


## ARTICLE

## Distinction and Survival: Zoroastrians, Religious Nationalism, and Cultural Ownership in Shi‘i Iran

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### Abstract

This article argues that the notion of Iranian culture employed in the public discourse of Zoroastrians allows them to tackle the dilemma of Shi‘i-dominated Iranianness without provoking Shi‘i authorities. The piece offers an analysis of ethnographic data, including detailed speech acts documented in Zoroastrians’ ritual spaces and cultural exhibitions. It explores the Zoroastrian configuration of an Iranian culture that summons and encodes pre-Islamic tropes and modern nationalist sentiments by constantly maneuvering around national, religious, and ethnic categories. This configuration’s underpinning assumptions, narratives, and texts have powerful platforms in Iranian nationalist imagination. I propose that this arrangement attempts to carve out a space for Zoroastrians’ distinct identity by connecting the history of the Muslim Arab invasion of Persia to the Shi‘i hegemonic norms of Iranian culture today. It further invokes Zoroaster’s indigeneity and teachings as the foundation of authentic Iranianness to establish Zoroastrians’ survival as a cultural system.

**Keywords:** Iranian culture; Iranian Zoroastrians; religious nationalism; rituals; Zoroaster

Zoroastrian traditions constituted the primary mode of Iranian religiosity before the seventh-century advancement of Islam in Persia.<sup>1</sup> However, over a millennium of marginalization, forceful conversion, and emigration have reduced the Zoroastrian community in size and power, constituting its perennial concern. Today, their number is about 14,000 to 25,271, mainly concentrated in Tehran and villages around the cities of Yazd and Kerman.<sup>2</sup> Due to the increased migration to Tehran observed among all minorities since the early twentieth century, the capital has become home to the largest Zoroastrian population, consisting primarily of the Yazdi and the Kermani descendants.<sup>3</sup> During eighteen months of fieldwork in 2007 and 2008, I frequented Tehran’s only functioning fire temple

<sup>1</sup> A version of the ethnographic materials in this article is presented in Fozi’s *Reclaiming the Faravahar*.

<sup>2</sup> This is based on a 2012 estimate that remains valid; the official number is 23,000. See Rivetna, “Zarathushti World.” Another estimate is as high as 30,000 (Niknam, *Āiyn-e Ekhtiyār*). Some report an increase of the Iranian Zoroastrian population from 35,000 before the revolution to 50,000 in 2000. See Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities*, 50; the government census shows a decline from 32,589 in 1986 to 27,920 in 1996. See also Price, *Iran’s Diverse Peoples*, 317; *FEZANA Journal* (2004:17/4 in Rivetna 2012) estimated the number in 2004 to be between 24,000 and 90,000 due to underreporting. See also Bekhradnia, “Decline,” 118. My interlocutors told me that the reasons for concentrations of Zoroastrians include the geographical isolation and tolerance for minorities in Kerman and a strong sense of religious commitment in Yazd. This also is discussed by Fischer in “Zoroastrian Iran.”

<sup>3</sup> The number of Zoroastrian merchants in Tehran increased from 50 in 1881 to 500 by 1912. See Kestenberg Amighi, *Zoroastrians of Iran*, 148.

and other Zoroastrian centers.<sup>4</sup> As a non-Zoroastrian Iranian with a Baha'i background and a US citizen educated in the United States, I was interested in the life of persecuted religious minorities. I secured the permission of the Zoroastrian Association or *Anjoman*, the administrative body of the community, to access the public events.<sup>5</sup> In the broader anthropological tradition of Iranian studies and Zoroastrian-focused ethnographies, I documented the community's oral histories and living practices by attending the seasonal thanksgiving of Gahāmbār, initiation ceremonies, and monthly and Nauruz (Iranian New Year) celebrations.<sup>6</sup> In these events, a mobed or learned member usually delivered a talk about the occasion's significance, and the mobeds performed the relevant rituals.

The presented ethnographic materials here that entail Zoroastrian public discourse of identity construction have a dialogical relation with the Shi'i majority. The Muslim Arab incursion into seventh-century Persian territories produced the Iranian-Islamic divide. As Marietta Stepaniants writes and other scholars agree, "although the elimination of Zoroastrianism as a religious institution did take place, as a cultural entity, it has never completely been eradicated."<sup>7</sup> Along the same line, scholars have addressed the formation of Shi'i and Islamic mystical traditions as the hybrid fusion of Sunni Islam with Zoroastrian ideas and rituals.<sup>8</sup> The "de-Zoroastrianization" process was accompanied by the emergence of the Shi'i tradition that eventually dominated and claimed the Iranian cultural and religious milieu, dismissing Zoroastrians.<sup>9</sup>

Iranian Zoroastrian contemporary discourse of cultural and historical relevance ties closely to the age of Iranian nation-building by Reza Shah Pahlavi and his son Mohammad Reza (r. 1925–1979). The Pahlavis elevated Zoroastrians to a secular pre-Islamic national resource to undermine the power of Shi'i clergy, who had gained authority since the time of the Safavids (1501–1722) and during the Qajar period (1789–1925) in shaping the education and judiciary institutions and were the main obstacle to the Pahlavis' secular nationalist project.<sup>10</sup> Just as the Zoroastrian religion provided the Pahlavis with a crucial nationalizing resource, the declaration of Twelver Shi'ism as the state's religion distinguished the Safavids from neighboring Sunni Ottomans with whom they shared Turkic and Islamic identities, rendering religion a political resource.<sup>11</sup> The Safavids' religious nationalist movement gradually produced a "credocentricity," Houchang Chehabi argues, fundamental to Iranianness; that is, "To be a true Iranian, it would seem, one has to be at least *culturally* from a Twelver Shi'i background."<sup>12</sup>

Reza Shah belittled the Shi'i establishment as a relic of the Arab invasions, recognized Zoroastrians as carriers of pre-Islamic Iranian traditions, transformed Zoroastrian religious symbols into secular ones, and positioned them as one of the principal registers of Iranian nationalism. However, the persecution and exclusion of Shi'i clergy from a national

<sup>4</sup> These included central Tehran's Narges building for the migrants from the city of Taft and its surrounding villages, and Tehrānpārs Mārkhār center and Rostam Bāq in east Tehran. There were primary schools and high schools (Firuz Bahram boys high school, established in 1923) and several other minor establishments. For a survey of Zoroastrian temples and sacred sites, see Choksy, "Religious Sites."

<sup>5</sup> For a full account, see Fozi, *Reclaiming the Faravahar*, ch. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Boyce, *Persian Stronghold and Zoroastrians*; Fischer, *Zoroastrian Iran*; Kestenberg Amighi, "Zoroastrians of Iran"; Michael Stausberg, "From Power"; Niechcial, "Sacred Homeland" and "Constructing Zoroastrian Identity".

