

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 verse²³⁸ 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 *ādash-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 worshipped idols. Using Barth's anthropology of knowledge (2002a), I show

how the dialectic of life under the Shi'a 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 sheyḏān-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-worshippers, [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 Hāfēz 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 Hāfēz 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 Azargoshasp 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 rationalization 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 Shi‘ite 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 Shi’a, 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 Shi’a, 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, Khosravi, 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 2008²⁶⁰ 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 ākshij 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, Tehran



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 Sa'd-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 practice²⁶¹ 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 Shi'i 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.