope of warming the large hall with its high ceilings. In his address, the head of the Association said, "Today the building is under renovation and cold; I hope that the fire of your heart brings us warmth." On each side of the stage, two triple-curtains of yellow and orange were part of the decoration. Somewhat loud Iranian pop songs that are prohibited by the regime but are nonetheless circulated widely were being played. Several reporters were setting up their cameras and people greeted one another with variations of "Happy Sadeh."

The official start of the programme was signalled when four mobeds clad in their official white vestments entered and sat on the front row; as a sign of respect the audience rose to their feet. As usual, the national anthem and the song *I am a Zoroastrian* were played; for both all remained standing. This was followed by the Avesta recitation by a twelve-year-old boy. He was wearing a green hat, the colour of the Zoroastrian religion, as Fischer also points out, "the color of life, of cypress and growing things" (1973:200). He asked all to respect the words of manthrā, so all stood up for this part as well. A large screen in the corner of the hall featured the whole event from the eye of the camera.

Congratulatory notes by the moderator, the head of the Association, the high mobed, and the mobedyar contained variations of "Happy Sadeh, the celebration of the discovery of fire, and of human progress."[120] The high mobed extended his congratulations to all Zoroastrians around the world, in Iran and to all Iranians. The moderator began, "From the sadeh celebration hearken to the peal of Nowruz, and in the darkness of night hearken to the arrival of the day."[121] He explained that since sadeh coincided with the end of the Shiʿa mourning month of Moharram, they would not celebrate it as elaborately as usual. The head of the Association said, "Out of respect for Ashura (culmination of the mourning in month of Moharram) we did not have a celebration last year and out of respect for Moharram we will keep it down this year as well." As discussed earlier, such experience of a continual constraint on Zoroastrian rituals helped inculcate the social consciousness of time.[122] This was the time that, as on other occasions, communal announcements were made,[123] circulating news, requesting prayers for the infirm, and keeping members informed. The rest of the programme included recitation from the Gāthās, an entertainment in which a lady posing as King Darioush (Darius I) recited his declaration of the liberation of the Jews and his announcement that countries under his rule were free to practise their respective religions—a juxtaposition of religious freedom and Zoroastrian traditions of tolerance to the hegemonic Shiʿi. Also a documen-

tary called *Takht-e Jamshid* or Persepolis was featured, which provided a close look at the history of this UNESCO world heritage site. Moreover, a music ensemble performed some popular songs, all of them reminding the community of its deep historical roots within pre-Islamic Iran, and providing a contrast with the Shiʿi world.

The programme culminated when the oldest mobed recited the fire-prayer (ātash-nyāyesh) from the podium and the crowd grew around him. Then six women, wearing white and holding fire urns, brought from the fire-temple, emerged from backstage, followed by the mobeds. Immediately, the familiar aromatic smoke of sandalwood and pinches of frankincense was released. They walked to the back yard and lit up an enormous pile of bushes in a space of about thirty square metres. While enjoying the warmth of the huge fire some worshippers danced to the loud music and took pictures. By this time, in addition to the crowded hall, the outside courtyard was filled with people on this cold day.

Many non-Zoroastrians, I assume Muslims, were among the congregation, indicating their interest in such celebrations that are erased from the official public memory. In this ceremony the mobedyar asked non-Zoroastrians in the crowd to revive and celebrate these old traditions in their own communities instead of participating in the celebrations of the Zoroastrians. (As discussed before, this is partially a response to the pressure exerted by the government but, as we shall see further, also to encourage the revival of these traditions beyond the Zoroastrian community.) An informant from Kerman told me, "In Kerman, a Zoroastrian stronghold, sadeh is the biggest celebration, and in parts of the town all people join in—Zoroastrians and the rest." In fact, I received several reports from Kerman showing the local city officials opening the ceremony, illustrating not only the deep historical roots of the celebration, but also the participation by the entire population. Therefore, the Zoroastrian ambit of influence must not be considered to be strictly limited to Zoroastrians, as it is in a constant dialogue, albeit limited and mostly cultural, with the surrounding Shiʿa.

3.1.3.2 – The Celebration of Zoroaster's Birth and Rise to Prophethood

The Zoroastrian community that I worked with was aware of the lack of objective historical data about the life and residence of Zoroaster.[124] However, it used and reiterated supportive scholarly materials when these accounts complemented its taken-for-granted narratives. The community approached and understood textual histories in order to construct its own

specialized historical knowledge. For instance, as mentioned earlier, it promoted the notion that Zoroaster had lived prior to Moses, and that Parthian Jews adopted and developed their eschatology and theodicy while under the protection of a Zoroastrian state. Moreover, the Zoroastrian religion's influence over Islam, particularly on the Shi'i tradition, was especially stressed (an aspect which I address more thoroughly in the following chapters).

The community always celebrates Zoroaster's birth and his rise to prophethood simultaneously towards the end of March (day of Khordād, the sixth day of month Farvardin or Nowruz). This day falls within the first week of the Persian New Year, which adds to its celebratory mood.[125] The mobedyar explained that combining these two events was a decision "by our prudent ancestors to limit the numbers of holidays and to avert disunity (*tashatot*) in the community." In 2007 and 2008, I attended this annual celebration, held both times at the Marker Centre. In the first year, several informative power-point presentations were played on a portable screen. They included pictures of eminent Zoroastrians,[126] the Association's website, and coverage of earlier ceremonies, many of which I had attended. The next year was more elaborate: Two large banners were posted by the entrance which said, "Happy the blessed day of *Ashu* [term used for reverence] Zoroaster's birth anniversary." Also, marking the Zoroastrian year 3746, as they count it today and not the official Yezdegardi date, a pamphlet was prepared for the event; and as always two women performed the customary ushering in discussed above. During my attendance in 2007, after I had shaken hands with the head of the Association, he invited me to sit in the front row. It was on this occasion, as mentioned earlier, that a woman angrily inquired "Are you a Muslim? Do you want to destroy us?"

The mobedyar, a regular speaker at these events, gave talks in both years. As always, he referred to the distinctive qualities of the community: the jubilant nature of the Zoroastrian religion, the importance of wisdom, and the equality of men and women. It is worth pointing out that, in contrast to the rest of the presenters, he never wore a tie, as opposed for instance to the head of the Association or the high mobed who, if not wearing the vestment, always wore ties, indicative of the high level of sensitivity surrounding the issue of dress in the Islamic Republic—after the revolution the new accepted image had to look different from that of the members of the Shah's regime who were accused of being the emulators of the West, including in their wearing of ties. So when not clad in the white vestments the mobedyar did not wear a tie, as symbolic rejection of the pre-Revolution regime and also as expression of inclusiveness—other mobeds did wear one.

FIGURE 4 Khordādgān, Marker, Tehran

The message of inclusivity went beyond the Shiʿa and was overtly expressed when he congratulated *all people of the world*, clarifying that Zoroaster talked to all wise people everywhere (*dānāyān*) and that people from all over the world can be in harmony with Zoroaster's teachings—a universalist trope of Zoroastrian discourse. During the first year, he also acknowledged and thanked the state TV and Radio News units, the *Familiar Voice* (*Sedā-ye Āshnā*), that were reporting on the celebration. He added that this Aryan prophet announced the unity of God for the first time; he also emphasized that Zoroaster was against myth and superstition, and that he promoted wisdom and choice, all part of the pervasive discursive construct of a community both distinct from the Shiʿa, yet also associated with them (I will discuss this duality at greater length in the following chapters). Next year, in congratulatory remarks he included the Prophet Mohammad and Imam Jafar Sadeq whose birth date coincided with the celebration. A poignant point of the mobedyar's talk was when he said,

> We have entered foreign figures into our calendar; it is a pity that day of Zoroaster's birth is not entered our callandar. So now non-Zoroastrian Iranians have no way of learning the day this Iranian prophet was born.

> Let this German saying not to be true that says 'prophets are unknown in their own homeland.'

He added, "During these last couple of months remaining of my term [in the Parliament], I will request the Parliament to include Ashu Zartosht in the official calendar of the country." Until that moment I had never noticed that Zoroaster is not even mentioned in the official Iranian calendar. Later, *Amordād*, the Zoroastrian Newspaper, reported that the mobedyar had actually asked the Parliament and reminded the Culture and Islamic Guidance minister (*Vazir* of the *Ershād and Farhang-e Eslāmi*) to enter the birth date of Ashu Zartosht into the calendar. This reminder was read in the Parliament's open meeting.[127] Such attitude later cost the mobedyar his nomination for the Parliament, and disqualified him from candidacy.[128]

3.1.3.3 – The Annual Commemoration of the Arab Invasion

Even though historical memory is fragmented and distributed unevenly, as Barth observes, it can be brought together on the occasion of ritual (1987). In this ethnographic study of historical consciousness, it is the disciplinary apparatus of the religious practice's demand for the community members' active participation that shapes and sustains this reconstituted consciousness of the past. In Zoroastrian religious space, historical narratives are collectively, albeit incoherently, rendered meaningful, allowing members to imagine their relations with the dominant Shi'a. Here I argue that a general feeling of distrust, resulting from a chronic and realistic sense of insecurity and historical anxiety, shapes the very modes of associational life of the Zoroastrian community. This section is evidence of the Zoroastrian sense of the travails and sacrifices of the past that embed their exclusivity. It is in this light that I understand and address challenges to my fieldwork discussed in chapter 2.

The immediate aftermath of the ancient conquests of Persia was massive numbers of dead. Zoroastrians collectively remember two such "critical events"[129] in annual commemorative rituals of general *porseh* or collective commemorations of all deaths with special attention to those of the Arab invasion and only passing acknowledgment of those of the Alexander. The first general porseh of the year goes back to the days when Iran and Turan fought and Iran lost many soldiers. While Zoroastrian narratives seem to use Turan in reference to Alexander's troops, they were in fact the Turkic tribes of central Asia.[130] A myth is associated with this war, as mentioned

in *Shāhnāme* and adopted by Zoroastrians: twelve days after that war Ārash Kamāngir (Ārash the Archer) put his life in an arrow and gave it to the *Izad* wind to settle the border dispute; it travelled two or three days and landed on *Damāvand*, the peak of the Alborz Mountains.

The second commemoration goes back to the Arab invasion, "the Arab barbaric attack," as a mobed framed it. At the ceremony, the high mobed announced, "Today is the commemoration of those who were brutally killed in the bloody war of *Tāziyān*[131] (a pejorative reference to the Arabs; lit., aggressors) against Iranians." A young mobed however framed the event differently to introduce a more inclusive ritual. He said, "We commemorate *all* those who were lost on both sides in this disastrous Arab invasion." He added, "The Arabs tried to spread this divine religion [Islam] through their culture." According to him, aside from religion, it was a clash of two cultures: the Iranian one, always generative of culture, and that of the Arab, incapable of generating culture. He went on to add that even the Arab scholars confess that the Islamic civilization flourished within the Iranian culture.

According to a speaker, "These are the two most awful wars in Iranian history" and, as the mobedyar explained, "Due to the large number of martyrs, it was impossible to hold individual porseh, thus our ancestors decided to commemorate all in a collective general porseh." On that occasion, a young mobed made a clarifying comment and said that "[w]e do not mourn death since we believe that after death our *ravān* (the faculty responsible for human decision and choice) will attain the *jāvidān* (eternal) world, thus anything that burdens this attainment is against our religion, and mourning is one of those." Nonetheless, he added, "On these two occasions we observe a general porseh to commemorate."

My first general porseh was on 14 February 2007,[132] and during the course of fieldwork I managed to attend two more. Although considered open to the public, they were advertised only among Zoroastrians, and most of the participants were Zoroastrians. Entering the Iraj Hall I felt a uniquely Zoroastrian atmosphere. A light and delightful aroma of sandalwood and the sound of chanting recitation of the Avesta by the mobed immediately induced in me a sense of calm, a quality enhanced further by the white colour theme, as opposed to the Shi'i black worn on such occasions. On a table by the door, a large crystal bowl was filled with a mixture of sugar and coffee, signifying both the sweetness and bitterness of life. Upon arrival or departure, the congregation used the provided spoon to put some in their palms first or directly threw it in their mouths, making sure not to touch the spoon with their mouths so as not to pollute it with saliva. Next to it

was another identical bowl, filled with chopped rock-candy yellowed with saffron (*nabāt*).

FIGURE 5 Portrayal of Zoroaster, Tehran Fire-Temple, Iraj Hall

Six framed photos on the walls depicted Zoroastrian holy sites, and an enormous portrait of Zoroaster that covered the middle portion of the wall, right behind the table, comprised the most significant permanent component of the Iraj Hall. This portrait, as seen in figure 5, depicts Zoroaster wearing a long, full beard and a hat that covers his long hair, as well as a shawl around his waist symbolizing *koshti* or the religious cord. He is holding a cane in his left hand and his right hand's index finger is in the air, as if he is

reproaching the audience. As Professor Choksy told me, it is modelled on (1) Tāq-e Bostān, Ardeshir II, Sasanian relief of Mithra, and (2) Raphael's "School of Athens" painting. Complying with the state requirement of such public places, two framed pictures of the Islamic revolution leaders, Khomeini and Khamenei, were also hung on the wall but relative to the size of the Zoroaster image they were minuscule, an arrangement reflective of the historical tension.

On these general porseh occasions the hall was always filled with people—about two hundred. In one of the ceremonies the men and women sat together, and in the other two events separately. I occasionally observed this voluntary gender segregation, which was criticized by some of the speakers as Shiʿi influence. Participants were offered hot tea, sugar cubes, and cookies. The ceremony always started at eight o'clock in the morning. On some occasions two mobeds performed, and on others only one did so. Clad in full priestly white vestments consisting of a robe and hat, they sat behind the table at the centre north end of the hall. Two vases and two burning candles were symmetrically placed over the table and two large bouquets of white flowers stood at the sides.

In this annual commemorative ritual of the 'martyrs' (the word is used by the community members) of the Arab wars, the high mobed, wearing his vestment and vivacious as always, identified Iranian and then world history as "the most necessary knowledge [for the community] to become familiar with." He reasoned that life is like playing a game of chess, and that every nation moves its own pieces. He added, "We have to play such a game so that at least we do not lose. History helps us to pay attention to others' movements, as others are looking at our pieces to move accordingly." Then, he narrated the following sobering historical sketch:

> During the last days of the Sasanian, every day a new king succeeded the throne, about twenty of them were announced in matter of a short period. It was the time that the Arabs found the chance to attack and with their perverted version of Islam killed all non-Muslims, as Caliph Omar ordered them to do so. Iranians made a wall of human shield by chaining themselves to each other so they could not flee; all were killed. Many Iranians were killed in war of *Nahāvand*; nonetheless, the Arabs reported to Omar that resistance was fierce. He ordered, "Kill them all and move the wheels of the mills with their blood and make my bread with that flour." They told him that "the blood gets clotted, should we mix it with water?" He permitted. Then a great Iranian emerged, his name Abu-Lolo;

> he converted to Islam, became close to Omar, and killed him. Abu-Lolo was a Zoroastrian as the majority of Iranians were at the time of the Arab occupation of Iran, and by some accounts he was even a mobed.

Themes in this narration were repeated on other occasions, such as framing the Arabs as enemies of Iranians and their understanding of Islam as perversion, thus drawing a boundary between Arab Sunnis and Iranian Shiʿa. This historical narrative enabled Zoroastrians to exploit the Shiʿa enmity towards the Sunni Arabs, hence placating Shiʿa hostility and assimilating pressures towards Zoroastrians—as we shall see, the efficacy of such strategy is subject to the political climate. Along the same lines a mobed told me, "After the Islamization of Iran, Zoroastrians were forced to leave their hometowns to live in desolate deserts, where they succeeded and produced vibrant communities." He added,

> They moved to deserts of Yazd, made aqueducts (*qanāts*) and founded villages. They made all the cisterns in these inhabitable lands, but Muslims attacked again and took over, destroyed the inscriptions so nobody would know that Zoroastrians had built them, also made two doors so Zoroastrians who were labeled 'unclean' (najes) had to use a separate door to enter.

He said that two major exoduses in the eighth and tenth centuries when many left Iran and established the Indian Parsi communities were a continuation of this internal migration that spilled over the borders.

While this Zoroastrian historical narrative depicts the Shiʿa in contrast to the Sunni Arabs and hence as insiders, other narratives make them outsiders. As we saw before, the establishment of the Shiʿi Safavids was always narrated in terms of renewed attack on Zoroastrians. According to the mobedyar, "During the Safavids Zoroastrians fought for their survival even more than before." This continued into the Shiʿi Qajar dynasty of eighteenth century Iran, when Zoroastrians were considered unclean. Sumptuary laws forced them to wear special insignia in public, and as non-Muslims they had to pay poll-tax (*jaziyeh*) in their own homeland, which the mobed recalled as the "worst of all" the penalties.

3.1.3.3.1 – *The Mobed Recitation and Collective Participation*

As is customary and was described before, when the mobed arrived all stood up out of respect and he invited them to be seated. In every general

porseh, three groups were commemorated: martyrs of the past wars, those of the recent wars with Iraq, and those who have died in the previous year. The mobed started his recitation[133] with the names of legendary Persian kings. Each name was remembered as follows: "The blessed-ravān, ravān of (name of the king), may be remembered."[134] On my inquiring about these names, a mobed told me, "These are passed down to us *sineh-be-sineh* [lit., chest-to-chest] or orally but many are lost; they go back to the wars." He said that the list varies between different cities. For instance, "[i]n Yazd they have more time as opposed to the hectic life of Tehran, so they use a more complete version of the list, their programme is fuller and longer." He added, "We use an abridged programme." While the mobed was chanting, people occasionally talked; those who had just arrived greeted each other, but the overall atmosphere remained calm.

3.1.3.3.2 – *The Booklet of the Deceased*

Copies of a booklet consisting of these names were given out at the door. In addition to the names of the kings that were recited, these names were also recited by the mobed and prayed for by all (called *tan-dorosti*, lit., physical health), as follows: "Blessings to the faravahar [as mentioned before, the particle from Ahura Mazda that Zoroastrians believe is deposited in every individual] of all the warriors who have lost their lives for Iran."[135] Then each name was remembered individually as follows: "[t]he lost-*jān* (life), living-ravān."[136] After this, there was a list dedicated "to the memory of all who have lost their lives in the unjustly waged war of Iraq against Iran: '[m]ay their ravān [soul] be blissful and heaven their place.'"[137] The third page listed the names of people submitted by their families, arranged by the date of death; each year included about a hundred names. These included the name of the deceased, the father's name, the family name, the date of death according to both the Iranian and Zoroastrian calendars, and the place of death.[138] They were remembered using a different formula: "The blessed-ravāns,"[139] and then three names, a combination of the name and the father's name, were chanted followed by: "May be remembered."[140] The mobed added the following phrase at the end: "All those who have passed away from Kiyumars [The First Human] to the Saoshyant [The Savior of Zoroastrians eschatology],[141] also ravān of fathers, mothers, ancestors, children, and nurses."

Parts of the ritual required collective participation, including generic rites that are also observed on other ritual occasions. In one of the sessions, a group of twelve male students, about fifteen years old, were brought in with

their instructors to participate, and in another one, two groups of first to the fifth graders attended. They were wearing the white religious hats, and all took part in the participatory parts of the ritual, while only some of the adults did. These participatory portions included prayers of *āfrināmeh*, a rite during which the priest would raise his right hand holding a tree-branch while reciting certain verses, and the rite of *visukhatra* done with two branches. Participants raised their fingers, first one and then two. According to mobedyar, "The little green branch is the symbol of life, meaning we do not dwell on death." This section included also the mentioning of the name of *Ahriman* when participants moved their hands down close to their left hips to signify damnation of the devil. During the hamāzury, yet another part of the rituals discussed earlier, when unity of the community is emphasized, participants rubbed their hands against their faces, a sign of proskynesis.

These commemorations afforded Zoroastrians a religiously-organized ritual space in which they narrated their own history of the Arab invasion and commemorated its aftermath. Moreover, by remembering all martyrs of the Iran wars they exhibited a strong sense of national commitment. The participatory moods and efficacy of the rituals were heightened by the invocation of the ancestral genealogies, since the families had the opportunity to supply the names of their deceased loved ones to be listed in the booklet and recited and prayed for along with the names of Zoroastrian martyrs. So, as the living families invested emotionally in the ritual, they established ties with the origin of the tradition and became integral parts of it, productive agents of an incessant history of resistance against enemies. The most hated antagonists of these histories were the Arabs, and Zoroastrians distinguished between them and Islam. As mentioned Alexander's attack was also discussed, but mostly in terms of an occasion that helped the diffusion of Iranian culture to West.

3.1.4 – *A Note on Theoretical Issues*

As must be clear by now, this ethnography shows that the dynamics of Zoroastrians' identity production unfolded in a constant dialogue with the dominant Shiʿa. Drawing on Nancy Fraser's important discussion of the public sphere, Zoroastrian ritually-facilitated counter- or alternative- religious spaces afforded a sphere for such an unfolding: a "parallel discursive arena" in which members of the Zoroastrian subordinated social group "invent[ed] and circulate[d] counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional in-

terpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (1990:67). These rituals framed Zoroastrians' collectivity within an elaborate structure of their jubilant calendar operationalized in a constant but oppositional negotiation with that of the mournful Shiʿa. Thus, as an integral part of the religious organization of certain historical representations and meanings among Shiʿa, ritual practices mediated Zoroastrians' identity through a painstaking enactment of a theologically grounded calendar. These practices recovered the generative forces of Zoroastrian cosmology and actualized it in temporal life. Through these processes of recovery and actualization of an alternative religious temporality, Zoroastrians reconstituted their memory of the past as well—remembering the Arab invasion and subsequent forceful conversions, recalling their underground religious life and the sumptuary laws that forced them to wear special insignia in public.[142] These tropes of historical consciousnesses were the cultivated shared prediscursive dispositions that Zoroastrians brought to the ritual space. Ritual performatives contributed to the maintenance of this condition as integral constituents of Zoroastrian tradition, a tradition that embodies collective imaginaries, affects, and sensibilities. Zoroastrians' exclusivity is an example of this historical condition.

As the rite of hamāzury and associated exegeses teach us, there was an emphasis on collectivity as the basis of the Zoroastrian universe. This collectivity, however, to a large extent was devoid of the Durkheimean effervescence that supposedly transports members "to a higher realm" leading to "intense hyperexcitement of physical and mental life" (1895:218). As Hefner argues, Durkheimean "effervescence," which is also echoed in Geertz's definition of religion, occurs in rituals that put the individual through an intense experience; yet, not all rituals have this intense quality. More importantly, the repeated performance of the same ritual does not overshadow and could not give credit to the variety of experienced faith (1985).

Since Zoroastrian communal gatherings were shaped in opposition to those of the dominant Shiʿa, they could better be understood in terms of Victor Turner's notion of anti-structure. As a matter of fact, Zoroastrian tradition provided a *liminoid* state for those longing for the pre-Islamic Iran. Nevertheless, they were devoid of "spontaneity and immediacy of communitas," characteristics of Turner's posit of the liminality of anti-structure (1969:132). Corresponding to the historical specificities, Zoroastrian ritual space created a dichotomy that overshadowed and outlived the operation of internal dynamics. In this context, the Zoroastrian community assumed a coherent lifeworld of its own. The exclusivity of Zoroastrian religiously-organized social life united the temporal, spatial, and relational, the three

components of social power,[143] to sustain and maintain a distinct sphere from that of the dominant Shi'a.[144]

To recapitulate, I have used a framework based on an oppositional model that accounts for Iranian Zoroastrians' universe countering that of the Shi'a: Within the exclusive calendric ritual spaces, members of the Zoroastrian subordinated community experienced their distinct spacio-temporality, and through active participation, edifying religious addresses, and ethical parables were encouraged to exemplify religious decorum and inhabit religious selves.

3.2 – The Occasional Gatherings

The community held many events that were not part of the calendric cycles. Among them, some were organized as informative exhibitions for non-Zoroastrians, for instance exhibitions of Zoroastrian rites or photo galleries of sacred places discussed below. Others were internal events of great significance to the vitality of the community, such as ritual initiations, which provided an incentive for the Zoroastrian youth to become members, or the ritual initiation of new mobeds. Other events such as celebrations of the reopening of Zoroastrians' library, clinic, and hospital, all originally established by Zoroastrian philanthropists, re-introduced and honoured the community's role-models and maintained the links to the past. Most importantly, they exposed a tension in the community since some members questioned the decision to serve non-Zoroastrians in these facilities and endowments. Only in these reopening ceremonies was a state official usually invited, indicating that in projects that transcended the Zoroastrian community and engaged the general public involvement of the state was imperative. But more importantly, the participation of a state official as a sign of cooperation served to assuage Zoroastrians' harsh memories of the Shi'a and to give the congregation a sense of security and participation in the larger community. An unintended, but inevitable, consequence was a discursive widening of Shi'a/Sunni divide, making it possible to blame the Arabs for Zoroastrians' suffering, hence expiating the Iranian Shi'a, at least partially. I address these issues fully in chapter 6.

There were many events that Zoroastrian women and students organized. For instance, as part of its annual tradition, the Zoroastrian Student Association celebrated the birthday of Ferdowsi, the epic poet of Persian speaking peoples, in the month of May. This is significant, in particular

due to the fact that during the initial years after the Islamic Revolution copies of Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāme* were purged from bookstores and omitted from university curricula. I will cover most of the occasional gatherings—exhibitions, competitions, annual commemorations, reopening of library and clinic—in the following chapters. Here, I will address two: a ritual commemoration of the deceased and the mobed's initiation of *nozuti*. While both are occasional, the former is a newly developed ritual and the latter is an established one.

3.2.1 – *Death Rituals and the Public Porseh*

Zoroastrian death rituals are elaborate and long, partially rooted in the belief "that when an individual dies, his or her soul sits near the head of the corpse for three days and nights" (Choksy 1989:127). An informant explained to me that "Zoroastrians remember their dead on the third, fourth, and thirtieth day after passing, then in the first anniversary or *sāl* (lit., year) that repeats annually for thirty years. Moreover, every month of the first year, on the day of passing, they observe rite of *ruzeh* (*ruz* means day)." Commemorative rituals of the first, third, and fourth days after passing are when families hold private gatherings, whereas the public porseh (lit., to convey condolences) is usually held during the first two weeks after the passing. Referring to this prolonged commemoration, an informant told me, "As you know, we Iranians are dead-worshipers (*mordeh-parast*)." It reminded me of Rumi's famous poetic criticism of this attitude: "[o]nly when I die do you become happy with me, why are we dead-worshipers and enemies of life?"[145]

I was told that the first day, when the corpse is buried,[146] people come to the deceased's house and are served simple food. In the early morning of the fourth day the deceased's soul is believed to be severed from this world. My informant told me that traditionally the third afternoon was reserved for women to visit the family, and the fourth morning for men. She added, "It did not mean that they do not let the opposite sexes in." Jokingly she said, "Non-Zoroastrians were not kicked out either." On *si-ruzeh*, or the thirtieth day after passing, the deceased's family invites relatives and close friends. In contrast, the public porseh within two weeks is open to the public—it was the only occasion on which the customary white hat was not worn. As mentioned earlier, moreover, at the monthly 'celebration' of farvardingan the whole community visits the graveyard, during the first month of the year.

While porseh is a standard Zoroastrian practice on the fourth day after death, the public porseh, of which I attended more than twenty, is a relatively new ritual and not one of the "traditional" commemorative rituals. It is an adaptation of old forms to the complexities of contemporary life. I asked around and gathered that in 1963 (1342 h.) the head of the Zoroastrian Association initiated this ritual as a way to provide all, Zoroastrians and non-Zoroastrians, with a chance to pay their respects to the deceased in one single ceremony. Later, in 1980 (1359 h.), a prominent Zoroastrian suggested the inclusion of a speaker in the programme. The programme, moreover, has changed from the time it became an established ceremony; for instance, now they use a recorded tape after a mobed's recitation. My informant in the fire-temple told me that "this tape is carefully put together since many outsiders participate and it is important what they hear." She added, "Also recently there were some discussions about changing certain elements of the ceremony again."

The mobedyar called porseh "a new religious rite (*āiyin*), a product of the modern world." On another occasion, he explained, "Since informing people is not easy in large cities, people might not be informed promptly of traditional ceremonies, thus we take advantage of this assigned day to participate; this is the first advantage of porseh. But secondly, as a community we have the opportunity to learn about the deceased." Once at the fire-temple, an elderly man told me that until thirty years ago sāl was observed every year, but now many are satisfied with the public porseh. Hence, it is even replacing the old rituals.

On my inquiring into the proper dress for this public commemorative ritual, my informant told me, "White is the proper colour." As mentioned, the white spectacle of Zoroastrian death rituals that symbolizes purity of the soul provided a sharp contrast to the black attire of the Shi'a. The idea conveyed to me was that death was supposed to be a happy occasion and not a cause for mourning. The question then is how these elaborate commemorative rites and rituals were understood in the absence of mourning. While I address this question later, simply put, commemorations were framed as ways to comfort the deceased's family and to honour the ravān and faravshis (faravahar) of the dead.

The programme was structured in three parts. The first included the mobed's Avesta recitation and a recorded tape in Persian. The second part was a speech, which was delivered half way into the programme; and the third was recitation and playing the recorded tape again. In the narrow hallway outside the Iraj Hall, young men all wearing ties and suits ush-

ered people. The congregation was mostly in its fifties and above, but there were some young people and occasionally children. Photos of the deceased were centred on the mobed table between two candles. There were several bouquets of flowers and a piece of paper recorded the names of benefactor(s). In addition to the Iraj Hall, occasionally the adjacent Khosravi Hall was used to accommodate larger crowds. This happened on rare occasions, mostly when the ceremony was being concurrently held for two people.

Among the congregation, there were usually more women than men. Men mostly wore suits and some wore ties. Women almost all wore white headscarves; some changed their headscarves to a white one on the spot. There were always some non-Zoroastrians who looked around surprised: If women, they mostly wore the black *chador*, and the greeting used by them was the Islamic *salām*, so they were easily detectable—as mentioned before, Zoroastrians use different greetings amongst themselves such as "good day, good morning, etc.," and never use salām.

During the programme, a speaker gave a speech that addressed different topics. Most of the audience did not stay for the whole ceremony, but they tried to be present for the speech portion of the programme, the contents of which I have used throughout this book. The programme lasted about two hours and this speech was given during the second half, when the hall was filled with people. Since outsiders also participated, it gave the community a chance to share tenets of their religions. The mobeds' recitation of Avesta was another part of the porseh, a link to the familiar that validated the ceremony within the Zoroastrian ritual tradition.

Entering the room, people expressed a sense of respect. Everyone who passed the door looked immediately to their left, knowing that men and women from the deceased's family were there. Some shook hands and kissed the family members on their cheeks; others simply nodded without approaching them. Women, in particular non Zoroastrians, would go to the females of the family and pay respect by hugging and kissing them. In most instances, in addition to the ushers, men from the deceased's family remained standing while women sat throughout the programme; but this was not a rule and sometimes the men sat as well. In this case, when new people entered the hall they rose to their feet again and did not sit until the new person was seated. They stood up when people left as well. If the new arrival made eye contact with others they acknowledged by nodding, accompanied by a minor bowing gesture, half-risen from their seats.

Two men served tea and biscuits/dates the whole time. They wore dark blue trousers and a waistcoat with a black bow-tie and white shirt. On their suits there was a faravahar lapel pin. Small spoons were provided with the tea. During the very last part of the programme, the mobed's recitation, all rose to their feet. At this time, one of the regular serving men entered, now wearing a white hat, carrying a blazing urn brought from the adjacent fire-temple, right behind the Iraj Hall. In the end, those who wished to do so put some of the prepared *esfand* (wild rue) on the fire and the smoke filled the air, after which they performed the hāmazury rite. Thereafter, the mobed almost always immediately left, and while leaving he nodded to the men and women of the deceased's family. Most people left by the main door in order to have a chance to show respect to the family by a nod or hand shake, or an exchange of formalities, such as "may his ravān be joyous, and may all deceased be forgiven."[147]

This public porseh, then, is an adaptive response to the exigencies of busy modern life that makes it hard to observe the elaborate tradition both for the deceased's family that has to host visitors and for the members to attend. It shows the flexibility of the community in coping with the challenge of maintaining and observing intricate traditional rites. While it does not abrogate them, it does lift the burden to a certain extent. Thus, Zoroastrians not only modify the old rituals, but invent new ones. This malleability that accommodates modern life improves internal ties, and provides a space for non-Zoroastrians to attend and redress their misconceptions as well, such as the accusation that Zoroastrians are fire-worshipers. Moreover, modern technology—specifically recorded informative and religious cassette tapes—has become an integral part of public porseh. Zoroastrian history of religious and political limitations indicates the mutable propriety of rituals, their transformation and use in the new context. Some Zoroastrian rituals are therefore protean modes of cultural responses, for the most part, in a dialogue with the dominant Shiʿa and not static cultural archetypes, or in the strict sense *unchangeable*: formalized, to use Maurice Bloch's phrase (1989).

In order to stress the importance of the renovation and adaptation of rituals, speakers regularly used Zoroastrians' highly regarded notion of *kherad* (lit., wisdom). The mobedyar emphasized the centrality of being knowledgeable (*kherad-mandi*) about Zoroaster's teachings "so one could advance with harmony." He expounded that "[i]n the past, people used to base their lives on imaginations (*pendārs*) without thought, and in order to understand the truth of a matter they mainly relied on their feelings."

He concluded that "Zoroaster taught us that this imagination results in the production of myth and superstitions." Accordingly, there was a claim that they are not practising a set of unchanged religious ordinances; rather, they struggle to meet new challenges. The authoritative discourse occasionally addressed the problematics of customs that were not compatible with the modern world. For instance, at the New Year, the high mobed discussed the significance of the Avestan term *fereshgar*[148] (lit., renovate) and suggested that [w]e need to learn about truth (*haqiqat*) and incorporate it in our lives; we also need to know the reality (*vāqeʿiyat*) of life and if customs have become burdensome then we get rid of them. Nonetheless, 'fereshgar' does not mean that we change everything, as there are beneficial traditions that we do not change."

FIGURE 6 A Public Porseh, Tehran Fire-Temple Iraj Hall

Similarly, once a speaker remarked that in this twenty-first century Zoroastrians had to follow a more modern religion and get rid of burdensome customs. She added, "Let's this New Year change the burdensome tradition when the whole community goes to the homes of those who have lost dear ones on the first day of the New Year (this is a tradition observed by all Iranians). Just let the close kin spend time together." Then she suggested, "Let's

just take advantage of the public porseh next Wednesday and see each other then." As we shall see further, kherad is a fundamental religious concept that allows believers to make changes while guaranteeing religious continuity in a new historical context.