<sup>7</sup> Stepaniants, "Encounter," 166. For instance, Choksy writes that even though initial encounters of the Arab "believers" with the "infidel" Iranians reshaped cultural predicates and categories of the Iranian world, Iranian society was nonetheless not subsumed "into an Arabian-style society" (*Conflict and Cooperation*, 41).

<sup>8</sup> Russell, "On Mysticism"; Choksy, *Conflict and Cooperation*, 41.

<sup>9</sup> Term borrowed from Khanbaghi, "De-Zoroastrianization and Islamization."

<sup>10</sup> See Choksy, "Despite Shāhs," 155; and Marashi, *Nationalizing Iran*, esp. 78. See also Marashi, *Exile*, for the impact of the Indian Zoroastrian Parsi community on Iranian nationalist intellectuals. For a detailed account, see Fozi, "Neo-Iranian Nationalism."

<sup>11</sup> See Frye, *Golden Age*, 229–30; and Abisaab, *Converting Persia* and "Ulama of Jabal." I also draw on Rhys Williams, "Religion as Political Resource."

<sup>12</sup> Chehabi, "Anatomy of Prejudice," 195, emphasis in original.

discourse did not translate into the disappearance of well-organized seminaries and mosques mobilized during the 1979 Islamic revolution.<sup>13</sup> The post-invasion structural rupture produced an epistemic gap in the Iranian historical consciousness that morphed into a space of cultural contestation and competition for emergent modern Iranian nationalist self-conceptions.<sup>14</sup> Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi writes, “The shift in the 1970s from a regime glorifying Iran’s ancient civilization to a revolutionary regime extolling Islamic heritage is only the most recent example of the creative possibilities and insoluble dilemmas engendered by the contested memories of pre-Islamic Iran.”<sup>15</sup> Afshin Marashi has framed this as a “dilemma of culture” that remains unresolved in defining the culture of Iran as a modern nation.<sup>16</sup>

After the revolution, the ban on publicly practicing and promoting any religion aside from Shi‘i Islam (including Sunni Islam) caused the Zoroastrian community, after an initial period of adjustment to the life of marginality, to invoke its recently forged connections to Iranian culture and nationalism. Having morphed into the emblem of Iranian nationalism during the Pahlavi period, Zoroastrians found a way to talk about their religion openly. Specifically, the Pahlavis’ secularization and culturalization of Zoroastrians and their religion had a depoliticizing effect.<sup>17</sup> It enabled them to use Iranian culture as a popular domestic discourse and publicly talk about their faith, which is entrenched in a history of resistance against invaders and marked by a glorious past of Iranian Zoroastrian kings.<sup>18</sup> Culture in Persian translates into *farhang*, an Avestan term that means teaching and education about what is needed to advance; it also refers to compiling a dictionary.<sup>19</sup> *Farhang-estan* and *farhang-sara* are learning institutions, and a *farhang-jou* seeks education. According to Zoroastrians, drawing from aggregates of historical resources, authentic Iranian culture is embedded in a moral and ethical universe proclaimed by Zoroaster’s surviving words in the Gathas, whereas the more disagreeable elements of Iranian modernity result from Islamic, or more specifically Arab, influences.

The decoupling of Zoroastrian traditions from politics becomes more significant in light of Iran’s long history of exercising power as a “religious practice.”<sup>20</sup> This history entails the mistreatment of Christians and other religions by Zoroastrian Sasanids (r. 224–651); the Muslim Arab conquest and conversion of Persia to Islam; the Safavids’ forceful Shi‘ification of the masses (1501–1722); the pro-Zoroastrian, anti-Islamic nationalism of the Pahlavi dynasty (1925–1979); and the Islamic revolution making the non-Shi‘a second-class citizens.<sup>21</sup> This trajectory highlights Iran’s religion-based political culture, which inextricably links to power and authority and excludes faiths other than the official religion as un-Iranian. The dilemma of cultural ownership discussed here results from the historical function of religion in producing Iranianness.

This ethnography shows that when Zoroastrians want to secure a space in the Islamic Republic, they assume the role of Shi‘i ally by employing discursive weapons like those of the Iranian Shi‘a against the Sunni Arabs. Yet, when establishing cultural authority, they

<sup>13</sup> See Milani, *Making*, ch. 7.

<sup>14</sup> Fozi, “Neo-Iranian Nationalism.”

<sup>15</sup> Tavakoli-Targhi, “Historiography,” 5.

<sup>16</sup> Marashi, *Nationalizing Iran*, 14.

<sup>17</sup> This is a version of the “religionization of politics,” which occurs when dealing with religious differences and invoking religion in politics. See Ivanescu, “Politicised Religion.”

<sup>18</sup> Here I draw on Baumann’s discussion of diversity and identity in *Contesting Culture*.

<sup>19</sup> See Dehkhoda, “Farhang.”

<sup>20</sup> This is informed by Nye’s discussion of culture and religion (“Culture and Religion,” 10).

<sup>21</sup> See Alan Williams, “Zoroastrians and Christians,” and Brock, “Christians in the Sasanian Empire.” Richard Payne complicates this image of Zoroastrian persecution by concluding, “As long as Christians did not seek to expand their institutions or ranks at the expense of the Good Religion, their ecclesiastical leaders could establish churches, shrines, and bishoprics and secular elites could gain office in the imperial administration and attain aristocratic status” (*State of Mixture*, 56). Factors other than forceful conversion of Persia to Islam have been suggested, including the equality, flexibility, and simplicity of Islam. See Stepaniants, “Encounter,” 64–65. This does not dismiss the role of religion in this power history.

challenge the Shi‘i-dominated Iranian culture by exaggerating the Arab influence and articulating a rift between the Shi‘a and what they frame as Iranian culture. This delineated genealogy of Iranian culture through shifting messages of resemblance to and difference from the official religion positions Zoroastrians as both religious and cultural fathers of the present Shi‘ism and its rival. By addressing Zoroastrian, Iranian, Shi‘i, Sunni, and Arab tropes, the contemporary discourse of Zoroastrian identity constantly and meticulously maneuvers around religious, national, and ethnic categories to draw boundaries, sustain exclusivity, and create the possibility of articulating Zoroastrian religion within a Shi‘i mode of state. This careful navigation, sometimes by fusing and sometimes by separating these sociocultural categories, I argue, responds to two main historical concerns of the community: distinction and survival.

It is important to note that, although no singular coherent Iranian culture is evenly diffused and shared by all Iranians, Zoroastrian discourse assumes an Iranian cultural core to validate the claim to cultural ownership and superiority. The Zoroastrian community I worked with was heterogeneous, composed of diverse ages, backgrounds, levels of education, and economic status. However, when facing the dominant Shi‘a, they adopted a uniform public discourse and collective identity, presenting a Zoroastrian-based notion of Iranian culture and a national positioning that renders them its custodians.<sup>22</sup>

### Addressing Distinction

Like other minority groups, Iranian Zoroastrians have struggled to maintain a distinct identity from the decisive majority. The ways in which they achieve distinction involves rhetoric and practice that is connected to their shared culture with the Shi‘i majority.

