

## **THE DECLINE OF THE ZOROASTRIAN PRIESTHOOD AND ITS EFFECT ON THE IRANIAN ZOROASTRIAN COMMUNITY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

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### *Introduction*

It might reasonably be assumed that clergy play an important role in maintaining the traditions of a religion and, therefore, that a decline in their numbers would be accompanied by a corresponding decline in the strength of the religion. The case of the Iranian Zoroastrians,<sup>1</sup> however, seemingly refutes such an assumption. In the early years of this century, a sharp decline in the number of the clergy was accompanied by the opening of Zoroastrian schools, migration to the capital, Tehran, and an increase in the number of well-educated Iranian Zoroastrians. A period of relative security and prosperity between the 1950s and 1970s lulled the community into believing that religious toleration in Iran was irreversible. Responsibility for the transmission of community history and religious knowledge was then relegated to teachers, whereas in the recent past this teaching had been

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1. For a brief introduction to the history and geography of Iranian Zoroastrianism, see Bekhradnia 1991.

the responsibility of parents. Between 1956 and 1966 the balance between rural and urban populations was reversed. Schools became increasingly secularized and fewer children knew about their traditions. Then, in 1979, the Islamic Revolution dramatically changed the situation. Religion became a compulsory subject at school, while distinct social and economic pressures forced an awareness upon all Zoroastrians that they were different; yet expressions of respect from Muslim Iranians both inside and outside the country made Zoroastrians particularly proud of their principles and history. Simultaneously, there were more participants at Zoroastrian religious and social occasions, indicating a rekindled sense of community and identity. More recently, with indications of large numbers of Iranian Muslims seeking a self-asserted Zoroastrian identity, together with the expression of Zoroastrian identity by some Yazidi Kurds,<sup>2</sup> some Tajiks and some Azerbaijanis, the Iranian Zoroastrian identity has also acquired a political and quasi-nationalist dimension. Some rituals and traditions survive, although they are observed in the main by elderly rural people.

The decline of the priest's caste among Iranian Zoroastrians is not a new phenomenon. The text *Dadestan i Denig* reveals that even as far back as the ninth century, Manuchehr, the Zoroastrian high priest of Fars and Kerman, was lamenting the difficult conditions that the Zoroastrians were obliged to endure as a result of the Arab invasion two centuries earlier. He was quite clear about the consequences for the clergy and did not castigate those priests whose sons did not follow in their footsteps, understanding that the economic rewards for priestly activities were simply not adequate for some people (Kreyenbroek 1987: 188). It was thus envisaged eleven centuries ago that many of the sons of priests might no longer follow in the footsteps of their fathers as the tradition had required (and has continued to require). But in the event, there seem to have been enough people able to retain and transmit traditions pertaining to their religion right through to the nineteenth century, despite many periods when Zoroastrians in Iran suffered evidently heavy declines in their population.

The nature of the knowledge handed down is interesting; much of it might be characterized as traditional, yet it is still difficult to conjecture how much was innovation, reflecting facets of society at particular periods. Furthermore, many of the clearly religious observances did not require the participation of a priest, but were domestic or neighbourhood occasions that the laity themselves organized.<sup>3</sup>

2. One member of this community has written a tract claiming Zoroastrian identity for the Yazidi Kurds, whose population stands at between two and three million; see Yazidi 1983. However, his claim to leadership and the veracity of his statements is disputed by a Yazidi Kurdish informant in London.

3. The importance of domestic organization of religious life corresponds to women maintaining the Little as opposed to the Great Tradition. The prominence of the rituals of Yazidi village women devoted to various *kheirat* as well as Bibi Sehshanbeh and Moshegelgoshah exemplify this. See Sered 1986 for the Jewish case, and see Atkin 1989 for the survival of Islam through folk or village practice in Soviet Tajikistan.