3.2.2 – *The Mobed-Initiation Ritual of* Nozuti

Zoroastrian priests have a distant though nonetheless necessary presence in the life of the community. Thus, the renewal of this institution is an important part of the community's survival. Priests are central to monthly celebrations, Gāhambār thanksgiving rituals, porseh and other commemorative rituals, maintenance of the fire in the temple, marriage, and initiations. Due to the problem with the hereditary monopoly of religious knowledge, an ongoing debate has begun about whether the priesthood was originally a learned position. As briefly mentioned earlier, the contemporary discourse was that the founder of the Sasanian dynasty supposedly created a system of *mobed-shāhi* (theocracy), and subsequently Zoroastrian mobeds became an integral part of the Sasanian state. The king was perceived to be Ahura Mazda's vicegerent on earth, as is depicted in the *Bistun* inscription that King Darius I the Great (522–486 BC) receives Faravahar's blessing, and in the *Tāq-e Bostān* relief wherein Khosrau II (628–591 BC) is depicted in a coronation ritual being crowned by two angels. When I asked a knowledgeable informant whether there was a way to *become* a mobed, he said, "From the Sasanian period it became hereditary. Thus there is nothing like the *Feyziyyeh* or Shi'i seminaries for one to attend and become a mobed." However, another informant told me a Mobedyar can discharge *all* the responsibilities of a mobed after completing the necessary education.

On Friday, 23 May 2008, I participated in a rare mobed initiation ceremony called nozuti. A graduation ceremony exclusive to Zoroastrian participants, it was publicized only among them.[149] At the door a young man asked me if I had any business there. It was the only occasion on which, even after I mentioned the name of the head of the Association, the guard took his time and called him to confirm. Older people sat on a balcony outside the Khosravi Hall of the fire-temple complex, while families took pictures of the initiate or *nozut*.

The term nozut (*no-zād*) refers to a person who is newly born to *mobedhood*. While Zoroastrians that I encountered had a basic knowledge of their religion, a nozut stands at a higher level and is capable of answering questions. The high mobed said that:

> *Zut* refers to the mobed who leads a ceremony or rite, and *nozut* is the person who has just recently been qualified to do so. With more study, he can achieve the status of *Avesta-dān* (lit., someone who knows the Avesta), but at the nozut stage he is still an *Avesta-khān* (lit., someone who recites the Avesta).

In a pamphlet distributed during the ceremony I read that:

> The *head Avesta-khān* in a ceremony is called *zut* and that the rest are called *raspi* or *raetveshkar* or *ritushkar*. In the past, the nozuti ceremony would take three days and after that the nozut could participate in all the religious affairs accompanied by other mobeds. After marriage, he could perform alone at Zoroastrian homes.

According to the same pamphlet, the Avesta refers to mobeds as *Maghoo paiti mag bod* or *mogh bod*. They have historically been responsible for learning to read *Din Dabireh* and to chant, and to memorize the Avesta; also they should know the principles and traditions and rites, rituals and the science of the time. The mobeds' committee organizes the spiritual affairs of the community. In the past, they were in several groups:

1. *Yazshangār* or Avesta-khān mobeds who would know by heart the seventy two *Haiti* or *hāt* of the *Yasnā* and could recite them correctly.
2. *Hirbod* mobeds who knew the religious knowledge, philosophy, traditions, but who were busy mostly educating others.
3. *Dasturān* who had achieved a high level of knowledge and could answer religious questions. During the Sasanian period they were consulted by the kings and were given the name of *dastur*, which means vizier.
4. Then there were the *andarziān* whose job was the dispensing of advice, giving religious and ethical lectures and leading and educating people in order to bring them to the right path.
5. The fifth is the *zaratoshtrutama* who was charged as the head of the *mogi's* society. After the passing of Zoroaster they were known for their knowledge and devotion.

As the pamphlet stated:

> This design provided a system in which there were always knowledgeable mobeds who never chose their own wealth over peoples. Rather, they encouraged Zoroastrians to give *dād* and *dahesh* (generousity), and

> Gāhambār, also to participate in public welfare. They never made themselves out to be saints and never made people kiss their hands or bow to them. They have always been the spiritual bones and nerves of the community. They never made a new sect, even the greatest of them, namely Tansar, Kertir, Meh Aspand, and Fanabagh. So throughout the annals of history our religion and our sect has been the Zoroastrian religion.

Though mobeds enjoy a certain respect, they were not venerated in their interactions with other members—it was interesting for me that when the high mobed was taking pictures in a competition for the design of a fire-temple (discussed in chapter 6), one of the Zoroastrians responsible told him it was prohibited to take pictures. In the end he was told to go ahead and take pictures, since "you want to take them to the Mobeds' Council." However, nobody ever stopped me and others who were taking pictures. As the high mobed recounted many times and the abovementioned pamphlet described, the Mobeds' Council was considered the highest religious authority and no single individual had the right to issue rulings, even the head of the Council, and all had to abide by the legislation of the Zoroastrian Association. This emphasis on the rule of law and equality created yet another contrast with the Shi'a religion that gives the religious authority or mulla a privileged status.

Returning to the ritual, the mobeds arrived in the backyard of the Iraj Hall, north of the fire-temple (Figure 7). For two days prior to this they had been performing and reciting the Avesta. For those days and nights the initiate was separated from society until several mobeds went to his house and crowned him with a *tāj*. In addition to the tāj, the *nozut* was clothed with a large turban similar to that of the Shi'i mullas, but ornamented with bright metals and hanging chains. His face was covered with the white cloth of the taj, which a large and heavy piece of gold pulled down, fixed over his ear with a bandana (Figure 8).

In front, the eldest mobed held the nozut's left hand in his right hand. Another mobed, whose left hand was on a green shawl on the nozut's shoulder, had a large pyramid-like green tray on his head. At the front and back of the pyramid were two mirrors and a bundle of six boughs of pomegranate or fig tree, covered with a piece of cloth. The front mirror symbolized the light of the path, and the rear mirror was a reminder not to forget the past. The nozut held a metal bar, called *verd*, in his right hand and waved it like a fan, "symbolizing the movement of the world," the pamphlet said. The group arrived in the yard where in the middle a table

FIGURE 7 Nozuti, Tehran Fire-Temple

FIGURE 8 Nozuti, Tehran Fire-Temple

and a huge brazier were set up. In a circle, they circled the table three times. Two women attired in traditional colourful clothing and several children wearing white followed them. The ceremony continued in the Khosravi Hall while the nozut returned to the temple to finish the last round of his recitation. Thereafter he was called a mobed. Among the many ceremonies that he has held since, one was on 5 March 2009 when he held a jashan ceremony in the Sasanian fire-temple of Rege, a massive structure that is now an archaeological site.

3.2.3 – *The Initiation Ritual*

While Zoroastrians are taught religious ways from childhood, at the age of fifteen they officially go through an initiation ritual of *sedreh/sudre-pushān*[150] where, in the presence of the community and with the help of a mobed, they become invested with sedreh or the religious white undershirt, as well as *koshti* or the religious cord. An informed student explained to me that "in Zoroastrian religion, when children reach a level of understanding and their parents also agree with their will to officially become a Zoroastrian this ceremony is held, wherein the dress is ceremonially worn."[151] Sedreh has a little pocket at the lower part, called *karkheh*, the equivalent of the Islamic *savāb* (lit., benefit); it encourages one to accumulate good deeds. As explained by a mobed, this pocket is understood to be a remnant of the pre-Zoroaster armour with a pocket for a dagger. It means that Zoroaster has transformed the old culture of war to that of peace; an explanation (repeated on many occasions) that implicitly criticized the Islamic notion of *jihād* or religious war. Koshti or a religious cord with two knots in the front and two in the back symboizes the four aforementioned ākhshij or purifying elements: water, earth, fire, and air. Koshti is made of seventy two[152] threads as signs of the seventy two hāts of Yasnā; the material is sheep's wool, and it was noted that a "sheep does not hurt anybody."[153]

Wearing of the koshti is accompanied by the proclamation of *iqrār*, which is an Arabic term, a formula in which the initiate proclaims: "I choose the *Mazdayasnā* religion [a term internally and interchangeably used for Zoroastrian religion; lit., 'Worshiper of God'] and Zoroaster as its founder." The mobedyar stated that "the most important part of this creed is when we say: 'I choose good deeds over bad ones, and I will make utterances to make others happy,' also when we anathematize Ahrimaan three times." So, in a ritual ceremony in the presence of the mobed, the initiate officially vows to

enter the cosmological fight and join with the forces of good against evil and is also committed to the happiness of mankind.[154]

The cord is one of the most significant (ritual) markers of a Zoroastrian, as in other rituals, including Gāhambār, there is a rite when male members untie and retie it during the ceremony. Its significance became clearer to me when, during a session introducing the Zoroastrian parliamentary candidates, one of them exposed his koshti and announced that he had always worn it. I observed that in most of the rituals where participants were called upon to take part in the tying and untying of this cord only a handful did so. The following historical glimpse sheds some light on the tension between the koshti's importance and the failure to observe the tying and untying rite. Rashna Writer points out:

> The *kusti*, being the outwards badge of membership of the Zoroastrian fraternity, was the obvious target of derision, and as from 8th century and well beyond, Arab tax collectors would forcibly remove the sacred girdle from the waist of the Zoroastrian, hang it around his neck, and ridicule the individual and his God. (Writer 1994:13).

"Not surprisingly," she adds, "therefore, even among the contemporary Zoroastrian community in Iran, the *kusti* is worn on religious occasions or to visit a fire temple, rather than its continuous wearing as prescribed in the texts" (Ibid).

After this official initiation, the initiate is religiously obligated to perform the ritual of daily prayer five times a day.[155] Themes of the daily obligatory prayer are repeated in Zoroastrian discourses. Due to the importance of this daily ritual, let us take a quick look at these themes here. In a discussion of Zoroastrian identity the mobedyar explained a recurring universalist theme of the obligatory prayer in which "we do not ask anything for ourselves; rather, we request good things for all the wise people; if we are among the well-wishers, many also pray for us." Adapting to the realities of modern life he added, "Our life pattern has changed and we cannot expect our youth to wake up early to pray towards the rising sun anymore"; nonetheless, he emphasized that "their identity has not changed." He addressed the three dimensions of human identity as arguably mentioned in the Avesta that in turn is entered the ritual of daily obligatory prayer: the *individual* with the faculty of thought and power to make tools, the *social*, and the *religious*. Then he mentioned that in the ritual of obligatory prayer, "we are reminded about these qualities five times a day. In the first portion, mentioning of

the word *mānoo* refers to home, to our personal identity." Accordingly, "in Zoroastrian culture self-disciplining is superior, since when individuals are disciplined the social follows."[156] He emphasized that kherad or wisdom also transcends other qualities and that if our goal is to achieve the highest status of *Ashāvahishta*, "[i]t is better to commit good deeds incognito."

The ideal of being in tune with the collectivity of "wise people and well-wishers" achieved through individual prayer was at the centre of many talks by the mobedyar regarding Zoroastrian spiritual identity. For instance, he said,

> Zoroastrian's prayer consists of sending salutations to all good people, wishing their light to be increased and to be healthy—since a healthy body is the location of a healthy ravān and knowledge—wishing them a joyous wealth, since there are many who have wealth but are not happy and in the end, asking for good children.

He went on to explain that *Zan Tooini* in the prayer refers to the tribe or city which constitutes one's social identity, and finally a reference to Zoroaster completes our religious identity. We shall further see how these themes of universalism, continuity, an emphasis on adaptation to modern rationality through the religious concept of kherad or wisdom, and, most importantly, complex relations with the Shi'i tradition, constitute the core of Zoroastrian discourses.

3.3 – Conclusion

These celebrations that gathered the small Zoroastrian community together in the megacity of Tehran and maintained internal ties were organized by cooperation among different Zoroastrian Associations and Committees—the Mobeds' Council, the Zoroastrian Association, the Women's Association, and the administration of Firuz-Bahram high school, and Sepand kindergarten. Further the high mobed charged the newly elected representative to the parliament with "the task of harmonizing different committees." The high mobed once addressed the contributions of Zoroastrian celebrations to sustaining "four-thousand years of history," and recited the following poem: "They broke us hundred times but we are still standing." Every single speaker and community member I spoke with acknowledged the importance of their celebrations, not just as expressions of resilience, but also

as signs of a continuing vitality. On occasion, the mobedyar employed a supposedly German expression that "the vibrancy of a nation can be determined by the number of celebrations it observes." One of my informants who reduced the role of the mobeds to a ceremonial one theorized that "all these ceremonies were for the sake of gathering the community together, where people learn about each other, and find out if someone needs help or is in trouble so that they would mobilize the community. This is the most important function of these gatherings."

These celebrations contributed to the preservation of cultural practices, internal revitalization, and the transfer of religious knowledge to the next generations. In them boys and girls mingled freely to facilitate and secure the community's endogamous tradition, as we shall see later. Moreover, they engaged the young in the programme and encouraged recognition of their achievements as part of the conscious revitalizing effort. The integrated repetitive cycles of rituals and the recurring themes of narratives provided fertile ground for the creation of the Zoroastrian lifeworld. In monthly celebrations as well in Gāhambār rituals, the Zoroastrian calendar meticulously fused the spiritual with the temporal. These rituals emphasized that one needs to commit to Zoroastrian principles of worship, purity, generosity, and righteousness, in order to attain spirituality as the ultimate human goal on earth. The ritual initiation provided the social context in which one became religiously empowered and required to do good deeds as symbolized by the little pocket in the religious shirt, and also to commit to Avesta and to be peaceful as symbolized by the religious cord. After this initiation, religious ordinances ought to be observed, among them the ritual of obligatory prayer, a daily reminder to wish everyone well and pray for all, while strengthening religious commitment through self-discipline. As opposed to this, as an individually performed ritual, the Gāhambār was concerned with the ritual enactment of generosity in a communal format.

In addition to these, the monthly celebrations and annual commemorations were all practices and methods by which members were reminded of principles of the Zoroastrian religion and required to observe them as well. The mobeds, who chanted the holy Avesta and the acolytes who provided theological exegeses both emphasized contemporary interpretations, foregrounded in the religious notion of kherad or wisdom, and adapted tradition to the exigencies of busy modern lives. At the same time, they stressed genealogical connections with the past as legitimizing links for the imagination of the religious self in the present. Participation in these ritualized practices of collective discipline had an imprint on affects and sensibilities

and helped to transform the priestly and religious knowledge into individuals' religious consciousness. Aware of this function, the high mobed recounted that the observation of collective rituals "facilitates the internalization of religion and then hopefully we act according to the principles of our religion." In Hirschkind's model of religious audition, "[i]t is the continual retelling, refashioning, and audition of these narratives, until they have become an ever-present memory anchored in one's heart, that makes moral action within one's life possible" (2006:189).

Each Zoroastrian celebration, calendric and occasional, enabled an alternative religious space to circulate a distinct socio-discursive lifeworld under the dominant Shi'a. Although *not* coherent in itself in terms of knowledge distribution and religious experience, nonetheless a social coherence emerged among the Zoroastrian community when their religious space was positioned in an oppositional relationship with that of the Shi'a. By confirming a claim to jubilation vis-à-vis Shi'i mourning, Zoroastrian events were different from the Shi'a and established cultural and emotional boundaries, a distinction felt even more and collectively when many Zoroastrian celebrations were cancelled, circumscribed by the prohibitive demands of the Shi'i calendar. Hence, Zoroastrians' circulatory ritual world was an example of "a scene in which a dominated group aspires to re-create itself as a public and, in doing so, finds itself in conflict not only with the dominant social group, but also with the norms that constitute the dominant culture as a public" (Warner 2002b:80).

Thus, all aspects of Zoroastrian ritual space were informed by what is uniquely Zoroastrian, and some by opposition to the Shi'a: the ushering in performed by the women clad in colourful traditional clothing who proffered rosewater and noql, the white vestments of the priests and their chanting of the Avesta in the Pahlavi language, the edifying religious parables and theological exegeses, the free mingling of men and women, the focus on jubilation, the architectural characteristics of the fire-temple and Shah Varahram-Izad with fire sanctums and its own rites, the aroma of sandalwood, the proskynesis gestures, etc. Therefore, the produced identity and inhabited religious self were distinctly Zoroastrian. In this space, to draw on Hirschkind's study of cultural organization of sensory experiences one more time, "[o]bjects are endowed with histories of sensory experience, stratified with a plurality of perceptual possibilities: those that become available to consciousness or integral to human action will depend on the capacities the subject brings to bear, and thus on the perceptual regimes that work to organize attention and inattention" (2006:29).

Zoroastrian historical consciousness of the Arab invasion articulated both cultural and genealogical links between the Shiʿa and the Arabs, attaching the imageries of the Zoroastrian tumultuous past to, and hence blaming, the contemporary Shiʿa. Thus Zoroastrian social imaginaries—the underlying modes of associational life—embodied a line of religiously-informed resistance towards the ruling Shiʿa, albeit supplemented by references to the earlier oppression by the Arabs. In particular, the imageries of this turbulent past saturated the performative focus of the rituals that commemorated 'martyrs' of the Arab invasion. I employed these imageries in order to understand the exclusivity of the Zoroastrian community. In the next two chapters, I will focus on Zoroastrian discursive utterances and further argue that by challenging the Shiʿi hegemonic norms of Iranian culture that have become the *de facto*, exhaustive, and monopolizing representative of Iranianness, the Zoroastrian configuration of knowledge tradition encoded and evoked cultural and historical resources to carve out a habitable and legitimate niche for itself in present-day Iran—a space for Zoroastrian transcendent and oppositional identity.

CHAPTER 4

Claiming Authenticity in Shiʿi-Dominated Iranian Culture

Having discussed Zoroastrian theologically grounded ritual cycles and elaborate ceremonies that facilitate the formation of distinct spatio-temporalities from the ruling Shiʿa, this chapter focuses on the socio-discursive conventions that condition these spheres, performatives that respond to the dilemma of Shiʿi-dominated Iranian culture. As Zoroastrians that I worked with understood, after the Arab invasion a fusion of Islam with Zoroastrian tradition resulted in the gradual emergence of Shiʿi Islam that eventually dominated the Iranian cultural and religious milieu. The Arab dominance produced the Iranian/Islamic dichotomy, and it looked as if this construct predated the conquest and accounted for it. At the same time Islamic textual and institutional practices shaped the spiritual and just Islamic as opposed to the oppressive and unjust Iranian.[157] If approached within the framework developed in modern colonialism literature, the Islamization of Iran could be a cultural project of control which the indigenous population resists.[158]

Zoroastrians' discursive acts of identity construction that I discuss here constantly manoeuvre around national, religious, and ethnic categories. Sometimes by coalescing, and sometimes by dividing Zoroastrian, Iranian, Shiʿa, Sunni, and Arab tropes, this manoeuvring was a response to two main concerns of the community: *survival* and *distinctiveness*. On the one hand, when the survival threat underlied the discursive inquiry—that is, when faced the fact that the community was shrinking—and it begged the question of changing policies to accept new converts and discontinue isolating those who marry outsiders, instead, they articulated, imagined, and traced the Zoroastrain survival and continuity within Iranian culture. This articulation of Iranian culture entails that Zoroaster's teachings as formulated in his surviving words, the *Gāthās*, have provided the ontological underpinnings of the Iranian ethical and moral universe. It also involves the claim that the social realization of such teachings by Zoroastrians have brought Iranians their cultural practices. This formulation of continuity is detached from and transcends the dwindling body of original believers. In this case a

notion of culture that is open, historical, shifting, and universal was employed. Such abstracted and universalized notion of survival, that transcends the original body of believers trivializes the extinction threat that the community faced, and thus defends the abovementioned protective and exclusive policies of endogamy and excommunication. By the abstracted and universalized notion of survival, I am referring to the community's belief that Zoroaster's teachings and Zoroastrian practices through which their survival has been secured are diffused throughout the world.

On the other hand, maintaining distinctiveness, this discourse regards the *Gāthās* as having been preserved and manifested fully *only* in the original body of the believers—hence the communal emphasis on ceremonies, which fix them as an essence of pre-Islamic Iran. So, their authenticity encompasses the two methods by which any entity would be characterized as authentic, as addressed by Lindholm: "genealogical or historical (*origin*) and identity or correspondence (*content*)" (2008:2). In this discourse, Zoroastrians who are the exclusive proprietors of authentic Iranian culture become the standard bearers of a culture that is bounded, ahistorical, static, and racialized. Thus, although in the former cultural genealogical mode, Zoroastrians' survival imageries are discursively expanded to an abstracted and universal notion, the survival praxes of the community are still phenomena inextricably bound to the existence of an original, but irreplaceably diminishing, human community that excludes all non-Zoroastrians.

Accordingly, while Iranian culture at the expansive end of this spectrum is inclusive of all Iranians (rather, all humanity), and could be ideational or phenomenal, its exclusive version fuses the two essences of authentic Iranian culture, as understood by Zoroastrians: the Gāthic ideational with the Zoroastrian phenomenal, which includes the original body of the believers and their particular patterns of practices.[159] To reiterate, the logic that regulates this discursive oscillation between the inclusive and exclusive notions of Iranian culture entails a meticulous navigation around, and conflation of, religion, ethnicity, and nationality in order to engage Zoroastrian concerns of survival and distinctiveness. Nonetheless, in both modes the community articulated its pedigree, thus appropriating the proprietorship of Iranianness.

The expandable notion of culture employed in this process is closely linked to the condition of possibilities in contemporary Iran and also the previous secular Pahlavi dynasty 1925–1979. The nation-building project put forward by Reza Shah Pahlavi and his son Mohammad Reza elevated the Zoroastrian community to a secular pre-Islamic national resource in order

to undermine the Shiʿi clergy. After the Islamic Revolution, however, the ban on promoting, as well as the tight control on practising, any religion other than the Shiʿi tradition resulted in the community itself regarding the Zoroastrian religion as culture. Zoroastrians who were morphed into the emblem of Iranian culture during the reign of the Pahlavi now had found a way to talk about their religion openly but through a culture concept entrenched in a history that embodied centuries of suffering, marked by a glorious past and the collapse of the Iranian/Zoroastrian kings. As we see, the discursive navigation within this expandable notion of culture is a religiously-informed construct of the past in the present that embeds the adopted protective policies both to accommodate the regnant Shiʿi prohibition on conversion from Islam to other religions, and to protect the community against infiltration by outsiders.

This discursive formulation of survival and distinctiveness has a performative quality, as it reiterates Zoroastrian teachings and ancestors and cites genealogical ties to establish Zoroastrians as the original creators of Iranian culture. For Zoroastrians, therefore, as the past is a system for arranging Iranian culture—dependent on specific assumptions, narratives, and voices that continue to have important platforms throughout the Zoroastrian and Shiʿi social and political order—culture is a system for arranging the past as well. Zoroastrians' contemporary readings of their history that imagine them as the origin of Iranian culture, and perform it through their roles as the current substitutes and transmitters of the past via the present to the future of Iran is an example of historical consciousness or historicity that, as Lambek writes, "suffuse[es] and emerg[es] from production and practice, rather than simply that objectified knowledge of the past" (2002:17).

In what follows, first I address how Zoroastrians constructed their authority vis-à-vis Iranian culture and imagined their originary status by claiming to be the indigenous Iranians and by articulating Iranian culture as fundamentally a Gāthic creation. They also claimed to be the source of social realization of that Gāthic ideational, and thus the true proprietor of existing Iranian cultural practices. Then, I examine the enactment of these genealogies through activities that promoted and preserved the "authentic" Iranian culture, as Zoroastrian understood it. In so doing, the chapter presents two interlinked representatives from Iranian culture in order to outline the general model by which practitioners reclaimed their pre-eminence: the religious rites of *sofreh* and Iranian Islamic mysticism. These two have become interlinked only in Zoroastrians' contemporary exegeses. Such a creative

way of understanding, revising, and reformulating the present and the past with respect to one another, the poiesis and phronesis, marks Zoroastrians as the originators of Iranian mystical traditions, which are understood among the loftiest Iranian theological enterprises. In the end, I discuss how the Zoroastrians that I worked with assumed role of cultural critics, address their evaluations of Iranian popular culture, and explain their logic, which embeds Zoroastrian theology and teachings. The labour that an expandable notion of culture does is crucial to accomplishing this Zoroastrians' claim. So, whereas the previous chapter mostly focused on phronesis, the historical dispositions "including understandings of temporal passage and human agency," the four issues that I discuss here are instances of poiesis, another aspect of Lambek's historical consciousness that entails "the continuous, creative bringing into being and crafting of the past in the present and of the present in respect to the past" (2002:17).

4.1 – Establishing Authority over Iranian Culture

4.1.1 – *The Indigenous Iranians*

Zoroastrians have a special tie to Iran which, as the incubator of their religion, transcends identification merely as a homeland. Rather, it embodies spiritual dispositions linked to the imagined original emergence of their eponymous prophet Zoroaster,[160] a land filled with Zoroastrian sacred and pilgrimage sites. A high ranking state official who was invited to a Zoroastrian ceremony[161] told me that "[n]o one has ever found a Zoroastrian who has betrayed Iran." Therefore, I was surprised when the high mobed in one of his addresses said, "In some crowds, when there is a mention of Zoroastrians they think we are anti Iran."

4.1.2 – *The Gāthās, the Ideational Source of Iranian Culture*

In the early stages of my fieldwork, when a mobed learned I was a student of cultural anthropology, he told me, "You need to study the *Gāthās* in order to learn the true Iranian culture [*farhang*], which is about *javānmardi*." His reference was a statement of cultural proprietorship, for javānmardi represents a congeries of Iranian moral, ethical, and religious codes. Fariba Adelkhah suggests that the essential characters of a, maybe even "apocryphal," javānmard include those of "a sense of family, of sharing, of giving,

and of justice," and qualities crowned by the courage to sacrifice one's life for others (1999:4).[162]

Such religiously-constructed model of Iranian culture that I was presented with is an ideational one, a culture based fundamentally on Zoroaster's teachings. My informants maintained that his teachings as formulated in the *Gāthās*, which is presumed to be the authentic utterances of Zoroaster, have laid the foundation of Iranian culture. Five in number, like the Davidic psalms, the *Gāthās* are divided into seventeen groups and have somewhat different dialects from the rest of the Avesta, wherein Zoroastrians' rituals, customs, and traditions are described.[163] Scholars of the *Gāthās* consider them to be lofty hymns,[164] generally very difficult to interpret,[165] "with multiple levels of reference: the human and divine worlds; the sacrifice, which connects the two; and the world of the poet" (Skjaervo 2011:7).[166] It has been argued that the unyielding observations of exact rituals by the mobeds have helped to preserve the Gāthās for over two thousand years before they were written down in the 5th–6th centuries CE. For instance, Firuze Kotwal asserts, "[The *Gāthās*'] use and application, right up to the present times, have been through the continuity of the acts of worship doggedly preserved, within a ritual framework" (1999–2000:2).

Zoroastrians' outlook on the Gāthās is fundamentally shaped by internal discourses that address its richness, historical precedence, and influence over Iranian culture. Also, at the same time as scholars struggle to explicate complex Gāthic notions such as Zoroastrian dualism, theodicy, and eschatology, versions of the following statement constituted a recurring theme in their gatherings: "[e]very verse of the Gāthās is so profound that it takes a book to translate properly." Moreover, repeated statements such as, "Zoroaster's *Gāthās* have had permanent imprints on Iranian culture and characters, including integrity, egalitarianism, and truthfulness" further shaped claims to pre-eminence and superiority. As Iranians are being exposed to similar assertions by non-Zoroastrian Iranian and foreign scholars, their image of Zoroastrians as originary Iranians are also being shaped. For instance, the late Professor Parviz Rajabi (1940–2011), an Iranian Muslim scholar and author of popular research on the history of Iranian culture, states, "With his simple and small manifesto, the *Gāthās*, which despite its minimalism similar to Hāfez' poetry [14th century] is filled with lofty philosophical thoughts, Zoroaster has painted the main face of Iranian culture at least for a thousand years" (2005:31).

This genealogy that traces the ancestry of Iranian culture to the *Gāthās* helped Zoroastrians generally to believe that throughout the tumultuous

Iranian history the *Gāthās* helped Iranians not only to protect their own culture, but also to influence cultures of the invaders. As a mobed told me, "All Iranians and even the invading nations, including the Arabs, Mongols, and Turks, came under the influence of Zoroaster's teachings and the high culture that he established." As we shall further see, they also portrayed a universal image of their tradition based on the influence of Zoroaster's teaching in sciences as well as world religions that rises above the Iranian boundaries. They drew on scholars' accounts, for instance, on the famous scholar of Zoroastrian religion Williams Jackson, who wrote, "They [*Gāthās*] possess a special interest for a biblical student, owing to the points of likeness or resemblance which Zoroastrianism shows to Judaism and Christianity" (1902:70).

In a Zoroastrian gathering, the mobedyar, charting out the moral universe of Iranian culture for the community, as discussed below, echoed that Iranian culture has been sustained by Zoroaster's teachings as set out in his *Gāthās*. In addition, by framing the attributes of Iranian culture as a counter to those of the dominating Shiʿi he articulated a rift between Shiʿi Islam and Iranian culture. As we shall see, the employed malleable culture concept of this model was crucial to achieving these goals—a concept that allows for and accommodates an expandable relationship between Zoroastrians and the Shiʿi tradition.

Jubilation (*shādi*) *and the capacity to make others jovial* were the first qualities of Iranian culture that the mobedyar listed. Citing the Gāthic verse "'*Happy is one that makes others happy*' [43:1]," he added that "Zoroaster elevated jubilance to the level of worship similar to reciting the manthrās—the holy words of the Avesta." While one mobed counted sixty Zoroastrian celebrations a year, the high mobed counted them to be as long as three months.[167] Thus, the cheerfulness of Iranian culture was addressed as a Zoroastrian gift. At the same time, speakers always juxtaposed this Gāthic emphasis on jubilation and its manifestations in their positive celebrations against the mourning enjoined by Shiʿi tradition—a discursive manoeuvring that delineated two diametrically opposing cultural expressions, particularly in response to adversaries. Corresponding to the nature of boundaries intended to parse out, the highlight of this performative opposition was situational. The high mobed, for instance, once proudly said, "In addition to these [scheduled calendric] festivities, *we Iranians* look for excuses to celebrate; we celebrate even when we paint our houses." So, he conflated Iranians with Zoroastrians, which allowed imagining Zoroastrian continuity hence survival within Iranian culture, consequently and subtly

distinguishing the opposing Shiʿi mourning penchant as un-Iranian. Then he focused on a practice observed *only* by Zoroastrians, framing it as the core cultural force of jubilation: "As opposed to Shiʿa, we [Zoroastrians] do not even mourn death."

Thirst for knowledge was the second attribute of Iranian culture that the mobed listed. He identified the origin of this Iranian pedanticism to be a teaching of Zoroaster that was subsequently formulated by the Persian epic poet Ferdowsi in a famous verse that even became the heading of all Iranian text books: "Competent is one with knowledge; an elderly heart becomes youthful with knowledge."[168] But the mobed distinguished this emphasis on knowledge from that of Western cultures, stressing that "[s]cientific progress alone is not sufficient; spirituality, and social and emotional ties are crucial, which, in contrast to the Westerners, Iranian culture embraces."[169]

Righteousness in thoughts, words, and deeds was the third attribute. He argued that regard for these ethical values in Iranian culture is directly linked to the core Zoroastrian triadic adage of good thoughts, good words, and good deeds that constitutes the foundation of the Zoroastrian moral universe. Rehearsed by various performative means, this maxim afforded a ground for the construction of spiritual pre-eminence.

Right to choose was the fourth characteristic, and the mobed said it "is rooted in, and evident from, the Zoroastrian prescribed marriage ceremony." While referring to what he considered to be "a Shiʿi practice" and ignoring the influence of Iranian tribal customs, he said, "In some cultures [implying Shiʿi], the brides' consent is established by her uttering the phrase 'With the elders' permission.' In our culture [implying Zoroastrian], however, following the *Gāthās* wherein Zoroaster provides marriage instruction to his daughter *Purchistā*, girls choose according to their own wisdom (*kherad*)." He added that "[this right to choose] also is apparent from the right to choose our religion. The *Gāthās* states, 'While listening to others, we have to decide and choose for ourselves.'" Since under the Shiʿi religious absolutism, conversion of adherents to other religions' into Shiʿi Islam has been, sometimes violently, enforced in Iran, the mobed's juxtaposition of Shiʿi tradition against Iranian culture further discerned what is to be considered as true Iranian vis-à-vis the Shiʿi-imposed elements.

Renewal was the fifth characteristic of Iranian culture to which the mobed added a tradition of *demystification* (*ostureh-* and *khorāfeh-zodāʿi*). "Zoroaster opposed the superstitions and fortunetelling commonly practiced during his time and emphasized good thoughts to replace bad imaginings," the mobed said. He branded the Gāthic notion of renewal (*fereshgar*)

as the pedigree of the rejuvenation concept that animates Nowruz, the Iranian New Year—yet another important influence or contribution to Iranian culture.

The mobed named the sixth attribute as *equality of men and women in Iranian culture as well as the high status of women in Old Iran*. He said that "pregnant women of Old Iran were provided with leave of absence and more rations; they became bosses and even kings." He reasoned that "this is because in the *Gāthās* good deeds count, not gender." Distancing themselves from misogynist aspects of the Zoroastrian tradition constitutes a recent theme and is frequently repeated and stressed in Zoroastrian circles, which I address fully in the following chapter. The mobed juxtaposed Zoroastrians' emphasis on gender equality and respect for women to the controversial and contested status of women in Muslim societies.[170] He did acknowledge the existence of a similar verse in the Quran, but presented it as an indication of influence that the teachings of Zoroaster have had on Islam.

This Zoroastrian situational discourse of boundary maintenance sometimes collapsed the Iranian/Zoroastrian dichotomy, while meticulously omitting the Shiʿa and framing the Shiʿi tradition as a strange and imposed addendum to Iranian culture. The estrangement and dismissal of Shiʿi tradition at this level allowed Zoroastrians to carve out a habitable niche of their own and also to imagine the inclusion of all Iranians, ethnic and religious, under the umbrella of a common Iranianness. At the next level, this canopy even encompassed the Shiʿi tradition; it was argued that Iranians Iranicized Islam and formulated the Shiʿi tradition against the Arab Sunnis. At these levels of inclusion and exclusion the Arabs remain central to the discursive dynamic negotiation of Zoroastrian identity, a diffusible and changing concept of culture is adopted to show that Zoroastrian religion is a surviving reality beyond its original body of believers.