#### *Indigenous sources of Iranian culture*

Iran is the incubator of the Zoroastrian religion, transcending classification merely as a homeland. Instead, it embodies a spiritual disposition linked to the imagined emergence of its eponymous prophet Zoroaster, a land with sacred pilgrimage sites that even Parsis of India, who emigrated from Iran in the eighth and tenth centuries, continue to revere and visit.<sup>23</sup> Beyond these physical and spiritual indigeneity, Zoroastrians have produced a model of Iranian culture based on Zoroaster’s teachings, as formulated in his Gathas, which they hold as the authentic utterances of Zoroaster. Five in number, like the Davidic psalms, the Gathas are divided into seventeen groups. They have somewhat different dialects from the rest of the Avesta, which encompasses Zoroastrian rituals, customs, and traditions. A mobed told me, “You need to study the Gathas to learn the true Iranian culture, which is about *javānmardy*.” This reference is an expression of cultural ownership, as *javānmardy* represents a congeries of Iranian moral, ethical, and religious codes. Fariba Adelhkhah suggests that the essential characteristics of a *javānmard* include “a sense of family, of sharing, of giving, and of justice,” and qualities crowned by the courage to sacrifice one’s life for others.<sup>24</sup>

In a gathering, a mobed charted the moral universe of Iranian culture, echoing that it has been created and sustained by Zoroaster’s teachings as enunciated in his surviving words. Here I draw attention to how this model of Iranian culture invokes the Gathas to envision cultural authority. In addition, by framing the attributes of Iranian culture that counter

<sup>22</sup> I draw on Beyers’s exploration of religion-culture connections (“Religion and Culture,” 1).

<sup>23</sup> Zoroaster is now believed by scholars to have lived and preached not in Iran but somewhere in central Asia. The “Kingdom of Bactria” was the scene of Zoroaster’s ministry. He was born in “Atropatene, to the west of Media,” but “met with a congenial soil for the seeds of his teaching in eastern Iran” (Jackson, “On The Date,” 21); and “its blossoms later bore fruit in the west” (Jackson, “Where was Zoroaster,” 231). Moulton and Bartholomae agreed that Zoroaster emigrated into East Bactria, but they specified Lake Fāmun, where he was welcomed by King Vishtaspa; it became the place of his religious activities (Moulton, “Early Zoroastrianism,” 84). On Parsis, see Darmesteter, “Parsi-ism”; and Luhrmann, *Good Parsi*.

<sup>24</sup> Adelhkhah, *Being Modern*, 37.

the dominating Shi'a, the mobed explored a rift between the two. The employed malleable culture concept is crucial in achieving these goals—it allows for and accommodates an elastic relationship between the “indigenous” Zoroastrians, Iranian Shi'a, and Arab Sunni.

The first qualities of Iranian culture that the mobed shared were *jubilant and the capacity to make others joyful*. Citing the Gathas, “Happy is one that makes others happy” (4:31) he added. “Zoroaster rendered the jubilant status of worship similar to reciting the *manthrās*—the Avestan holy words.” Another mobed counted these celebrations to amount to three months a year, and called the cheerfulness of Iranian culture a Zoroastrian gift. The mobeds' juxtaposition of this Gathic emphasis on merriment and its celebratory manifestations with the mourning enjoined by the Shi'i calendar was particularly effective in delineating two diametrically opposed cultural expressions, especially in response to adversaries. This highlighted opposition was situational, corresponding to the nature of intended boundaries. For instance, a high mobed once proudly said, “In addition to these [scheduled calendrical] festivities, we Iranians look for excuses to celebrate; we celebrate even when we paint our houses.” So, he conflated Iranians with Zoroastrians to articulate Zoroastrian continuity within Iranian culture, subtly identifying the Shi'i mourning penchant as un-Iranian. He subsequently focused on a practice observed only by Zoroastrians: “As opposed to Shi'a, we do not mourn the death, and [we] wear white instead of [the] black [of Shi'a].” The community had to face these conflicts in practice as well. For instance, on many occasions, they were unable to book a place for their celebrations that coincided with Shi'i commemorations, making the majority rule more palpable.

The second attribute was *a thirst for knowledge*, which was identified by the mobed as the origin of Iranian pedanticism. He added that this idea was later formulated by the Persian epic poet Ferdowsi in a couplet found in all Iranian textbooks: “Competent is one with knowledge; an elderly heart becomes youthful with knowledge.”<sup>25</sup> The mobed distinguished this emphasis on knowledge from that of Western cultures, assuming Iranian superiority: “Scientific progress alone is not sufficient; spirituality and social and emotional ties are crucial, which, in contrast to the West, Iranian culture embraces.” The third attribute of Iranian culture was *righteousness in thoughts, words, and deeds*; the mobed stated, “They are directly linked to the Zoroastrian triadic adage of good thoughts, words, and deeds.” This maxim, constituting the foundation of Zoroastrian ethics, affords the community a solid ground for constructing spiritual preeminence vis-à-vis Iranian culture. The fourth component was *the right to choose*, and the mobed said, “It is rooted in, and evident from, Zoroastrian marriage.” Referring to what he considered “a Shi'i practice” and overlooking the influence of tribal customs, he said, “In some cultures, the bride's consent becomes known by her uttering the phrase ‘With the elders' permission.’ However, following the Gathas in which Zoroaster provides marriage instruction to his daughter, in our culture, girls choose according to their own wisdom (*kherad*).” He added, “[This right to choose] also is visible in the right to choose our religion. The Gatha teaches that although we listen to others, we have to decide for ourselves.” The mobed's collocation of the Islamic prohibition of conversion with the Zoroastrian freedom to choose further underlined what he considered the “true Iranian versus un-Iranian Shi'i elements.”

The fifth feature was the importance of *renewal*, to which the mobed added a tradition of *demystification* (*ostooreh-* and *khorafeh-zodāii*): “Zoroaster opposed superstitions and the fortune-telling commonly practiced during his time, and replaced bad imaginings by good thoughts.” He branded the equivalent Gathic *fereshgar* as the ancestor of the rejuvenation that animates the most celebrated rituals among Iranians, associated with Nauruz or the Iranian New Year. He then named the sixth attribute as *equality of men and women and the high status of women in old Iran*: “Pregnant women of old Iran were provided with leaves of absence and more rations; they became leaders and even kings.” He reasoned, “This is because in the Gathas good deeds count, not gender.” He acknowledged the existence of a similar verse

<sup>25</sup> All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

in the Qur'an; however, he presented it as an indication of Zoroaster's influence, and therefore superiority, and further addressed the inheritance laws in Shi'i Islam favoring men.

