

Claiming Authenticity in Shi'i-Dominated Iranian Culture

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4.1 – Establishing Authority over Iranian Culture

4.1.1 – *The Indigenous Iranians*

Zoroastrians have a special tie to Iran which, as the incubator of their religion, transcends identification merely as a homeland. Rather, it embodies spiritual dispositions linked to the imagined original emergence of their eponymous prophet Zoroaster,¹⁶⁰ a land filled with Zoroastrian sacred and pilgrimage sites. A high ranking state official who was invited to a Zoroastrian ceremony¹⁶¹ told me that "[n]o one has ever found a Zoroastrian who has betrayed Iran." Therefore, I was surprised when the high mobed in one of his addresses said, "In some crowds, when there is a mention of Zoroastrians they think we are anti Iran."

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

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

and of justice,” and qualities crowned by the courage to sacrifice one’s life for others (1999:4).¹⁶²

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4.1.3.1 – The Sofreh Exhibition in Qeytariyyeh

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

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

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

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

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

4.1.3.2 – The Nowruz Sofreh Competition

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

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

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

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

FIGURE 9 Nowruz Sofreh Competition, Iraj Hall, Tehran



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

4.1.4 – Zoroastrianizing Iranian Islamic Mysticism

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4.2 – Cultural Critics

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4.3 – Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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