Beyond this lineage of the Iranian culture that is traced back to the Gāthās, there were other ways by which the speakers constructed Zoroastrians integral, original, and dominant relationship to what they regarded as authentic Iranian culture. Among them was highlighting links between the eminent Muslim Iranians and the Zoroastrian tradition. For instance, the influence of Zoroaster on the Persian epic poet Ferdowsi, who is venerated both by Iranian Zoroastrians and non-Zoroastrians for reviving Iranian culture four centuries after the Arab invasion, was often discussed. The community's poetess, one of the regular and emphatic voices in most ceremonies and celebrations, repeatedly explained that "Ferdowsi starts his *Epic of the Kings* in the name of 'God of Life and Wisdom,' which is an exact translation

of Zoroaster's 'Ahura Mazda.'" Additionally, she told me that Iran's greatest twentieth century poet laureate Malak al-Shoʿarā Bahār (1884–1951) had a commitment to Iran comparable to that of Ferdowsi; he was a professor of Persian literature, a politician, historian, and journalist who loved Zoroastrian culture and revered one of the mobeds of the past to the extent that he considered him to be the "Iranian Aristotle." In the same vein, she said, "Other eminent Iranians, like Sadeq Hedayat—Iran's leading modern writer of prose fiction (1903–1951)—learned the Avestan language and Pahlavi, and were conversant with the religion of Mazdayasnā."

Nonetheless, historically Zoroastrians have carefully maintained their distinction from non-Zoroastrians by racializing their own identity. As mentioned, they do not permit converts, which seems to be enforcement of a strict law of endogamy, and only Zoroastrian paternal offspring are permitted into the religious fold.[171] These restrictions expose the internal contradiction of exercising freedom of choice, as mentioned earlier. At this level of distinction, a closed notion of culture was adopted by fusing the two constitutive essences of authentic Iranian culture as they understood them, namely, the cultural stock rooted in the Zoroastrian sacred text with the original body of Zoroastrian believers. It is only this combination that makes for a Zoroastrian. According to Mary Boyce, Zoroaster's teachings have thus become a part of Zoroastrians' own "racial heritage" (1979:47). In this extreme communal and physical boundary maintenance, we see a process that both generates and maintains Zoroastrian identity as an ethnic group; it invites our attention to the defining boundaries, but also to the cultural contents *only* as they signal and prove to be the emblem of difference.[172]

4.1.3 – *The Founders and Preservers of the Gāthic Social Realization*

At the same time that the speakers articulated Zoroastrian status as holders of the ethnic stock and spiritual depositories of Iranian culture, they shored up this status by arguing that the existing Iranian cultural practices were the enactment of Zoroastrian pre-Islamic ideas. Moreover they stressed that Zoroastrians preserved these practices after the Arab invasion. The contemporary prohibition against pre-Islamic celebrations is enforced by the Islamic Republic against ceremonies such as *chahār-shanbe-suri*, when Iranians jump over a bonfire and children go trick-or-treating on the last Wednesday of the year, or the rites associated with *Shab-e Yaldā* at the winter solstice, which celebrates the victory of light over darkness—symbolizing

the central Zoroastrian theme of the constant fight between good and evil.[173] The mobedyar criticized these prohibitions, affirming Zoroastrians' status as the preservers of Iranian culture. He did not mention the government explicitly, and in fact softened his criticism by framing himself, a member of Parliament, as a culprit by saying, "When *we* [the state] deny our people their own culture and put away our ceremonies and celebrations in a closet, then people turn to other cultures and adopt ceremonies like Valentine's Day."

This critique of the ban on pre-Islamic Iranian celebrations explored a rift between the ruling Shi'i order and Iranian culture, at the same time strengthening Zoroastrians' own oppositional identity in relation to it. The vocal members of the community were well aware of the Islamic Republic's total disregard for their voices; nevertheless, they were keen to educate their own community and share their ideas with those non-Zoroastrians who were in contact with them; and as long as these issues were raised merely among the community members, they were tolerated by the state. However, when the mobedyar took some of these issues to the Parliament, a rare move in the Zoroastrian community, he was disqualified from running for reelection.[174] The community in turn knew that its elites rarely, if at all, could have an impact on matters outside their own community; however, they also eagerly listened and followed such issues.

I see such discourse, therefore, as part and parcel of Zoroastrian creative performatives of the past that severed Shi'i tradition from Iranian culture with the goal of establishing their own deep connection therewith. Once the mobedyar proudly asserted, "Our Zoroastrian community has always protected and preserved the Old Iranian customs." He admitted, "Unfortunately, due to the repeated attacks by the invaders and the ban imposed by them many of our celebrations are forgotten. Nonetheless," he added, "We [Zoroastrians] have preserved many." The articulation of Zoroastrians' position as the preservers of Iranian heritage sustains, albeit subtly, the continuity of the struggle against the Arab invaders' ban on Iranian pre-Islamic heritage, nowadays upheld by the ruling Shi'i government.

In addition to retaining the Old Iranian celebrations in their own community, these influencial individuals expressed the hope of revitalizing them among all Iranians. For instance, in a celebration that was crowded with non-Zoroastrians who were not familiar with it and curiously were taking pictures, the mobedyar addressed them and complained that they treated the Zoroastrian community as a "museum" of Iranian culture and added, "Enduring enormous pain, we [Zoroastrians] have succeeded preserving

these traditions and customs and now it is the duty of the statesmen and nation as a whole to safeguard them." He encouraged the non-Zoroastrian audience to revive these ceremonies in their own communities, cities, and villages.

In order further to clarify the position of Zoroastrians as the preservers and promoters of Iranian cultural institutions, I discuss two cases which illustrate the dilemma of Zoroastrians' dealing with the Shiʿi-dominated Iranian culture. First I introduce a rite and then discuss the Zoroastrian contemporary exegeses of this rite that claims influence over Iranian Islamic mysticism. It was promoted that both this rite and Iranian mysticism were originally Zoroastrian, which had permeated the Islamic tradition. The problem that they had to struggle with was that many similar occasions were known only in Islamic terms. Thus, various groups arranged informative exhibitions mostly for the Shiʿa outsiders, as well as competitions for community members in which they performed their own historical and cultural genealogies. Thus, in what follows, the competitions were *private* affairs that targeted Zoroastrians themselves, and the exhibitions were *public* and targeted non-Zoroastrian visitors.

4.1.3.1 – The Sofreh Exhibition in Qeytariyyeh

Zoroastrian sofrehs are event-specific rites involving a tablecloth, usually a white one covered by a smaller green one, with edible and inedible items arranged on it. These items are used in order to address subtle shifts between different sofrehs as reflections of certain annunciations. Sofrehs are observed in marriage, death, initiation to the age of religious maturity, the seasonal thanksgiving of Gahāmbār, and the celebration of Nowruz. Only the last, called sofreh of *haft-sin*, and that of the marriage, sofreh of *aqd*, are still adamantly observed by all Iranians.[175] Beyond this continuity among all Iranians, the idea of sofreh has infiltrated the core of the Shiʿi tradition, albeit Islamized. This diffusion is narrated as part of the Zoroastrians' larger claim to historical influence over the Shiʿa. For instance, the mobedyar referred to this Zoroastrian influence when he mentioned the sofreh of Hazrat-e Abul-Fazl, a sofreh associated with a Shiʿi Imam.

On Monday, 5 March 2007, I visited an exhibition of Zoroastrian sofrehs that was coordinated by the *Zoroastrian Students' Society*, which functioned under the Zoroastrian Association. The exhibition was set up in north Tehran, in *Qeytariyyeh Park*, once home to Amir Kabir (1807–1852), the Qajar Dynasty Prime Minister, where two *Negār-khāneh* or galleries were designated for the displays. These buildings were part of the permanent

cultural exhibition site in the park. With elaborate visual displays and informative aspects, this exhibition was a semiotically regimented discipline with targeted groups that included the educated middle class audience of the Qeytariyyeh museum, students who visited as part of their educational projects, and visitors who arrived from different parts of the country.

Up to 12 Zoroastrian students, one or two for each sofreh table, offered information, and several of them sold books, New Year cards, and CDs. Therefore, such exhibitions provided Zoroastrians themselves, here students, with a chance to expand the understanding of their own tradition, since they needed to be prepared to answer questions and introduce further sources. However, the most important function of such exhibitions was to afford opportunities to construct, perform, and stage a particular historical/cultural genealogy.

Non-Zoroastrian visitors were enthusiastic; they asked many questions, and were surprised to learn that there were so many different sofrehs, all linked to Zoroastrian tradition. Many did not know about the significance of the items used in sofrehs and were fascinated by the explanations they received. I heard many of the visitors express a sense of sadness to learn that Iranians have lost "these beautiful, colourful, healthy rites, succumbing to the dark and mourning culture of the invaders." These were not Zoroastrians; they were interested visitors with sympathy for the Zoroastrian tradition—while nominally Shi'a, many Iranians express a desire for the pre-Islamic religion of Iran, and criticize Islam.

4.1.3.2 – The Nowruz Sofreh Competition

In addition to this exhibition, in an annual internal competition that focused on the Nowruz' sofreh and was held before the actual celebration of the New Year, visitors who were mostly Zoroastrians emphasized their connection with this particularly important Iranian sofreh. In this event, the community members were provided with the chance to present their designs, and the best sofreh was chosen by the votes of the visitors—non-Zoroastrian visitors could vote too. I attended two of these events. In the second year, the community took further steps to institutionalize the competition. Now on the second day of Nowruz when the families gather in the fire-temple, the prize-winning sofreh is presented to the community as a whole. Accordingly, the competition provided both material and social incentives to engage in the tradition.[176]

In both years, eight tables were arranged. Most of the presenters were women, and to my surprise they were not wearing headscarves—later I

learned that this was allowed by the government while on their own premises. Some of the presenters also had Nowruz-related materials to sell, including painted eggs, small gift bags, spices, homemade biscuits, etc. One of the tables was very colourful and lush. As an innovation, it contained many Barbie dolls, all voluptuously dressed, wearing make-up and carrying New Year signs. A person was interviewing the participants for a documentary and a wooden box was set up so that visitors could vote for the best table. Many exchanged New Year greetings, drank tea, and mingled.

In the second year, while I was there the high mobed was also visiting. People surrounded him and he talked about elements on some of the tables. This year, one table particularly caught my attention since it bore a political message. The sofreh was designed as the map of Iran, showing two mice trapped at its borders. On the Persian Gulf was distinctly written *Daryā-ye Fārs* or Persian Sea, and inside it several red fish, part of the New Year sofreh, were placed. The sofreh designer explained to me that the project was in response to the Arabs' efforts to change "this established historical name to Arab Gulf," also "a reaction to some foreign news agencies that have either adopted the phrase Arab Gulf or just use 'the Gulf' instead."

FIGURE 9 Nowruz Sofreh Competition, Iraj Hall, Tehran

As these competitions were just days before the Nowruz, they also provided an opportunity for announcements. Some of these addressed the role of the Zoroastrian community vis-à-vis Iranian culture and history. For instance, a handout was prepared by a Zoroastrian youth group called *Ashui Society of Iran*. It used the Zoroastrian calendar and announced Nowruz of 3746 instead of the official Islamic year of 1387. It proposed that this year should be called "Year of Darius the Great." It explained that this title was appropriate because "[t]he foreigners and some of their supporters are trying to inflict harm upon the *ahurāii* or divine body of our country." This was a reference mostly to some ethnic separatists. It added "Darius the Great was the first who defeated separatists in this land."[177]

4.1.4 – *Zoroastrianizing Iranian Islamic Mysticism*

Returning to the sofreh rites, each item of sofreh is deeply linked to Zoroastrian theogony or genealogy of the divines. Consequently, beyond specificities, sofrehs share a general form and meaning, since the items comprising them are understood in terms of symbolic representation of Ahura Mazda and his six archangels or *Amshāspands* (lit. Holy-Immortals).[178] Sofreh rites' link with the Amshāspands provided Zoroastrians with yet another opportunity to establish their significance and originary status in relation to Iranian culture by claiming influence over Islamic Mysticism, which today is known in Islamic terms. The underlying open culture concept, as discussed earlier, is linked to the abstracted notion of survival regardless of the shrinking number of believers. Once the mobedyar explained that "Sofreh and its seven elements constitute an emblem of Zoroastrian *erfān* [reference to Iranian Islamic Mysticism], or mystical path towards God." Accordingly, the seven earthly elements of sofrehs that symbolize the six Amshāspands, together with Ahura Mazda, create the "circle of perfection."[179] In his book, the mobedyar claims that this was the first time that sofreh was being discussed in terms of the seven paths of Zoroastrian *tasavvof* [another reference to the Islamic mysticism] (Niknam 2006:83).[180] However this mystical interpretation was initiated twenty years earlier by a Dinshah Irani under the subtitle of "seven spiritual stages."[181]

Farid al-Din Attār (1145–1221) is one of the most influential Iranian mystical theoreticians. His characterization of the Seven Valleys of Love in his celebrated *The Conference of the Birds* is only one among the many Iranian Islamic mystical epics that address the seven stages of spiritual perfection. Attār recounts these Seven Valleys as those of Search (*Talab*), Love (*Eshq*),

Knowledge (*Ma'refat*), Contentment (*Esteqnā*), Unity of God (*Towhid*), Astonishment (*Heyrat*), Poverty and Nothingness (*Faqr* and *Fanā*). The Zoroastrian contemporary interpretation establishes similarities between these stages and the attributes of the seven Amshāspands. For instance, the seventh valley is attained when the wayfarer has traversed all the other valleys. In this final valley, Faqr or Poverty means death from the worldly that is required to achieve Fanā or Nothingness, meaning annihilation in God. This is identical to the Zoroastrian's notion of Immortality, characterized by both the sixth and seventh Amshāspands. Another one is the third valley, Knowledge, equivalent to the fifth Amshāspand, Hoorvatat.

These intellectual and cultural cross-linkages are among attempts from the late 19th century onwards—during the Constitutional Revolution, through works of intellectuals such as Poure Davoud and also by the Indian Parsis missionary activities, as well as the Pahlavis' nationalizing project—to tie Zoroastrian tradition to Iranian nationalism and culture.[182] As such, they are instances of creative interpretations that Zoroastrians have adopted to bring the past to bear on their status and thus improve it among the Shi'a in the present.

The following section employs three of my ethnographic examples—mostly collected from the aforementioned exhibition in the Qeytariyyeh Park, and to a lesser extent from speeches of the mobedyar and the high mobed—in order to discuss the Amshāspands and their symbolic representations in sofrehs as complementary to the argument of Iranian mysticism and its link to Zoroastrian tradition.

Vahuman or *Bahmān*,[183] the first Amshāspand, symbolized by the whiteness of egg or milk on the sofreh, stands for good thought as well as for God. It is also the name of the second day of the Zoroastrian months and the eleventh month of the Zoroastrian year. According to the Gāthās 28:3, whenever Zoroaster expressed gratitude to God, he did it with pure thought. This is identical to the weight that Iranian Islamic mysticism devotes to the value of purity necessary for Truth to descend upon the mirror-like pure heart of the wayfarer.[184]

Ashāvahishta or *Ardibehesht*, the second Amshāspand, is symbolized by the flame of candles on the sofreh and refers to the best *ashuii* or attributes. It is also the name of the third day of the Zoroastrian month and the second month of the Zoroastrian year. The mobedyar said that Ardibehesht has up to eighty meanings, such as humility, truthfulness, and righteousness. Generally, Ardibehesht refers to the state of human maturity and completeness; it is signified by fire since flames reach high. The high

mobed said, "Like fire, we have to burn our impurity and become righteous, quite similar to the importance of humility and truthfulness emphasized in the seven valleys of Iranian Islamic mysticism."

Khshatra-vairya or *Shahrivar*, the third Amshāspand, is generally symbolized by metals that denote kingly power, and traditionally by a blend called *rudin*, an amalgamation of copper and zinc. It is also the name of the fourth day of the Zoroastrian month and the sixth month of the Zoroastrian year. Shahrivar teaches us to go beyond the human frame and to practise control over carnal desires. For contemporary Zoroastrians in Iran, this brought to mind the fourth Valley of Iranian Islamic mysticism, Contentment, which is achieved through detachment from worldly desires.

Spanta-armaiti or *Esfand*, the fourth Amshāspand, is symbolized by woman or earth and refers to love and humility. It is also the name of the fifth day of the Zoroastrian month and the last month of the Zoroastrian year. It symbolizes kindness, friendship, and the faithfulness of a mother to her children and that of the earth to everyone. That is why *lork*, an admixture of nuts and dried fruits that signify love of earth to humans is an imperative element of all sofrehs, also served in Zoroastrian ceremonies.[185] Some specified that the number of the nuts has to be seven, which shows the importance of the number seven in Zoroastrian tradition, hence used as an affirmation of influence over the Iranian Islamic Mysticism that has seven stages of perfection. Zoroastrians celebrate mother's day, known as *sepandār-mazgān*, on this day of the last month of the year.[186]

Hoorvatāt or *Khordād*, the fifth Amshāspand, is symbolized by water and means purity. It is also the name of the sixth day of the Zoroastrian month and the third month of the Zoroastrian year. Water denotes that human should absorb knowledge and wisdom. As we saw above, the third Valley of Iranian Islamic mysticism is devoted to knowledge, and similarly it is about spiritual knowledge. "The Khordad Amshāspand helps to learn about *Ahriman* or Devil, to become cleanse like a *sepanteman* [Avestan: Spitaman, Zoroaster family name that also means pure]," the poetess Shahryari put it.

Ameretāt or *Amordād*,[187] the sixth Amshāspand, is symbolized by a green branch signifying immortality. It is also the name of the seventh day of the Zoroastrian month and the fifth month of the Zoroastrian year. Amordād is the stage of perfection, the purified soul. According to the high mobed, after reaching Amordād we become immortal. The poetess said if we achieve this Amshāspand we enter the realm of completeness, a status that is called 'God-like human,' similar to the state that the wayfarer reaches in the sixth Valley in Iranian Islamic mysticism, devoted to the Unity of God. It is mostly symbolized by a branch of cedar, as it retains its greenness throughout the

year. The mobedyar said that is why every Zoroastrian village has at least one cedar.[188] Like other statements of universal influence, he believed that cedar at Christmas is an adoption of this Zoroastrian custom. "Cedar is important for several reasons. It is straight so teaches to be truthful. It is taller than other trees but its head is always humbly downward. It also looks like fire."

Regarding the nature of the seventh Amshāspand, an ongoing ambiguity existed in the community that served a purpose in the contemporary exegeses of the sofreh rites. In his book, the mobedyar calls the seventh Amshāspand *sarausha* or *sorush* "the internal voice, to signify the seventh step towards perfection" (Niknam 2006:83). This is similar to the aforementioned Dinshah Irani's interpretation, who called the last stage *vesal* (attainment, fulfillment of love) describing unification with God, which belongs to the next world.[189] Oktor Skjaervo translates sorush to mean "readiness to listen," in the *Old Avesta*, and "a warrior god, whose main function is to destroy evil gods and other harmful beings" in the *Young Avesta* (2011:15). According to Professor Choksy, "Srosh" or "Sarosh" is the angel of prayer and is not and has never been an Amesha Spenta.[190] The official statement of the Mobeds' Council declares that the last Amshāspand is sepanteman [Zoroaster family name], which means that after reaching the sixth stage of immortality one becomes closer to the complete human or Ahura Mazda's vicegerent on earth.[191] According to Professor Choksy, this is also a contemporary interpretation, which "is not accepted by other Zoroastrians (in India and elsewhere)—the mobeds in Iran are using Avestan *spit* meaning "white" to mean "clean, pure" and so turn the name into an Amesha Spenta."[192] Just to end this section, I cite how the mobedyar summed up the link between Sofrehs and mysticism by explaining that "[t]hese seven Amshāspands declare to us that 'we have the same thoughts, deeds, and words and that is why we never fall ill, become old, nor die.' If your actions and words and thoughts become the same you [human] will become immortal too."

Therefore, the rites of sofreh in Iran that are observed at various occasions contain deeply Zoroastrian connections. Whereas they have permeated the Iranian Shiʿi tradition, Zoroastrians' relations to them are now mostly forgotten by the public. Thus Zoroastrians tried to revive their links to them and reminded the public of their ownership. The exhibition that was arranged by the Zoroastrian students to inform their fellow Iranian Shiʿa, as well as the communal competition settings that served to revitalize the Zoroastrian community internally, indicate Zoroastrian authorities strove to restore these connections and to challenge the Shiʿi monopolizing order. Further, Zoroastrians' contemporary exegeses link these rites to Iranian

mystical traditions, and portray Zoroastrians as the source from which this form of Iranian religiosity proceeded.

4.2 – Cultural Critics

Zoroastrians' struggle with the Shi'i-saturated Iranian culture was evident from the ways in which my informants invoked the authoritative pre-Islamic past to construct their discourse of cultural and historical precedence. Thus, they pointed to themselves as the origin of Iranian culture, and as these performatives accumulated the force of authority through citation, the community became the substitutes and transmitters of the past via the present to the future of Iran. Based on this contrived authority, they criticized the Islamic aspects of Iranian culture and performed their role as its standard bearers. Their criticisms were informed by and in accordance with the supposed moral universe outlined by Zoroaster's teachings in the Gāthās, not only as a genuine but also as a higher Iranian religious and cultural source. On many occasions the mobedyar and poetess identified some aspects of the popular Iranian cultural beliefs as un-Iranian, thus continue to subtly venture a rift between Iranianness and Shi'i tradition. For instance, the mobedyar once criticized subscribers to the fatalist ideology as articulated in Shi'i tradition. He stated that we humans are born and will die differently from one another and have no say over this part of our lives. "Nonetheless," he added, "we can choose how to live in between." Sarcastically, he went on to say that "[s]ome consider even this in-between to be the matter of fate." Then he cited some Persian proverbs, such as, "One's fate is written on one's forehead," and "If one's fate is painted black, it could not be whitened with *Zamzam* or *Kowthar* [two heavenly pools in Islamic tradition]."[193] He retorted, "This is wrong, our fate is not preordained; kismet is not the whole story; we can choose."

The most interesting part of his critique was when he criticized a verse by Hāfez, the most celebrated Iranian poet whose book of poetry many Iranians own. While the mobedyar recited Hāfez copiously, always citing his name, this time he did not mention his name. He recited, "The goblet of wine and painful heart are given to different people arbitrarily, this [randomness] in the cycle of kismet is the circumstance [to accept]."[194] The mobedyar continued by saying that "If we really believe in this, then we have to doubt God's justice." He grounded this criticism in the Zoroastrian concept of *ashā*, being "the order governing this world and its synchronicity with

universal ethics" (Babayan 2002:21).[195] According to Zoroastrian ethical duality a human has the right to choose good or evil and subsequently will be held responsible for his choice.

The mobedyar also engaged Iranian popular knowledge, sometimes by criticizing and sometimes by citing it regardless of its connection with Shiʿi tradition, in order to discern the authentic Iranian culture. Regardless, Zoroaster's alleged teachings were always the criterion for such discernments. Once he criticized two widely used sayings that state "[r]ecalcitrant learns as a walnut stays on a slope,"[196] and "[b]orn of a wolf, [regardless of how much training] eventually becomes a wolf."[197] He added that "[t]his is not true; education is of fundamental importance in human life." He recited a verse by Hāfez, again criticizing him without citing his name, saying that "[o]nly a pure essence is worthy of blessings, not that every stone and clay become pearls and corals."[198] The mobedyar contended, "Everyone has the potential." In other instances where the mobedyar found Hāfez aligned with his criticism, he cited his name. "As Hāfez says," he recited, "'You are not less than dust, don't abase yourself and do love; so you ascend towards the sun while dancing. Reach robe of the Friend and split from the Enemy, become the man of God and stay away from Devils.'"[199] Arguing that human nature is malleable and could be transformed, this time he recited a popular rhythmic proverb emphasizing the importance of association in positive transformation, "One day a piece of aromatic clay reached me from a beloved […] I asked 'are you a *moshk* or *abir* (musk or ambergris) that I am intoxicated by your sweet aroma?' It replied, 'I was a piece of worthless clay, acquainted flowers for a while; affected by them, I am transformed […]'"[200]

Similarly while acknowledging Saʿdi's (1184–1283) status as a major Iranian poet, known in particular for his social thoughts, the poetess criticized him, informed by the principle of righteousness that constitutes one of the bedrocks of Zoroastrian teachings. She asserted, "In a famous poem, albeit in passing, Saʿdi justified telling lies if telling the truth would cause turmoil." She added, "No religion offers anything but truthfulness." Similarly the mobedyar criticized another poet and said, "Orfi says, 'O, Orfi! Tolerate good and bad so that after your death Muslims would wash you with the Zamzam or heavenly water, and Hindus cremate you.'"[201] The mobedyar explained that the poet advises us to pray to God to be accepted by Muslims, also to worship idols to be praised by Hindus. "This is not the Iranian culture," he added, "since it suggests that we are irresolute, like people who change direction with the wind, whereas we always have to seek truthfulness."

Some of the criticisms deflected even the proverbial knowledge imparted by the Zoroastrian community itself, for instance, support for social passivism. The mobedyar's critique was notably sharper when he referred to a proverb saying, "No need to wrap a head that does not ache,"[202] meaning, do not look for trouble for no reason. He criticized Zoroastrians' social and political neutrality, and said, "As individuals we ought not to isolate ourselves from the society; rather, we are responsible for raising our voices." This invitation to political engagement in particular is meaningful, since nonchalance, quietism, and tepidity seem to characterize the religious minorities' general stance in political and legal matters in Iran. As discussed earlier, post conquest, it was "[t]he threat of absorption into the increasingly large Muslim community [that] reinforced the Zoroastrian tendency toward cultural preservation, and as the community grew smaller this tendency increased" (Choksy 1987:29–30).

Zoroastrian cultural critique, therefore, employed religious teachings in order to discern and introduce an authentic Iranian culture. The way in which this discourse was mostly articulated was however to frame and present incongruous characteristics such as belief in fatalism, randomness of kismet, and passivism as Islamic. Beyond the Zoroastrian spiritual source of authority, proverbial sayings and popular knowledge also linked the critics to the origin they liked to represent. Nonetheless, they meticulously selected from the available array of cultural materials and incorporated them in their line of reasoning to accumulate authority and better support their main idea, that is, that true Iranian culture is embedded in a moral and ethical universe that Zoroaster has elaborated in his Gāthās, and disagreeable elements are the results of Islamic, more specifically Arab, influences.

4.3 – Conclusion

Here I have addressed Zoroastrian socio-discursive acts in response to the dilemma of Shiʿi-dominated Iranian culture as the technical apparatus of religious practice by which historical consciousnesses are mediated and transmitted to the next generations. Through performatives of originality, superiority, and distinctiveness vis-à-vis Iranian culture, the Zoroastrian community I came to know cultivated social imaginaries, or the ways of imagining social surroundings, and historical insertion into Iranian society, in order to adapt to the expectations of the dominant Shiʿa. These acts

resonated within Zoroastrians' historically disposed affects and sensibilities and those of the sensitive Iranians within reach who harboured nationalist sentiments.

Zoroastrian historical genealogy sought to establish distinctiveness through cultural precedence and authority regarding Iranian culture. A central tenor of this historicity hearkened back to the glorious past of the Iranian-Zoroastrian state. The outline and articulation of Iranian culture fundamentally as a Zoroastrian product—enunciated and formulated after the Gāthic moral cosmos, erected and nurtured by Zoroastrians—provided the bases for the community to imagine preeminence in Iranian society. At the same time, they excluded all non-Zoroastrians, did not accept converts, and enforced endogamy; thus, as the holders of the authentic Iranian culture, Iranian cultural trope was a way to talk about the Zoroastrian religion openly. This authentic, bounded, closed, and ahistorical notion of Iranian culture as essentially Zoroastrian was established by treating Shiʿi tradition as an imposed addendum that consisted only of Arabized elements.

However, when the question of extinction and the threat of a dwindling community were raised an open and changing culture concept was adopted by which Zoroastrian ideational and phenomenal were imagined as having been diffused not just in Iran but also throughout the world. Nonetheless, imagining themselves as an irreplaceable yet reducing community (and, perhaps, belief system) that preserved the essence of Iranian culture, the actual survival of the original community had remained a grave concern and Zoroastrian survival was still inexorably bound to the physical existence of the community.

Whether Zoroastrians' proclamations of cultural authority were acknowledged in the Shiʿi-dominated public or not, they constructed a model of history or genealogy of Iranian culture that at the discursive and pragmatic level located Zoroastrians at the core of Iranian inventiveness, assigning to them a privileged role. It is from this position that, as depositories and originators of authentic Iranian cultural values and practices, the mobeds and adepts provided cultural critiques, promoted forgotten rituals, and defended Iranian historical heritage. Through practices of collective discipline, they sought to adjust and attune themselves to a present lifeworld of marginality and subjugation to the regnant Shiʿa, while imagining an identity with ties to pre-Islamic Iran. It was through a meticulous addressing of Zoroastrian, Iranian, Shiʿi, Sunni, and Arab tropes that they drew boundaries, reproduced uniqueness, and created the possibility of an articulation

of Zoroastrian tradition within the Shiʿi mode of state. Zoroastrian positioning in the Iranian Shiʿi-saturated cultural universe was more complex and was accomplished through shifting messages of similarity with, and distinction from, the ruling Shiʿa, discussed thoroughly in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

The Performance of Difference and Similarity

While Islamic traditions are derived from a complex nexus of influences, the impact of Zoroastrian tradition in spawning a multi-faceted and often contradictory corpus of religious theories in Islam is generally acknowledged. Jonathan Berkey remarks:

> [T]here is evidence for the circulation of Iranian religious ideas in Arabia in the form of Persian loan words in the Koran, most notably *firdoaws*, 'paradise.' And so the extensive influence of Iranian civilization on Islam after the seventh-century conquests would seem in fact to continue much older trends among the Arabs. (2003:47–48)

More palpable influences can be traced in some Shiʿi theological and liturgical practices that differ from those of the Sunnis. Distinctions between Shiʿa and Sunnis have been interpreted by some scholars in terms of semiotics of Iranian resistance. For instance, Rajabi suggests that the emergence of Shiʿi after the Arab invasion, who did not have a clear understanding of Islam, was an Iranian attempt to maintain its cultural existence and practices (2001). Similarly, the high mobed told me:

> Shiʿa have preserved Zoroastrian culture. They still respect the light, albeit in Islamic way by remembering Prophet Mohammad through a *salavāt* when they light up a bulb [salavāt refers to a collective recitation of 'May God send His praise upon Mohammad and his Family']; they still visit graves of their ancestors on Thursday nights, which is a Zoroastrian custom; they also use the rosary, and pray five times a day. The stew that Shiʿa prepare for Imam Hoseyn's commemoration reflects generosity of our Gāhambārs too.

He concluded that "Iranians did not become Arabs." In this sense, in addition to maintaining the pre-Islamic cultural practices enshrined in the

Gāthās as discussed earlier, Zoroastrians that I worked with believed that Iranian Shiʿa had remained somewhat Zoroastrian. In fact, they recalled the marriage of Imam Hoseyn to *Shahrbanu*, a daughter of the last Sasanian king, Yazdgird.

Here I further analyse Zoroastrians' complex performative construction of their contemporary relations with Iranian Shiʿa and the Shiʿi state, where agendas and ideas produced by public figures, artists, and scholars cannot be freely circulated unless they reflect the official dogmas of the state religion. As Warner suggests, "[I]t might be that the only way a public is able to act [in this case, in Iran] is through its imaginary coupling with the state" (2002:89). By extension of the same principle, the Zoroastrian religion has been historically protected under the Shiʿi mantle. I heard from a Shiʿa who was interested in history that "many treatises attributed to Shiʿi Imams belong to Zoroastrians, like Nahjol-Balaqeh (a treatise attributed to Imam Ali)." He added, "It was a Zoroastrian strategy to preserve their writings." Similar strategies have been adopted to protect other aspects of their tradition as well. For instance, many informants told me that Zoroastrians have succeeded in protecting their sacred sites by associating them with Shiʿi figures, which includes calling them *imam-zādehs*, burials of the Imams' descendants. In this sense, to apply Warner's model of publics and counterpublics one more time, Zoroastrian religious space was public too, since it worked by many of the same "circular postulates" (2002:81).

Therefore, I argue that the reconstruction of Zoroastrian imaginaries that I documented revolved around similarities and differences in relation to Shiʿi Islam. My informants explained resemblances with Shiʿa as signs of their influence, asserting origin and authority. At the same time, they maintained a discourse of difference, sustaining fundamental uniqueness and often asserting the inferiority of Shiʿi theories and practices. Moreover, as we saw and shall further see, these discursive conventions differentiated between Shiʿi tradition and Iranian culture, carving out a habitable niche in the national cultural realm.

Let me give an example as a prelude to my discussion. When linking Zoroastrian tradition to Iranian culture, a mobed referred to the Gāthic decree of 'making others happy' (hāt 43) and asserted, "That is why generosity is one of the most admired virtues among Iranians." *Immediately*, he parsed a contradistinction with Islam, emphasizing that "this generosity differs from that which is promoted in Islam: We do not give donations (*sadaqeh*) to avert seventy two calamities as Muslims do; rather, we are committed to acts

of generosity (*dahesh*) so everyone will *benefit* from it." Similarly, regarding the same hāt, another exegete told me, "We have to help others *not in the hope of reciprocation*, as Shi'a do. For us, helping others is *inherently* an act of worship." (According to them, this articulation should not be confused with the ritualized tradition of *nazri*, when one makes a wish and in order to make it come true or when it came true feeds people or relatives, which is a practice also adopted by Shi'a).

In addition to establishing difference from and similarity to Shi'a, a body of Zoroastrian religious knowledge has been formulated that emphasizes Enlightenment and defines Zoroaster's teachings as guidelines for the discovery of a universal truth. Within this framework, the official lens of Zoroastrian tradition magnifies certain aspects of the Iranian Zoroastrian historical past and ignores others in order to situate the religion both nationally and globally. For instance, scholars have argued that a political Shi'i is a legacy of the Zoroastrian Church's central role in the pre-Islamic Persian Sasanian Empire. According to Berkey, "Zoroastrian doctrine affirmed the union of Kingship and religion, and so enjoined universal obedience to the sacralized monarch" (Cf. Choksy 1988). Elsewhere Berkey states, "The close connection between religious and political authority in late antique Zoroastrianism is important for its foreshadowing of later developments in Islam" (2003:29). However, my informants refrained from making this historical connection, since emphasizing unity of church and state would violate the Enlightenment's secularism thesis and validate the present regime in Iran. Instead, they stressed the division between the two. The high mobed once asked me the following rhetorical question: "Why did previous mobeds not change the first day of the Nowruz, celebrated on the first day of month Farvardin, to the birth of Zoroaster on the sixth of Farvardin? Why did they not merge these two celebrations?" He answered himself: "I believe that this is because they kept politics and religion separate." He supported his thesis by adding that "[f]or the mobeds the sixth day of Farvardin is still considered Nowruz-e Bozorg [Great Nowruz], however, they did not turn it into a religious holiday for everyone."

At the same time, in this body of religious knowledge, some of the aspects of Zoroastrian religion that are more appealing to present-day Zoroastrians are stressed. Among them is the proclamation of Zoroaster as the founder of the oldest and first monotheistic religion, a proclamation which formulated their religion as the foundation of Western theology. This is despite the fact that in his surviving hymns, the *Gāthās*, Zoroaster regards himself as a "devotional poet" (Choksy 2003b:408), and "only with the advent of

Protestant Christian missionaries to Iran and India did the doctrine of cosmic dualism,[203] and the elaborate rites it had spawned, slowly begin to attenuate" (Choksy 1996:104).