This situational discourse sometimes collapsed the Iranian-Zoroastrian dichotomy, diligently rendering invisible the Shi'i influence, allowing Zoroastrians to become one with all Iranians, ethnic and religious, under the umbrella of Iranianness. This canopy also housed the Shi'i tradition, but as "Iranicized" Islam, different from "the religion of the Arabs." Therefore, after fourteen hundred years, Arab ethnicity has remained central to Zoroastrian identity negotiation that summons Iranian nationalist sentiment in the Iranian Shi'i majority context. At these levels of inclusion and exclusion, a diffusible and malleable notion of culture is adopted to show that Zoroastrian religion is a reality that survives beyond its believers, as discussed later. However, Zoroastrians simultaneously and carefully maintain distinction by racializing their identity. As Mary Boyce writes, Zoroaster's teachings have become a part of Zoroastrians' own "racial heritage."<sup>26</sup> They do not permit converts, enforce endogamy, and only recognize Zoroastrian paternal offspring, exposing internal contradiction in the exercise of freedom of choice.<sup>27</sup> The employed culture concept here is self-contained and bounded, fusing the two constituents of authentic Iranian culture as they understand them: the "authentic" Iranian cultural stock in the Gathas and Zoroastrian practitioners.

The late professor Parviz Rajabi (1940–2001), an Iranian Muslim scholar of the history of Iranian culture, stated, "With his simple and small manifesto, the Gathas, which despite its minimalism similar to Hafez's poetry [fourteenth century] is filled with lofty philosophical thoughts, Zoroaster has painted the main face of Iranian culture at least for a thousand years."<sup>28</sup> Scholars consider the Gathas lofty hymns and generally very difficult to interpret.<sup>29</sup> The community's view of the Gathas is shaped by similar internal and external statements that address their precedence, depth, and influence over Iranian culture. Although scholars try to expound on intricate Gathic notions of dualism, theodicy, and eschatology, versions of the following statements were frequent among the community members as they shaped their claims to superiority: "Every verse of the Gathas is so profound that it takes a book to interpret it properly," and "Zoroaster's Gathas have made permanent imprints on Iranian culture and characters, including qualities of integrity, egalitarianism, and truthfulness." This genealogy of Iranian culture supports Zoroastrians' claim that the Gathas helped Iranians protect their own culture and influence the invaders throughout Iran's tumultuous history. A mobed told me, "All Iranians and even the invading nations, the Arabs, Mongols, and Turks, came under the influence of Zoroaster's teachings and the exceptional culture that he produced." It is important to note that Zoroastrians also portray a universal image of their tradition, based on its influence on the sciences and world religions beyond Iranian borders. They draw on scholars' accounts, for instance, on the famous scholar of Zoroastrian religion Williams Jackson, who wrote, "They [the Gathas] possess a special interest for a biblical student, owing to the points of likeness or resemblance which Zoroastrianism shows to Judaism and Christianity."<sup>30</sup>

### *Gathic social realization*

The Zoroastrians of my study shored up their special status with regard to Iranian culture by arguing that the existing cultural practices in Iran, beyond their ideological foundation, result from the socialization of pre-Islamic Zoroastrian ideas. More importantly, they claimed that Zoroastrians preserved those practices after the incursion. The Islamic Republic has systematically opposed pre-Islamic celebrations such as *Chaharshanbe Suri*,

<sup>26</sup> Boyce, *Zoroastrians*, 47.

<sup>27</sup> The law against admitting new members has been challenged, mostly in the North American Zoroastrian community. See Writer, *Contemporary Zoroastrians*, 218–20.

<sup>28</sup> Rajabi, *Hezarehā-ye*, 31.

<sup>29</sup> Kotwal, "Select Ritual Aspects," 1–8; Jackson "Gāthās," 768–69.

<sup>30</sup> Jackson, "Gāthās," 770.

when Iranians jump over a bonfire and kids go trick-or-treating on the last Wednesday of the year, and the rites associated with *Shab-e Yalda* at the winter solstice, celebrating the victory of light over darkness—symbolizing Zoroastrian dualism, the struggle between good and evil.<sup>31</sup> A mobed who represented Zoroastrians in the republic's parliament criticized these prohibitions without mentioning the government explicitly. He even softened his tone by framing himself as a culprit and said, "When we deny our people their own culture and put away our ceremonies in a closet, then they turn to other cultures and adopt celebrations like Valentine's Day." Similar criticisms of the ban on pre-Islamic celebrations ventured a gap between the ruling Shi'i order and Iranian culture while solidifying Zoroastrians' own oppositional identity as its preservers. The vocal members of the Zoroastrian community were aware of the Shi'i authorities' disregard for their voices; nevertheless, they were keen to educate their community and outsiders within their reach. If raised merely within the ritual space, the state tolerated these statements. However, when the mobed presented similar complaints to the parliament, he was disqualified from running as Zoroastrian representative.<sup>32</sup> The community, in turn, knew that its elites rarely, if at all, could impact matters outside their community; however, they eagerly listened and engaged with similar concerns about what they considered authentic Iranian culture.

I see such discourse as an extension of Zoroastrian performativity of the past; they are speech acts that aim to sever Shi'i tradition from Iranian culture and groom their own connection. Once, a mobed asserted, "Our Zoroastrian community has always protected and preserved the old Iranian customs." He admitted, "Unfortunately, many of our celebrations are forgotten due to the repeated attacks and the ban imposed by invaders." He added, "Nonetheless, we [Zoroastrians] have preserved many." Similarly, scholars have argued that the adamant observations of exact rituals by the mobeds with their agnatic or paternal priestly ties helped to preserve the Gathas for over two thousand years before they were written down in the fifth and sixth century CE. For instance, Firoze Kotwal asserts, "Use and application [of the Gathas], right up to the present times, have been through the continuity of the acts of worship doggedly preserved, within a ritual framework."<sup>33</sup> The articulation of Zoroastrians' position as the preservers of Iranian heritage sustains, albeit subtly, the continuity of struggle against the invaders, today represented by the ruling Shi'i government. In addition to retaining the old celebrations, my interlocutors expressed their hope of revitalizing them among all Iranians. For instance, at a religious event crowded with non-Zoroastrians, a mobed complained about treatment of the Zoroastrian community as a "museum" of Iranian culture. He added, "Enduring enormous pain, we [Zoroastrians] have succeeded in preserving these traditions and customs, and now the statesmen and nation as a whole must safeguard them." He encouraged the non-Zoroastrian audience to revive them in their communities, cities, and villages.