### *The Decline of the Priesthood*

The decline in the number of priests (inherited through the male line within priestly families) is evident in a detailed headcount of 1891 (Azargoshasb 1973: 110-11). By that time, the main body of Zoroastrians in Iran lived in or around the towns of Yazd and Kerman, on the edge of deserts in the central south-east of the country where both the terrain and climate are harsh. There were 63 priestly families in Yazd,<sup>4</sup> but with only 35 individuals serving as officiants for a total Zoroastrian population of 6908 in Yazd and its 23 outlying villages. The shortage of male adults within the priestly families (one out of six of the priestly caste compared to one out of four or five in the non-priestly population) can be explained by migration. At the time they were in Bombay and other parts of India, earning money with which to support their families (since in both Iran and India they were paid only for each officiation). As, with their increasing poverty, the number of Iranian Zoroastrians dwindled in the nineteenth century, there were fewer people in Iran who either needed or could afford the priests' services. From the middle of the nineteenth century, when Parsee philanthropists decided to rescue Iranian Zoroastrians from their destitution, and because sea and rail links developed quickly at that time, it became commonplace to find Iranian Zoroastrians setting off for Bombay, as if to a promised land. Priests were able to ply their trade much more successfully in India than in Yazd, since there was a larger and wealthier Parsee population there (c.90,000 people).<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Yazdi priests were especially popular amongst both the Parsees (because they were considered authentic) and the migrant Iranian Zoroastrian community. Their absence from Iran thus explains the anomaly of a low adult male priestly population.

However, there are further problems associated with this headcount. The size and reproduction of priestly households was significantly curtailed: 62 boys and 36 girls within 63 households gives an average of just 1.5 children per household; while amongst the lay Zoroastrian urban population of Yazd, households averaged 5 children (202 girls and 202 boys). These contrasts may perhaps indicate a relative inadequacy of the material means to maintain a family among the impoverished priests, in contrast to the relatively prosperous Zoroastrian townsfolk.

Levels of literacy are also indicative of the wretched plight of the priests. Although it might be expected that priests would have a higher level of literacy than the lay population, the headcount reveals that in 1891 only 65% of adult priests in Yazd were literate, compared to some 68% of lay urban male adults. Yet amongst the priests, 58% of their sons were literate compared to only 23%

4. It might be assumed that since no breakdown for priestly and non-priestly families was given for Kerman, the size of the priesthood there was already insignificant by 1891.

5. The Parsees are descendants of Iranian Zoroastrians who migrated to India in the tenth century.

among the sons of laymen. From this one deduces that there was a greater number of literate adult lay males than there were priests, possibly reflecting new needs for literacy in the practice of trading enterprises. On the other hand, the higher percentage of literate sons of priests suggests that a considerable value was being placed by priests on the ability of their sons to read and write. These skills were in fact the first step to an escape route from the priesthood, the profession of priest being understood by practising priests to be an effective guarantee of low income and status. Indeed, most of the first generation of Iranian Zoroastrian professionals (doctors and engineers) came from priests' families, while the lay public excelled in trade, property speculation, and farming, the latter occupation holding limited prospects for the future, given the increasing desertification of Yazd.

Just as in the ninth century, when Manuchehr the high priest recognized a problem for the future of the priesthood, so too did Dastur Namdar e Dastur Shahriar, the high priest in the early years of the twentieth century. Like so many other priests from Yazd, he was often away on trips to India, and so he vested his general authority in a council of priests (*kankosh e mobedan*) which he set up in 1916. His cousin, Dastur Mehraban e Tirandaz, presided over the council during his absences, and the council of priests made decisions as a body. Subsequently, Dastur Mehraban's nephew and son-in-law Rostam took over the presidency of the council. Between the 1920s and 1930s there were about 85 priestly households in the priests' quarter in Yazd, but the number quickly dwindled since most priests began to move their families to Tehran, where better educational opportunities and careers were available for their children. By 1944, most priests had moved to Tehran and the council was dissolved. In 1952, the council of priests was reconvened in Tehran under the presidency of Mobed Ardeshir e Azargoshasb, who is regarded by most Yazdi families as the high priest, by virtue of his genealogy and knowledge, since he is the son of Dastur Namdar e Dastur Shahriar, the founder of the priests' council. He actually supplied me with this information and claimed that the title of high priest (*dastir e mas*, more formally *dastur e dasturan*) was bestowed by popular assent. He acknowledges, however, that any decision relating to religion is made by the council, which nevertheless shows great respect for his opinions.<sup>6</sup>