This eclectic approach to the past in fact has a regularity that informs its creative adaptation to the present, a poiesis mode of historicity. That is, at the same time that it secures a place among the Shiʿa through a discourse of similarity, it establishes influence and originality. When they maintained distinctiveness, however, it was through a discourse of difference based on the morality of universalism, articulated nonetheless on Zoroastrian principles. Thus, survival and distinction constituted the criteria of validity and feasibility that governed the production of Zoroastrian knowledge tradition, generated through the interplay of life with both the monopolizing Shiʿi state and a plurality-conscious world. Accordingly, by identifying the potentials and constraints that these criteria provide, we can observe the trajectory of a changing mass of knowledge for the production and transmission of the Iranian Zoroastrian tradition. More importantly, as we shall see further, this inquiry allows us to explicate the forms of coherence that the Zoroastrian tradition of knowledge achieves within its present-day relationship with Shiʿi theocracy.[204]

The Zoroastrian hierarchical community of the laities, adepts, and mobeds participated in this creative process differently. While the mobeds and adepts provided the intellectual capital, laypeople furnished the necessary social and economic capital, which made the world in which religious knowledge was mediated, reproduced, and practised. For instance, the adepts theorized and outlined Zoroastrian pedagogy of historical remembrance, seeking to discipline the community in protocols of contemporary self-understanding. This was done through juxtaposition to the dominant Shiʿa and principles of the modern secular, moored in Zoroastrian theology. As discussed previously, the continuous tensions accompanying the social and political Islamization of post-invasion Iran have been maintained within the contrasting structures of affects and sensibilities and within the religious practices wherein such forms of expression and experiences have been cultivated. In this respect, as Taylor writes, "What start off as theories held by a few people may come to infiltrate the social imaginary, first that of elites, perhaps, and then of society as a whole" (2002:106).

Zoroastrian historical lenses that understand the Islamic Shiʿi religiosity in ways tending to delineate the Arab/Iranian boundaries while emphasizing the Zoroastrian impact on Shiʿa ensure the originality, preeminence, and authenticity of the tradition. Emphasizing the role of Salmān-e Fārsi, a Per-

sian Muslim, in the development of Islam depicts only one of these historical paterns of remembrance. Similarly Persian literary figures are understood in terms of their links to the Zoroastrian religion. This has provided the community with a way to claim and incorporate the rich Persian literary landscape, although it is generally recognized as a product of the Islamic period. Moreover, as we have seen, Shiʿi socio-religious practices such as sofreh and commemorations such as Ashura are perceived as and proclaimed to be the continuation of pre-Islamic practices.[205] Also, symbolic and numerical expressions such as the choice of the colour green to represent Islam, and Shiʿi veneration gestures and other moral physiology such as proskynesis integral to ritual observances in holy places are attributed to the influence of Zoroastrians, and as such raised to the status of public truths.

This discourse of influence stretched the ambit of the Zoroastrian habitable niche in the Islamic Republic. One critical outcome was the ability to blame Zoroastrians' historical sufferings on the violation of the "true" will of Prophet Mohammad by Sunni Arabs who denied his son-in-law Ali's right to succession—a narrative shared by the Shiʿa as well, who understand the "fall" of Islam as dating from the murder of Ali and the later betrayal and martyrdom of his son Hoseyn at the battle of Karbala. For example, a Shiʿi cleric who was invited to the Zoroastrian library argued that since Imam Ali was denied succession to the Prophet, a peaceful Islam was morphed into a military machine, resulting in the murder of many Iranians. By blaming the Arab Sunnis for this catastrophe, he both vindicated the Shiʿa and established a tie with the Zoroastrian community.[206]

The continuous shared legacy of enmity with Sunni Arabs is apparent from Zoroastrian and Shiʿi devotion to the tomb of Abu-Lolo, who is the alleged Iranian murderer of the second Sunni Caliph, Omar. However, this otherwise clear alliance between Zoroastrians and Shiʿa in opposition to Arab Sunnis has been complicated by the contemporary politics of the Islamic Republic, which insists that Muslim unity should supersede the national cultural heritage. As a result, local Shiʿi rituals honouring and commemorating Abu-Lolo were cancelled and the building was closed[207] soon after the Religious Leader Khamenei named the year 2007 as "The Year of National Unity and Islamic Harmony."[208] Even though this building has been registered as one of the Iran's cultural heritage sites, an order for its destruction has been issued by the government in order to facilitate Shiʿa/Sunni unity.[209] Reports say that this was a positive response to the request of Mohammad Salim Al'awa, the Secretary-General of the International Union for Muslim Scholars (IUMS), who told the al-Arabi'a news agency:

> The request for its [Firuzan] destruction was delivered to Iran by a group of Arab representatives … after the Doha assembly at the beginning of the year. At the assembly a large number of Sunni scholars asked Iran for the total destruction of the tomb.[210]

5.1 – Similarities, Differences, and Influences

In the important monthly celebration of Ardibeheshtegān that honours Fire and Light, the high mobed explained that the Zoroastrian God is *sheydān-e sheid*, which means light of lights. He added, "*nur al-anvār* of the Quran in reference to God is the exact translation of this *Avestan* phrase." On another occasion, a young Zoroastrian female physician, an occasional speaker to the congregation, explained that Zoroastrians recognize human beings to be the highest creation of Ahura Mazda since only a human has the faculty of thought. Thus, in the Zoroastrian religion a human being is called *Daman* (creation) and *Pahlom* (the highest or superior). She was quick to add that "in Islam the exact same phrase is adopted from Zoroastrian religion to refer to human, which is *Ashraf-e Makhluqāt*." In the same vein, on many occasions the mobeds and speakers reiterated that it was originally Zoroaster who introduced and distinguished between the two worlds of *Gitavi* or the material world, and *Minavi* or the celestial world, known as *Jamādāt* and *Kāenāt*. One speaker said, "Later Greek and Muslim thinkers adopted these notions and in Islam they replaced them respectively with *Māddi* and *Maʿnavi*." Thus he not only articulated an identity vis-à-vis the Shiʿa but also carved out a worldwide niche.

Influences were also articulated in the symbolic and numerical realm. During the celebration of Zoroaster's birth, the mobedyar told me that according to Zoroastrian folk culture seventy two blessed events happened on that day. One Zoroastrian preacher remarked that "[a]t the age of seventy seven with seventy two of his followers, Zoroaster was martyred by Tor Brator." I was familiar with the significance of the number seventy two, with the parallel numerology within the Shiʿi context in which the third Imam Hoseyn is said to have been martyred with seventy two of his followers, a similarity that the preacher traced its roots to Zoroastrian tradition. Even in the early years of the Islamic Revolution the number of high ranking officials killed in an attack on the parliament was reported to be seventy two.

The articulation of Zoroastrian influence over Islam and Shiʿi tradition goes beyond the ideological, symbolic, and numerical. It contains the realm

of practices as well, for instance, that of the obligatory prayer mentioned earlier. The mobedyar once said that the beginning of the Gāthās consists of *namanghā*, in which both palms are raised towards the sky; this *namāj* or *namāz* became *salāt* in Islam.[211] Thus, the five daily obligatory prayers in Islam, one of the pillars of the religion, is said to have been modelled on Zoroastrian practice.[212] Zoroastrians observe this practice by turning towards the Light, which could be the sun during the day or any source of light at night. The *Kaʿba*, Zoroastrians believe, is a substitute for this source of adoration in Islam.

Another significant ritual influence claimed by the Zoroastrians was the commemoration of Imam Hoseyn. On the occasion of Ashura, the mobedyar explained that "[t]he very style of commemorating Ashura began after the murder of Syavash,[213] an Old Iranian hero. Afterwards, the *su-va-shun* style of mourning for him was adopted by the Shiʿa [to commemorate Imam Hoseyn]." Similarly, he argued that the *tarhim* sessions where Shiʿa commemorate the deceased, accompanied by a *nowheh* or ritual lamentation, originated in Zoroastrian practices, though without the Shiʿi addition of self-flagellation. But, as he clarified:

> Fortunately we [Zoroastrians] do not have a culture of mourning. Instead, we have *sugvāri*, to commemorate or honor (*bozorgdāsht*). The same ritual is now held for Imam Hoseyn, to whom we also pay tribute. There is no mourning, self laceration, or cursing of the enemy in that; rather, it is to learn from these great figures, as learning is just one of the attributes of our culture.

As pointed out earlier, jubilation was always enthusiastically embraced among Zoroastrians, even in porseh commemorations and other events that the Shiʿa would perceive as mourning occasions, on which they would wear black, weep, and occasionally beat themselves. Zoroastrian porseh commemorations provided a stark contrast, as participants wore white and did not lament. Similarly, announcing the news of the passing of a mobed,[214] the high mobed expressed his sorrow and sent condolences, but he was quick to remind the congregation that "[w]e do not mourn." This difference, in particular on the occasion of death, is informed by Zoroaster's cosmology, which I outline here to address how this distinction was addressed in the community. The most popular section of porseh rituals, as I discussed in chapter 3, was the speech given by the mobeds and acolytes. These talks mostly focused on the ways in which Zoroaster understood and addressed

human existential questions. Using these speeches, and similar talks given on other occasions, I here construct a more complete picture of the connections or distinctions between the Zoroastrian tradition and the Shiʿi and Islamic heritage.

Informed by Zoroastrian cosmological dualism, the mobedyar explained why mourning on the occasion of death was proscribed in the Zoroastrian religion but prescribed among the Shiʿa. "The philosophy behind this is that whatever is unpleasant to us has a purpose. Insomuch as thorns are necessary to see the beauty of flowers, death is necessary for us to feel and understand the beauty of life. This belief helps us to celebrate and pay homage to life, and not to lament death." He added, "This is why happiness is at the core of our religion, not sadness or asceticism." The mobedyar also discussed the nature of death itself:

> When we move from this world to the next, there is no death; it is just a transformation. This life is not linear with a starting and an ending point. Rather, there is no beginning nor is there an end; it is a continuous process. In reality when our body has reached the end of its cycle in this world it dons different form. That is why there is no need for crying and mourning. Rather, we need to be happy as we become closer to God. Isn't this the ultimate goal of all religions?

Then, he referred to two fundamentals of Zoroastrian ideology about humans: "[t]he *ravān* and *faravahar* of the dead to which we offer our salutation are always alive."

These concepts were further elucidated by the community's poetess. According to her, Zoroaster teaches that an effulgence of *sheydān-e sheid* or light of lights is deposited in every individual. This is "a drop of the endless ocean of Ahura Mazda. A drop called faravahar that does not cease to exist after death." Acknowledging that a similar notion existed in other religions and in Islam, she added, "Nonetheless it is not as fully developed as it is in Zoroaster's teachings." Rather,

> Other religions believe only in ravān, which is the human faculty responsible for decision making (while) three worlds exist in Zoroastrian cosmology: that of the Amshāspands or manifestations of Ahura Mazda, that of the *Izadān* or angels, and faravaharān (sing., faravahar). After death, our faravahar remains intact and returns to its origin, the world of faravaharān, and becomes part of the cosmos.

Stressing Zoroastrian influence on Islam, she stated that the Quranic verse proclaiming "that '*all are from God and return to Him*'[215] is directly taken from this Zoroastrian ideology." She added, "Faravahar leads us like a lamp, but if we stray from the right path it is our own fault since our *orvān* or ravān is responsible for making the final decision." Using the notion of ravān, the mobedyar provided an interpretation that addressed the continuity of one's life after death even in this world, beyond the survival of faravahar that is due to its connection to Ahura Mazda. He named the great Persian mystics and poets Ferdowsi, Hāfez, and Rumi "who are always alive to us, because ravān never dies but remains in this world; memory lives forever."

As we see, emphasizing this world and stressing Zoroastrian influence and originality were the consistent messages of the porseh's commemorative expositions. Concepts of Heaven and Hell were discussed along the same lines. The poetess explained, "While Heaven and Hell are notions diffused from Zoroastrians not just to Islam but also to Judaism and Christianity, there remains a fundamental distinction." She stated, "Zoroaster focused on *this* life and emphasized *ahishteh-vahishteh* that includes the best and worst of psychological conditions. So if we are merry this world is Heaven and otherwise it is Hell."

This is a good point at which to return to the question I posed earlier. That is, how then were the commemorative rites and rituals understood—Zoroastrian ceremonies that are, as Fischer writes, citing a Zoroastrian informant, "the most burdensome of the several religions [in Iran, including Jews, Muslims and Baha'is]" (1973:194). The answer is that commemorations were framed as ways to comfort the deceased's family and to honour the ravān and faravshis (faravahar) of the dead, and also as occasions to offer advice for leading an ethical life. A mobed said that "[t]oday in Yazd a beautiful tradition exists among Zoroastrians that the villagers bring burning candles to the doorsteps of the deceased family. In so doing, they invite light to the house and try to comfort the family. All these gatherings aim to ease the pain of the loss and help the deceased family." Such understanding was adopted by the laypeople as well. During a conversation in a porseh observed for a young man, a middle-aged woman discussed the jubilant nature of the Zoroastrian religion and told me that "[t]hese are not mourning gatherings. Rather, they are to help overcome these periods of hardship." She justified this attitude by emphasizing that "[t]he law of nature is that things have a destiny, which is to move forward, so death is not bad [unavoidable]." Since that porseh was for the untimely death of a young man who was killed

in a car accident, she clarified that "this view of death is of course only for when we reach old age not for youth." Thus, there was no attempt to ignore the poignant nature of a premature death.

Another repeated theme in these rituals referred to eulogizing, arguing, "The remembrance of the *life* of the deceased is also important. We have to remember the birthday of the deceased." The mobedyar added, "Thus, we should live in a manner so that after our death those left behind say good things about us behind this podium. Death is the destination of us all, but it is important to prepare for this journey [with good deeds] as we prepare for a worldly trip. But unfortunately, we prepare for the latter more." Nonetheless, he immediately and implicitly criticized the Islamic notion of moral policing, and affirmed his point by reciting from Hāfez: "Whether I am good or bad, O pious man! you mind your own life. Everyone will harvest only what he sows."[216] Moreover, the long rituals were understood for the community to go beyond formalities and contribute towards the progress of the deceased's soul in two religiously outlined ways: generosity and prayer, which are both ritually achieved. For instance, during these rituals, *kheyrāt* or generosity is practised by inviting people in and feeding them.

While the influence of Zoroastrian ideas and practices over Iranians was always emphasized as positive, the reciprocal influences from Shiʿa were painted as negative. The mobedyar and other speakers repeatedly addressed some of these "undesired" influences. For instance, the mobedyar said, "On the first day of the New Year we visit families who have lost loved ones (this is a standard practice among the Shiʿa). This visit is not a porseh, but just to show that if an uncle is gone the familial ties remain strong." He suggested, "Therefore, instead of the Arabic phrase *tasliyyat* that conveys sadness [during these visits], we could use the Persian term *ārāmesh-bāsh*, wishing tranquility and peace."

5.1.1 – *Claiming the Mystics*

In the previous chapter, I provided an example of contemporary interpretation of the seven archangels (Amshāspands), an interpretation that understands them in terms of Persian mystical tradition and reiterates Zoroastrian influence. Here, I outline how, through a discourse that also emphasizes the influence of Zoroastrian ideology over mysticism, they actually claim Persian mystics. As Amighi points out the community generally countered the threat of assimilation to the Shiʿa dominant society "by the incorpora-

tion of those dominant influences within the boundaries of the community" (1990:333). In addition, such a discourse ventured to further exploit the existing rift between Shi'a and Iranian culture and created yet another opening for Zoroastrians by claiming Persian mystics as direct heirs of Zoroaster's teachings. The mobedyar occasionally expounded:

> We have three general modes of living: that of the *zāhed*, an ascetic who suffers in this world in order to attain heaven in the next; that of the *ābed* who enslaves himself in this world in the hope of heaven; and that of the *āref* or mystic who tries to find his vocation in this world and answers the main questions that Rumi posed: 'whence am I from, who am I, and where am I going to.'[217] The first two categories of zāhed and ābed refer to religious orthodoxy that was criticized by eminent Persian mystics including Rumi, Hāfez, Khayyām, and Attār.

He added, "From these three modes Iranians mostly followed Rumi who says, 'I am the Divine Bird of the Heavenly Garden and am not from the World of Dust, they have just made a temporary cage of my body, rejoice the moment that I fly in the Divine Realm of God.'" Then he framed this vision as a contribution of Iranians to the world as follows:

> What Iranians have given to the world is *erfān* or *shenākht* or knowledge that encourages us to learn about our path and try to advance, not by rejecting the world or by enslavement to God; rather, by working hard to provide order and manage our lives. Of course, worship is an important part of it, but it is not the whole story.

Nonetheless, Zoroastrians believe that the influence of the *faravahar* concept is either consciously adopted or unconsciously reflected in this mode of mysticism among Muslim poets who attack hopelessness and affirm eternal life. For instance, the community poetess said that Rumi's most celebrated poem, the *Masnavi* clearly reflects the influence of the Zoroastrian notion of faravahar "when he invites us to 'Listen to this reed as it complains: it is telling a tale of separations. Saying: ever since I was parted from the reed-bed, man and woman have moaned (in unison) with my lament. Everyone who is left far from his source, wishes back the time when he was united with it.'"[218] She explained, "We are the reed and the reed-bed is the faravahar within us, longing to return to its origin." She added that the great Hāfez also says, "My body becomes the veil of my soul, rejoice when I rend

asunder this veil. Such a cage is not worthy of a bird like me, I migrate to Heaven to which I belong. How could I circumambulate the Sacred World, as I am limited to the shackles of this body."[219] "This last part," she clarified, "shows that our faravahar is caged in our body, wishing to return to its origin."

Claiming that these eminent mystics were influenced by Zoroastrian theology affords present-day Zoroastrians yet another opportunity to establish their distinct and authoritative spiritual identity: like the mystics, they believe that they too are in touch with the ecstatic mystical knowledge of an encompassing truth. In this sense, Zoroastrians' emphasis on merriment strengthens their connection to Persian mysticism. When I researched the link further, I discovered that in his essay on mysticism among Zoroastrians, James Russell points out, "Where one does encounter joy as a salient feature of mysticism in Iran, it may well have Zoroastrian hallmark, even in its later, Sufi manifestations" (1993:76). He traces further Sufi practices and qualities: "[t]he Sufi leapt in ecstatic dance, *mast-e alast*, intoxicated by the great Question 'Am I not your Lord?' to which the souls of men answered 'We testify to it!' before Creation. His wine and his joy, the Question, the Answer, and the stages and mysteries of the Creation that follow […]" and concludes that "all derive ultimately from the mystical practices—and orthodox doctrine—of the Good Religion of Iran, rooted in the primal, revelatory source of that faith: the Gāthās of Zoroaster" (1993:93–94).

Moreover, it is also curious that the process through which it is believed that Zoroaster received revelations is akin to the anchorite mystics' experience in the state of selflessness, attained through an abstemious life by suppressing carnal desires during a long period of prayer and meditation. Boyce states:

> That material offerings were not, moreover, enough in themselves [Zoroaster] made abundantly clear in another verse which is still spoken daily in the presence of fire: 'Then as gift Zoroaster gives to Mazda the life indeed of his own body, the choiceness of his good intentions, and those of his acts and thoughts which accord with righteousness, and (his) obedience and dominion' (Y. 33.14) … these all indicate of Zoroaster to have been … a priest, reached his complex doctrines of the seven great Amshāspand and the seven creations: through pondering, that is, on the daily rituals in which he had been trained since childhood, which must, through ceaseless repetition, have been as familiar to him as drawing breath. (1975:219–220)

The speakers occasionally and subtly conveyed that while nowadays Iranian mystics, like Rumi and Hāfez, are being claimed and accepted by the Shiʿa (of course, no mystical group is free to practise in contemporary Iran), during their lives they were criticized by the Muslim orthodoxy and even accused of heresy. Some were forced into exile, like Rumi's family; some were executed, like Sohravardi (d. 1234) and Eyn al-Qozāt (1098–1131); and the most renowned of all the self-apotheosizing Mansur Hallaj (d. 922) was arrested, crucified, and decapitated for utterances such as *ana'l-Haqq* or "I am the Truth." A mobed once said that even Hāfez was denied a proper Muslim burial by the clergy who opposed him. Therefore, the discursive expansion of Zoroastrians' link with mysticism was accompanied by an exploitation of Shiʿi orthodox opposition to it.

Exploring relationships between some prominent men among the early Muslim Sufis and Zoroastrian tradition, I found that Bāyazid-e Bastāmi (d. 874), the founder of the intoxicated tradition among the sufis (as opposed to that of the sober mysticism), was the son or grandson of a Zoroastrian,[220] and the aforementioned Hallaj,[221] the epitome of ecstatic union, is said to have been "the grandson of a Zoroastrian priest" (Stepaniants 2002:172). Moreover, Sohravardi's school of Illuminationist philosophy (*Eshrāqi*) was influenced by the Zoroastrian notion of light of lights (Stepaniants 2002:168) and, as Mottahedeh remarks, he saw himself as heir to "the Iranian prophet Zoroaster and a host of culture heroes mentioned in the pre-Islamic Iranian tradition" (1985:150). These figures promoted latitudinarianism, while their allegorical rejection of orthodox religion was characterized in terms of antinomianism, and their self-apotheosizing public statements of ecstatic gnosis were judged heretical. As a result, they aroused the ire of Islamic orthodoxy.

5.1.2 – *Zoroastrians and the Shiʿi 'Religion' Concept*

When it came to the exposition of the concept of 'religion', contradictory and somewhat confused accounts were formulated. Nonetheless, they all shared a familiar theme: that the proper concept of *din* or religion was originally announced and perfected by Zoroaster, and that others, including Muslims, have tainted this Zoroastrian contribution. For instance, the high mobed stated:

> There are two components that make every religion: a book that gives rise to religion and a tradition (*sonnat*) that creates a sect (*mazhab* in Arabic,

> *kish* in Persian). There never had been a religion before Zoroaster, for he brought the first religious book, but mazhab (pl. mazāheb) existed. Mazahebs have problems due to being confined in religious law (*shariʿat*) that discusses the unnecessary nuances of the mundane.

Thus, as he implicitly criticized the Islamic obsession with religious laws, he established Zoroastrian originality. According to the mobedyar, verified by the high mobed, Buddhism and Confucius "are schools of thoughts (*maktab-e fekri*) and not religions." On another level, both men stated that through five faculties of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch, the human being gathers information, and then through an internal command of *daenā* or 'a conscious conscience' (*vejdān-e āgāh*) these various data are combined, without such a synthesis they are worthless. They agreed that all human beings possess this quality; they only need to use it.

In Persian and Arabic, the word *din*, a derivative of *daenā*, stands for religion. The high mobed once clarified that based on Zoroastrian ethical dualism while wisdom (kherad) drives us to pursue personal gains, daenā[222] is at the basis of love for others. "We have to find a balance between the two," he added. In addition to an enunciation of a universal concept of religion, this exegetical emphasis on subjectivity in religion distinguished it from Islam. Further, this notion of religion is said to transcend that of the Shiʿa, which is first and foremost concerned with the regulation of rights and not the quality of the consciousness. The contemporary Zoroastrian rendition of the concept of religion furthermore makes conversion absurd and emphasizes racial heritage while in Islam conversion is fundamental. Choksy notes:

> When marriage occurs between a Muslim and a Zoroastrian in Iran, sometimes-but not always-there are attempts to incorporate the couple into the Zoroastrian community, *even without conversion of the Muslim partner* (my emphasis), and thus forestall Zoroastrian spouse's conversion to Islam and further decline in the community's demographics.
>
> (2006a:172)

In addition to the conversion issue, fully discussed in the next chatper, another related trope drawing a distinction from Islam was the peacefulness that Zoroastrians claimed, entailed in statements such as "Zoroaster replaced swords with pens." On an occasion, in a text recited by a young man Zoroaster was introduced as a prophet who inspired righteous follow-

ers without bloodshed. According to the high mobed, "When Zoroaster reached the Truth, he started to fight," but "with thought and not with sword." Using this religious parable then he commented, "No one has the right to attack others' beliefs." They further referred to the Gāthās 46:1 where Zoroaster complains that even his own family did not accept his teachings. Instead of forcing them to believe, he left them and wandered around the world until he found king *Goshtāsb* [Vishtaspa] *Kiani* who accepted his teachings. After that his teachings spread.[223] Living among the proselytizing Muslims for over a millennium is certainly one of the reasons that different speakers reiterated and cherished the idea that Zoroaster forced his teachings on no one—with the implication that no one should force his beliefs on them. It seems that they have perhaps revised their historical memory in order to fit into the modern world and complete their differentiating narrative from Islam, but more importantly in order implicitly to criticize the oppressive treatment they receive from the dominant Shi'a.[224]

5.1.3 – *Spiritual Development*

Addressing the issue of spiritual development was another area of differentiation from Islam. The mobedyar once drew a connection between the *inner* and *outer* and said that "the light around our body, the aura particularly around our head, intensifies with our inner purity; prophets had an intense aura around their heads. This aura is proven today by scientists." By asserting scientific proof he tried to validate the spiritual in a modern way. Emphasizing purity, a forty-year-old male informant used the following illustrative analogy: "[a] human is like a glass, standing on the table of the material world. Ahriman or the Devil is his shadow that corresponds to humans' greed, bad thoughts, jealousy, and so forth." He continued, "In this world, humanity is always attached to this shadow. However, as one purifies his heart the shadow gradually fades away and when one enters the World of Light this shadow vanishes entirely." I asked him, "How can one purify his heart to enter the World of Light?" I mentioned that some religions offer a *practical* method, sometimes presented in terms of the devotions and techniques of mysticism. He noted, "The Zoroastrian community is divided mainly into two Iranian and Indian communities. Under the influence of Indian mysticism, the Parsi community in India adopted many ascetic practices." He labelled them *tavahhom* or illusions, but stated that "we do not have such practices in Iran."

I found this answer unsettling, since the *Gāthās* emphasize the necessity of a struggle to attain the World of Light. Thus, I thought that a tradition of mystical practice has to exist. Indeed, historically speaking Zoroaster's discovery of a constant conflict and struggle between the forces of nature did influence some specific ascetic traditions. For instance, albeit dated and indirect evidence, theologian Henry Smith affirms that Zoroaster's discovery "intensified the Manichean revolt against the world and the flesh; it lay at the heart of the asceticism which arose in moral protest against the luxury and sensuality of the age" (1904:501). Moreover, James Russell reports that "[a]mong modern Zoroastrians there is a school of theosophical esotericists, organized in the 20th century by incorporating various older traditions, called '*elm-e khshnum*'" (1993:83). He also reports a specific practice, that "[t]he Kayvanis [linked to the Persian Zoroastrian Eshrāqi mystic of the time of the Mughal emperor Akbar], and Khshnumists, recite the Persian mantra, *Nist hasti be-joz yazdān*, 'There is no being but God,' which may perhaps be seen as a philosophical extension, and a calque in its phrasing, of the Muslim credo, *Lā ilāha illā Allāh*, 'There is no god but God'" (Ibid:92–93). Choksy points out, "[T]he twentieth-century and twenty-first-century CE initiates of Ilm-e Khshnum, 'Teaching of Joy,' a Parsi Zoroastrian mystical movement, seek to subdue sexual desire for they hold that it arises from *Drug* to lead humans away from the divine" (2002:105).

Although these hints support the existence of such practices among the Indian Parsis, they refer to the link to Persian mysticism outlined earlier. The high mobed's discourses, nonetheless, always stressed that Zoroaster's art was that "he never put the two forces of good and devil against one another. Rather, he introduced them *alongside* one another (*dar rāstā-ye yek-digar*), opposite but complementary." Contrasting this teaching with Hindu ascetics' suppression of this world to achieve the other, on the one hand, and the this-worldly Western culture rooted in the Greek philosophy, on the other, a mobed stated that "Zoroaster argues that both are equally important."[225]

I decided to investigate whether there were any mystical practices among Iranian Zoroastrians, even if these practices were not necessarily ascetic, rather similar to dances of *samā* and fervent repetition of devotional phrases of *zekr* practised by some Muslim mystics. In the Sofreh Exhibition that I discussed before, when a student described the seventh element of the sofreh as a symbol of immortality, I raised the question about mystical practices. I also shared the above story that I had heard about the Indian

Parsi community's ascetic practices. He vehemently disagreed, averring that "there is no such thing in Zoroastrian religion." While acknowledging that "Parsis are *mota'asseb* or conservative," he clarified, "nonetheless *riyāzat* or asceticism is prohibited." A bystander listening to our conversation interjected, "In a museum in Baku[226] [Azerbaijan] I saw a demonstration of painful ascetic practices endured by Zoroastrians." At this point a Zoroastrian female student intervened and retorted that "there is no such thing in Zoroastrian religion." I clarified that I did not mean asceticism characterized by the austerity of practices and suffering; rather clear sets of practice, methods to achieve the World of Light, an achievement at the heart of the Gāthās. This time he replied that "it is to be achieved through the principle of good thoughts."

I could not understand why they were so sensitive about this issue, in particular since they emphasized their influence on Persian mysticism but simultaneously rejected the normative asceticism that is common among mystics. So, I tried once more from a different angle and said that in the Gāthās there is an ongoin struggle between Light and Darkness. It is not merely an internal fight, like that of the lesser *jihad* in Islam; rather, it extends to the outside world. Zoroaster constantly reminds us that those who help bad people go to Hell. I added that even Zoroaster himself implores Ahura Mazda's help in succeeding in his own endeavour against the devil. Given all this, it seems logical to have a clear method for achieving spirituality, internally and externally. She replied, "I do not see these two as two separate entities, they are together."[227] I agreed that they are inseparable, but said that at the same time they are opposite and mutually exclusive. This time she adamantly reiterated that "the way to achieve spiritual perfection is through good thoughts."[228]

It seems that this opposition to asceticism is a logical extension of emphasis on merriment and rejection of the mode of religiosity that promotes this-worldly suffering for the next. As inducing pain would be a violation of this principle, the forceful denial of asceticism could be interpreted as yet another way to distinguish themselves from the mournful Shi'a. However, as opposed to other instances they did not articulate this distinction clearly. Even later I learned that some discourse does exist on how to realize the spiritual requirement of good thoughts. For instance, once the community's poetess said, "in order to purify our thoughts, we have to try not to hold grudges and hatred, not to testify unless we have witnessed, and not to gossip." She introduced the Gāthās 25:5 as Zoroaster's instruction "how to discover Ahura Mazda within us," and added that "if we become pure

we can see Ahura Mazda with our thoughts. Then faravahar, the implanted effulgence of Ahura Mazda in us, guides our ravān, our responsible faculty for decision making." She concluded that "the next step is sorush to which in the Gāthās is referred as 'the summoning of our conscience.' We have to become aware of this summoning and if we fail to hearken, we might lose it."

The Zoroastrians that I worked with recognized one's commitment to truthfulness as an absolute principle for spiritual development, the maintenance of a healthy society, and the sustenance of the cosmos. Regarding the place of truthfulness in Zoroastrian theology, Ilya Gershevitch writes, "Truth is one of the organs, aspects, or emanations of Ahura Mazdah through which the god acts becomes accessible" (1964:12). Once the high mobed told us that "[r]ighteousness is made of reality and truth; we have to recognize that lying is horrible and, as holy Zoroaster taught us, it destroys society." Again he turned to science to substantiate religious principle through objective proofs and said that "nowadays science has discovered that all humanities' problems and sufferings originate from lies."

In terms of spiritual development, truthfulness is identification with God and constitutes an important way in which an individual may contribute to the sustenance of *ashā*, a fundamental Zoroastrian concept. Jackson, who investigated the usage of ashā in Zoroastrian rituals, remarks that "[t]he designation signifies not alone the ceremonies fitness in accordance with the outward order of the ritual and its observance, but, above all, that inward holiness of spirit which makes for righteousness and for final deliverance" (1913:201). Lawrence Mills asserts that ashā is the rhythm of universal law that "expresses the sublime rhythm in the regularity of his [Ahura] procedure which was supposed to follow from the internal characteristic or attribute which was believed to reside in his nature" (1899b:53). Babayan regards ashā to be "knowledge of the truth and of order […] of the skies and time […] the knowledge of a cosmic order that entails an understanding of the associations between the material and spiritual world, with the earth at its center and partners of stars above," and "the order governing this world and its synchronicity with universal ethics" (2002:21), and Skjaervo considers it to be the cosmic and ritual order (2011:10–11).

The internal expositions provided many examples to make the concept more accessible; but the emphasis was always on good thought and good deed. According to the poetess, "*Ashuii*, a derivative of ashā, says that the

smallest change in this world, for instance in the motion of the stars, causes enormous changes in the whole cosmos: the law of ashā maintains order in our world." The high mobed also addressed the issue, elaborating that "[w]e have to discover ashā, the ruling law of the world, through our kherad or wisdom. In the stage of *Ashāvahishta* we become attuned with ashā and can achieve ashuii or the best attributes." The mobedyar provided further exegeses, drawing on famous poems. In addition to considering the role of personal endeavour and kherad or wisdom as an important focus for one to become aligned with the law of ashā, he emphasized the link with the teachings of Zoroaster:

> Zoroaster's Gāthās establishes that there is one creator whose symbol on earth is *vahuman* or good thought, which has to be used to discover ashā or 'the law of creation' (*hanjār-e hasti*). As Sa'di says, 'every leaf of the green trees is a book for a wise person to know the Creator';[229] thus, we have to observe and ponder that rain fulfills its destiny by descending while water does so by ascending. We have also to become attuned with the law of ashā, to discharge our duty. As Sa'di says, 'the clouds and the wind and the moon and the sun and the skies all are in motion, so you [human] earn a living and do not subsist oblivious of their works, all of them are wandering, obedient for your sake, it is not fair if you do not abide.'[230] As Zoroaster instructs us, we have to do deeds that make the ravān or soul of the creation joyous, to be committed to good deeds, love all, be kind, and help others.

As I have discussed, my endeavour to identify how levels of enlightenment are achieved, practised, and recognized did not produce any substantial results. This is in contrast to Islamic mysticism that has specific ways of ranking the spirituality of a disciple and many specific methods for achieving enlightenment.[231] Unlike Sufi sheikhs, Zoroastrian mobeds only discharge their ceremonial roles. Their ability to recite texts does not necessarily mean they have other kinds of religious knowledge or spiritual qualities. In Weberian vocabulary (1993), they are priests, not prophets. Once I asked a mobed a simple question about the logic of numbers used to identify different chapters of the Avesta. He said, "I am *Avesta-khān* or reciter of the Avesta and not *Avesta-dān* or scholar of the Avesta." It seems then that one's spiritual rank and attunement to ashā could be a combination of knowledge produced through the power of thought, truthfulness, and other personal and moral attributes. As opposed to the Islamic mystics, this ranking is not through

submission to ascetic practices or to a religious authority, or through expressions of ecstatic communion.