Community members also built on their position as the original Iranians and assumed the role of standard bearer. They commented on and criticized the Shi'i Islamic aspects of Iranian culture. These comments were informed by and followed Zoroaster's teachings, as not only a genuine but also a higher Iranian religious and cultural source. Drawing on Judith Butler's discussion of performance, these performative acts accumulate "the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior and authoritative set of practices."<sup>34</sup> On many occasions, speakers identified some aspects of Iranian cultural beliefs as un-Iranian, exploring a rift between Iranianness and Shi'i tradition. For instance, a mobed criticized subscribers to the fatalist, predestination ideology. He stated, "We humans are born and will die differently and have no say in that." He added, "Nonetheless, we can choose how to live in between." With sarcasm, he said, "Some consider even this in between to be the matter of

<sup>31</sup> "Iran Celebrates."

<sup>32</sup> See also Choksy, "Despite Shāhs," 183.

<sup>33</sup> Kotwal, "Select Ritual Aspects," 2.

<sup>34</sup> Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 51.

fate.” Then he cited some Persian proverbs, such as, “One’s fate is written on their forehead,” and “If one’s fate is painted dark, it can not be changed with *Zamzam* or *Kowaar* [two heavenly pools in Islamic traditions].” He continued, “This is wrong. Our fate is not preordained, kismet is not the whole story: we can choose.” The most curious part of his critique was the criticism of a verse by Hafez, one of the most celebrated Iranian poets. Although the mobed recited Hafez copiously, always citing his name, he did not refer to his name this time. He recounted, “The goblet of wine and painful heart is given to different people arbitrarily; this [randomness] in the cycle of kismet is the circumstance [to accept].” The mobed continued, “If we 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.”<sup>35</sup> According to Zoroastrian ethical duality, humans have the right to choose but subsequently will be held accountable for their choices.

The mobed also engaged with widespread Iranian knowledge, sometimes by criticizing and sometimes by citing it regardless of its connection with Shi‘i tradition, to discern authentic Iranian culture. Nevertheless, Zoroaster’s teachings were always the criterion for such discernments. Once, he criticized two widely used Persian sayings: “Recalcitrant learns as a walnut on a slope,” and “Born of a wolf, [regardless of how much training] eventually becomes a wolf.” He said, “This is not true; education is of fundamental importance in human life.” Again, without referring to the name, he recited a verse by Hafez: “Only a pure essence is worthy of blessings, not that every stone and clay become pearl and coral.” He contended, “Everyone has the potential.” Arguing that human nature is docile and can be transformed, this time he recited a famous proverb that emphasized 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 with flowers for a while; affected by them, I am transformed.’” Only when the mobed found Hafez aligned with his position did he refer to him by name. “As Hafez says,” the mobed recited, “You are not less than dust, don’t abase yourself and do love; so, you ascend toward the sun while dancing. Reach the robe of the Friend and split from the Enemy, become the man of God, and stay away from Devils.”

Similarly, although acknowledging the status of Sa‘di (1184–1283) as a prominent Iranian poet, known for his social ideas, a speaker criticized him, informed by the principle of righteousness that constitutes a bedrock of Zoroastrian teachings. She asserted, “In a famous poem, albeit in passing, Sa‘di justified telling lies if the truth would cause turmoil.” She added, “No religion teaches anything but truthfulness.” Likewise, a mobed criticized another poet, saying, “Orfi says, ‘O, Orfi! Tolerate good and bad so that after your death, Muslims will wash you with the *Zamzam* or holy water, and Hindus cremate you.’” The mobed explained, “The poet suggests that we pray to God to be accepted by Muslims, and also worship idols to be praised by Hindus.” He continued, “This is not the Iranian culture, since it suggests being irresolute, like people of the wind [who easily change direction], but we always have to seek truthfulness.” Here, he implicitly criticized the Shi‘i practice of dissimulation (*taghiya*) of faith when facing danger.

These performativities constitute an expanded version of “ritual criticism,” to use the words of Ronald Grimes, “the interpretation of a rite or ritual system with a view to implicating its practice.”<sup>36</sup> Zoroastrian cultural critics employed religious criteria to discern authentic Iranian culture by articulating, framing, and presenting unsuitable characteristics such as Shi‘i beliefs in fatalism and the randomness of fate. Even though these poets were Sunni, they constitute Iranian Shi‘i cultural heritage. Beyond the Zoroastrian spiritual source of authority, the proverbial sayings and knowledge traditions linked the critics to the origin they represented. Therefore, maintaining distinction, Zoroastrian discourse regards the Gathas

<sup>35</sup> Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*, 21.

<sup>36</sup> Grimes, “Ritual Criticism,” 16.



to have been preserved by and fully manifested only in the Zoroastrian community—thus the communal emphasis on ceremonies, depicting them as an essence of pre-Islamic Iran. Post-conquest, it was “the 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.”<sup>37</sup> Zoroastrian survival imageries in this formulation are bound to a physical community that claims to be the exclusive proprietor and standard-bearer of authentic Iranian culture. This formulation is enconced in a notion of culture that is bounded, ahistorical, self-contained, static, and racialized.

Here I want to briefly consider the work of Paulina Niechcial, a contemporary anthropologist of Iran who conducted fieldwork during the same period and continues to publish on Iranian Zoroastrian collective identity. Her analyses overlook the central role that Iranian Shi‘i and Sunni Arab tropes play in constructing Zoroastrian identity. She mentions Article 13 of the Islamic Republic’s constitution, which establishes Shi‘i Islam as the official religion of Iran; she argues that Zoroastrians are a recognized religious minority in Iran.<sup>38</sup> She refers to the Islamic Republic’s political system as “confessionalism,”<sup>39</sup> and the reader is left with an impression of Zoroastrians in the republic as a free-to-practice recognized religious minority with access to proportionally distributed political power. Niechcial also writes that Iranian Zoroastrians try to establish they are “rightful members of the Iranian nation.”<sup>40</sup> However, as this detailed ethnography shows, Zoroastrians’ identity discourse goes beyond the claim of rightful membership in the Iranian nation to assert proprietorship and superiority. It claims that Iranian culture is the product of Zoroaster’s teachings, of which Zoroastrians are the depositories. The detailed and nuanced discursive analyses presented here depict Zoroastrians’ careful navigation around notions of religion and ethnicity to exploit the Shi‘i-Sunni divide: they frame Shi‘i Iranians as influenced by Zoroastrians, in this way separating them from Sunni Arabs. They do not stop there, but define their own authenticity vis-à-vis Iranian culture and accuse Shi‘i Iranians of distorting this culture by allowing its foreign Arab elements.

### Addressing Survival

In addition to maintaining distinctiveness, one of the continuing concerns of the Iranian Zoroastrians is their declining number. Here I discuss their discourse of survival beyond the original body of believers. This formulation adopts an abstracted and universalized notion of survival, demonstrating that Zoroastrian religion continues in Iranian culture and that Zoroastrians are the actual owners of this culture.