From the mid-1950s onwards, there were few practising priests left among Iranian Zoroastrians, and the council was opened to all *dasturzadeh*, i.e. men or women who could claim paternal or even maternal descent from the families of priests. By 1978, when I was last in Iran, there were only five practising priests in Yazd and eight in Tehran, all aged over 55, being paid by the *anjoman* or Zoroastrian council. One Parsee priest had been brought over from India, but he was not able to communicate with his congregation, i.e. those within his *husht* or parish, nor was he familiar with the Iranian Zoroastrian way of celebrating

6. In the summer of 1991, an official publication of the Priests' Council of North America referred to Mobed Ardeshir's brother, Firooz, as the high priest, possibly because of Mobed Ardeshir's ailing health and old age.

religious occasions, though he obviously picked up some ideas of how things were done while in Iran. In 1991, an informant surveyed the situation there and reported three priests in Yazd, one in Isfahan and five salaried priests in the Tehran area.

### *Religious Education*

According to older informants, children used to learn about their religion and how to say the Avesta or holy texts, simply by spending time in the company of adults.<sup>7</sup> They would listen with great attention when their elders sat around a brazier on winter evenings telling stories from the *Shahnameh* (the tenth-century Persian epic 'Book of Kings') and lamenting the onslaught of the Arabs. It was not the priests who passed on knowledge to the children of a community but the parents, the mother usually being more available and also usually the more pious and regular in the observance and performance of rituals, as well as more inclined to story-telling. Communal religious occasions, which almost always involved communal eating (for example, *osh e kheirat* or charity stews, the cooking of *sirog* or sweet spiced fried bread and Gahambar commemorations six times a year), were an integral part of community life in which the children participated with all the members of their families. The annual spring visits to the shrines and the major festivals of Nowruz, Tirgon and Mehrized were part of the regular annual calendar that everyone in Yazd observed. Children would be expected to undergo their Sedreh Pushi (initiation ceremony) before puberty, but not all children experienced the official ceremony, usually because it involved the laying-on of hospitality for a number of guests.

By the 1920s, each of the 26 villages around Yazd containing Zoroastrians had a school for Zoroastrian girls and boys, run by a Zoroastrian headteacher, and often paid for by Parsees. Zoroastrian schools for girls and boys had also been

7. The word *avesta* is used by Iranian Zoroastrians to mean the whole body of holy texts, from which a number are regularly recited as prayers. The language of these texts varies, reflecting the time of their composition. Thus the most ancient are totally unintelligible to Iranian Zoroastrians, while others of much more recent origin are in part fairly easy to understand. The texts were written down as well as orally transmitted, but it is said that Alexander the Great's invasion in the fourth century BC and the Arab invasion in the seventh century AD destroyed the bulk of the recorded material. Even when new records were compiled from orally transmitted texts after the Arab conquest, these were regularly destroyed by hostile rulers. Thus oral transmission assumed particular importance. When Anquetil du Perron went to India in 1758, specifically to investigate the Zoroastrians there, he was the first European to find them in possession of texts, which he studied for two and a half years with the assistance of one of their priests (see Firby 1988: 155). He cross-checked them for accuracy and consistency, and was persuaded that they were authentic, being composed in an ancient Indo-European language.

founded in Tehran. Religious education, including the teaching of the Avesta, was integrated into the school curriculum. Thus the responsibility for teaching the children Zoroastrian history and traditions passed from the parents to the teachers. Of course, some parents did continue to teach their children what they knew, but with the opening of the schools, and the drift to Tehran, the number of parents who did this gradually declined. Since Zoroastrian schools were never exclusively for Zoroastrian children, they began to attract a large number of Muslim children as well, many parents (including Reza Shah, the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1925, and many of his ministers) believing that the standard of education and upbringing was better than the available alternatives. This sharing of Zoroastrian schools with non-Zoroastrians resulted in less emphasis being placed on Zoroastrian religious education during school time. Meanwhile, a youth wing of the *anjoman* council, the *sozemon e fravahar* or youth association, was created to make up for the lack of education in schools.