5.1.4 – *Gender*

Due to the contested status of women in Islam—women are not qualified to act as witnesses in court, they inherit half of what a man does, have to be fully subservient to their husbands, and are easily divorced but have limited recourse to divorce—the Zoroastrian emphasis on an equal position for women has become an important marker of their distinct identity. While I draw on my fieldwork to address the modes of boundary maintenance as articulated within the framework of the treatment of women (a large proportion of the data comes from the monthly celebration of Women's Day discussed below), Zoroastrian gatherings were not the only occasions for such discourse and practice. For instance, the community poetess who represented the Zoroastrian community in a meeting of religious representatives of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, held in response to the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, told a non-Zoroastrian crowd that "[w]hen other cultures were ashamed to have a daughter (a reference to the Arabs before Islam), women enjoyed maternity leave and were paid up to four times more than men under the Achaemenid Iran."[232] Such hyperbolic statements were also common in the community. For instance, the mobedyar stated that "[i]n our religion, women are even ranked somewhat higher than men." He qualified his statement by elaborating that "[e]tymologically, the Avestan word *zan* (lit., woman) is derived from *zenate*, meaning creator and the one that gives birth (*zāyesh dahandeh*), which men are incapable of." He added, "Men are indebted and dependent on their mothers their whole lives, even grown up men need their mothers."

The Zoroastrian celebration of women during Esfandegān was one of the more elaborate of the monthly celebrations. The Esfandegān celebration that I attended in 2008 was held in Firuz-Bahram Zoroastrian high school in Tehran. Whereas in other celebrations the genders were evenly balanced, in this event with the exception of three men (including myself) the rest of the congregation were women. A woman who welcomed me and noticed my surprise said, in an explanatory tone, "Most of the participants are women." She added, "But there are a few men and more will come." Later an informant explained to me that for this particular day many families have their own plans to honour their mothers and, since the focus is on

women, men must not have felt obligated to attend. A speaker explained that this celebration was arranged by the Zoroastrian Women's Association, founded 58 years earlier, so the chairwoman of the Association remembered the founders.

When a Zoroastrian entertainer was invited to recite her poem, she described the occasion as one which again established the progressive nature of Zoroastrians as opposed to that of the dominant Shi'i culture. She relayed, "While I was riding in a taxi, the driver spoke ill of his daughter-in-law. I was so angry that when got home composed this poem." The gist of the poem was that women are equal to men, like men they make their own paths, and whoever says men are superior is simply reiterating the Arab's *jāheliyyat* or ignorance. The poem also warned against the belief that women are seductive, or that they have one rib less than men: "In the age of knowledge and science these beliefs are embarrassing." At the end of the ceremony, a teenage girl recited from Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāme*. She performed in the tradition of *naqqāli*, an oral and verbal art in which a professional storyteller or *naqqāl* (lit., transmitter) performs selected epic stories. Accordingly, she held a stick as a prop that took on the life of a horse, mountain, sword, and the like. She appeared on many other occasions, and since *naqqāli* is traditionally a male profession, her performance was always introduced in terms of Zoroastrian iconoclastic innovation.[233]

The internal gender discourse focused on several themes, of which the abovementioned superior position of women in ancient Iran compared to the subordination of women among the Arabs, was the most repeated trope. Despite the reiteration of the idea in different ways, the constant was a reference to "the misogynist Arabs before Islam who buried their daughters alive." After such a reference on the occasion of the Women's Day, one woman expressed a sense of "communal pride," since "in ancient Iran women were co-equal with men." She added, "We had female kings, like *Purāndokht*, women had legal status, and could own property." Emphasis was placed even on the "pre-Islamic" practices, both of the Arabs and Iranians, so as not to upset present-day Muslims, an implicit link between Islam and the Arabs in terms of their supposed misogyny once again explored a fissure between Iranianness and Islam.

At its core, such discourses sought to establish that the contribution of Zoroastrians made gender equality possible in ancient Iran—also a covert claim to advanced consciousness and to being more modern. Moreover, as on other occasions, reference was made to other world religions. The poetess asserted, "I can say, with absolute certainty, that the Zoroastrian tradition is

the only religion in the world in which women are coequal of men and that women can occupy the highest status." She added:

> In Old Iran, a woman could perform religious rituals, recite the *manthrās*, and in her old age she could care even for the fire in the temple (*ātash-bān*). She could also become a lawyer, and participate in archery alongside men. We used to have women fighters like *Gord-Āfarid*.

Equating Iranian culture with Zoroastrian tradition, she immediately relayed a story by *Ferdowsi* in which *Sohrāb*, a Turanian hero, engaged in a duel, and only after the fight realized that he had fought a woman named *Gord-Āfarid*. At that moment he said, "If Iranian women fight such a [manly] fight, how then must their [male] warriors fight?"[234]

Beyond a religious ordinance, she argued that this equality of the sexes also has a divine manifestation "since three of the six Amshāspands are male and three female,"[235] concluding, "Ahura Mazda then is both feminine and masculine." This is a modern interpretation in Zoroastrian hermeneutics that ignores the gradual transformations in religious beliefs and imageries "on ascriptions of demonic and deistic feminine images vis-à-vis masculine images and of female roles in contrast to male roles" (Choksy 2002:105). "Zarathushtra appears to have differentiated, in devotional poems of praise and blame attributed to him, between a neuter Asha, 'order, reality' which was equated to 'righteousness,' and a feminine Drug, 'disorder, illusion' which was equated to 'falsehood'" (Ibid:15). Moreover,

> [W]hile the powers attributed to supposedly negative spiritual entities were on the wane, the Persian Revayats of the early modern period retained the notion that, in general, men were righteous and women were potentially problematic: "The holy Zarathushtra asked Ahura Mazda, 'why is the father superior and the mother inferior?' Ahura Mazda replied, 'The father is superior because I first created a righteous man and pronounced blessings upon him … [and because] the accursed Angra Mainyu first seduced woman from the true path' (1:172)." (Ibid.:107)

Choksy points out that the "doctrinal adjustments and, consequent, wide-ranging communal transformation are largely direct consequences of western-style, non-sectarian, social and educational settings" (Ibid). The contemporary community focuses on its society in a modern context, rather than on misogynistic aspects of the religion in an historical one that for in-

stance sees women during menstruation as ritually impure and barred from entering the fire-temple, and generally women are prohibited from achieving priestly status.

Another distinction from Islam was related to the issue of marriage. Citing Christensen, the famous scholar of Iranian culture and the Zoroastrian religion, the poetess explained that, "In Old Iran girls were free to choose.[236] Zoroaster told his daughter Purchistā that she had to decide and chose her husband. Further, after marriage both men and women were called the head of the household." She emphasized, "Our brides and grooms are reminded of this on the *govāh-girān* sofreh." This distinction was more elaborately discussed by the mobedyar. "In the Old Iranian household there were two terms: *namān-o-pāeiti* and *namān-o-patāni*, which translated to head-man (*kad-khodā*) and head-woman (*kad-bānu*), so both were equally important, while in other religions man is clearly defined as the head of the family." In these statements, "the other cultures" is a reference to the Arabs and "other religions" is an oblique reference to Islam; nonetheless, world religions are also included.

In addition to establishing the influence of Zoroaster's teachings in the formation of Iranian culture, and emphasizing the differences between the Arabian and Iranian cultures, the speakers stressed Zoroastrian influence on Islam. For instance, the mobedyar said, "Many religions present women as inferior to men; this is while Avesta, the oldest part of Iranian culture, teaches us that there is no difference between men and women, and that only the pious peoples are superior." He added, "As a result of Zoroastrian influence, a similar verse has entered the Quran, announcing that among believers only the pious ones are superior. However, it is never enforced in practice."

As I mentioned earlier, the influence was not understood in one way, and in several instances the mobedyar warned the community against the influence of the Shiʿi ideology: "[i]t saddens me to see that sometimes in our gatherings men and women sit separately." He added sarcastically, "if this is so, why not hang curtains so men and women could not see one another." This comment hinted at the Shiʿi practice of separating men and women in this manner. Therefore, attempts were being made to 'liberate' Zoroastrian tradition from these "outside" influences. On another occasion the mobedyar generated excitement when he proudly and enthusiastically announced, "I am glad to inform you that breaking from the outside masculine (*mard-sālār*) culture that had affected our tradition, we have now passed an internal law that makes our daughters equal heirs." This is yet

another sharp contrast with Islamic law, in which daughters inherit half of what sons do.

A related matter was divorce, which has risen sharply in contemporary Iran. The Zoroastrian community has not remained immune to this trend, and the way in which this problem was addressed in the community followed the general pattern that sought to elevate an ideal Zoroastrian thought and practice and criticize the dominant Shi'a. This is while "Zoroastrianism does not allow divorce: it is a twentieth century innovation" (Fischer 1973:194). Among a crowd of women in *Esfandgān* the representative said, "Unfortunately, we have come under the influence of the outside world. We should not have divorce in our community, as in our tradition there is no force and pressure for marriage." He added, "I remember when I was marrying, the mobed asked me and my wife separately 'Why are you getting married? Are you sure? Has anybody forced you to do so?' So when there is no pressure for marriage, there should not be any regrets afterward." Reappropriation of old practices was also discussed in order to combat divorce. On the same issue he said, "In the past, the Zoroastrian community had women called *usto* who taught life lessons. Nowadays boys and girls marry without having understood the realities of life. We might need to have men and women to teach lessons vital for their shared lives and thus prevent divorce."

Gender equality, free choice, and other enlightened themes of these expositions were generally directed at the West, demonstrating Zoroastrian modernity and advanced attitudes. But the construction of Zoroastrian identity was achieved, to a large extent, through drawing contrasts with the dominant Shi'a. Also, aligned with the discussion of previous chapters, Zoroastrians that I worked with portrayed themselves as creators of Iranian culture. As we saw, while they drew a genealogical link between the equality of men and women and the teachings of Zoroaster, this practice was also framed in terms of an Iranian practice in contrast to the supposed misogyny of the Arabs.

5.2 – Conclusion

While these practitioners emphasized similarity with Shi'a in order to establish their historical influence and moral authority, they also articulated a discourse of difference in order to maintain a distinct and superior identity. Moreover, beyond the two levels of uniqueness confined to a body

of original believers and the culture shared with the Iranian Shiʿa, their discourse gradually moved from racial and cultural particularity to an all-encompassing universal and enlightened struggle to discover the Truth. We saw this in their concept of religion. The effort to achieve distinction was partly linked to the presentation of the Zoroastrian tradition as a modern religion by emphasizing gender equality, choice, and tolerance as opposed to their portrayal of the Shiʿi religion as patriarchal, proselytizing, and intolerant. These contemporary and sometimes revisionist exegeses were shared with a community disposed to formulate "modern" self-imaginaries. Therefore, they emphasized Zoroastrian secularism versus Shiʿi religious governance, downplaying the historical existence of the Zoroastrian religious state. The celebration of Women's Day in Esfandegān provided yet another occasion for an even more specific expression of boundary maintenance. The exegetes elaborated on the equality of men and women in the Zoroastrian religion vis-à-vis the Islamic patriarchy as manifested in marriage, divorce, and inheritance laws. Moreover, as preservers of a supposedly halcyon original Iranian culture, there was a constant emphasis on Zoroastrian merriment in contrast to the mournfulness of Shiʿa.

At the same time, the Zoroastrian discourse of similarity made it possible for the community to function in Islamic Iran through the coupling of its imaginaries with the state. Nonetheless, these same imaginaries offered an opportunity for an internal discourse that emphasized Zoroastrians' precedence and influence, and superiority. Similarity with the Shiʿi tradition, moreover, helped Zoroastrians imagine the survival or continuity of the beliefs and practices of their community among Iranian Shiʿa, a survival that could compensate for the gradual dwindling of Zoroastrian believers that I will discuss in the next chapter. Zoroastrian influence over Islam was sometimes articulated as part of the general impact on world religions, which is also acknowledged by scholars—some more and some less interested in affirming Zoroastrian pre-eminence; they are eclectically cited by the community itself.

CHAPTER 6

Religious Rationalization and Revivalism

> Religious rationalization includes (1) the creation and clarification of doctrines by intellectual systematizers, (2) the canonization and institutionalization of these doctrines by certain social carriers, and (3) the effective socialization of these cultural principles into the ideas and actions of believers.
>
> (Hefner 1993:18)

Outlining some of the longstanding challenges that Zoroastrians have faced—threats to their physical survival as well as to the reproduction of a certain number of cultural traits essential to what the community today conceives as its tradition—this chapter addresses the ways in which they identify, rationalize, and legitimate their doctrine, rituals, and practices as a form of response to the imposing hegemonic context. Themes such as cultural survival, the invention of tradition, minority legitimization in a context of majority dominance, and the transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next are all instances of religious rationalization. Coupled with projects that aim to revitalize the community they provide material support for the development of an abstract notion of survival pursued by the aforementioned discourse of similarity, and facilitate the maintenance of the original body of believers aligned with the discourse of difference discussed earlier.

During my fieldwork Zoroastrians were trying to go beyond the physical and cultural challenges by taking advantage of a newly opened political space, which, as a new condition in the Iranian political arena, had allowed them to intensify their drive to achieve a habitable niche in the public realm. This possibility produced a renewed and vibrant spirit in the community. The reopening of an abandoned clinic and a library and the effort to con-

struct a new fire-temple were among examples of this spirit that I discuss here. Zoroastrians' adopted strategies, including exegeses to deflect old accusations of fire-worship and also decisions to reopen abandoned premises, are efforts to remain relevant and vibrant in contemporary Iran and in the modern world. The mobed who complained that the Zoroastrian community had been in a "defensive mode for too long" encouraged a more "active presence in the public arena." Here I will trace the development of that community.

6.1 – Continuous Challenges and Rationalization of Doctrines and Rituals

6.1.1 – *Conversion, Accusations of Fire Worship, and Burial Practice*

Conversions to Islam and in the last two centuries to the Baha'i faith have posed a great threat to the Zoroastrian community. Choksy points out that conversion to the Baha'i faith, a contributing factor to Zoroastrians' demographic decline, was directly linked to "the increased socioreligious liberalism itself—which led some Zoroastrians to espouse the Baha'i faith, with its offer of universalism, just as members of the Iranian Jewish community had done" (2006a:160). I met several Baha'is from Zoroastrian backgrounds who had lost touch with their Zoroastrian relatives due to their parents' or grandparents' conversions.[237] I also learned about Zoroastrians who had converted to Islam and had severed ties with relatives. The following account shows a move from cultural and racial notions of Zoroastrian religion towards a more universal category, a shift that by rejecting conversion provides the rationale for the maintenance of tradition.

On different occasions, the mobedyar argued against conversion and in favor of the necessity for Zoroastrians to follow their "own tradition." His argument against conversion was based on the Quranic assertion that "every prophet has come with the language of his own people." He recited the Arabic verse[238] and added that that is why the Avesta is in Avestan and the Quran in Arabic; each group is entitled to its own religion. To repudiate the argument of "progressive revelation" put forward by the Baha'is to establish that Bah'u'llah is the prophet of this day and age, he responded, "If we say that God has sent prophets and revealed religions progressively, it means that he did not have the knowledge in the beginning, which

contradicts God's all-knowing attribute." Against the Jewish claim to be the "chosen people," he argued that "some would say their race is chosen, which contradicts God's absolute love for all; there is no chosen race and all have daenā, that conscious conscience." In addition to this enlightened and universal notion of religion, he provided a mystical reading of the Zoroastrian religion, transcending the trivial religious ordinances: "[w]e look for humanity; we do not care where the *qebleh* is (the point of attention in obligatory prayer; for Muslims, Mecca); Qebleh is the qebleh of the heart and the rest is meaningless."

As discussed before, in post-conquest Iran, pejorative and condescending terms such as *ātash-parast* or fire-worshiper were used by Muslims to refer to Zoroastrians. This accusation has continued into modern times. For example, according to Zoroastrian websites, the founder of the Islamic Republic Ayatollah Khomeini has stated, "Some dishonourable knaves have declared that *Zardosht* the *magus*[239] and a worshipper of fire is holy and a worshipper of God. If this dirty fire that has arisen from the temples of Fārs is not extinguished, soon the dirt will spread and invite all to join the *Gabre*'s[240] creed."[241] Historically, the Zoroastrian community has taken great pains to denounce and repudiate accusations of fire-worship, and it still struggles to deflect this today. An aspect of this denunciation is manifest in the changing body of religious praxis having to do with fire.

When after 1960 non-believers were granted open access to Zoroastrian temples by the secular Pahlavi and rituals were exposed to the outside world, Choksy observes that "attenuation in notions of purity and pollution with regard to fire took place" (2006a:160). For instance, the purificatory ritual called pādyāb—ablution of ritual purity, discussed in chapter 3—and koshti—the rite of tying and untying the religious cord—both performed prior to entering the presence of a holy fire, became ever less frequent (Ibid). In addition, another change that took place, also after 1960, was to let non-believers enter fire-temples without removing their footwear and covering their heads—practices observed by Zoroastrians themselves as signs of respect for the fire.[242]

In discussing the Zoroastrian theology of fire, different members of the community pointed out to me that Zoroaster was the first in the world who talked about the one and only God. His Gāthās 44:7, referring to Ahura Mazda and his unity, was usually cited. Addressing similar concerns, the poetess always reminded the congregation that as a result of the teaching of Zoroaster Iran is the only country in the whole world that has never worshiped idols. Using Barth's anthropology of knowledge (2002a), I show

how the dialectic of life under the Shiʿa has helped to generate modern rational criteria to validate and make feasible Zoroastrian reproduction of the knowledge tradition with respect to fire. The constraints that these criteria provide show the trajectory of the changing corpus of Zoroastrian knowledge.

Zoroastrian fire discourse was informed by theological, mystical/allegorical, scientific/evolutionary, and comparative exegeses. The extent to which this discourse was elaborated and developed, however, reflects the depth of the Zoroastrian struggle with the accusation of fire worship. The elements of the shared struggle against such accusations that are informed by Zoroastrian ideology and are adopted to modern knowledge forms allow us to explicate the forms of this fire discourse. Nonetheless, in the Weberian rationalization model, "[t]he more rationalized a religious world view, the deeper and more pressing the contradictions it presents, and the stronger the impulse for religious innovation" (Cf. Swidler 1993:xv). The existing variations and sometimes contradictory explanations, similar to other instances we have so far seen, indicate, moreover, the differential distribution of religious knowledge among community members.

One ecological interpretation of the Zoroastrian emphasis on fire was framed in terms of modern miasmatic debates that blame disease on poisonous air and a polluted environment, but was also absorbed into the older Zoroastrian discourse of ritual purity thus appropriated. As an informant told me:

> Our world is made from four ākhshij [purifying elements in Zoroastrian ideology] of water, earth, fire, and air. All of them are necessary for the survival of living creatures. We have to understand that they are rendered holy status in Zoroastrian religion so we are obligated to keep them clean. We have to appreciate their value and not release atomic waste in our planet, not pollute the air and water, for all creatures are dependent upon these elements.

However, he was not clear how fire fits into this logic. As a matter of fact, the high mobed distinguished fire among the four ākhshij and said, "Our ancestors discovered that water, earth, and air are materials; thus, they called them gitavi; not being material, fire was called minavi or spiritual." According to him, fire symbolizes truthfulness as it never changes and we *cannot* pollute it. Moreover, the other three ākhshij could not operate without fire, for without warmth they could not generate life.

Fire was also approached within the evolutionary scheme of human development, as a discovery integral to advancement. "It was due to the discovery of fire," the mobedyar said, "that humans started consuming cooked food, left caves, and progressed in all aspects of life." He added, "Thus, our temples were made to maintain fire." Appropriating the modern idea of evolution, the high mobed also stated, "The discovery of fire gave human progress an unprecedented swiftness. When we look around us, nothing could be done without fire; technology is not possible without it. So fire is one of the most important and vital human discoveries." Along the same line, a young informant provided a modernist interpretation of the fire symbolism: "[f]ire is the symbol of technology that empowers us; it could be positive or negative, but we ought to be on the positive side. It is given to us to melt the earth and forge metals, also to evaporate water and produce energy." Moreover, as a move to extend the similarities to other high cultures and civilizations and claim equal status, the high mobed drew the following parallels:

> The emphasis on fire is not exclusive to Zoroastrians; rather, it could be found all over the world. The Chinese and Japanese, for instance, demonstrate a great fondness for fire. Also, the fire of the Olympics has been burning for about three thousand years. Everything, without an exception, has to pass through fire to reach civilization; any civilization has fire embedded in it.

One of the most important comparative interpretations engaged Abrahamic religions and was given by the high mobed in the monthly celebration of Ardibeheshtegān, dedicated to the celebration of fire. I have already stated that he said that in the Zoroastrian religion God is sheydān-e sheid, meaning light of lights, which the *nur al-anvār* of the Quran in reference to God is the exact translation of. He added:

> Even in Islamic Iran, fire has always been the symbol of love. Moreover, God was revealed to Moses in the form of fire and in Christianity God is the absolute light without any room for darkness. Thus, light is our [Zoroastrians] point of attention; we worship *toward* light; fire *is not* our qebleh or point of adoration. A proof of that is that we never enter a city looking for a fire-temple to pray.

He concluded his talk by reciting Ferdowsi's following verse: "Do not think

that they [Zoroastrians] were fire-worshipers, [nay, rather] they worshiped the exalted God."[243]

In another type of exposition, fire was given an allegorical meaning. For instance, the high mobed reflected, "Many sacrifices have been made to preserve this fire, in particular the *fire of the Zoroastrian religion*." Elsewhere, he beseeched God to help the community "keep our *inner fire* burning." This exegetical approach was even more palpable in the reading of Persian literature with its numerous references to fire, all the more so when the mobedyar with his mystical proclivities interpreted such verses. Once he recited a poem by Hāfez where he says that "[t]hey love me in the Zoroastrian temple since the undying fire burns in my heart."[244] He went on to add that "[f]or us [Zoroastrians] the lighting of a fire refers to the *fire of love* that we kindle in our heart. The same that Rumi has said: 'tis the fire of love that is in the reed, 'tis the fervour of love that is in the wine, this noise of the reed is fire, it is not wind, whoso hath not this fire, may he be naught.'"[245] The mobedyar also writes that during the worship we have to be thinking about "the *fire of our jān* (lit., life) and *ravān* [soul]" (Niknam 2006:91). The references to Muslim/Iranian mystics, similar to comparisons with other civilizations, not only provided substantiation for beliefs and practices, but also were attempts to whittle a universalistic contour for the Zoroastrian religion. These references were aligned with what I discussed in the previous chapter in terms of the formulation of a body of religious knowledge that stressed enlightenment and defined Zoroaster's teachings as guidelines by which to discover a universal truth.

Informed by this universalistic discourse, Zoroastrian exegeses of fire rationalized the importance of fire in the Zoroastrian religion and refuted the accusation of idolatry. As the first condition of religious rationalization cited above, through these doctrinal expositions—in addition to what I addressed before in terms of emphasizing the right to choose, freedom of religion, separation of religion and state, and equality of men and women—Zoroastrian intellectual systematizers adapted themselves to the performatives of rational-critical discourse. Thus, they sought a higher status for their religion, validated their beliefs and rituals, and asserted their modernity. They also established historical influence over Iranian cultural/religious heroes such as Hāfez and Rumi, bolstering their imagined continuity.

The community has abandoned some religious ordinances and simplified others, sometimes to avoid persecution by the Shi'i religious or state authorities, or in response to the necessities of modern life. During the Pahlavi regime laws were generally simplified due to influences of western-

ization, urbanization, and secularization. Among those superseded was the Zoroastrian law that prohibits burial and enjoins one to expose the body in the open air for desiccation in funerary towers called *dakhmeh*, a practice fully abandoned since 1938 in Tehran. Mobed Azargoshasp, in *Zoroastrian Rituals and Rites*, describes the dakhmeh or Tower of Silence as a round area about a hundred metres on top of a mountain away from the village. A small door was installed to enter and exit the structure, which was fully built from stone and concrete. Four wells each a hundred metres deep were connected to a larger central well called *Saradeh* or *Asta Dan* (lit., the place for bone). The wells were filled up to one metre with sand and stones. The interior was angled towards the centre, divided into three parts: the largest for men, then for women, and children. Each division was further divided into smaller blocks for individual corpses and there was a canal to the central well (1992:218–219).

Fischer tells us that according to Yazdis' local opinion, the origin of this practice goes back to the Arab invasion and the massacre of Zoroastrians "since one could not bury individually each of the fallen" (1973:220), and its abandonment was "to avoid the appearance of backwardness" (Ibid:110 n. 1). "Now in most locales, including Sri Lanka and Iran, the corpse is placed in a hearse which is followed to the burial ground by relatives and friends in a motorcade" (Choksy 1998:667). Mobed Azarghoshasp employs both philosophical and historical arguments to address and justify the change. The philosophical rationale states that Zoroastrians generally innovate and change their practices. He argues that even a religious ordinance could be changed without affecting the *essence* of the Zoroastrian religion. According to him, religious teachings have two aspects. One is eternal and deals with moral laws that never change. The other is social, which is derived from the condition of time and space, hence change. Subsequently, he argues that Zoroastrians were and are entitled to use different methods of handling corpses (1993:213–215).

His historical justification claims that Zoroastrians always employed different ways to deal with corpses. He draws similarities between Zoroastrian practices and those of other societies, arguing that the method of treating a corpse chosen by any people had a close relationship with their environment. If close to the seas and rivers, they threw the body into the water; in jungles with lots of wood they burned the corpse; in sandy regions or plain fields, they buried; and in mountains with lots of snow, dakhmeh was the solution. With the exception of the first method, the other three, he argues, were common in ancient Iran: burning in the east, burial in the south,

and dakhmeh in the west (212–213). Such ratiaonlization legitimates change. *Iran Vij*, where the Aryan race used to live, he states, was a very cold place so, according to *vandidad par gard panjom* that outlines rituals and rites, the ancestral Aryans kept the body in a room until the weather changed and then moved it to a dakhme (215–216). He mentions a group of people in Tibet and in Afghanistan in the Hindu Kush Mountains who leaves the corpse on top of the mountain, thus, "[t]here is no doubt in my mind that the main reason for dakhme in the old days was the cold weather and the mountain regions where Aryans inhabited: The frozen earth could not be dug up" (217). In this line of reasoning, he leaves out one of the most important ideological rationales behind the Zoroastrian prohibition of burial. That is, the buried corpse pollutes the earth.[246] Such necessary abandonments of tradition, under the pressure of modernity, do not arouse much nostalgia today. However, changes due to a *passive* adoption from Shi'a are criticized, an aspect of Zoroastrian historicity addressed next.

6.1.2 – *Worries of Knowledge Transmission and Socialization*

Throughout my fieldwork, speakers often said that due to its tumultuous past the Zoroastrian community had lost some of its customs; that some practices were no longer popular and had been transformed into special knowledge known only by a handful of mobeds. The high mobed once expressed his sadness that if he spoke in Dari some in the congregation could not understand. As mentioned earlier, Dari is the most frequently spoken language among Zoroastrians in Yazd, and is incomprehensible to non-Zoroastrians. The mobedyar also repeatedly complained that the community's lack of knowledge of the Avesta was the reason behind its lack of attention when the sacred text was recited for "a little too long." He said that "[i]f we knew the language, it would have helped us focus and reflect." The loss of the Pahlavi language has further distanced the followers from their tradition, and has increasingly distinguished the priests and experts' religious experience in rituals from that of laypersons. This differential distribution of religious experience is in addition to that rooted in the division of ritual labour which I discussed earlier.

Sometimes speakers adopted a sharper and more emotional tone, addressing the "heedlessness" of the community as regards its tradition. One of the most emotional addresses occurred after the last Gāhambār of the year, when a frequent female speaker complained that their ceremonies were "vanishing and losing significance in the community." She focused her criti-

cism on the contemporary situation, stating that what she had learned about the Zoroastrian religion as a child was much more than what parents teach their children today. She continued, "Given the amount of available translated materials and other forms of information it should be the opposite." She identified this lack of knowledge transmission to the next generation as "the community's main concern" and demanded a serious look at its root causes. Partly blaming the parents for "their failure to groom their children in religious knowledge," she added, "When they are six years old, what children learn becomes their second nature, which does not happen in older age." She also encouraged the Association to recognize and reward those children that participated in ceremonies.

Zoroastrian authorities were trying to change this pattern by forming religious classes and employing the children in ceremonies. For instance, in the mobed initiation ceremony, discussed earlier, two plays were performed by kindergarteners. They illustrated some religious principles, depicting the Zoroastrian adoption of the modern notion of religion category as a body of ideology.[247] In the first play, they thoroughly explained and enacted the faravahar emblem: that faravahar is implanted in every one and its hands are towards the sky as it worships Ahura Mazda; its ring means love and kindness; references to the triad of good thoughts, good words, and good deeds, etc. Similar detailed elaboration occurred in the second play, and by the time they had finished the performance had to have memorized names of the archangels (the Amshāspands), their significance, and symbolic meanings.

In addition to these kindergarteners who performed in various celebrations, and so learned and taught ideology, young people were also involved in elaborate theatrical performances. For instance, during the Zoroaster birth ceremony they gave a performance about the haft-sin sofreh, in which each girl represented an item, and when the leading voice asked what it represented, she had to enact her persona; and after each part the group as a chorus repeated that "[w]e are the haft-sins, and we see each other at the New Year sofreh." The objective of the play was formulated in its last verse that reiterated, "Let's honour the ancient tradition of the haft-sin, and respect such customs."[248] In the end, in a circle of hamāzury, a fundamental concept to Zoroastrian community that literally means unity, they held hands and recited the New Year (*tahvil-e sāl*) prayer. Thus, beyond parenting and schooling, socialization within the religious context of rituals, the "legitimate peripheral participation"[249] of children, actively as well as passively mediated the process of knowledge transmission.

In addition to regular projects to teach children and young people, community members were constantly reminded of the importance of participation, and different speakers emphasized its various values. In addition to the high mobed who elaborated that the observation of collective rituals facilitates religious internalization, another mobed encouraged the observance of and participation in ceremonies, arguing that "[w]e have to partake in religious activities to meet those members we have not met yet." Another mobed referred to the importance of jubilation in these celebrations for improving productivity. Invoking more authority, he added, "Darius the Great stated that Ahura Mazda created the world, people, and jubilation; he created the latter for the former." All these are instances of the third element of religious rationalization, namely the effective socialization of cultural principles into the ideas and actions of believers.

6.1.3 – *The Population Dilemma*

Given the declining population, it would seem to be a sound survival strategy to accept new converts, or at least not to lose exogamous members. Due to the absence of such possibilities, we might assume that the Zoroastrian identity is ethnically constructed. Stepaniants writes, "Similar to Judaism, all Iranians were supposed to follow the teachings of Zoroaster, but no foreigners were allowed into the faith community (although on occasion, for example at the time of Kartir at the end of the third century, certain groups of non-Zoroastrians were converted by force)" (2002:165). There exist contradictory reports regarding conversion among contemporary Zoroastrians. Choksy writes, "In part because many of their fellow citizens, even though Muslim, may have distant ancestors who were Zoroastrians, Iranian Zoroastrians still do accept converts covertly although they do not proselytize for fear of retribution from the majority Shiʿite community" (2006a:172). He compares this attitude with that of the Indian Parsis: "[i]n this regard they are different from the Parsis who now act as a pseudocaste within Indian society and so do not accept converts to Zoroastrianism" (Ibid). However Amighi told me that "in the 1970s a number of Muslims tried to convert, and in fear the mobed refused to help them. They went to India, where they were converted and returned to Abadan, Iran. Several Zoroastrians seemed very proud of this; others worried about the impact." Stepaniants relays the following that contradicts both, "When the prominent Iranian scholar Poure Davoud desired to become a convert, Zoroastrian communities in both Iran and India rejected his request despite his contributions

to the study of Zoroastrianism" (2002:165). Once in the fire-temple, two patrons requested a private audience with the lady in charge of the visitors: "They wanted to convert," she shared with me later, "When they want to talk in private it is always about conversion, which is not possible." She explained, "We comply with the government law that prohibits conversion." She had explained to them that "[t]hey could commit themselves to the teachings of holy Zoroaster, but could not convert."

This particularism is a threat to the very survival of Zoroastrians since it severely limits the possibility of new converts, nonetheless it helps to preserve the tradition by not incurring the wrath of Shiʿa, an adaption to the Islamic law that enjoins execution for Muslims who leave Islam for another religion. Fischer points out, "It is agreed that this [no conversion policy] is not a religiously or theologically grounded rule, but rather a pragmatic rule for survival" (1973:67). Even during the reign of the secular Pahlavi "in Iran it [was] expressed as a fear still today that were there visible apostasy from Islam there would be violent killing of Zoroastrians" (Ibid). In the light of the ambivalent effort to preserve members but not to proselytize or convert outsiders, we can understand the apparent internal contention in the formula in which conversion is not practised and one ought to be born into the religion, but in which there is a even certain age when Zoroastrians choose to *become* initiates. An elderly Zoroastrian man told me that:

> Unlike Shiʿa, we do not believe that one is born into a religion. We believe that at age seven our kids can decide for themselves whether to *become* a Zoroastrian or not. This is the age that they should start observing religious ordinances (*senn taklif*). For instance, they have to say the obligatory prayer five times a day.

The problem of low population has already caused difficulties in the community. Several months after the opening of a Zoroastrian house for the elderly, a member of the Zoroastrian Association appealed to the community and complained that "[t]here is a need for paid positions in the elderly house wherein fourteen are being cared for and we prefer not to hire outsiders, but no Zoroastrian has signed up yet." This was partly blamed on the lack of desire to work in such an environment, but also on the emigration of the able and young members of the community which at best estimates has no more than 30,000 followers remaining in Iran.

At present, worries about depopulation are deepened by the decline in traditional extended families and modern marriage practices. On an occa-

sion the mobedyar addressed the troubling increase in the age of marriage in the community, noting that girls postponed marriage to their late twenties, and even then did not want to have children or wanted to have only one. He identified this as a major contributing factor to their population loss and said that at the time of the Revolution "our community had about seventy to eighty thousand members but now it has one third of that."[250] In a general porseh where the names of all who had died in the previous year were listed, the mobedyar announced that the community had lost about ninety individuals in one year, wondering whether they could be replaced. While asserting that the small size of the community was "not a disadvantage" as they did not want just a "huge crowd," he reminded them that "the late high mobed Shahzady advised each family to have four offspring: two to replace the parents and two for the community's growth." He asked the community to follow this advice, and warned against its future if they did not.

Various reasons were given for the low rate of marriage and childbirth. On one occasion the mobedyar implied that people in the community were worried about costs. Moreover, he criticized gossip and rumour as hindrances to marriage: "[w]e have to admit that one problem that our community faces is that our women are jealous and engage in many gossip games, saying, for instance, that this girl is not from our social class and not good enough for our sons. The first thing they are concerned with is what occupation the man has or how much money." He added, "We have built a Zoroastrian centre in Esfahan but could not find a Zoroastrian willing to work there; everyone looks down upon the job of housekeeping. A father with money is desirable, but one who serves the community is not."