#### *Sofreh* rites

To further clarify Zoroastrians’ claim of superiority with regard to Iranian culture, here I introduce a rite and discuss how Zoroastrian contemporary exegeses of that rite claim influence over Iranian Islamic mysticism, one of the loftiest Iranian theological enterprises. The community framed both this rite and Iranian mystical traditions as fundamentally Zoroastrian even if, like many other ceremonies, they are commonly thought of in Islamic terms. They staged public cultural exhibitions primarily to educate non-Zoroastrian visitors. They also designed competitions in which the performances of community members reflected their own historical and cultural ties and Zoroastrians’ imaginaries.

Zoroastrian *sofreh*s are event-specific rites consisting of a tablecloth, usually a white piece covered by a smaller green one, arranged with edible and inedible items. These items are used to address subtle differences between different *sofreh* rites as reflections of certain religious annunciations. *Sofreh*s are observed at marriage, death, the initiation to the age

<sup>37</sup> Choksy, “Zoroastrians in Muslim Iran,” 29–30.

<sup>38</sup> Niechcial “Constructing Zoroastrian Identity,” 196; Niechcial “Key Content,” 154–155.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid 191

<sup>40</sup> Niechcial, “Constructing Zoroastrian Identity,” 202.

of spiritual maturity, the seasonal thanksgiving of *Gahāmbār*, and the celebration of Nauruz. Only the latter, called *sofreh* of *haft-sin*, and that of the marriage, *sofreh* of *aqd*, are still adamantly observed by all Iranians. Beyond this continuity, the idea of *sofreh* has infiltrated the core of the Shi'ī rituals, donning Islamic specificities. This diffusion was narrated as part of Zoroastrians' more significant claim to historical influence over the Shi'a. For instance, the mobed referred to this Zoroastrian influence when he mentioned the *sofreh* of *Hazrat-e Abul-Fazl*, associated with a Shi'ī imam.

On Monday, March 5, 2007, I visited a Zoroastrian *sofreh* exhibition of the Zoroastrian Students Society, which functions under the direction of the Zoroastrian Association. The collection was set up in north Tehran, in Qeytaryeh Park, once home to Amir Kabir (1807–1852), the celebrated prime minister of the Qajars, where two *neqār-khāneh*, or art galleries, were designated for the displays. These buildings are part of a permanent cultural exhibition site and offered an opportunity to present the Zoroastrian religion disguised as Iranian culture. Given the elaborate informative visual outlays, this exhibition could be understood as a semiotic regimented discipline with targeted groups, including the educated middle-class audience of the museum, students who visited as part of their educational curricula, and visitors who arrived from different parts of the country. Up to twelve Zoroastrian university students, one or two for each *sofreh*, provided information, and several of them sold books, New Year cards, and compact discs. Similar exhibitions that occur several times a year provide Zoroastrians with a chance to expand their understanding of traditions, as they need to be prepared to answer questions and introduce additional sources. However, the most crucial function of these exhibitions is to afford opportunities to construct, stage, and perform a particular cultural-historical pedigree.

Non-Zoroastrian visitors were enthusiastic; they asked questions, surprised that so many forgotten *sofreh*s were associated with Zoroastrians. Many did not know the significance of the items used in *sofreh*s and were fascinated by the explanations. Zoroastrian rituals in this cultural setting become social mediators. I heard many visitors express a nostalgia, learning that Iranians have lost “these beautiful, colorful, healthy rites, succumbing to the dark and mourning culture of the invaders.” These were not Zoroastrians; they were sympathetic visitors who expressed their liking for the pre-Islamic religion of Iran. In addition to this exhibition, an annual competition for the best Nauruz *sofreh* design was held before the New Year celebration. Those who visited emphasized their connection with this essential Iranian *sofreh*. At this event, the community members had the chance to present their creative designs. The visitors to this event were primarily Zoroastrians, who voted to choose the best design; non-Zoroastrians could vote too. The community took further steps to institutionalize the competition in the second year: on the second day of Nauruz, when families gathered in the fire temple, the prize-winning *sofreh* was presented to the community. So, this competition provided financial and social incentives to engage in the tradition, targeting community members directly and non-Zoroastrian visitors indirectly.

#### *Sofreh* rites and Iranian mysticism<sup>41</sup>

Each item of the *sofreh* is linked to Zoroastrian theogony or divine genealogy. Consequently, beyond specificities, all *sofreh* share a general form and meaning. The comprised objects are understood as the symbolic representation of *Ahura-Mazda*, the one true God declared by Zoroaster, and his six archangels, or *amshāspands* (lit., holy-immortals). The chief among them is *Sepante-Mainu*, “God’s creative organ [or] the ‘Holy Spirit.’”<sup>42</sup> The *sofreh* rite’s connection to the *amshāspands* provided Zoroastrians an opportunity to depict their significance and originary status in Iranian culture by claiming influence over and survival in Iranian Islamic mysticism, known today in Islamic terms only. Once, a mobed explained that “*sofreh*

<sup>41</sup> For survival of Zoroastrian ideas in Sufism, see Stepaniants, “Encounter,” 166–68; and Henry Corbin, *Spiritual Body*.

<sup>42</sup> Gershevitch, “Zoroaster’s Own Contribution,” 12.

and its seven elements constitute an emblem of Zoroastrian *erfān* [a term denoting Islamic mysticism] or mystical path toward God." In his celebrated *The Conference of the Birds*, one of the foremost Iranian Muslim theoreticians of Sufism, Sheikh Farid al-Din Attar (1145–1221), characterizes the Seven Valleys of Love. Attar recounts them as Search (*Talab*), Love (*Eshq*), Knowledge (*Ma'refat*), Contentment (*Esteqna*), Unity of God (*Towhid*), Astonishment (*Heyrat*), and Poverty and Nothingness (*Faqr* and *Fanā*). For instance, the seventh stage, *Faqr* or Poverty, means death from the worldly to achieve *Fanā* or Nothingness, meaning annihilation in God, attained when the wayfarer has completed the journey. This is identical to the Zoroastrians' Immortality, characterized by the sixth and seventh *amshāspands*. Another one is the third valley, Knowledge, an equivalent of the fifth *amshāspand*, *Hoorvatat*.