### *The Islamic Revolution*

Although the 1979 revolution has had all sorts of effects on the Zoroastrian community in Iran (including the prohibition against Zoroastrians running Zoroastrian-founded schools), one of the results has been a reinvigorated sense of difference between Zoroastrians and Muslims. This in turn has manifested itself in an increase in the number of people coming forward to take the priesthood examination (although they do not necessarily practise as priests afterwards). It is also reported that more children are having their Sedreh Pushi or initiation ceremony performed. The demand of the present regime that all children must be examined in religion means that the youth association plays a very important role in providing religious education within the community. Interestingly, this revived interest appears to have resulted in more people wearing the traditional symbol of Zoroastrianism, the *koshti* cord worn around the waist, something that very few Iranian Zoroastrians were doing even in the villages of Yazd in 1976.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, because the revolution created a large diaspora, consisting of approximately one-third of the Iranian Zoroastrian population (up to 10,000 Zoroastrians are said to have left Iran), the need was felt for the establishment of a priests'

8. Most Zoroastrians seem to have given up wearing their *koshti* upon moving to Tehran. Certainly, many informants from Yazd associated the end of their *koshti*-wearing with their entering a much larger community of non-Zoroastrians, such as at school or training college. The Parsees, in contrast, lay great store on the wearing of a *koshti* and insist that a person not wearing a *koshti* cannot possibly be a bona fide Zoroastrian. This was graphically illustrated to me in 1978, when two well-known Iranian Zoroastrians and myself (all of us attending the Third World Zoroastrian Congress) were denied entry to a fire-temple in Bombay on the grounds that none of us was wearing a *koshti*.

council of Iranian Zoroastrians in North America where the majority had settled (the council's composition consisting again almost exclusively of *dasturzadeh* rather than practising priests). Furthermore, as communities of Iranian Zoroastrians formed in the United States, Canada and Britain, with few practising priests amongst them, *dasturzadeh*, or sons of priests (few of whom had passed the examination granting them official entry into the priesthood) began to officiate when required for particular occasions. Young members of the community, who had not shown the remotest interest in their cultural heritage before their migration from Iran, began to attend and help organize such community events as the festivals of Jashn e Sadeh, Jashn e Tirgon and Nowruz. They also began organizing such social events as discos, excursions and sporting fixtures for members of the Iranian Zoroastrian community in their vicinity.

These activities suggest an increasing awareness of religious cohesion and a community united by a common cultural heritage, rather than apathy and a lack of interest. Unfortunately, it is not yet possible to assess the longer-term significance of this increase in religious awareness for the cultural attributes that will be associated with post-revolution Iranian Zoroastrianism. However, it cannot be disputed that during the years before the revolution, the number of priests and initiations, the attendance at fire-temples, and general interest in the religion was declining. In general, the move from the rural to the urban context that occurred mainly between 1956 and 1966 dramatically affected the frequency and the nature of religious observances.

### *The Significance of the Rural Context*

It should be remembered that for centuries Zoroastrianism was practised and understood within a framework bounded by an agricultural way of life. Prior to the 1950s and 1960s, when an urban experience became common for the majority of Iranian Zoroastrians, almost all religious observances were expressed in idioms or symbols embedded within a rural culture. For example, the significance of eating meat on an important festival day (such as the coincidence of the day of Mehr and the month of Mehr, i.e. the 16th day of the 7th month) needs to be appreciated as a practice of subsistence farmers who could not afford to deplete frequently their modest stock of animals. The rare treat of eating roast lamb on an important holy day was thus much looked forward to and regarded as a reward for hard work. The foods distributed at the Gahambar memorial celebrations (occurring six times a year, each over a five-day period) and during weddings were merely the foods that were available locally: that is, nuts and various dried fruits together with sugar-coated nuts and other white sweetmeats, known collectively as *lorik*. Similarly pragmatic explanations could be given for the frequency of distributing *sirug* (fried bread) and *osh* (pulse and vegetable stew). The reverence

for fire could also be explained by the practical experience of daily life where fire was essential for warmth, cooking and light, all of which are necessary for a reasonably comfortable though simple life-style. At the same time, fire was seen as symbolizing the life energy and as a symbol of eternal truth. The respected status of water was similarly reinforced by an absolute dependence on irrigation to cultivate crops in particularly hot and arid conditions: it is understandable how water might assume sacred associations in drought conditions.