Marrying non-Zoroastrians was also a population threat. An informant told me that there were many such cases. She said, "My own cousin married a Muslim girl and their son is not considered a Zoroastrian."[251] The rationale for exclusion is very similar to that given by Jal N. Birdy, a Parsi priest of the migrant Indian community in Corona, California, who will not perform weddings for mixed couples. He says, "As soon as you do it, you start diluting your ethnicity, and one generation has an intermarriage, and the next generation has more dilution and the customs become all fuzzy and they eventually disappear. That would destroy my community, which is why I won't do it."[252] Thus when the preservation of the Zoroastrian tradition as a practised body of knowledge was at stake, the survival notion became inextricably attached to the body of believers, both racially and culturally.[253]

Another factor that threatens the Iranian Zoroastrian community with the prospect of eventual annihilation is emigration, characterized by the

major departures of the eighth, tenth, and eighteenth centuries to the Indian subcontinent, and by the most recent waves to the United States and Canada. Regarding the new waves of emigration, the head of the Association once said that contrary to those who were worried he was not; he expressed his "faith" in Zoroastrian youth's love for Iran and argued that "they will return after completing their education." Nonetheless, the new waves of emigration have exacerbated the community's survival worries and have pushed it to reflect upon their consequences. A mobed expressed to me:

> Today, our problem is survival […] we have to recognize this dilemma. If in the past our ancestors immigrated twice [to India], it was the only way to protect a community that was threatened by annihilation. Even internal migrations were to protect fire of the temples, as fire in [the city of] Kerman was brought from west Iran (Azarbaijan), and that of the [village of] Sharif-Abad from Mashhad […] Unfortunately, our emigration today is not to protect Zoroastrian community or our Faith; rather, it is a random and blind emigration, which pursues no plans.

Migration worries constituted one of the election campaign topics that the three Zoroastrian candidates for the Islamic Republic Parliament had to address. A candidate called it "a serious problem that needs to be investigated." He added, "If the goal is to pursue education, to advance and return to serve the country, it is positive; if permanent, it is a negative move." He complained that "not only the youth, but also families are leaving the country." The winner of the election said that they had a seminar in Yazd on this very issue and today the youth were working to identify reasons behind emigration. The third candidate emphasized that "[w]e cannot simply stop our youth from leaving the country." He cited problems including joblessness, low income, and the difficulty of finding housing, which also contributed to low marriage rates. He hoped that with the help of the Association and other organizations in the community these problems could be solved.

I would like to interject here that these are not *Zoroastrian* problems per se; they are rather general challenges that the youth have to face in Iran. But, like other persecuted minorities, Zoroastrians have the opportunity to migrate to western countries as religious refugees and they often take advantage of that. The Islamic Republic seems to be happy with the high rate of religious minorities' emigration, as it has no system in place to stop the trend. Moreover, some international foundations, including the

United Nation High Commission for Refugees, have a policy to help Iranian religious minorities in their migration. The aid is supposed to be granted if there is a threat to life, but in practice this requirement has not been enforced; rather, unemployment that more harshly affects minorities and the prospect of forceful conversion to Islam are cited by asylum seekers. Therefore, religious minorities are leaving Iran.

In extremis, the community resorted to a dormant religious solution to address this dilemma. A mobed announced that "as a religious response" in order to combat emigration the community had planned to observe the *yasht-e hezāreh* ritual, in which believers commit to reciting a portion of the Avesta until the whole text had been recited numerous times. He explained that in the past, when there were serious problems, the Kermani Zoroastrians used to observe this ritual. A moderator in another ceremony explained that for the first time this ritual was observed during the Safavids when an order of genocide against Zoroastrians was issued in retaliation for the murder of a Muslim by a Zoroastrian. "They held this rite and [as a result] Shah Abbas intervened and rescued them." Another mobed said, "This ritual is for us to review the Avesta, and to sustain morale of the community. We hope that sickness and emigration decrease, and those who migrate for education return and serve their country."

In the Tehran fire-temple, the ceremony started with the mobeds' collective recitation, led by the eldest mobed. The starting day was on *varahrām izad* day of month Ardibehesht and it ended on the same day of the next month Khordād, which was a celebration. Believers all over Iran were asked and encouraged to contact the person in charge in Kerman and commit themselves to reciting a portion of the text. Later, the high mobed expressed his surprise at the high number of participants, as *fifty seven hundred* recitations of *varahrām yasth* were accomplished. Soon in different ceremonies they referred to it as "a great movement," which boosted the community's morale. In the initial ceremony, the high mobed announced that the "*varahrām yasth* section of the Avesta guards truthfulness and wards off lies, so this rite will cause unity among Zoroastrians all over the world." He added, "This hamāzury or unity has saved us throughout history." In another instance, as a gesture of inclusiveness, he further commented that "[w]e do not recite only for our families, but rather for all *beh-dinān* [Zoroastrians] and all the people." The Zoroastrian news agency Amordad wrote, "This initiative of the Kermani community is intended for the hamāzury and well-being of Zoroastrians all over the world as well for the progress of all beloved Iranians."

I hope this section has illustrated Zoroastrians' ambivalence towards their dwindling numbers. My informant in the fire-temple told me, "Regardless of the community's physical survival, the Zoroastrian religion will survive through those who research and work on its history and sacred texts." I agreed that her notion of survival was important, indeed, but I commented that "the community was more important." She concurred. Others were more vocal, pointing out the necessity of the survival of the population. Once a mobed said, "If an Egyptian sees the Pyramids and an Iraqi the Ctesiphon (*Ivān-e Madāen*) they just see *history*, but when Iranians look at Pasargadae [the tomb of Cyrus the Great], they know that there still is a community, a society, a living culture [referring to the Zoroastrian community]." Although the Zoroastrians' survival imageries are discursively expanded towards an abstracted universal notion, the community's survival praxis is still inextricably bound to the existence of an original, but irreplaceably reducing, human community that excludes all non-Zoroastrians, does not accept converts, and enforces endogamy.

I suggest that, burdened by continuously renewed struggles and entrenched in the legacy of a tumultuous past, in order to avoid racial and cultural adulteration by admitting outsiders, Zoroastrians have opted for maintaining the original community, ambivalent about the grim prospect of extinction. It is the prospect of gradual disappearance in their homeland, coupled with the deeply ingrained attitudes of exclusivity and structural rigidity, that has led them to imagine and articulate a different kind of survival, embedded in the open culture concept that I discussed before. This transformation expands Zoroastrian survival imageries by detaching them from the dwindling body of original believers, first, by framing it in terms of influence over and endurance in Iranian and Shi'a. Second, at an even higher level, Zoroastrian cultural notions of survival transcend the national context, validated on the basis of significant contribution made to humanity as a whole. As an example of this, the high mobed once said, "The dualism enunciated by Zoroaster in his Gāthās is a major discovery in the intellectual history of mankind that later found its way into Marx's dialectic understanding of history."

6.2 – Revivalism beyond the Survival Worries

Zoroastrian administrative authorities were committed to improving the quality of religious and communal life. Iraj, Khosravy, and Marker halls were

renovated, members were provided with free transport to and from the major ceremonies, the mobedyar was charged with finding an additional office for the mobeds so that the community could have easier access to them, and a new fire-temple and amphitheatre were designed. Moreover, they wished to go beyond simply improving the community's facilities, and to remain vibrant and relevant in the larger Iranian context. For instance, a traditional handywork exhibition in the *Sa'd-ābād* palace, a popular cultural centre in Tehran, was set up during the five days of a Gāhambār, and an exhibition presented Zoroastrian sofreh rites to outsiders. I attended several events that marked this shift from serving the community to educating Iranians as a whole. Here, I look at the reopening of two abandoned Zoroastrian premises: a clinic and a library. However, first I would like to provide some notes on the achievements and challenges of the Tehran Association as the main engine behind such decisions.

6.2.1 – *The Fortieth Assembly of the Association*

As discussed in chapter 1, the Zoroastrian Association as an administrative authority was set up by Hataria, the emissary of the Parsis of India in 1854, with the aim of improving Iranian Zoroastrians' conditions. It was not until after his death in 1890, however, that the first Association of twenty-three members was elected. The Mobeds' Council was also a product of this period. While the linking of religious authority to new, more objectified, and typically more bureaucratized forms of organization is a new religious phenomenon and initially posed a challenge to the authority of the mobeds, the high mobed depicted this associationalism nevertheless as an ever-present Zoroastrian approach to the issue of religious authority. Reasoning that even Zoroaster operated through an elected body of the Magi Association (*Anjoman-e Moghān*), he criticized the assumption that he had more authority as the Chair of the Council and introduced himself as a *member of the Council* and *not its authoritative head*. The institutionalization of the doctrine of distributed authority illustrated the community's preference for the bureaucratic and impersonal mode of administration, as opposed to the charismatic and personalized. Moreover, there was an implicit criticism of and distinction from the Shi'i concept of Supreme Jurist that gives one single Ayatollah the status of God's vicegerent on earth. Given the ideological framework that presupposed the priority of reason, this formulation presented Zoroastrians as more rational and thus superior.

In his annual message, the head of the Association announced, "I dare to say that the Association made a revolution during its fortieth assembly." Hoping that the forty-first one would continue the trend, nonetheless he acknowledged that there were important tasks yet untouched. He considered the Association's most important accomplishments to be the reopening of the Yegānegi Clinic and the Yegānegi Library, the creation of an home for the elderly, the convention of the Zoroastrian Physicians' Society, the creation of the Zoroastrian Physicians' Charitable Association, the renovation of the Marker, Khosravi, and Iraj halls and also the renovation of the building adjacent to the fire-temple, which would provide the future home for the Association. He outlined some plans, including repatriation of Zoroastrian estates confiscated by different state organizations, and announced that the Association would soon purchase a building to be used as a House of Artists (*khāneh honarmandān*) or a museum. These achievements were proudly and repeatedly recounted by other members at various events. They were also acknowledged by the high mobed and the mobedyar.

Nonetheless, structural problems prohibited the making of the experience of the past Associations available to new members, as there was no collaborative transitional period. The head of the Association asked for some "innovative ideas" to overcome this deficiency. Additionally, the Association suffered from unfounded and malicious rumours that were circulating within the community. Gossip and rumours usually act as a way for individuals to evaluate authorities and discuss the direction of the community. But in an emotional talk after his disqualification by the Islamic Republic's Guardian Council from candidacy for reelection, the mobedyar denounced Zoroastrians "who spread rumours about the Association."

> Recently some circulated text messages that the Association is selling the *Qasr-e Firuzeh* land. The truth is that with the work of the Association this previously confiscated 33 acre land is finally returned to our community, and nobody can sell it as it is a religious endowment (*vaqf*). So, why poison people's minds? There are a few who do that and they destroy our community.

Then he relayed the following apologue from Bohlul's picaresque novel:

> It has been relayed that Caliph Mo'tasem heard about a wonderful and massive cedar in Iran. He decided to use it in his palace, so asked his people to cut it and bring it to him. The news upset Iranians but to no

> avail. On the way to Baghdad, when they put the tree down to take a break, Bohlul arrived at the scene and sat on the tree. He put his ear on its trunk and constantly nodded in agreement. He refused to provide any answers to the curious inquirers until they bit him up. Then he said "I asked the tree 'why did they cut you,' and the tree replied 'because I was upright.'"

He concluded that the Association had worked hard and achieved a lot, though some self-interested individuals criticized its members. These people are those who cut down the tree.

6.2.2 – *Instances of Revivalism*

Most of the dissatisfaction with the Association was framed in terms of the Association's spending habits on projects that non-Zoroastrians could also benefit from. The decision to reopen the Yegānegi Clinic was of great importance, probably one of the most positive steps during the reign of the fortieth Association. Adjacent to the west of the fire-temple, the building was constructed in 1972, and paid for by the benefactor Dr. Bahrām Yegānegi. During the reopening ceremony that was held in the Iraj Hall, the enthusiastic moderator recited sayings of the great Persian physicians like Avicenna and Loqman-e Hakim.[254] The poetess recited from her own work and from other poets, and the mobedyar proudly announced that the reopening coincided with the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution on the 12th day of month *Bahman*.[255] After the ceremony the public was invited to visit the clinic, which was accessible through the interior yard of the fire-temple complex.

The occasion provided an interval in which a period of revival during the Pahlavi regime when the clinic was constructed could be remembered and relived. A member of the Association said, "Preparing the clinic for renovation, we found large numbers of files from all religions and walks of life," affirming that the clinic had had a good reputation, not just among Zoroastrians. He also named some of the many great physicians who had served there, and proclaimed that "this reopening has a unique meaning for those who used the clinic in the past." Different speakers also emphasized that the renovated clinic lived up to the highest modern international standards.

However, it was clear that the decision to reopen the clinic had not been an easy one. The head of the Association announced, "There were many

discussions as to whether we should commit ourselves to this project. Questions like who will benefit from it, co-religionists or others? Considering the location," he answered, "it is clear that it will be used mostly by *others*. Nonetheless, it will become a centre for *our* physicians and physician assistants." Justifying the move, the mobedyar stressed that "as Zoroastrians we have always received recognition due to the centres we create in different cities. We have always been helpful to society. We have to be thinking about others and not merely about ourselves." Another line of reasoning compared Zoroastrians to other religious minorities in Iran, noting that the Jews had a hospital and Christians had established several clinics, but Zoroastrians had only one hospital (*Firuzgar*). In the end, the renovation was recognized as a sign of revival, a major success for those who promoted a more active position for Zoroastrians in the larger Iranian community, as opposed to the isolationists.

The second major achievement of the Association was the reopening of the Yegānegi Library, also adjacent to the fire-temple.[256] After two mobeds recited from the Avesta in the ceremony, the future head librarian, a woman, announced that they had spent about 23 million *tumans* [$25,000.00] and that the library was totally up to modern standards. The library had around twelve thousand volumes, which were mostly historical and on Zoroastrian topics. It was announced that the library of the Islamic Republic Parliament had repaired many of the volumes. She also announced the acquisition of books on history published *after* the revolution. This library had been a gathering centre of Iranian literary figures before the revolution.[257]

This occasion afforded yet another chance to list contributions to Iran and transcend particularism. A distributed pamphlet introduced the benefactor Ardeshir Yegānegi. Among his contributions were listed the building of the first leather factory in Tehran, and the first hydroelectric generator in Iran. His wife, to whom the library was left in 1958, herself had contributed to modernizing the Persian handicraft industry (*sanāye'-e dasti-ye Irān*). His son, who resided in the U.S.A. but was present for the occasion, delivered his mother's address, emphasizing that "[t]his library, my mother wanted to reiterate, does not belong to any specific religion, race, or sex; it is for everybody."

One of the important aspects of this gathering was the participation of Haj Aqa Dr. Ahmadi, the Islamic Republic's High Cultural Commissioner (*Vezārat 'Ali-ye Farhangi*). His presence showed that these projects had been possible only with the approval of the state, thus demonstrating a space for

Zoroastrians within the Islamic Republic. He arrived with the mobedyar, and sat in the front row. He seemed quite familiar with the Zoroastrian religion and took part in the religious gestures, such as raising the palms during the prayer performed by the mobeds. The mobedyar introduced him to the congregation, saying that "Haj Aqa recently wrote a commentary on *Shāhnāme* [Ferdowsi's Book of the Kings]," and added, "Hāj Āqā told me 'You see, we mullas also like the *Shāhnāme*,'" which excited approval in the audience. The mobed ended his introduction by saying that "I am happy that this land has produced such people; they are the fruits of our Iranian culture."

In his address, Ahmadi also praised the superiority of Iranian culture, the originality of Zoroastrians, the importance of the Persian language, and *Shāhnāme*. He also absolved the Shi'a from injuries historically inflicted upon Zoroastrians. Like Zoroastrians, he blamed the Sunni Arabs for the Arab invasion's slaughter of Iranians and said that "[t]he first non-Arab that entered Mecca was an Iranian, Salmān-e Fārsi; since others were jealous of his relation to the Prophet, the Prophet told them, 'Salmān is a member of my family.'"[258] "The holy Prophet," he added, once said that "one day the Arabs will leave Islam and Iranians remain Muslims," and that "if learning were suspended at the highest parts of heaven, the Persians would attain it,"[259] a phrase that was also printed on a new banknote. Connections with Zoroastrians were even more specifically pursued when Ahmadi went on to add that "[o]nce the Arab believers said to Imam Ali that 'You love the Iranians more, these *white* people.'" He replied, "I searched the book of God and did not find any saying that one [race] is better than the other." While such historical narratives attempted to bring Shi'a and Zoroastrians closer together, he pointed out that it is also good for the Islamic Republic's international standing to have a functioning Zoroastrian community. However, when the excited congregation asked him to help change the name of the library's street from *Shahid Mohammad Beig* (a martyr of the Iran-Iraq war) to its old name of *Arbāb Key-Khosro* (a prominent Zoroastrian), he left the podium unhappy and mumbled something to the mobedyar. In the end, some memorabilia were distributed, including to Ahmadi; during the library visit many pictures were taken of him and he signed books.

Another sign of the community's revival was a competition on Friday, 7 March 2008[260] for the design of the *Great Ādoriān* [another name for fire-temple] which was held in the Iraj Hall where some seventy people competed (figure 10). The whole hall was covered with designs informed

by Zoroastrian themes. One had the four ākhshij elements of wind, water, fire, and soil, another resembled the faravahar, and another was designed so that the names of the Amshāspands were reflected. The high cost of constructing a massive centre in Tehran shows that the community hopes to maintain an active presence in Iran. I was surprised at this ambitious plan, since the Islamic Republic prohibits Zoroastrians from building new fire-temples. However, during a conversation between the high mobed and one of the referees I learned how this prohibition was to be circumvented. When the high mobed criticized a design saying that "the fire sanctum had to be at the back, not in the centre; there are architectural standards that we have to follow," it opened up an illuminating discussion, in terms of both religious concerns and the political limitations that the community had to manoeuvre around. One of the referees said:

> Since the Constitution prohibits us from building new fire-temples, we have not mentioned anything about this place being one; rather, we are calling it a Cultural Center. So, as of right now, we are just calling for some concepts to be discussed and later we will choose the winner and will modify and rectify these issues.

FIGURE 10 New Fire-Temple Design Competition, Iraj Hall, Teharn

We have previously seen that the community set up exhibitions to have a presence in well known cultural centres, including a handicraft display in the Saʿd-ābād Palace, a sofreh exhibition in Qeytariyyeh Park, and the annual celebration of Ferdowsi day. Another opportunity to introduce Zoroastrian tradition and arts to the general public was on Tuesday, 8 April 2008, in the popular cultural centre of *Arasbārān*. The exhibition included seventy photos, mostly celebrating Zoroastrian ceremonies and old edifices. Two Zoroastrian girls clad in colourful traditional dress performed the customary ushering in of the visitors with a goblet of rosewater, noql, and a mirror.

In addition to these revival projects with an external focus, other programmes, including efforts to build housing for Zoroastrians, were primarily attempts to reduce emigration. Nonetheless, a disagreement existed between the members and Zoroastrian authorities. The head of the Association once said, "Some would say that we should build apartments in the community lands and give them to our youth for residence." He explained, "The Association already has set aside eighty to ninety buildings all over Tehran for our youth. What we lack is not a roof over their heads, rather spaces wherein we can educate them in art and other skills, as in the old days." Similarly, the mobedyar argued that the community had to spend money on the young *now*, not to save for the *future*. In conjunction with this idea, a young mobed announced the formation of the *Art Group* of the Mobeds' Council, which would offer artistic and attractive ways of presenting religious principles to the Zoroastrian youth and to the general public. Moreover, the head of the Association was an adamant advocate of dedicating a portion of all ceremonies to teaching religious knowledge to the youth, for instance, organizing a competition for the best Gāthās recitation. He repeated this request, expressly criticizing the Mobeds' Council for having had it implemented. His insistence was driven by his personal belief that "recitation of the Avesta generates energy." He added, "If we learn how and when to read it, it will provide comfort and relaxation; it is better than any music to my ear."

These efforts gradually came to fruition. For instance, the head of the Association announced that new religious textbooks were being prepared for students. Also, in the second year of my fieldwork, during the annual celebration of Zoroaster's birth in 2008, a member of the Association announced that the boring uniformity in the printing of the Zoroastrian calendar was being replaced with a variety of designs by young people. The Association had arranged a competition and distributed prizes for the best designers of pocket and wall calendars. This strategy to recognize the youth's

work and reward them was extended to core religious practices as well. Along with the Association's revitalization efforts, the Mobed's Council announced that "in order to encourage youth to become initiates and don the religious undershirt (*sedreh-push*), all those who officially commit to this practice[261] would receive a gift of a *sedreh* [the religious shirt], a *koshti* [the religious cord], a holy book of *Khordeh-Avesta*, and a letter of acknowledgment from the Mobeds' Council." According to Bekhradnia (1992) Zoroastrians showed renewed interest in wearing their religious badge after the revolution, and during my fieldwork the community intended to do even better.

Another way to engage the youth and also preserve tradition was announced later in my fieldwork. This was by the creation of the *Traditions and Rites Committee* (*Sonnathā va Āiyinhā*). A mobed complained that "[i]n the past preservation of our folklores, which hearts of the mobeds' were the depositories of, was institutionalized: When children reached seven they memorized them. Sadly, these gems are threatened with being forgotten." He also shared with the community that Dr. Roshan Rahmani from Tajikistan University had complained that "we do not collect our stories, and are allowing our folklores to disappear." Thus, the community was engaged in dialogue beyond the national territories. It was in response to these concerns that the mobedyar announced the news of the Mobeds' Council initiating a committee of Traditions and Rites, in which the mobeds would train the youth to document and record memories of Zoroastrians all over Iran. Just during the two months of its emergence, this new committee had done some important work, for instance, collecting oral traditions how weddings or Gāhambārs were celebrated a hundred years ago. Beyond engaging the youth, the efforts to recapture folklore were part of a larger project of discovering roots—found also in nationalistic and ethnic movements worldwide. The process through which these are recorded is a matter of anthropological investigation. Whereas these internal efforts consciously pursued revitalization policies, some external changes beyond the control of the community that I discuss next facilitated them.

6.3 – Revivalism and New Condition of Possibilities

Fischer points out that "the organization and national position of Islam [prior to the Islamic Revolution] is quite different from that of Zoroas-

trianism so that whereas the result of modernization for Zoroastrianism has been liberalization of doctrine and ritual, the result of modernization for Islam has been a drift towards conservatism with the liberals being siphoned off into other groups" (1973:xii). Choksy points out that after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, "[r]eligious revivalism has spread from Islam to Zoroastrianism, although not in any fundamentalist or militant aspect. Rather, mirroring the Iranian population at large, the post-revolutionary period has witnessed a rise in devotional interest among Zoroastrians" (2006a:172). In addition, since the Shi'i regime "reinvigorated the sense of difference between Zoroastrians and Muslims," an increase in the number of Zoroastrians taking the priesthood examination has been recorded, even though some may not necessarily practise as priests afterward (Bekhradnia 1992:42). It seems that when belief is challenged one of the reactions is to seek out the foundations—that leads to historical, folkloric research, and also to more textual involvement and commitment. When belief is taken for granted, none of this is necessary.

Moreover, priestly decline was accompanied by the twentieth century opening of Zoroastrian schools, yet another contribution of the Parsis of India, which resulted in schools that share the burden of knowledge transmission with parents. The Islamic Revolution inadvertently heightened the role of Zoroastrian schools in religious education and aided the internal cohesion of the Zoroastrian community. Schools were secularized before the Revolution, which, coupled with the participation of non-Zoroastrians in Zoroastrian schools, had marginalized religion as a subject of study. This shortcoming in religious education had triggered the emergence of *Sazemān-e Faravahar*, the youth wing of the Zoroastrian Association, aiming to improve religious education and the activities of youth. After the Islamic Revolution, religion became a compulsory subject in all schools and the recognized religious minorities, including Zoroastrians that were granted the right to pursue their own religious education, incorporated religion into their curricula—Zoroastrian textbooks familiarize students with religious principles, obligations, and history.[262]

The Islamic Republic has, also unintentionally, improved Zoroastrians' public standing. One of the central slogans of the Islamic Republic was and still is the eradication of *tahājom-e farhangi-e gharb* or 'cultural invasion of the West.' The government rehearses this slogan in terms of the triumph of the Revolution. It is nonetheless known as a failed project. The generation raised following the Revolution is fascinated with Western fashions, films, and even cuisines. As discussed in chapter 2, most recently the Supreme

Leader criticized the social sciences taught in Iranian universities for promoting un-Islamic Western assumptions.

Whereas the problem of westernization was also discussed before the Revolution, western cultural influences have deepened in recent years, owing to new media technologies, where, for instance, locally manufactured and installed satellite dishes have burgeoned. There are very few roofs in Tehran not covered with these dishes. It is more or less the same all over Iran, even in the most remote villages. Every now and then the government dispatches its agents to collect and destroy them, and penalize the owners and makers, but to no avail; they are replaced immediately. Use of the Internet is also remarkable, so it is not surprising that the regime is pursuing a plan to create its own national internet. Iranians rank among the ten top bloggers worldwide.[263] Since dissidents have a limited venue of expression, bloggers have become targets of the regime, summoned to court, and their weblogs banned. As a result, many write anonymously. In 2009, Omidreza Mirsayafi, a 29-year-old blogger, became the first casualty in the battle between the bloggers challenging the Islamic Republic and the authorities. He died in the notorious Evin Prison.

As the onslaught of Western practices is progressively succeeding in filling the gap created by the Islamic Republic's eradication of Iranian cultural practices, Zoroastrian celebrations have found new meaning in post-revolutionary Iran. For an outsider they seem aligned with the anti-Western stance of the Islamic Republic. The new context emboldened Zoroastrians' tactical defence of the Iranian cultural heritage, which for them was rooted in Zoroastrian history. A specific example was the Zoroastrian celebration of Esfandegān, the celebration of Women's Day. I witnessed that on St Valentine's Day shops were filled with valentine's objects, candles, and balloons with "happy valentines" messages in English, luring customers with red heart-shaped boxes in the windows. Esfandegān is banned in Iran, but these imported practices are indicative of the Iranians' continuous struggle to maintain a long history of romance that post-conquest was morphed into, and crystallized in, the language of allegorical poetry.[264] The aforementioned contemporary avant-garde Iranian poet, the late Ahmad Shamlou, protested in a poem that has become part of the Iranian youth's proverbial repertoire, more so after it was sung by Darioush, one of the most beloved pop-singers:

> They [the religious vigilantes] smell your breath lest you have uttered 'I love you,' and they search lest still there is a flame burning in your heart.

> It's a strange time O darling! And they whip love on the street: love must be hidden in the closet, passion must be hidden in the closet … God must be hidden in the closet.

The invasive imported celebration of St Valentine's Day provided a great opportunity for Zoroastrians to raise their voices against the state's ban on pre-Islamic customs and traditions. The mobedyar told the community that he had shared his concerns with the Parliament, complaining to them that "while we have Esfandegān in our own culture, which is for everyone and is the celebration of pure Godly love, our people have adopted the Valentine's Day that focuses only on boys and girls. Such cultural invasion happens when we ban our own heritage." Proclaiming Zoroastrian cultural pre-eminence, an obsession of the community, he added, "Valentine's Day started only several decades ago while Esfandegān is an ancient and richer tradition."

It is worth noting that outside the Zoroastrian community I also observed increased interest in pre-Islamic Iranian identity. Albeit mostly among the Iranian youth, scholars, and intellectuals, nonetheless, as Taylor suggests, these may penetrate the social imaginary of the society at large (2002). For instance, the non-Zoroastrian *Neyshabur Foundation*[265] that attracts youth and teaches the Pahlavi language and the pre-Islamic history of Iran celebrates many of these events. As an example, the foundation also expressed worries about the imported Valentine culture. In an informative essay attached to an email that the foundation circulated it argued that "*Izad Banu Sepandar Maz*, the Amshāspand or the archangel of Esfandegān, has had a great influence on Western thought, and it was during the Crusades that westerners learned from Iranians to celebrate this day." Professor Joneidy, director of the foundation, provided a detailed historical account in an interview, arguing that "[t]he celebration of Valentine had Iranian origins and roots in Sepandar Maz."[266] As discussed in chapter 1, Zoroastrians' standing within Iranian nationalist movements is linked to the secular Pahlavi. Surprisingly this trend did not stop after the Islamic Revolution, but continued in a different way.[267]

All in all, new forms of religiously based associations, publications, renovation of old buildings and plans to construct new ones, as well as the adoption of new textbooks can be described as different facets of religious rationalization to legitimate Zoroastrian tradition within an environment in which many of the terms for success are laid down by the Shiʿi authorities, albeit with some room for negotiation and agency. "As a response to

the challenge of identity and moral community in a plural world," these movements are aligned with world religions that "regularize clerical roles, standardize ritual, formalize doctrines, and otherwise work to create an authoritative culture and cohesive religious structure" (Hefner 1993:19–20).

In addition to the opportunities to strengthen internal ties and improve their status in the eyes of the public, my informants were also conscious of the international context. As an instance, the example of Nowruz helped them to imagine their survival beyond the original community. Not only all Iranians but also the whole Persianate world, which stretches from Western China and Central Asia to Mesopotamia, the Caucasus, Anatolia, and beyond,[268] celebrates Nowruz and Zoroastrians see themselves at its centre. Rites associated with Nowruz, like haft-sin and the elaborate cleaning of the house to usher in the New Year (*khāneh-tekāni*), even if adopted by all Iranians, are undeniably ingrained in Zoroastrian practices—not to mention other elaborate and esoteric Nowruz-related rites that only Zoroastrians observe and preserve, such as Farvardegān and Farvardingān discussed earlier. Zoroastrians boast their survival and centrality in the Persianate world via this nationally and transnationally celebrated Old Iranian festivity.

During my fieldwork, the community followed the news about the pending status of Nowruz in UNESCO reports, and was eagerly waiting for this holiday to achieve international recognition. The speakers and presenters always broached this international element in Nowruz related events, and the positive international reports added to the community's sense of pride and provided incentives to retain and reclaim their traditions. To conclude this section, let me refer to four of these instances. In 2008, as a result of efforts by a number of legislators, including an Iranian-Canadian member Reza Moridi, the British Columbia parliament and the Ontario Provincial Government recognized the Spring Equinox of each year as Nowruz. Moreover, a haft-sin sofreh was set up in the White House in 2008 and the photo caption is:

> A traditional Haft Sin table celebrating Nowruz, the Persian New Year, is seen set Wednesday, March 19, 2008, in the State Dining Room of the White House. Nowruz is, in Persian and some other cultures, including Kurdish culture, a family-oriented holiday celebrating the New Year and the coming of spring. The Haft Sin table has seven items symbolizing new life, joy, love, beauty and health, sunrise, patience and garlic to ward off evil.[269]

President Obama's appeal to the Iranian Nation and Leaders for a new beginning after 30 years of strained relations occurred on the day of Nowruz, 20 March 2009, indicating the importance of this national celebration,[270] and finally, in 2009 the United Nations officially recognized Nowruz.

6.4 – Conclusion

The Iranian Zoroastrian community that I encountered continued to struggle with a prolonged legacy of persecutions, accusations, and emigrations. In conjunction with the practices of the modern nuclear family and the decline in the birth rate, emigrations exacerbated the long-standing dilemma of the community's dwindling numbers. Due to the external Islamic prohibition on conversion, which has also intensified the Zoroastrians' own internal proscription, the possibility of accepting new converts as a remedy did not exist. Consequently, Zoroastrians' survival strategies and conceptual framework increasingly expanded beyond the original body of believers, gaining a national character. These imaginaries were embedded in performatives that proclaimed Zoroastrian ideology and practice as the epitome of Iranian culture—a theme with which I will conclude this book in the next chapter.

The continuum, however, spilled across the national frame to portray a universal image of Zoroastrian religion. This performative manoeuvring among three imageries of Zoroastrian identity—essence confined within an irreplaceable community, uniqueness available to all Iranians, and enlightenment introduced by Zoroaster to the world—rescued the community from the grim prospect of extinction, producing a renewed revitalizing impetus in search of vibrancy and relevance. This liberating expanded survival imagination nonetheless did not make the original community irrelevant, as these activities also tended to strengthen internal ties and reduce emigration. Furthermore, the community continued to take practical measures to retain population and increase the loyalty of the youth, as well as efforts to manifest vitality through novel ambitious projects. Moreover, the resurgence that I documented here was indebted to two other factors. The first one that I will further discuss in the next chapter was the Islamic Republic's failure to implement Islam as a sufficient indicator and the vanguard of Iranian nationalist self conception. Secondly, this resurgence owed much to the emboldened Zoroastrian leadership.

CHAPTER 7

Conclusion

> Religion without society is like a book in the corner of a library.
>
> After the Gāthās and Avesta, customs (*sonnat-hā*) ensure the continuity of the community.[271]

The choice to work with Zoroastrians after my unfinished project with the Ahl-e Haqq was another attempt to learn about marginalized communities in Iran. At the time, I did not know that the Zoroastrian religion was marginalized in academia as well, despite the fact that about a hundred years ago the famous scholar of Zoroastrian religion, Williams Jackson, noted the importance of this religion in the study of world religions:

> A creed that holds […] ideals of good thoughts, good words, good deeds, together with faith as a mainspring of salvation; which teaches a belief in a supreme deity, of angels and archangels, as opposed to the powers of darkness; which postulates that man is a free agent to choose the right; which inculcates the doctrine of the final triumph of good, the coming of a savior, the resurrection of the dead, a final judgment and a life hereafter—such a faith deserves to claim a right to occupy an important place in the study of the great historic religions of the world …
>
> (Jackson 1913:205)

Nonetheless, as late as 1985 James Barr complained that even though "the Jews lived about two centuries under the *Pax Persica*, and some of their most important books were written in that time, it therefore is striking that, on the whole, biblical and Jewish studies have remained very much aloof from the study of Iranian language, literature, and religion" (201). The failure to make Zoroastrian studies an integral part of the scholarship of world religions

has even affected *Numen*, which its first two numbers in 1954 and 1955 were dominated by lengthy essays on Zoroastrians. Michael Stausberg writes:

> From the year 1970 onwards, however, Zoroastrianism disappeared as an object of study in its own right from the pages of the journal [*Numen*]. While it is mentioned in some general articles or in articles on neighboring religions such as Manichaeism, with one partial exception (Hasenfratz [1983] on different forms of dualism in Iran), no more articles on Zoroastrianism were published in *Numen* after 1969! This is an impressive testimony to the marginalization of Zoroastrian Studies in our scholarly field. (2008:566)

As a student of cultural anthropology, I learned that the amount of field research among Zoroastrians was even more disturbing. As far as I could discover, there are only four ethnographic works on the Iranian Zoroastrian community: Fischer's unpublished dissertation fieldwork in 1971–1972, Boyce's book published in 1977 based on her fieldwork in 1963–1964, Amighi's book based on her 1972–1973 fieldwork published in 1990, and Robert Langer on Zoroastrian Shrines initially published in 2004. Whereas a thorough investigation of the causes and reasons behind such a comprehensive marginalization of Zoroastrian study requires another project, the lack of fieldwork as discussed is partly due to the preterrain of social sciences in Iran that at best makes it extremely difficult for foreign scholars to conduct fieldwork in the country, in particular after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. To this we need to add Zoroastrians' exclusivity, which makes fieldwork access difficult for non-Zoroastrians.