The following can be understood as an example of creative interpretations, crafting the historical origin to bear on Zoroastrian contemporary minoritized status and, more importantly, their claim of relevance to and influence on Iranian culture. I have synthesized three ethnographic accounts to discuss the *amshāspands* and their symbolic representations. *Vahuman* or *Bahmān*, the first *amshāspand*, symbolized by whiteness, stands for good thought and God. It also is the second day of the Zoroastrian months and the year's eleventh month. According to the Gathas (28:3), whenever Zoroaster expressed gratitude to God, he did it with pure thought. This attitude is identical to the weight that Iranian Islamic mysticism devotes to the value of purity necessary for truth to descend upon the wayfarer's heart.<sup>43</sup> The whiteness of egg or milk symbolizes this purity on the *sofreh*.<sup>44</sup>

*Asheh-vahishteh* or *Ardibehesht*, the second *amshāspand*, is symbolized by fire and refers to the best *ashuii*, or attributes. It also is the third day of the Zoroastrian month and the second month of the year. A mobed said that *Ardibehesht* has eighty meanings, such as humility, truthfulness, and righteousness. Generally, *Ardibehesht* refers to human maturity and completeness; it is signified by fire since flames reach high, and candles are used for the *sofreh*. A 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 symbolized by metals, denoting kingly power. It also is the fourth day of the Zoroastrian month and the year's sixth month. *Shahrivar* teaches going beyond the human frame and practicing control over carnal desires. This recalls the fourth valley of Persian mysticism, Contentment, achieved through detachment from worldly desires. Zoroastrians traditionally have used items made of an amalgam of copper and zinc or brass to signify this.

*Spanta-armaiti* or *Esfand*, the fourth *amshāspand*, is symbolized by woman or earth and refers to love and humility. It also is the fifth day of the Zoroastrian month and the last month of the year. It means kindness, friendship, and commitment of a mother to her children and the earth to everyone. That is why *lorik*, a mixture of nuts and dried fruits that signifies the love of earth for humans, is an imperative element of all *sofrehs*, and also distributed at other ceremonies.<sup>45</sup> Some specify that the number of nuts must be seven to indicate the importance of seven in Zoroastrian traditions, used as an affirmation of influence over Persian mysticism's seven stages of perfection. Zoroastrians celebrate Mother's Day, known as *sepandār-mazgān*, on this day of the last month of the year. *Hoorvatāt* or *Khorādād*, the fifth *amshāspand*, is symbolized by water and means purity. It also is the sixth day of the Zoroastrian month and the year's third month. Water conveys absorbing knowledge and wisdom. As above, the third valley of mysticism is devoted to learning, including spirituality.

<sup>43</sup> Vahuman is "the good-minded saint." Mills, "Vahumanah," 87.

<sup>44</sup> As the protective angel of animals, Vahuman occupies a special place among other angels, and in every month the days that coincide with this *amshāspand* are called *nabor*. On these days Zoroastrians are encouraged to abstain from meat consumption.

<sup>45</sup> See also Bekhradnia, "Decline," 45n11.

*Ameretāt* or *Amordād*, the sixth *amshāspand*, is symbolized by a green branch signifying everlastingness.<sup>46</sup> It also is the seventh day of the Zoroastrian month and the year's fifth month. *Amordād* is the stage of perfection, the purified soul. According to a high mobed, after reaching *Amordād*, we become eternal. A speaker said that if we achieve this stage, we enter the realm of completeness. This status is called "God-like human," like the state that the wayfarer reaches in the sixth valley, devoted to the Unity of God. It is mainly symbolized by the cedar branch, which retains its greenness throughout the year. The mobed said this is why every Zoroastrian village has at least one cedar. In conjunction with other statements on universal influence, he said that cedar at Christmas is the adoption of this Zoroastrian custom: "Cedar is significant for several reasons. It is straight, so it teaches us to be truthful. It is taller than other trees, but its head is always humbly downward. It also looks like fire."

The nature and meaning of the seventh *amshāspand* are contested. Kurosh Niknam calls the seventh *amshāspand* *sarausha* or *sorush*, "the internal voice, to signify the seventh step towards perfection."<sup>47</sup> Choksy says "'srosh' or 'sarosh' is the angel of prayer and is not and has never been an Amesha Spenta [different spelling of *amshāspand* one of the archangels]."<sup>48</sup> The official statement of the Mobed Council has declared that the last *amshāspand* is *Sepanteman* (the Zoroaster family name), which means that after reaching immortality, the sixth stage, one becomes closer to the complete human or *Ahura-Mazda's* vice-regent on earth.<sup>49</sup> A mobed summed up the link between the *sofreh*s and mysticism by explaining, "These seven *amshāspands* declare that 'we have the same thoughts, deeds, and words and that is why we never fall ill, become old, nor die.' If your actions, words, and thoughts become the same, you will become immortal too." Dinshah Irani adopted the Arabic term *vesal* used in Sufi literature for the last stage to denote attainment and fulfillment of love, describing unification with God, like the final mystical stage.<sup>50</sup>

The seven earthly elements that symbolize the six *amshāspands* and *Ahura-Mazda* create the "circle of perfection." Niknam writes that this was the first time the *sofreh* was discussed as it related to the seven paths of Zoroastrian *tasavvof* (another term used for Islamic mysticism).<sup>51</sup> Niknam's reading of *sofreh* in relation to Persian Mytticism is contemporary, although the first person who adopted this contemporary rendition was Dinshah Irani some twenty years earlier, under the subtitle of "seven spiritual stages."<sup>52</sup> These parallels were not made until modern times. I consider these historical revisions examples of what Michael Lambek describes as historical consciousness entailing "the continuous, creative bringing into being and crafting of the past in the present and of the present in respect to the past (*poiesis*), and judicious interventions in the present that are thickly informed by dispositions cultivated in, and with respect to, the past . . . (*phronesis*)."<sup>53</sup> In this case, my interlocutors adopted an open culture concept to highlight diffusion and influence over Iranian culture, implying that they would survive in other forms regardless of their shrinking community.

<sup>46</sup> Contemporary pronunciation is *mordad*, which actually means mortal. This corrective point was made on many occasions. I have noticed recently that *amordad* is being used as well.

<sup>47</sup> Niknam, *Az Noruz*, 83.

<sup>48</sup> Personal correspondence with the author.

<sup>49</sup> This explanation was provided on the flier distributed by the Mobed Association.

<sup>50</sup> Dinshah Irani was a Zoroastrian whose family left Iran for India during the eighteenth-century wave of Zoroastrian migration. He studied law and became a major advocate of Zoroastrian rights. He founded the Iranian Zoroastrian Anjoman in 1918 to improve the condition of his coreligionists and was an academic who translated the Gathas and wrote on Zoroastrian religion. For a comprehensive account see Afshin Marashi, "Irani, Dinshah." See also Irani, *Ancient*.

<sup>51</sup> Niknam, *Az Noruz*, 83.

<sup>52</sup> Irani, *Falsafa-ye*, 107

<sup>53</sup> Lambek, *Weight of the Past*, 17.