The attitude towards these elements helps to explain the unique Zoroastrian way of disposing of the dead. Using the *dakhmeh* or tower of silence obviated the need to use the good earth for the disposal of corpses: soft earth that could be dug was used for cultivation, not for the proliferation of putridity. The towers were located at some distance from human settlements, on mountain tops inaccessible to all but the corpse-bearers, so that communities should not be affected by disease-ridden corpses. (It has also been suggested that the towers developed from the need to find effective ways of speedily disposing of large numbers of dead after a battle or a massacre.)

The distinction between pollution and non-pollution extended to the human being. Contact with corpses, blood, saliva, nails and hair was avoided or at least minimized.<sup>9</sup> These attitudes were translated into ritual practice during menstruation and death, thus giving rise to the observation of purity laws or *pak o pacholi*. From discussions with older informants, during whose lives these purity laws were observed, it would certainly seem that ordinary rural people understood these ancient ritual practices through their own practical 'common sense' interpretations. Is it too fanciful to suggest, like them, that the concepts of purity and pollution were merely a schema into which elementary hygiene laws were encoded?<sup>10</sup>

Most of these practices are regarded by non-Iranian Zoroastrians as features that, individually or together, set apart Zoroastrians from other religious groups. Indeed, in discussions with some Western scholars it has been suggested to me that the purity laws were dreamt up primarily to distinguish very clearly those people who did observe them from those who did not, thus serving to demarcate real Zoroastrians from the rest. Scholars, Parsees and some urbanized Iranian Zoroastrians have an image of authentic Zoroastrianism as a religion that must be expressed through such traditional rural observances, the absence of which they lament as indicative of the passing of the true religion. While it may be true that such practices are to be found uniquely amongst Zoroastrians, it is not necessarily true that they constitute the essential principles of being Zoroastrian. This view is endorsed unconsciously by Iranian Zoroastrians who have continued to practise many of the so-called traditional rituals, but who have also adopted modifications

9. The procedures pertaining to purity and pollution are derived from the Zoroastrian texts known as the *Videvdāt*, an Avestan-language text, and also from the Pahlavi *Vendidad*. For further discussion, see Choksy 1989.

10. See Douglas 1968: 45, and Irani 1990.

to traditional practices. For example, nowadays the majority of Iranian Zoroastrians do not live in close-knit neighbourhoods. Thus in Tehran or Los Angeles, the charity stews are no longer held within a local neighbourhood, nor are the Gahambar periods kept six times a year, nor do they necessarily consist of a distribution of oven-baked bread and local fruits and nuts or pulse and vegetable stew. A Gahambar in an urban context is much rarer than it is in a rural setting, partly because it is dedicated to the house where the person bequeathing it used to live (which was until recently usually Yazd), and partly because neither Tehran nor London (nor for that matter any other urban situation) is an appropriate setting as there are no specifically Zoroastrian neighbourhoods. And when they do take place outside a rural context, being rarer and people having to travel from much farther afield to attend, it is more usual to serve a meal than merely to hand out bread, dried fruit and nuts.<sup>11</sup> Because urbanized Zoroastrians today eat food in greater quantities and of much wider variety, it is thought that their expectation of what is fitting to receive or serve at a Gahambar has risen. To provide more than the traditional bread and *lorik* is too expensive, and perhaps for this reason too, Gahambars are declining.