The Iranian Zoroastrians' exclusive identity is shaped in an uneven dialectic with the dominant Muslims post-Arab invasion of seventh-century Iran. The anxiety to preserve the religion against absorption into the dominant Shiʿa has made cultural survival a priority. The attenuation of traditions due to the prohibitive Islamic rules and influences of modern life has made such a concern more palpable. At the same time, a tradition of exclusivity has historically given priority to racial survival that prevents the community from accepting new members. This is despite the fact that due to emigration and conversion, accompanied by postponed marriages and fewer children, the number of Zoroastrians is dwindling, a serious threats that imparts a sense of urgency. The community does not accept Muslim Iranians partly to avoid against the Islamic prohibition on conversion from Islam to other religions; but also, as one informant put it, since they "betrayed Zoroastrians

and converted to Islam during the hardship after the Arab invasion and now want to come back." The Zoroastrian community has lost membership due to conversion to the Baha'i faith too. Many Zoroastrians, even some high ranking mobeds, accepted Baha'u'llah as the return of the promised Shah Bahrām in late nineteenth century Iran.[272] They were excommunicated from the community. This exclusivity has left even those who married outsiders abandoned, increasing the racial component of the religion by a strict endogamous law, as a prophylactic against racial and cultural dilution, creating the conditions for imagining a community with pure Iranian/Zoroastrian blood.

Moreover, Iranian Zoroastrians' newest wave of emigration in a general pattern of moving from the peripheries to the centre and to the West since the late 18th century could be framed as continuation of the historic exodus to the Indian continent. Zoroastrians' as well as other Iranian religious minorities' emigration from Iran has been facilitated on religious grounds. While pro-freedom and human and minority rights movements have provided a respite from the tight Islamic Republic laws for this indigenous community, by encouraging emigration such movements also have further reduced the dwindling populations. As such, the new danger to the life of Zoroastrians (and other religious minorities) in Iran is also external. The Islamic Republic has been only too happy to further this purging process through out-migration.[273]

Even so, the domestic hardships have had some inadvertent consequences regarding the internal dynamics of the Iranian community, resulting in a stronger sense of religious attachments. The regime's emphasis on religious education increased Zoroastrian schools' role in educating Zoroastrian students in their own religious matters, leading to an increased emphasis on Zoroastrian ancient and primordial identity. Moreover, due to the religious revivalism that spread from Muslims, more Zoroastrians took the priesthood examination. Nonetheless, the maintenance of religious knowledge in the community has suffered due to the new generation's disenchantment with organized religions and its historically restrictive hereditary dimension, causing criticism of the hereditary mobeds' position. All in all, disenchantment with the traditional religious authority, coupled with the introduction of elected associationalism and the rise of secularizing modern rational forces—such as the right to choose, freedom of religion, the separation of religion and state, and the equality of men and women—have transformed Zoroastrians from a community around authoritative religious figures to a community organized by electoral bodies. Nonetheless, even a

contemporary concept of authority defines the mobeds' position as ceremonial, criticizes agnatic rules, and emphasizes religious education, during my fieldwork only one ceremony took place in which a learned mobed was initiated.

As discussed earlier, the community was trying its best to stay alive and revive by observing prescribed celebrations and ceremonies, encouraging and accommodating members in their participation in events, attracting and using young people in programmes, holding competitions and offering rewards, (re)opening new and old establishments, renovating buildings, and assembling exhibitions. At the same time they redefined survival in a formulation which the socio-religious practices of the Shi'a and many other Iranian rites were understood as continuations of Zoroastrian pre-Islamic practices. This mode of historicity provided imagined continuities with the past. Such implicit denial of cultural interruption helped to reformulate the Shi'a as the unconscious bearers of the Zoroastrian tradition, affirmed by similarities with the Zoroastrians and by genealogical ties. Beyond trying to ensure survival, if only in terms of the continuity of practices and beliefs, this mode of establishing a cultural genealogy linked with Shi'i tradition aimed to improve life under the Shi'a, as all historical sufferings were blamed on the Sunni Arab violations of the true word of prophet Mohammad regarding his successor.

The community was also redefining and extending its notion of Zoroastrian tradition to incorporate Iranian culture. An aspect of Zoroastrian survival reformulation was the claim that all Iranians shared a culture inseparable from Zoroaster's teachings, resulting in an even sharper distinction between the Iranian Shi'a and Arab Sunnis. This trope of Zoroastrian discourse and performance of survival, moreover, linked them to a glorious past by affirming that Zoroaster's teachings provided the ground upon which great world religions and philosophical traditions were built, thus even assuming a universal relevance. Zoroastrian speakers, from whatever segment of the community, always brought attention to their contributions in the realm of governance, human rights, administration, and medicine. Further, they claimed to be the progenitors of monotheism. This claim was even made by a Muslim scholar. During Dr. Farugh's series of talks on pre-Islamic Iran, he stated that a historical ambiguity existed regarding Zoroaster: some argued that there have been several Zoroasters and that one was Abraham![274] Therefore, these imaginaries of Zoroastrian identities and theological universe exhibit not just their relations to Shi'i Islam, but also within the larger global context of world religions.[275]

The ritual performance of Zoroastrian social identities was a way to deflect challenges to its existence. The socio-discursive manifestations of such identities were configured as alternative and sometimes counter-hegemonic religious space. With their distinct priestly white vestments and melodic voices reinforced by the communal participation in a ritual space filled with the aroma of incense, Zoroastrians constructed an alternative religious space. In religiously-configured experiential and ideological spacio-temporalities of collective discipline, from an early age members participated in ritual acts, and observed religious duties; they experienced sounds, images, smells, and meanings and accordingly shaped their religious selves. In these communal gatherings many sensitive topics were discussed, such as the struggle to assume ownership of Zoroastrian ancestral lands and religious buildings confiscated by the regime, efforts to repopulate abandoned Zoroastrian villages, and attempts to stop the new generation from emigrating.

Zoroastrians' shared history as a subaltern community resulted in a communal sense of resonance-seeking evaluation, consonant with the discursive ideals embedded in these performances. As performatives that I outlined closely linked their historical juxtaposition against the dominant Shiʿa, the contours of Zoroastrians' "cultural proclivities,"[276] "historically cultivated dispositions,"[277] and "prediscursive modes of appraisal"[278] were shaped in, and their protruding edges effectively attenuated by, the continuous chafing against the imposing and dominant Shiʿa. Such prolong frictions have honed Zoroastrians' sensibilities and articulations thereof. While private dialogues that I gathered were saturated with the discourse of difference from Shiʿa, public ones were circumscribed by the regnant and assimilating demands of the Iranian Shiʿi regime.

Two elements strike one as being of the utmost importance in fashioning a legitimate niche through messages of sharedness with and difference from Shiʿa. One is the unambiguous Iranianness of Zoroastrians, providing the basis for their discourse of distinction and superiority. Zoroastrian practices sought to engender deep emotional connections to its eponymous founder Zoroaster and his teachings, and towards Iran and the pre-Islamic grandeur of Iranian/Zoroastrian culture. As modes of historicizing, these created links between past and present and put Zoroastrkians at the genealogical core of Iranianness. Such assertions of priority and authority reversed external assimilating pressures and competing knowledge forms while simultaneously making the internal ties and traditions of knowledge significant through the ritualized recollection and the reliving of history.

The inculcated consciousness that I explicated involved a sense of precedence, preeminence, and authenticity, and a ubiquitous sense of distinction from and priority to Shiʿi Islam, accompanied by the resentment of the Arabs. Thus, the second element in fashioning a legitimate niche was the historical Iranian-Shiʿa /Arab-Sunni rift, which Zoroastrians exploited to formulate a dialogue of relatedness with Shiʿa. Through these discourses the past was mediated, exigencies of the day were considered, and attempts were made to ensure the efficacy of rituals and maintain amicable relations with their Shiʿa countrymen.

These socio-discursive enactments of the traditional semiotics of resistance have been configured by the fact that no overt political opposition to the state was possible, at least in public; it was therefore a challenge for Zoroastrians to maintain distinction. This tension shaped the internal logic and discursive regularity of Zoroastrians' organization and structuring of histories and historical consciousness. By means of non-threatening conventions, then, they sought to carve out a habitable space both in the Islamic Republic and among the Iranian Shiʿa majority. So first through discourse of similarity and continuity with Shiʿa, they made alliances against the Sunni Arabs, but implicitly stressing historical authority and influence over the Shiʿa. And in order to maintain a non-political disciplinary contradistinction, Zoroastrian performative utterances emphasized apolitical jubilation and gender equality, in contrast to the Shiʿa.

The speakers' dramatic and persuasive styles during public rituals, as exhibited through oral narrations of myths, life histories, parables, and tales, utilized tactical resources such as figurative language, proverbs, metaphors, allegories, and allusions. Such poiesis of the Zoroastrian universe was indebted to the indirectness of the elliptical Persian language, which facilitates the kind of ambiguity that in Austin's analysis would make a speech act performative as opposed to constative (Austin 1962). That is, by drawing upon linguistic resources and literary images these performatives accomplished their goals and thus were "felicitous." Citing Persian poets to criticize Shiʿi mullas's claim to sacred authority, invoking fabulists to discuss the historical oppression of Iranians during the Islamic period, and drawing upon Persian expressions to refute Shiʿi fatalism and passivity were all examples of this mode of historicity. To all these we can add "the poiesis of scene making," to use Warner, that is "transformative, not replicative merely" (2002:88). Even though the stylized Zoroastrian orality was observed in the fixed pleasantries, honourifics, and formalities, it still provided a creative space for the orators. These all served to maintain and inculcate Zoroastri-

ans' perspectives on their central place in Iranian history and contemporary world.

The proliferation of socio-discursive activities in the Zoroastrian circulative space exhibited a richness and complexity of temporal, numerical, and metaphysical symbolism, for which multiple and occasionally contradictory interpretations were available. In order to capture some of these contrasting perspectives and tensions, I quoted overlapping authoritative discourses. The religious discourse was enunciated by the mobeds and acolytes who also had academic authority, and the political discourse was that of the Zoroastrian member of the Islamic Republic's Parliament and members of different administrative bodies. I used three individuals as ideal-typical representatives of these status positions—the high mobed, the mobedyar Parliamentary Representative, and the community poetess. Each one's mode of address, edifying comments, and interpretations were closely tied to their personal inclinations and place in the Zoroastrian community, which also defined their connections to the outside world and the Islamic Republic. Nonetheless, their shared interpretations and perspectives all attempted to make the religion seem scientifically real, positive and healthful, as well as historically grounded, mystically potent, and universally relevant.

The high mobed's discourse in general was informed both by Zoroastrian theology and his profession in medicine. He chaired the religious body of the Mobeds' Council. As a physician, he exhibited a strong interest in framing religious matters in terms of Zoroastrian contributions to the sciences. In contrast, the mobedyar had a mystical approach. He knew many poems by Hāfez, Rumi, and Saʿdi and even contemporaries like Sohrab Sepehry[279] by heart and recited them regularly. His mystical inclinations provided a disembodied and universal reading of religious ordinances. But, more importantly, he was an intrepid political figure whose sharp criticisms of the government disqualified him from a second term as Zoroastrian Member of Parliament. When this occurred, his status increased among his co-religionists. Other educated members and acolytes focused on different issues, always anchored in the Zoroastrian religion. The poetess held a Ph.D. in Persian literature and her peremptory statements often sharply criticized the government. She was loved and famous for her own poems in which Zoroaster's teachings and contributions to Iran and to the world were recounted. Zoroastrian history was also used to frame a renewed Iranian nationalist sentiment. This in turn underpinned a sense of pride and at the same time provided the community with a condition in which improvement and not just survival could be achieved. The Islamic Republic's failure to

stop westernization, and the adoption by Iranians of practices such as St Valentine's Day provided the chance for Zoroastrians to ask the regime to ignore its negative attitudes towards celebrations linked to Zoroastrians and even to revive some ceremonies. This improved the community's position in Iranian nationalist discourse by providing imageries that bridged the religious gap and instilled a sense of national unity in the populace at large.

In the wake of the surge of Iranian national sentiment after the Constitutionalism of the 20th century, Iranian nationalism increasingly became interwoven with the ancient religion of Iran. During the secular Pahlavi regime Zoroastrians were officially elevated to symbols of Iranian nationalism. Moreover, after the Islamic Revolution, starting with the Iran-Iraq war and then during the reformist president Mohammad Khatami in 1997,[280] the Islamic Republic increasingly invoked nationalism to rally domestic support, for instance, for its controversial nuclear programmes. This rhetoric was pursued more forcefully by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, in particular after his contested second term in 2009, during which the protesters' initial slogans of "Where is my vote?" evolved into a larger demand of replacing the "Islamic Republic" with "Iranian Republic." The association of Zoroastrians with symbols of Iranian nationalism, albeit secular, in opposition to Islam, attaches them to many images of Iranian historical sites and also to the narratives that proclaim Iranians' contributions to the modern world. But more relevant is their attachment to what many Iranians would like to remember as a great civilization in which all religions and ethnic groups used to be free. These links for the most part were previously explored by scholars and nationalist movements that attempted to revive the pre-Islamic grandeur of Iranian culture, but were suppressed in the heyday of the Revolution.

There has emerged yet another opportunity for Zoroastrians' historical ties to become more observable. In light of a renewed ethnic consciousness among the Iranian Kurds, Turks, and Arabs, the religious leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, announced that 2007 was the year of "National Unity and Islamic Harmony," and the state-run media initiated programmes that gave the different ethnic and religious groups a public voice in Iran, allowing them to talk about their histories, traditions, languages, and heritage. Archaeological research covered in the media attempted to create a vision of one great nation with shared historical roots. Such positive image of the pre-Islamic past is in direct contrast to the image of ignorance and oppression promoted during the early years of the Revolution. The result is the creation of a space for academic research on ethnic and religious minorities in universities and

the production of art forms and documentaries for media consumption, both domestic and international.

This process was exacerbated by the creation of the Iranian international round-the-clock English news network (the Press TV). Even though the initial decision of the government to create the Press TV was to rebuff attacks from the Western media, its demands for materials to soften the image of the Republic's record of human rights abuse by presenting Iran as one of the greatest and oldest of world civilizations with a record of toleration and inclusion provided a venue for religious and ethnic minorities to be interviewed and their cultures presented not only to an international audience, but also locally. This defensive decision by the regime had the unintended consequence of helping to break the taboo of discussing nationalism and pre-Islamic grandeur, and resulted in the proliferation of pre-Islamic artifacts in the public arena in the form of images, pictures, jewelry, books, etc.,[281] many of which were associated with Zoroastrians.

The Islamic Republic that revived this non-Islamic notion of nationalism must now Islamize it, and present it as part of the evolving repertoire that combines Islamic and pre-Islamic symbols. One aspect of this Islamization was the regime's use of certain Islamic traditions, such as the supposed saying of the prophet Mohammad and the first Shi'i Imam Ali about high status of Iranians. Reference to Persians' intellectual superiority created a distinct sense of Iranianness and provided a context in which the nuclear technology became presentable as a matter of national pride and an expression of national intellectual genius. Among the many related activities, the Cultural Research Bureau began publication of a series of books entitled *What do I Know About Iran*. Its 34th volume was entitled *Zoroastrians*. In it, the author Katayoun Mazdapur says that this book will "provide those interested in Iran and the engaged young people of our country with vital, precise, and constructive information" (2005).

The regime's use of a new combination of pre-Islamic and Islamic cultural imageries was evident when in 2010 Rahim Mashaei, President Ahmadinejad's controversial Chief of Staff, talked about an "Iranian School of Thought" (*maktab-e Irāni*) instead of the usual "Islamic School of Thought" (*maktab-e Eslāmi*). He even said that the word "Iran" is a zekr or holy mantra. This positive re-evaluation of Iran's past occurred even though the previous Revolutionary Islamic governments not only ignored but forcefully suppressed some of the ancient Iranian and Zoroastrian cultural practices as anti-Islamic. These included ceremonies heavily linked to Zoroastrians such *chahār-shanbe-suri* and *Shab-e Yaldā*. Ayatollah Mortezā Motah-

hary (1919–1979), one of the architects of the Republic, had once announced that "[s]ome stupid people observe this custom [*chahār-shanbe-suri*] and when one asks them why, they respond, 'because our ancestors did it.'"[282] In the late 1980s, in my early twenties I was personally arrested three years in a row for my participation in the *chahār-shanbe-suri* celebration.

With the emergent nationalist sentiments however a shift has taken place. For instance, during my fieldwork in late 2000, these rites were openly celebrated and incorporated into the programmes of the state-run media; the official newspapers designated and announced certain parks for these celebrations, inviting the public to attend. Within the Zoroastrian community of discourse, the renewal of these practices was seen as a victory for the authentic Iranian culture that they promoted. As the high mobed told me, "An Iranian would say I will give up my life, but not my *chahār-shanbe-suri*." He added that the evidence of this new attitude is that "Keyhān, [the most conservative newspaper] has written about the celebration of the *chahār-shanbe-suri*." He pointed to the Shi'a-Sunni divide regarding the choice of the day for this celebration: "[t]he reason for this celebration was that the Abbasid Motavakkel was killed or died that day, so it became a day of celebration for Iranians." I observed more signs of this orchestrated move when the Islamic Republic formally protested at the portrayal of the Achaemenid as savages in the Hollywood film *300*. In this 2007 fictional narration of the battle of Thermopylae, 300 Spartans defeat the Persian army of more than one million soldiers led by the Persian king, Xerxes the Great. In Iran, media panels, consisting of movie critics, historians, cultural experts, and even religious authorities, attacked all aspects of the film as yet another attempt by the West to dismiss Iranians' past by depicting them as a barbarian nation, thereby perpetuating the Western colonial and oppressive missions in the Middle East.

In another example, during the commemoration of Ferdowsi's eleven hundredth birthday on Thursday, 15 May 2008, several state-sponsored events took place. Ferdowsi's image was printed on the Iranian 50 thousand *tuman* banknote, and his tomb was covered with flowers; the city of Tehran passed a law to establish a specialized library for Ferdowsi, and park-museums and passages were named after him. Other official events celebrated Ferdowsi's pre-Islamic national epic, including musical performances, and traditional recitations of naqqāli, and traditional wrestling. The regime also acknowledged Charles Melville's work from Cambridge University who was digitalizing all the existing illustrated copies of *Shāhnāme*. "It is accepted by all Iranians," the mobedyar told me, "that Fer-

dowsi intended to revive the *ajam* (a degrading term used by the Arabs in reference to Iranians)." Ferdowsi's concluding verses in *Shāhnāme* confirm this intention: "[writing this book] I suffered for thirty years and brought life back to ajam through the [marvelous] Persian language." The mobedyar added, "The lifelong endeavour of Ferdowsi is indicative of Iranians' patience, which is evident even today." His comment was a reference to the shared Iranian legacy of the Arab invasion and struggle to preserve Iranian culture, while also obliquely referring to the Zoroastrians' endurance of suffering. Another mobed recited the same verses and concluded, "This is why we Iranians have the expression that 'the end of the *Shāhnāme* is pleasant,' because in the end Persians survived and did not become Arabs."

Other examples of this revivalism as linked to Zoroastrians could be observed in Iranian cinema. The 2009 film *Green Fire*—rich in Iranian mythology and history, and featured in Iranian theatres and festivals—used the voices of mobeds reciting the Avesta and delved into the Old Iranian mythologies. While banning many of these films inside Iran, the regime permitted them to be exported to court international recognition. Another curious example of revival was a project to construct a faravahar-shaped island on the Persian Gulf,[283] especially significant due to the controversy surrounding the Arab promotion of the title "Arab Gulf."

As the scenery of Iranian nationalist discourse is being permeated with imageries linked to Zoroastrian tradition, Zoroastrians acquire new forms of visibility. The Islamic Republic is thus inadvertently helping to expand the ambit of Zoroastrian influence. However, this entails certain dangers for the regime. For example, Iranian youth's revulsion toward religious austerity may cause some to be attracted to the allure of Zoroastrian tradition as an inviolate original Iranian tradition. After the contested re-election of President Ahmadinejad, these indigenous ceremonies became ritual spaces for the opposition, the so-called Green Movement, to protest. For example, reformists proclaimed *chahār-shanbe-suri* to be an ancient protest against the darkness of oppression.

All these show that a renewed desire of Iranians to rediscover and reevaluate their past—Iranian nationalist historicity—converges with Zoroastrian religious historicity, providing a potential space for Zoroastrians to become an important symbolic resource for an emergent Iranian new public, and Zoroastrian imageries enter the temporality of Iranian politics. As Charles Taylor argues, to reiterate, when people take up, improvise, or are induced into new practices, a new theory penetrates and transforms the

social imaginaries, hence reshaping ways in which people imagine their social surroundings and fit together. Further, as Zoroastrians adapt themselves to the performatives of rational-critical discourse, through emphasizing associational life and rationalization of tradition, the Zoroastrian discourses and practices gain the potential to animate a social movement, acquiring agency *in relation to the state*.

This new salience has dangers as well as advantages for Zoroastrians, as too much difference from and similarity with the public could become identity threats. Thus, the question becomes how Zoroastrians deflect the threats to the transformative force of their alternative public as a result of relations with the state. As I have demonstrated, the *source* of authority for Zoroastrians is not the state. As a matter of fact, it is the state that draws on Zoroastrian cultural and historical imageries. The negative historical legacy of the Arabs, on the one hand, and the Shiʿi political predominance and exhaustive presence in Iranian culture, on the other, may explain ways in which Iranian Zoroastrians strike a balance when drawing on imageries that could be interpreted both as differing from and coupling with the state. This helps one to understand the Zoroastrian positive attitude towards the Shiʿa when they address a generic discourse of Iranianness, and their negative attitude when they intend to convey a more exclusive sense of Iranianness. Thus considerations of survival and distinction constitute the criteria of validity and feasibility that govern the production of Zoroastrian knowledge. It is in the pursuit of this logic that Zoroastrians render the eminent Iranian literary figures of the Islamic period a Zoroastrian reading, hence drawing on their authority by citing them.

The political and quasi-nationalist dimensions of Iranian-Zoroastrian identity in the construction of Iranian national imaginaries become even more palpable as this worldwide, scattered, and "unstructured nation" (Writer 1994) experiences a new sense of diasporic life—in particular through the conduits of the modern media, via the burgeoning of Zoroastrian websites and newspapers. Writer (1994) and Bekhradnia (1992) have reported elements of a fresh Zoroastrian revivalism in parts of the Persianate societies. For instance, some Izedi Kurds have recently identified themselves as of Zoroastrian lineage, and the Russified Tajik and Azerbaijani Zoroastrians have begun to express a Zoroastrian identity. Distinctive to the contemporary Zoroastrian community, as opposed to the past, is the possibility of mass communication between members of the diaspora. This has the potential to change the mode and scale of discourse that is constructive of modern Zoroastrian identity.

This ethnography shows that the long Zoroastrian struggle has reached yet another critical phase. At this juncture of my work they had successfully dealt with some tough decisions. The reopening of three communal establishments, the renovation of several centres, changes in ceremonies, and also the launching of several websites, justify such a claim. If successfully finalized, the most important sign of this resilience may be the construction of the massive fire-temple complex in Tehran. Nowadays Zoroastrian histories and historicities are ineluctably parts of the active construction of Iranian national-cultural imaginaries. Let me conclude with an extreme but telling example. In one of the Gāhambār ceremonies in the fire-temple, a young man greeted me with a *Salām*—he was not a Zoroastrian. He was from Birjand, a city in east Iran, had worked in Tehran for five years, and had some Zoroastrian friends. I asked why he was there and he answered: "national fervour" (*ergh-e melli*) and added, "They [the government] do not let us convert, but if it was permitted all Iranians would convert to become Zoroastrian!"

Notes

1 Roy Mottahedeh writes, "It might be very well to claim that he [Hāfez] meant that it was internal religion that really mattered and that that the Elder referred to was a master of *erfan*, not a Zoroastrian in the normal sense of a fire worshiper. But Hāfez seemed never to find the words to praise such real guardians of religious law as mullahs" (1985:141).

2 Three months in Summer of 2004 (May–August), three months in Summer 2005 (May–August), one year from November 2006 to November 2007 of which about three months were spent in Gahwāreh, conducting fieldwork among the Kurdish Ahl-e Haqq, and ultimately six months from January 2008 to July 2008.

3 Amighi (1990); Barr (1985); Bekhradnia (1991, 1992); Boyce (1968–1970); Carter (1918); Choksy (1987–2006); Darmesteter (1887); Fischer (1973); Hanson (1975); Herzfeld (1947); Hinnells (1969–1976); Hintze (2000, 2004); Humback (1991); Jackson (1896–1913); Jones (1964); Langer (2004); Luhrmann (1996); Moulton (1913); Nigosian (1993); Rose (2011); Shaked (1984); Skjaervo (2001); Stausberg (2004); Writer (1994).

4 Judith Butler clearly distinguishes the two: "It is important to distinguish performance from performativity: the former presumes a subject, but the latter contests the very notion of the subject … What I'm trying to do is think about performativity as that aspect of discourse that has the capacity to produce what it names. Then I take a further step, through the Derridean rewriting of Austin, and suggest that this production actually always happens through a certain kind of repetition and recitation. So if you want the ontology of this, I guess performativity is the vehicle through which ontological effects are established. Performativity is the discursive mode by which ontological effects are installed." (1993a:111–112).

5 Including works of Austin (1962), Buttler (1990–1997), Barth (1993, 2002a), Hefner (1985), Hirschkind (2001a, 2001b, 2006), Lambek (2002), Sahlins (1981, 1985), and Warner (2002a, 2002b).

6 Drawing on Judith Butler and John Austin works that I discuss in next pages.

7 Post conquest, as Jamsheed Choksy points out, "Specific interactions, particularly those involving conflict and cooperation, led to new relationships within a territorial expanse stretching from the Euphrates River to beyond the Oxus River" (1997:138).

8 For a comprehensive history, see Richard Frye (1975), Richard Bulliet (1975), and Patricia Crone (2012).

9 Taylor draws distinctions between social theories and social imaginaries, "I speak of *imaginary* because I'm talking about the way ordinary people 'imagine' their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms; it is carried in images, stories, and legends. But it is also the case that theory is usually the possession of a small minority, whereas what is interesting in the social imaginary is that it is shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society. While leads to a third difference: the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy" (2002:106).

10 Ibid.

11 Muhammad Arkoun defines cultural imaginary as "the deeply-held indigenous values that provide the most salient and strongly motivating bases for action, feeling and thought, inspiring them in their ordinary lives, in their symbolic and religious experiences, and in their dialectical interaction with the rest of the world" (Lindholm 2002:10).

12 Using Hodgson phrase (1974:vol. II), kerygmatic mode of religious experience, "in which the ultimate is sought in the moral events recorded in history. Recalling this historical revelation permits re-imagining one's own life within the historical religious drama" (Lindholm 2000:292).

13 Using Benedict Anderson phrase (1983).

14 See Roshan Rivetna (2012).

15 For other waves of migration to China, Russia, and the Caucasus, see Choksy (2006a:138) and (2006b:333). Regarding Zoroastrian migrants to China, Choksy writes, "By the late Middle Ages, all those communities either had been completely assimilated into the local population or had died out" (2006b:333).

16 Roshan Rivetna (2012).

17 For statistics before 1960 see Boyce (1977). In 1966, "Association membership combined with census data placed the overall population of Zoroastrians within Iran at approximately 60,000"; "The 1960s and early 1970s were a period of increased opportunity for Zoroastrians to travel outside

Iran. As a result, by 1979, relocation to France, Germany, Canada, and the United States of America for educational and vocational training followed by resettlement in those countries had reduced the community's numbers" (Choksy 2006a:160). FEZANA Journal estimated the number in 2004 to be between 24,000 and 90,000 due to underreporting (2004:17/4). While Eliz Sanasarian refers to an increase of the Iranian Zoroastrian population from 35,000 before the revolution to 50,000 (2000:50) the government census shows a decline from 32,589 in 1986 to 27,920 in 1996 (Price 2005:317).

18 The official Iranain census. http://iran.unfpa.org/Documents/Census2011/2011%20Census%20Selected%20Results%20-%20Eng.pdf (accessed, 28 May 2014).

19 A Kermani Zoroastrian graduate student in Tehran told me that their concentration in Kerman is probably due to the region's geographical isolation as well as the tolerance of minorities there.

20 For instance, Zoroastrian merchants in Tehran increased from 50 in 1881 to 500 by 1912 (Amighi 1990:148).

21 Article 13 of the 1979 Constitution of the Islamic Republic: "Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian Iranians are the only recognized religious minorities who, within the limits of the law, are free to perform the religious rites and ceremonies, and to act according to their own canon in matters of personal affairs and religious education" (Choksy 2006a:163). Also see Janet Afary (2005) for earlier roots in Constitutionalism of 1905, as well as Houri Berberian (2005).

22 The idea of self-representation in *majlis* goes back to 1906 with the backing of Ayatollah Abdullah Behbahani (Choksy 2006a:150).

23 Marker was a Parsi who moved to Quetta, Pakistan, during the British Raj, and also funded a Zoroastrian school in Yazd (Choksy, personal correspondence).

24 For a complete survey of Zoroastrian temples and sacred sites see Choksy (2006b); also Robert Langer (2004).

25 Using Abbas Amanat on Persianate world (2002).

26 See Patricia Crone (2012).

27 See Richard Frye (1975); Aptin Khanbaghi (2009).

28 Term borrowed from Aptin Khanbaghi (2009).

29 Ibid.

30 See Patricia Crone (2012) important study for a comprehensive account of these revolts.

31 Abu Moslim was a pseudonym—he was known as "Abu Muslim Abdul-Rahman b. Muslim al-Khorasani ('a Muslim son of a Muslim, father of a

Muslim of Khorasan'). This name was meant to indicate that he was neither client nor patron, Arab nor Persian, but was simply a Muslim from Khurasan. As M.A. Shaban says, 'he was a living proof that in the new society every member would be regarded only as a Muslim regardless of racial origins or tribal connections'. His integrative policy was also indicated by the fact that recruits were registered not by lineage, as had been Umayyad practice, but by name and place of birth" (Lindholm 2000:97–98).

32 See Aptin Khanbaghi (2009:206).

33 http://www.radiofarda.com/articleprintview/318719.html (accessed, July 2013). http://qurt.blogsky.com/print/post-19/ (accessed, July 2013).

34 See Richard Frye (1975).

35 Ira Lapidus writes that the vast empire of Abbasid made the capital Baghdad "a great commercial city for international trade … Jews, Christians, and Muslims, as well as secret pagans, Persians, Iraqis, Arab Syrians, and Central Asians made up its cosmopolitan population …" (1988:56).

36 He "claimed to be the manifestation of God, the divine fire of the hidden imam, and the *mahdi* [the twelfth Shi'a Imam]" (Lapidus 1988:241). For a comprehensive discussion of the Imam concept, see Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi (1994).

37 Isfahan "symbolized the legitimacy of the dynasty, its vast plazas and bazaars were a symbol of the ordering of the world by royal decree; its religious monuments signified royal sustenance for the faith; its gorgeous decoration was the universal sign of royal splendor" (Lapidus 1988:240).

38 Andrew Newman challenges this "migration thesis," arguing that "… Arab Twelver clerics … rejected the Safawid identification with Twelver Shiism in this period. Clerical disquiet with the Safawids stemmed from such factors as the abruptness of Ismail's conversion to Twelver Shiism; the consistently extremist nature of Safawid religio-political discourse which, following Tabriz, was an unorthodox amalgamation of non-Shii and Shii religious expression and politics …" (1993:67).

39 Lindholm (2002:117).

40 During the same period, however, fourteen churches were built for Armenians in Isfahan.

41 Posted on vohuman.org on February 5, 2005.

42 Ibid.

43 Mary Boyce (1979:178).

44 For the complex sequence of events on Zoroastrians cooperation with the Afghan forces and paying a hefty price later see Choksy (2006a:139–141).

45 "Here was a fascinating situation where colonial power could extend across national borders to impact directly on the lives of Individuals who were not citizens or subjects" (Choksy 2006a:143).

46 http://www.cais-soas.com/CAIS/Religions/iranian/Zarathushtrian/zoroastrians_iran_islamic_era.htm#_ftnref2 (accessed, July 2013).

47 "Apocalyptic thinking," Amanat writes, "continued to resonate with the ways in which history was interpreted and lived by a variety of Muslims in nineteenth-century Qajar Iran. Astrological calculations in synchronicity with Shi'a eschatological tradition set the date 1844 as a fatal year when a variety of millenarian responses were voiced within the Shi'a community-Nimatullah, Isma'ili, Babi—and, beyond, among a heteroglot Christian, Zoroastrian and Jewish population living in Persianate landscapes" (Amanat 1989:96). Also see Philip Kreyenbroek (2002).

48 For a list of other efforts during the Qajr in order to lift discrimination against Zoroastrians see Choksy (2006a:143–144).

49 For population figures see Choksy (2006a).

50 I am deeply indebted to Professor Jamsheed Choksy for this data.

51 Bekhradnia (1992:37–41); Choksy numbers the schools to be thirty-eight (2006a:148).

52 See Tavakoli-Targhi (2001).

53 These terms are borrowed from Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* and Michael Lambek's *The Weight of the Past: Living With History in Mahajanga, Madagascar* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

54 Kamyar Abdi (2001:51–76).

55 See Afshin Marashi (2008, 2009).

56 See Hamid Algar (1972), and Abdul-Hadi Hairi (1977).

57 See گبر in Dehkhoda Dictionary; according to Choksy gabr means "'hollow, empty,' hence 'one lacking faith, infidel'" (2006b:332).

58 Dehkhoda Dictionary.

59 اگر گبر صد سال آتش فروزد/ سرانجامش همان آتش بسوزد (ویس و رامین)

60 It says, "Human beings are members of a whole, In creation of one essence and soul. If one member is afflicted with pain, Other members uneasy will remain. If you have no sympathy for human pain, The name of human you cannot retain."

61 Sa'di, *The Rose Garden* or *Gulistān*, trans. Edward Rehadzek p. 2. Omphaloskepsis, Ames, Iowa.
ای کریمی که از خزانه غیب گبر و ترسا وظیف خورداری/ دوستان را کجا کنی محروم تو که با دشمن این نظر داری

62 For these translations I am indebted to Farid Fozi.

63 For the different attitude in North America and "accepting" new members, see Rashna Writer (1994:213–218).

64 Choksy points out that since many Iranian Muslims "may have distant ancestors who were Zoroastrian … Iranian Zoroastrians still do accept converts covertly although they do not proselytize for fear of retribution from the majority Shi'ate community" (2006a:172). See chapter 6.

