

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 spatio-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 them⁸⁵ 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-

celebration 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 Shi'a, 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 Ardibehesh-tegān*). 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 Shi'a 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 *ta'ziyeh* (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 Shi'i 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 Shi'a.

Additionally, while the Shi'i 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 Shi'i 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/Shi'i 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 Shi'a. 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 Shi'a. 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 Shi'a, 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 Shi'a 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-gah⁹⁷ celebrates the creation of Skies, held on the forty-fifth day of the year in month Ardibehesht, around the end of April.
2. Midiosham-gah⁹⁸ celebrates the creation of Waters, held on the one hundred and fifth day of the year in month Tir, around 10 June.
3. Paeteshahim-gah⁹⁹ 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-gah¹⁰⁰ celebrates the creation of Plants, held on the two hundred and tenth day of the year in month Ābān, around 12 October.
5. Midiarim-gah¹⁰¹ 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-gah¹⁰² 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 Durkheimian “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 Sa’di: “[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 day¹⁰⁵ 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 school¹⁰⁷ 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-worshipping 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-Isad, 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 Tehran¹¹⁹), 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 manthra, 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 Shi’a 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 Shi’i. 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 Shi'i world.

The programme culminated when the oldest mobed recited the fire-prayer (*ādash-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 Shi'a.

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 Shi'a 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 Shi'a, 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 mobed-yar 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 mobed-yar 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 Shi'i 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 Shi'a. This historical narrative enabled Zoroastrians to exploit the Shi'a enmity towards the Sunni Arabs, hence placating Shi'a 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 Shi'a in contrast to the Sunni Arabs and hence as insiders, other narratives make them outsiders. As we saw before, the establishment of the Shi'i 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 Shi'i 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 (*jaziyyeh*) 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 recitation¹³³ 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 *āfrināmeḥ*, 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 Shi’a. 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 “in-vent[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 Shi’a. Thus, as an integral part of the religious organization of certain historical representations and meanings among Shi’a, 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 Durkheimian effervescence that supposedly transports members “to a higher realm” leading to “intense hyperexcitement of physical and mental life” (1895:218). As Hefner argues, Durkheimian “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 Shi’a, 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-worshippers (*moreh-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-worshippers 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 *mobed*yar 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 Irāj 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-worshippers. 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 Shi'a 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 (*vāqe'iyat*) 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 *zaratoshttrutama* 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* (generosity), 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 Aspad, 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 symbolizes the four aforementioned ākhshij or purifying elements: water, earth, fire, and air. Koshti is made of seventy two¹⁵² 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 Shi'a and the Arabs, attaching the imageries of the Zoroastrian tumultuous past to, and hence blaming, the contemporary Shi'a. Thus Zoroastrian social imaginaries—the underlying modes of associational life—embodied a line of religiously-informed resistance towards the ruling Shi'a, 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 Shi'i 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.