Methods of disposing of corpses have also changed with the move to an urban context. Burial and cremation have become acceptable to almost all Iranian Zoroastrians, even to those brought up within traditional priestly homes, and during whose early years only the *dakhmeh* was known. Not one of my many informants could give even one example of a person undergoing today a Noshveh or purification rite, a common enough practice a few decades ago. Neither could any of my female informants think of anyone who still went into segregation at menstruation, even though such was the norm (expected to be strictly enforced within priestly families) just a few decades ago and within the first-hand experience of many of my informants. A vestigial trace of such observances is present in the fact that even today girls and women brought up in Tehran or the West, as well as Yazd, will not usually enter a fire-temple during menstruation. These people, however, are regarded by fellow Iranian Zoroastrians as the most traditional because of the very fact of their attendance at holy places and their daily prayer recitals, observance of the Zoroastrian calendar, regular attendance at fire-temples and observance of meat abstinence days. People considered most traditional may also continue to maintain observances for the souls of the departed, but very few people still maintain *all* the observances that would have been the norm in Yazd and Kerman 40 years ago.<sup>12</sup> The festivals of Tirgon and Mehrgon

11. Dried fruit and nuts are still handed out at weddings (including those taking place outside Iran), often a small symbolic amount being elaborately wrapped in decorative green or white net and handed to each guest and also sent to absent guests. *Lorik* has thus acquired the function of representing an aspect of traditional Zoroastrianism.

12. I witnessed a rather poignant scene not long ago at the funeral of a family friend who provided me with her life story. Her daughters had been educated in the West, had married non-Zoroastrian husbands and thus had had little contact with the Zoroastrian community since their

are still celebrated by some communities, but the practices (and the names in some cases) associated with them are not necessarily the same as they once were. In the case of Tirgon, tying seven coloured ribbons to the wrist and pouring water over passers-by, followed by a kind of fortune-telling (*chakeh dulong*), is no longer feasible. In the case of Mehrgon, as eating meat is largely taken for granted nowadays, having a feast built around a roast lamb is not such a noteworthy occasion and the celebrations do not feature prominently. It is nowadays commonplace to find Iranian Zoroastrians, either as a community or as individuals, maintaining disparate aspects of what is termed traditional. They have no difficulty in recognizing themselves and others as genuine Zoroastrians, despite the non-observance of the many purity laws that even within their own lifetimes had once been strictly applied.

### *Conclusion*

The Islamic revolution in Iran has brought back into sharp focus the moral values and principles for which the Zoroastrians have suffered such a long history of persecution. Among younger members of the community, these moral values of Zoroastrianism seem paramount, while the importance attached to specific ritual is minimal. It is not the outward form of religion but the inner content that interests them; many simply consult the oldest Avesta texts, the *Gathas*, for a real understanding of their religious principles. The most popular expression of Zoroastrian values by younger informants took into account the importance of truth and honesty, the importance of honest work, the importance of helping others and charity, and the importance of respecting nature by planting trees, not polluting the earth, the water and the air. In other words, the Zoroastrian adage passed on through the centuries, 'good thoughts, good words and good deeds' (*pendor e nik, goftor e nik, kerdor e nik*) has survived.

I would contend that, while the lifestyle of the Iranian Zoroastrian has changed, and while many of the rituals traditionally associated with the priesthood and religion have disappeared, the changes do not necessarily imply that the ethical sense of being an Iranian Zoroastrian has been weakened. On the contrary, I would suggest that precisely because of the present political circumstances, Iranian

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youth. They clearly wanted to do the right thing at the funeral in order to show the respect and love they felt towards their mother, and in the knowledge that she would have liked and expected to have a Zoroastrian ceremony. However, they were completely at a loss to know what ritual was expected of them. They illustrated very well the gap between the generation that was born and raised in Yazd and Kerman and the generation born in an urban context.

Zoroastrians have a strongly developed sense of their history, their principles, and their identity.

Even though the number of practising clergy has declined since the 1930s, their numbers may be once again on an upward curve. Because of events in Iran, and their political implications for Iranian Zoroastrians living abroad, as well as political events in nearby lands such as Kurdistan, Azerbaijan and Tajikistan, a new dimension has been incorporated into the concept of the Iranian Zoroastrian identity, a component that carries strong resonances of reawakened nationalism. Consequently, it may be said that the identity of an Iranian Zoroastrian is undergoing change. It has undoubtedly assumed a more secularized form and content: the outward form of the religion that the priesthood has helped to maintain is no longer as important as it was. Instead, its ethical ideology has acquired greater prominence and interest, and has assumed a politicized dimension. At what point does a group that is both referred to by others and refers to itself by reference to a religious category lose its genuinely religious connotations?

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