65 This model is partially influenced by Dilip Gaonkar's "Towards New Imaginaries" (2002) and Nilufar Gole, "Islam in Public" (2002). Also see Benjamin Lee, and Edward LiPuma (2002).

66 For scholarly discussion on these influences see Barr (1985); Shaked (1984); Hinnells (1969, 1974, 1976); Carter (1918); Hanson (1975); Jones (1964).

67 Professor Choksy, personal correspondence.

68 He also argues that they are agonistically toned, redundant, empathetic, conservative and homeostatic.

69 Zoroastrians do not reflect the kind of heroic society that Sahlins refers to; however, the two characteristics are recognizable: "the main relationships of the society are at once projected historically and embodied currently in the persons of authority" (Sahlins 1985:47).

70 Developing this description, I had Marshall Sahlin's of Maori's cosmology in mind (1985:35–57).

71 Using Comaroffs' phrasing (1992).

72 Benedict Anderson's phrase.

73 http://www.leader.ir/langs/fa/?p=contentShow&id=5814; For the English version see http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/02/world/middleeast/02iran.html (accessed, May 2014).

74 Attār has influenced Iranian mystics who created its mystical landscape, including Rumi. The following couplet is ascribed to Rumi, "Attār traversed the seven cities of love; We are lost in the curve of the first alley."
هفت شهر عشق را عطار گشت/ما هنوز اندر خم یک کوچه ایم

75 After the election of President Ahmadinejad the political situation in Iran became grim. I started communicating with the Fulbright-Hays requesting to change my project. I defined a project in Tajikistan. Fulbright-Hays' answer was negative, even though geographically and linguistically it was very similar. Tajikistan was even more appealing to my expertise as I did not speak Kurdish and Tajiks speak Persian.

76 Case no. IA-8651.

77 http://amordad.blogfa.com/post-2005.aspx (acceassed, May 2014).

78 See Negar Mottahedeh (2008).

79 It is worth noting that during my fieldwork I met a young man who was

working on his Religious Studies master's degree, focusing on Zoroastrians. He said the Iranian community is much more open than the Indian Parsi community.

80 For a comprehensive history of this conversion, see Susan Stiles (1984), and Fereydun Vahman (2007).

81 Accompanied by her two sons in the field, she has been exposed to certain aspect of the culture, like enrolling children in school, learning views on appropriate child behaviour, cross-cultural play, etc.

82 آب دریا را ا گر نتوان کشید/هم به قدر تشنگی باید چشید Rumi, Mathnavi Manavi.

83 For an extensive discussion of this see Anne Lovell (1992).

84 Phrase borrowed from Henry Rutz (1992).

85 See Louis Gray (1907:343).

86 Richard Frye writes, "We know that the Persians, as well as other peoples of the Near East, borrowed from Egypt, for example, the so-called Zoroastrian calendar which may have been introduced from Egypt ca. 441 BC" (1972:104).

87 Louis Gray addresses this in his discussion of the Avestan months (1904: 195).

88 For the list of "Life-giving immortals," see Oktor Skjaervo (2011:14), and Jenny Rose (2011:28–29).

89 "This Time/ritual exhibits a hypertrophied cosmology, resembling the Mayan obsession with time" (Personal correspondence with Charles Lindholm).

90 For a more complete accout of the Zoroastrian scripture, see Nigosian (1993:46–70).

91 Avestan: *urvān*; Pahlavi: rawān (soul).

92 "The *Yasnā*, literally, 'sacrifice,' was the text accompanying the morning ritual (*yasnā*) performed to recreat the world of light after a period of darkness" Skajaervo (2011:34).

93 See Simone Cristoforetti (2004).

94 On the fortieth day of Imam Hoseyn's martyrdom, called Arbaʿin-e Hoseyni, I caught a cab covered with Quranic writings driven by a religious looking old man with a white beard. When we saw a procession of flagellating mourners, he shook his head and said, "They have ruined our youth; those who were nice were killed in the war (Iran-Iraq) and the rest are busy with this stuff." Then he articulated a philosophy against mourning saying that, "If Imam Hoseyn was killed in God's path, he will go to Heaven as God has promised in Quran, so we need to celebrate the occasion, what is this mourning and flagellation for then?"

95 Using Ali Hussein characterization (2005).

96 See Ali Hussein (2005:85).

97 چهره ی میدیوزرم گاه

98 چهره ی میدیوشم گاه

99 چهره ی پئته شهیم گاه

100 چهره ی ایا سرم گاه

101 چهره ی میدیاریم گاه

102 چهره ی همسپتمدیم گاه

103 For comparison see Mary Boyce's account of Gāhambārs in Sharif-Abad village, Yazd (1977:33–52).

104 خفتگان را خبر از زمزمهٔ مرغ سحر/ حیوان را خبر از عالم انسانی نیست

105 Monday, 30 April 2007; 15 March 2008; Tuesday, 29 April 2008.

106 Friday, 4 May 2007.

107 Sunday, 16 March 2008.

108 In the end they distributed raw nokhod and stew (*āsh*).

109 Amirieh, which is a part of Pahlavi or Vali Asr street south of Moniryyeh. The hill is Jian Panah.

110 For further discussion see Boyce (1977:99–107); also see Choksy (1989:94–99).

111 On the basis of this principle, in a competition for the design of a new fire-temple in Tehran, the high mobed criticized a design and said that "the fire sanctum has to be on the back not in the centre; there are architectural standards that we have to follow." I discuss this issue in chapter 6.

112 For more information on the fire discourse see chapter 6.

113 On pādyāb ritual see Choksy (1989:53–62).

114 Mahmoud Omidslalar (2006).

115 "The emission of breath … and saliva … is governed by the notion that bodily substances are open to pollution upon leaving the human body" (Choksy 1989:84). For complete discussion on rituals of purity see Choksy (1989, chapter 4).

116 On one occasion, while reciting from the Avesta, the mobed picked up one of the fruits from the table and in a circular motion touched the rest of the fruits. In another Gāhambār when the mobed representative performed, he used a vase filled with branches to touch the *lork* or admixture of nuts several times, also in a circular motion. Another mobed cut the fruits at the beginning of recitation, while during another Gāhambār, the mobed started by peeling an orange, and cutting the watermelon, and cucumbers. When I talked to him afterward, he said, "It [chopping] is part of the ceremony and it is usually done by the assistant." On the occasion that I

am narrating here, at the very beginning the mobed lit the candles and cut the fruits.

117 See Oktor Akjaervo (2011:17–18).

118 While Zoroastrians do not publicize these celebrations, other cultural organizations, for instance *Neyshabur Foundation*, a non-Zoroastrian cultural foundation, circulated an email containing information on the ceremony. While encouraging attendance, it warned that "in order to make documentary *Vezarat Ershad* or Ministry of Guidance's approval was required."

119 Looking for *Marker*, I entered a building on the south-east corner of the *Eshraq* square where on its blue ceramic portal an inscription of *Rostam Baq*'s is calligraphed. I had heard it to be one of the Zoroastrian buildings in that block. I asked a lady how to get to *Marker*. "Who has invited you?" she asked. When I replied "the head of the Zoroastrian Association," she said, "In that case, follow me." We took a five minute walk towards the Centre's gate. Part of the left yard was a playground and around it was a pathway giving cars access to the back of the main hall. As on other occasions, a truck loaded with dried bread and other items from Yazd was selling by the main entrance.

120 جشن سده، جشن بزرگداشت کشف آتش، جشن پیشرفت بشریت، بر همه مبارک

121 از جشن سده صدای نوروز شنو/در ظلمت شب صدای روز شنو

122 Modelled after Robert Rotenberg (1992:18).

123 For instance, the head of the Association delivered what he framed as a "joyous message" about the reopening ceremony of the Zoroastrians' *Yeganegi Clinic*, inviting all "to attend." He mentioned that the community's poetess had undergone surgery; the high mobed then requested a prayer for her health. Nonetheless, she had sent her book of poetry, from which a young man recited a poem that contained the story of sadeh

ای آتش گرم و روشن و پاک/وی بال گشوده سوی افلاک .../ناگاه شراره ای بر افروخت/هر خار و خسی که بود از آن سوخت .../پیدایش آتش از همینجاست/هر چند در این میان سخنهاست/در روز دهم زماه بهمن/شد آتش جاودانه روشن/زنهار که هدیه ای خدایی/روشنگر قوم آریایی/پیری است که بس شراره دیدست/گه گفته و گه شنیده است/افسرد ولی نگشت خاموش/از خاطره ها نشد فراموش/زنهار اگر زبان گشاید/بس راز نهفته را نماید/این ملک زبس که زین دلم دید/چون آهن آبدیده گردید/ایرانی پاکزاده زنهار/این آتش گرم را نگهدار/چون شعله عشق جان است/یاد آور آتش مغان است

124 For a survey of diverse scholarly opinion see Solomon Nigosian (1993:15–16).

125 Indian Parsis also celebrate this day.

126 www.t-z-a.org.

127 Reading that "[i]n our calendar the dates of the divine prophets are nicely recorded and it is necessary to record the day of khordād from month Farvardin and the day khordād from month *Day* respectively for the birth and ascension of the ancient Iranian Prophet." http://www.amordad6485.blogfa.com/post-111.aspx (accessed, May 2014).

128 Earlier, on 20–28 November 2005: "Remarks by ayatullah Ahmed Jnnati, secretary of the Council of Guardians or Shura-ye Negahban of the Constitution … comparing non-Muslims to 'animals who roam the Earth and engage in corruption' garnered a sharp response from majlis' representative Niknam. Niknam rebuked Jannati for his 'unprecedented slur against religious minorities,' adding 'non-Muslims not only are not beasts, but if Iran has a glorious past and civilization to be proud of it owes this to those who lived in the country before the advent of Islam.' Niknam commented further 'those who sully the Earth are humans who do not show respect for the other creatures of God.' In a warning to members of religious minorities not to question the state's fundamentalist Shi'ite leaders and their views, Niknam was summoned before a tribunal of the Revolutionary Courts to answer charges that he had displayed a lack of respect for Iran's Muslim leaders and had spread false information" (Choksy 2006a:183).

129 Veena Das' phrase (1995).

130 See Williams Clackson (1868); also Gherardo Gnoli (1980).

131 "Iran: Tajikān (Tajiks) which was the late Middle Persian term for Arab invaders" (Professor Choksy, personal communication). Also, see Choksy (1997).

132 25 of Esfand, Wednesday.

133 On one occasion two mobeds and on another only one performed. In one of the events the mobed's voice was especially emotional. The man next to me said, "He does not even recite well; he does not pause where he is supposed to. He is just happy to recite, (*delesh khosheh*)." In a while he made another comment, saying that "He just skipped a couple of pages."

134 انوشه روان، روان (اسم) ایدر یاد باد

135 درود باد بر فروهر همه جانبازان و سلحشوران و همه جان باختگان راه ایران

136 جانباختهٔ زنده روان

137 و همه جان باختگان جنگ تحمیلی با هماروانان در اینجا به یاد باد. روانشان شاد و بهشت برین جایگاهشان باد

138 The list included nine in the U.S., three in Bombay, two in London, one in Sweden, one in Pakistan, seven in Yazd, three in Kerman and the rest in Tehran. These were the deceased of year 2007–2008 (1385–1386). With the exception of one name that was *Ruh-u-llāh*, the rest of them

all were non-Arabic and Persian. The first four pages included this list and on the seventh page in large printed letter it read, "Truthfulness and Righteousness are the best beneficences and the cause of serendipity. Serendipity belongs to the person who desires the best truthfulness and purity." راستی و پاکی بهترین نیکی ها و سبب خوشبختی است. خوشبختی از آن کسی است The back cover reads, "May their ravān be blissful and Heaven their place" که خواستار بهترین راستی و پاکی باشد. and the روانشان شاد، بهشت برین جایگاهشان باد bottom reads, "Tehran Zoroastrian Association."

139 روانشادان

140 ایدر یاد باد

141 See Poure Davoud (1995).

142 See Richard Bulliet (1979).

143 As Robert Rotenberg identifies them (1992).

144 Idea borrowed from Robert Paine (1992).

145 گهی خوشدل شوی از من که میرم/ چرا مرده پرست و خصم جانیم؟

146 The burial of the corpse is a change from exposure of the corpse to the open air for desiccation, discussed in chapter 6.

147 روانش شاد، آمرزیده همگی درگذشتگان

148 Avesta: *frasho-kereti*; Pahlavi/Middle Persian: *frashegird*; Farsi: *fereshgar* (Choksy, personal correspondence).

149 فراخوان حضور در آیین نوزوتي 18/2/1387 انجمن موبدان تهران با انتشار آگاهي نامه اي از زرتشتیان خواست تا روز آدینه سوم خردادماه در آیین نوزوتي یکي از دانش آموختگان این انجمن حضور یابند. متن اطلاعیه انجمن موبدان تهران از این قرار است: با شادماني بسیار به آگاهي همکیشان گرامي میرساند آیین نوزوتي آقاي سهراب موبد بهرام هنگامي در روز سپندارمزد و خردادماه 3746 زرتشتي برابر آدینه 3/3/1387 خورشیدي از ساعت ۸ بامداد در مکان آدریان تهران و جشنگاه خسروي برگزار میشود. حضور گرم شما همکیشان در این آیین روحاني شکوه افزاي این مراسم خواهد بود.

150 See also Firoze Kotwal (1999–2000).

151 "The age of initiation was gradually lowered, with present-day Irani Zoroastrians undergoing it between twelve and fifteen and with Parsi Zoroastrians initiating their offspring at age seven due to the influence of Hinduism" (Choksy 1989:55). Mary Boyce also refers to the ages of fifteen and seven for Iran and India, respectively (1977:236).

152 Seventy-two is a significant number both in Zoroastrianism and in Shi'a Islam, and Zoroastrians believe the Shi'a adopted it from them. I will discuss this further later.

153 In the sofreh exhibition an old koshti-spinning wheel was also displayed, fed with seventy two threads. They told me, "Some elderly women might still be able to operate the machine."

154 For a detailed discussion of the verses corresponding with the ritual winding and unwinding of the cord see Choksy (1989:55–62).

155 "As for times of private prayer, it was ordained that the Zoroastrian should pray once during each of the five watches of the twenty-four-hour day-an invaluable religious exercise which Mohammad adopted from Zoroastrianism" (Boyce 1977:29). For a complete description see Mary Boyce (Ibid).

156 This talk was given in a commemorative ritual of porseh wherein references to the deceased by means of the phrase "jubilant ravān" were frequent, wishing the deceased an elevated status in heaven. He said, "We have to fulfill this wish in *this* world; we have to wish to experience heaven here. We succeed in achieving this through self-discipline that transforms the whole society."

157 Influenced by Nicholas Dirks' discussion of anthropological histories (1996).

158 Using Nicholas Dirks' discussion on colonialism and culture (1992).

159 For these views of culture see Ward Goodenough (1964, 1990).

160 This is while Zoroaster is now believed by scholars to have lived and preached not in Iran but somewhere in central Asia. Jackson identified the "kingdom of Bactria" as the scene of Zoroaster's zealous ministry, and wrote that he was born in "Atropatene, to the west of Media," but "this prophet without honor in his own country met with a congenial soil for the seeds of his teaching in eastern Iran" (Jackson 1896:21). and "its blossoms later bore fruit in the west." (Jackson 1893a:231). Along the same lines, Moulton and Bartholomae agreed that Zoroaster migrated into East Bactria but they specified Lake Hamun as the place of his religious activities, where he was welcomed by King Vishtaspaes (Cf. James Moulton. *Early Zoroastrianism*, 1912:84).

161 He addressed the reopening of a Zoroastrian library, discussed in chapter 6.

162 Fariba Adelkhah further discusses that the ethic of *javanmard* goes beyond "a traditional legacy," and offers "a permanent improvisation according to a given mode in the musical sense. Through studying it one can understand more clearly the emergence of 'the individuality of eminence' with a certain charisma; the affirmation of social qualities that can be turned into political qualities; the importance of gifts in Iranian society; the changes in, and especially the institutionalizing of, the idea of trust that is at the heart of practices involving gifts; and, in addition, the operation of the economic networks of the bazaar" (1999:4).

163 Almut Hintze's analysis indicates that "[t]he Gathic hymns are arranged in concentric circles around the Yasnā Haptanhaiti, 'written in a liturgical rhythmic prose style'" [Johanna Narten 1986 Cf. Hintze 2000:32]. "On the Literary Structure of the Older Avesta" (Ibid:50).

164 See Firoze Kotwal (1999–2000:1–8).

165 See Lawrence Mills (1902:768–769).

166 Also see Jenny Rose (2011:71–73).

167 The difference results from the different counts of the six seasonal thanksgivings of gāhambārs that each lasts for five days. They could be counted as six or as long as thirty days.

168 توانا بود هر که دانا بود/ زدانش دل پیر برنا بود

169 It seems this is a common way of thinking among Iranians. For instance, a middle aged grey-bearded Muslim told me once, "The Western world has progressed in technology but they do not enjoy their lives. They are secluded in their houses without having any relations with others. What is good in that? They are still fighting for the advancement of the principles of individualism in the form of liberalism, democracy, self-centrism, and egoism. This would not bring unity. From the time of Adam human has been pursuing these issues."

170 See Shahla Haeri (1985).

171 This law has recently been challenged, mostly in the North American Zoroastrian community. See Rashna Writer (1994:218–220).

172 Influenced by Fredrik Barth's situational approach to ethnicity (1969).

173 See the Associate Press 20 December 2008 article on the *Yaldā*.

174 See note 126.

175 For a sophisticated comparative analysis between Zoroastrian and Shi'i sofreh see Sabine Kalinock (2012).

176 These sorts of inventions are not without precedence in the community. For instance, this gathering on the second day of the New Year in the fire-temple itself is somewhat new, about a hundred years old and founded by a prominent Zoroastrian, Keykhosro Shahrokh. It was originally to be held on the first day of *Nowruz*, but when Shahrokh became member of the parliament and this day was occupied in the congress for the *salām* ceremony dedicated to the shah, it was changed to the second day.

177 اشونامه شماره 8

178 The chief among them is Sepante-Mainu, "God's creative organ [or] the 'Holy Spirit'" (Gershevitch 1964:12).

179 A term used by Irach Taraporewala, cited in Jalil Doostkhah's translation of Avesta, *Introduction* page thirty-nine.

180 While still a contemporary reading, Dinshah Irani discussed these under the subtitle of "seven spiritual stages" twenty years earlier; he named the last stage as *vesal* (attainment, fulfillment of love) describing unification with God, which belongs to the next world. (1982:107).

181 Dinshah Irani (1982:107).

182 See Afshin Marashi (2008:61).

183 As the protective angel of animals, Vahuman occupies a special place among other angels, and in every month the days that coincide with this Amshāspand are called *nabor*, wherein Zoroastrians are encouraged to abstain from eating meat.

184 Lawrence Mills translated Vahuman to be "the good-minded saint" (1900: 87).

185 Bekhradnia reported that *lork* nowadays are handed to each guests and also sent to absent guests at weddings both inside and outside Iran, a small amount wrapped in decorative green or white net. "*Lork* has thus acquired the function of representing an aspect of traditional Zoroastrianism" (1992:23–45).

186 One of the students told me that "in reverence of this Amshāspand that, which is symbolized by earth, all sofrehs are spread on the floor." Nonetheless, in many instances this was not observed and tables were used instead—which with all the emphases put on keeping the tradition alive, I was surprised to observe.

187 Contemporary Iranians' pronunciation is *mordad*, which actually means mortal, exactly the opposite. The community was reminded of this corrective point by many speakers on many.

188 Some of the oldest cedars in villages of Yazd and elsewhere were cut down as Ahmadinejad initiated a campaign against "superstitions."

189 Dinshah Irani (1982:107).

190 Personal correspondence.

191 *Mobed Association* (2008:29).

192 Personal correspondence.

193 گلیم بخت کسی که ساخته اند سیاه/به آب زمزم و کوثر سفید نتوان کرد

194 جام می و خون دل هر یک به کسی دادند/در دایره قسمت اوضاع چنین باشد

195 For further discussion on ashā see next chapter.

196 تربیت نا اهل را چون گردکان بر گنبد است

197 عاقبت گرگزاده گرگ شود

198 گوهر پاک بباید که شود قابل فیض/ور نه هر سنگ و گلی لولو و مرجان نشود

199 کمتر از ذره نه ای پست مشو عشق بورز/تا به سرچشمه خورشید رسی رقص کنان/دامن دوست بدست آر و ز دشمن بگسل/مرد یزدان شو و فارغ گذر از اهرمنان

200 گِلی خوشبوی در حمام روزی/رسید از دست محبوبی به دستم/بدو گفتم که مشکی یا عبیری/که از بوی دلاویز تو مستم
بگفتا من گِلی نا چیز بودم /ولیکن مدتی با گل نشستم/کمال همنشین در من اثر کرد/وگرنه من همان خاکم که هستم

201 چنان با خوب و بد سر کن که بعد از مردنت عرفی/مسلمان به زمزمت شوید و هندو بسوزاند

202 سری را که درد نمیکند نباید بست

203 On cosmict dualism see Solomon Nigosian (1993:88–90), also Oktor Skjaervo (2011:8–9).

204 Formulated after Fredrik Barth's anthropology of knowledge model (2002a).

205 See chapter 3.

206 As Professor Choksy pointed out to me, "Zoroastrians also have a parallel tradition, dating from Safavid times onward of blaming Shi'a for extreme persecutions."

207 http://www.cais-soas.com/News/2007/June2007/28--06.htm (accessed, May 2014).

208 http://www.asriran.com/fa/news/14038 (accessed, May 2014).

209 There are reports that on Tuesday, 26 June 2008 many Iranians (I assume mostly local Shi'a), gathered in front of the governor's residence to protest at the destruction order.

210 http://www.cais-soas.com/News/2007/June2007/28--06.htm (accessed, May 2014).

211 He said we can understand this in many different ways. It may be an innate expression of supplication. Or it may symbolize that God is everywhere, particularly in the skies. Energy therapy is another explanation. For further discussion on similarities with Islam see Alessandro Bausani (2000).

212 These five times include three o'clock in the morning to dawn, dawn to noon, noon to three o'clock, three o'clock to dusk, and then the night prayer till midnight.

213 Fischer also refers to this possible link (1980:268 n. 15).

214 *Mobed* Goshtasb 52, *Yazd*.

215 انّا لله و انّا الیه راجعون

216 عیب رندان مکن ای زاهد پاکیزه سرشت/که گناه دگری بر تو نخواهند نوشت/من اگر نیکم و گر بد تو برو خود را باش/هرکسی آن درود عاقبت کار که کشت

217 This is also the opening question of the Chidag Handarz: Poryotkeshan, a 9th–11th cent. AD/CE Pahlavi Zoroastrian catechism. Transl. R.C. Zaehner, *The Teachings of the Magi*.

218 Nicholson trans (1926).
بشنو از نی چون حکایت میکند/ از جدایی ها شکایت میکند/کز نیستان تا مرا ببریده اند/از نفیرم مرد و زن نالیده اند/ هر کسی کو دور ماند از اصل خویش/ بازجوید روزگار وصل خویش

219 حجاب چهره جان میشود غبار تنم/خوشا دمی کزین چهره پرده بر فکنم/چنین قفس نه سزای چو من خوش الحانیست/ روم به روضهٔ رضوان که مرغ آن چمنم/چگونه طوف کنم در فضای عالم قدس/که در سراچه تقدیر تخته بند تنم

220 See Jawid Mojaddedi (2003); Michael Sells (1996); Gerhard Böwering (2005).

221 Mason reported on Luis Massignon's discovery of Hallaj and his later travels to "the Middle East, Iran, Khurasan, and Western India, collecting any and every work by him and memorial to him that had survived the centuries. Massignon discovered that Hallaj was indeed very much alive, often in folkloric ways, in the popular imagination and in circles of religious orders in remote areas of the Islamic world. In recent decade Hallaj has been the subject of a number of plays and poem by leading Arab, Persian, and Turkish writers" (1979:xix). Mason wrote that Hallaj "danced as an alternative to abstractionism and despair," and "believed in … direct inspiration from the Source …" (Mason 1979:xvii).

222 Skjaervo writes, "The daenā is what allows man to 'see' in the world of thought, but she also appears to the (breath-) soul in the form of a woman representing the totality of a person's thoughts, words, and deeds in life, which determines how she looks and for which the soul is judged in the beyond … The word is often translated as 'religion,' but this only applies to certain uses of *den* in the Pahlavi literature and there is no reason to think that the word may have had the modern meaning of religion in the *avesta* and early Sasanian times" (2011:31).

223 For a full account of this popular tradition among Zoroastrians, see Solomon Nigosian (1993:12–13).

224 Some historical accounts give a different picture of the spread of Zoroaster's message that also violates the abovementioned rejection of religious conversion: "[h]is ringing voice of reform and of a nobler faith found an answering echo in the heart of the Bactrian king, Vishtaspa, whose strong arm gave necessary support to the crusade that spread the new faith west and east throughout the land of Iran. Allusions to this crusade are not uncommon in Zoroastrian literature. A fierce religious war which in a way was fatal to Bactria, seems to have ensued with Turan." (Jackson 1896:21)

225 According to him, it is only in the cosmology born out of Zoroaster that two worlds are equal which made Plato, who identified himself as a student of Zoroaster, assume, albeit mistakenly, a third middle world.

226 "After Zoroastrians abandoned the fire temple at Baku, it was used by Hindus (there the remnants of ascetic practices)" (Professor Choksy, personal correspondence); also see Choksy (2006b).

227 "This was influence of Islam and Christianity on Zoroastrianism in both Iran and India" (Choksy, personal correspondence). Professor Lindholm commented, "I think this may well be a response to the Shi'ite denial of mystical practice—and to a desire to be modern. Ascetic or ecstatic practices are 'primate.'"

228 "William James called this the "once born" perspective" (2004).

229 برگ درختان سبز در نظر هوشیار/ هر ورقش دفتریست معرفت کردگار

230 ابر و باد و مه و خورشید و فلک در کارند/ تا تو نانی به کف آری و به غفلت نخوری
همه از بهر تو سرگشته و فرمانبردار/ شرط انصاف نباشد که تو فرمان نبری

231 See Anne Schimmel (1974).

232 *Amordād* reported, http://www.amordad6485.blogfa.com/post-1095.asp (accessed, July 2013).

233 In recent years, some Muslim women have also entered this male dominated tradition, breaking the taboo.

234 زنانشان چنین اند ایران سران /چگونه اند گردان جنگ آوران

235 According to her, the masculine Amshāspands are vahooman (wisdom and good thought), Ashāvahishta (rule and order in the world), Khshatra-vairya (that Ahura Mazda has power but uses it in the good path). The feminine Amshāspands are Sepante-armiti (love and sacrifice that is exemplified on earth in the mother), Hoorvatāt (completion and perfection) and Ameretāt (everlastingness and immortality, a status will be achieved after achieving the first five).

236 A modern interpretation. See Choksy (2002).

237 See chapter 2.

238 وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِن رَّسُولٍ إِلاَّ بِلِسَانِ قَوْمِهِ

239 Another pejorative term from the root *mogh*, originally used for pre-Zoroastrian priests.

240 Another pejorative term from the Arabic *kafir* meaning infidel.

241 http://archive.today/TNh2U (accessed, May 2014).

242 For a detailed discussion on this change see Choksy (2006a:15).

243 مپندار که آتش پرستان بُدند/پرستندهٔ پاک یزدان بدند

244 از آن به دیر مغانم عزیز میدارند/که آتشی که نمیرد همیشه در دل ماست

245 Rumi, trans: Nicholson (1926).
آتش عشق است کاندر نی فتاد/جوشش عشق است کاندر می فتاد
آتشست این بانگ نای و نیست باد/هر که این آتش ندارد نیست باد

246 On burial practices in Iran see also Fereydoon Shirmard Farahmand (1998).

247 For a discussion of such transformation in other religions see Talal Asad (1993).

248 سنت قدیمی هفت سین و زنده داریم/به این آداب و سنن احترامی خاص میذاریم

249 Qoutingn Lave and Wenger phrase (1991). Pierre Bourdieu's model of *habitus* (1977) accounts for two kinds of learning process: the unconscious inculcation of religious principles in the more traditional settings, as well as the formalized and conscious learning of formal schooling. See LeVine (1994).

250 In 1981, Mehrdad Mehrin estimated the population to be "more than three hundred thousand." Other estimates indicate 360,000 Zoroastrians in 1977 (Amighi 1990). See chapter 1, n. 8.

251 In personal correspondence professor Choksy commented that the religion is passed through the paternal line. Accordingly, the child should be considered Zoroastrian.

252 http://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/06/us/06faith.html (accessed, May 2014).

253 Among the Parsis, Tanya Luhrmann (2002) notes that different schools of thought have different emphases on the importance of rituals, approaches to dualism, intermarriage, and conversion. The orthodox that promote total exclusion of others are concerned that increasing assimilation will alter the community beyond recognition, while the liberals are concerned that the community will die out without intermarriage and conversion. Maneckji Nusserwanji Dhalla, the Parsi high priest of Karachi critical of orthodoxy writes, "The permanent blockade to an influx from outside, the abandoning of the fold by an increasing number of both men and women, and the ever-falling birth-rate of the community … it can be said that [the question of conversion] has become the thread on which hangs the very existence of this microscopic community" (1975:713–714).

254 "A celebrated eastern fabulist and philosopher, sometimes identified with Aesop," *The Larger Persian English Dictionary*, S. Haim.

255 Friday, 1 February 2008.

256 Friday, 15 February 2008.

257 It was originally named *Anjoman-e Iran Bastan*, frequently visited by figures such as Foroozanfar and Hamidi Shirazi, Bahrām Farahvashi also mobed Firuz Azar Goshasb and mobed Shahzady.

258 سَلمانُ مِنّا اَهلُ البَیتِ

259 I am using the translation by Franz Rosenthal of Ibn Khaldoun's *Muqaddimah* (III, pp. 311–315, 271–274).

دانش اگر در ثریا هم باشد مردانی از سرزمین پارس بر آن دست خواهند یافت

260 This event was simultaneous with the *Haft-Sin* competition discussed in chapter 4.

261 Starting on the first day of 1387 (March 2008).

262 Even though the Islamic Republic's constitution guarantees the right of the recognized religious minorities to operate according to their canon in religious education, in practice it is not fully in their purview and the basic religious books for minorities produced by the Ministry of Education and Training are also used. See Choksy (2006a:168), and Patricia Higgins (1984).

263 *Technorati*: http://www.sifry.com/alerts/archives/000493.html (accessed, May 2014).

264 Roy Mottahedeh writes, "In fact, Persian poetry came to be the emotional home in which the ambiguity that was at the heart of Iranian culture lived most freely and openly. What Persian poetry expressed was not as enigma to be solved but an enigma that was unsolvable. In Persian poetry of any worth nothing was *merely* something else; the inner space of the spirit in which Persian poetry underwent its thousand transformations was ultimately a place where this ambiguous language reached a private emotional value that had to remain private, because to decode it as mere allegory, to re-express it in any form of explanatory paraphrase would be to place it back in the public domain and, therefore, in the realm in which it was intended to remain ambiguous" (1985:164).

265 While the Foundation marks this day on Esfand 29, the celebration of Zoroastrians was on Bahman 29 which is according to the fifth day of Esfand to the Zoroastrian count, Monday, 19 February 2008.

266 http://www.sarmayeh.net/ShowNews.php?35324 (accessed, July 2013). "کلاً جشن روز ولنتاین برگرفته از جشن سپندارمزدان ایران است و اساساً مبدایی ایرانی دارد."

267 While this trend regarding Zoroastrians challenges Andersons' argument that the dawn of nationalism necessarily marks the dusk of religious modes of thought (1991:11), it proves him right in terms of using Islam as the precursor of Iranian nationalist self conception.

268 Using Abbas Amanat on Persianate world 2002.

269 White House photo by Chris Greenberg: http://www.payvand.com/news/08/mar/1247.html (accessed, May 2014).

270 While the U.S. media headlines overwhelmingly announced that the Iranian Supreme Leader immediately dismissed the President's call for a new beginning, he actually left the door open, conditioned upon measures to indicate "real change" in the U.S.A. "hostility" towards Iran, including "release of Iranian assets, lifting the oppressive sanctions, and abandonment of unconditional support for the Zionist regime."

271 A Zoroastrian mobed.

272 See Christopher Buck (1998).

273 This is similar to what the Soviet Union did with the Jews and Cuba with the dissidents by permitting out-migration. In the larger Iranian context, however, Zoroastrians exemplify an Iranian history that is filled with emigrations of this nature. Recalling Shamlou who calls on fellow Iranians to "[r]emember our strange migration from one alienation to another, so that the search for Faith would be our only virtue," recalling that "our history was of restlessness. Not of belief. Not of hometown."

274 Babayan also refers to the conflation of Zoroaster and Abraham (2002:189).

275 This research addressed a larger theoretical discourse concerned with the mechanisms of sociocultural reproduction in a globalized world where minority groups struggle to remain viable and to affirm their "authentic" status. The Zoroastrian case can serve as a point of comparison for parallel efforts undertaken by global "indigenous rights" movements, as documented by Ronald Niezen (2003) and others. It shows how the Zoroastrian situation, as both a global community and a local minority, and as a literate monotheist religion, both differs from and resembles these "aboriginal" movements for recognition. As we saw, Zoroastrians continually make claims to be more modern and rational than the predominant society. The usual rhetoric of first nations, however, relies on spiritual superiority, innate connection to the earth, collective unity, and generally other rational and mystical claims to assert authenticity and authority.

276 Phrase used by Whitehead in his notion of historicity (2003).

277 Phrase used by Lambek in his discussion of historicity (2002).

278 Term used by Hirschkind in his cultural analysis of history (2006).

279 As he once recited, Sohrab Sepehry says that "'we have to wash our eyes and look differently.' With a blue or red lens everything is blue or red. Now imagine if we wear glasses of pessimism or cynicism, then we always see the empty half of the glass. No wonder that Sohrab Sepehry also reminds us that we have to find the truth from children. This is because they are not familiar with lying; it is we adults who teach them to lie."

280 Shervin Malakzadeh's (2009) analysis of textbooks in Iran shows a move away from revolutionary images that now even include the image of the Pasargadae in the text when illustrating an Iranian family in its home. Hamid Rezai (2009) also argues that Khatami brought about structural and institutional changes that allowed for an identity construction different from that of the "Islamic Man."

281 As reported by Amordad, the Zoroastrian news agency, they are partly for

the tourists, while many of the shop owners as well many youths who wear jewels made of these images do not know their significance.

282 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l_uTfuI2Pt8 (accessed, May 2014).

283 http://www.berasad.com/fa/content/view/1560/ (accessed, May 014).

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