### Claiming Iranian mystics

In addition to claiming to be the forefather of Persian mysticism, the community created another opening through their interpretation of the *sofreh* to claim Persian mystics as direct heirs of Zoroaster's teachings. A mobed expounded about three general modes of living: that of the *zāhed* or a pious person who suffers in this world to attain heaven in the next; that of the *ābed* or a devout who enslaves himself in this world in the hope of heaven; and finally that of the *āref* or mystic who tries to find his vocation in this world and answers the main questions that Rumi posed: "Whence am I from, who am I, and where am I going to?"<sup>54</sup> The first two categories of *zāhed* and *ābed* refer to religious orthodoxy criticized by eminent Persian mystics, including Attar (1145–1221), Rumi (1207–1273), and Hafez (1325–1390), the most celebrated Iranian cultural heroes, mystics, and poets. Most Iranians own their books of poetry. The mobed added, "From these three modes, Iranians mostly follow Rumi, who says, 'I am the Divine Bird of the Heavenly Garden and not from the World of Dust, they have made a cage of my body for just a few days, rejoice the moment that I fly in the Divine Realm of God.'" Then, dismissing the Zoroastrian-Iranian divide, he said this vision was the contribution of Iranians to the world: "Iranians have given the world *erfān* or *shenākht* [knowledge] that encourages us to learn about our vocation in this life and try to advance, not by rejecting the world or enslavement to God but by working hard to bring order to our lives. Of course, worship is an integral part of this process, but it is not the whole story [a criticism of Islamic orthodoxy]." This notion of shared and mutable culture enabled him to articulate Zoroastrian influence, and therefore cultural survival.

At its core, my interlocutors believed that the Zoroastrian ideology of *faravahar*, an effulgence of *Ahura Mazda* implanted in every soul, was either consciously or unconsciously adopted by and became part of Iranian Islamic mysticism. For instance, a speaker stated that Rumi's opening of the *Masnavi* book of poetry reflects the influence of the Zoroastrian notion of *faravahar*: "This is evident when he invites us to 'Listen to this reed as it complains: it is telling a tale of separations. Saying: ever since I was parted from the reed-bed, man and woman have moaned (in unison) with my lament. Everyone who is left far from his source wishes back the time when he was united with it.'"<sup>55</sup> She explained: "We are the reed and the reed-bed is the *faravahar* within us, longing to return to its origin." She added that "the great Hafez" also says: "My body becomes the veil of my soul; rejoice when I rend this veil asunder. Such a cage is not worthy of a bird-like me; I migrate to heaven whereto I belong. How could I circumambulate the Sacred World as I am limited to the shackles of this body." "This last part," she clarified, "shows that our *faravahar* is caged in our body, wishing to return to its origin."

To recap, when the survival threat underlies the discursive inquiry and the community must face its dwindling numbers, they articulate and imagine survival and continuity within Iranian culture and Shi'i practices divorced from the original body of Zoroastrian believers. They justify not admitting converts and disbaring those who marry outsiders. They employ an open, historical, mutable, and universal notion of culture in this case. Such an articulation of Iranian culture implies that Zoroaster's teachings, formulated in the Gathas, have provided the ontological underpinnings of the Iranian moral and ethical universe. It also claims that Zoroastrians' social realization of those teachings produced Iranian cultural practices. This abstracted and universalized notion of survival transcends the believers, trivializes the extinction threat, and defends 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 continues, are diffused throughout Iran and the world, establishing historical and cultural relevance and ownership of Iranian culture.

<sup>54</sup> This also is the opening question of the *Chidag Handarz: Poryotkeshan*, a ninth- to eleventh-century CE Pahlavi Zoroastrian catechism. See Zaehner, *Teachings of the Magi*.

<sup>55</sup> Nicholson, Reynold A. "Masnavi Manavi." (1983). Online edition: <http://www.masnavi.net/3/50/eng/1/1/>.

This discourse brings together the “two overlapping but distinct modes for characterizing an entity as authentic,” as discussed by Charles Lindholm, namely “genealogical or historical (origin) and identity or correspondence (expressive content).”<sup>56</sup> In merging the two, Zoroastrians take advantage of the full array of cultural potentials to assume authenticity, namely the phenomenal (believers and practices) and the ideational (Zoroaster and his teachings). As instances of the “poiesis” and “phronesis” of historical consciousness, creative ways of understanding, revising, and reformulating the present and the past as they interact with each other mark Zoroastrians as the origin of Iranian mystical traditions. As Aguilar has discussed, “Ritual and performance constitute the moments when culture and religion are mediated. It is through [a] ritual that religious practices are adapted, and it is in a ritual performance where culture is contested and challenged.”<sup>57</sup>

## Conclusion

As this ethnography shows, the identity discourse of Iranian Zoroastrians, which circulates their ritual space and spills over to reach outsiders, is formulated in contradistinction to the ruling power. The religion-based politics that produced Shi‘i Islam as the representative of Iranianness were challenged when the Pahlavis’ nationalism elevated Zoroastrians, although the official religion remained Shi‘i Islam. The contours of the Zoroastrian cultural disposition are historically shaped, and protruding edges are attenuated by the constant chafing of its religious spaces, ideology, and practices against the dominant one. This friction has honed Zoroastrian’s sensibilities and articulations to formulate a malleable notion of Iranian culture, bolstered by the Pahlavis’ nationalist project that transformed Zoroastrians into a pillar of Iranian nationalism. A central tenor of this historicity hearkens to the glorious past of the Sasanid Zoroastrian state, the indispensable constituent of the Pahlavis’ nationalism. At its expansive end, this culture includes all Iranians, even all humanity, and can be ideational or phenomenal. However, its exclusive version fuses the Gathic ideas with the physical community of Zoroastrian practitioners. Another way of framing this construct is to consider an Iranian cultural core special to Zoroastrians that is diluted as it moves outward by adding the Arabized Shi‘i elements.

I have argued that this discursive oscillation between the inclusive and exclusive notions of cultural identity helps Zoroastrians adjust and attune to their present-day lifeworld of marginality in Iran. It entails meticulous navigation around and conflation of religion, ethnicity, and nationality to address the two Zoroastrian historical concerns of distinction and survival without inciting the ruling Shi‘a. When establishing the former, they see themselves as the origin of Iranian culture through the contemporary reading of their history and religion. Furthermore, the outline of Iranian culture as fundamentally Zoroastrian—articulated by Zoroaster, formulated after the Gathic teachings, and sustained by the believers and their roles as the current substitutes and transmitters of the past to the future—provides the basis to envision cultural ownership. The historical consciousness of the community that embeds their narration of Iranian cultural genealogy stands in for the reality of the history it claims. This static, racialized, and bounded notion of culture is established by subtly treating Shi‘i traditions as an imposed addendum to Iranianness. This cultural trope is a way for Zoroastrians to talk about their religion openly. However, addressing the question of the declining population and the threat of extinction, they adopt an open and mutable culture concept in which the Zoroastrian ideational and phenomenal have diffused throughout Iran and the world. Although its survival within Iranian culture is imagined, Zoroastrian continuity as an irreplaceable yet receding community (and perhaps, belief system) is still inexorably bound to the body of practicing believers.

<sup>56</sup> Lindholm, “Rise of Expressive Authenticity,” 362.

<sup>57</sup> Aguilar, “Religion as Culture,” 233.

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