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The Preterrain of Fieldwork in Iran

2.1 – The Preterrain

Mohammad Shahbazi notes that due to the late Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's (reign 1941–1979) emphasis on the modern sciences and technology, the social sciences were ignored, which “prepared the ground for the general notion among the public that educated people, especially social scientists, opposed the government and were subversive and untrustworthy” (2004:595). Framed in terms of a modernizing demand, at the core of the Shah's policy was intolerance of criticism of the state by social scientists. An example of official intolerance is the experience of Sekandar Amanolahi, a western-educated anthropologist based in Iran, whose work that documented the government's failure to improve the Qashqâ'i tribes' lives was censored before the Revolution (2004:621). My conversation with a Zoroastrian informant exhibits what could be characterized as the trickle-down impact of the state's negative attitude to the Iranian education system: “[i]n schools, we have to memorize subjects without comprehension and make it our goal to become physicians; we don't know why not sociologists.”

Although one might think that enemies of the Shah's regime would appreciate the social sciences, suspicion of social scientists continued into the Islamic Republic. Most recently, Ayatollah Khamenei blamed the expansion of the social sciences in universities for the 2009 protests against the alleged mass electoral fraud in the presidential elections. He argued that this expansion was fed by the imported materialist theories that perceive the human as an animal without responsibilities. “We do not have enough experts, thus have failed to indigenize this western knowledge,” he added.⁷³ Consequently, he asked for an overhaul, a complete review of the programmes, which immediately started in universities. This recent attempt shows the failure of a much earlier agenda to “Islamize” universities: For a period of two years immediately after the Revolution, universities were shut down

under the slogan of Cultural Revolution; programmes were reassessed, and “Islamized.”

2.1.1 – *My Fieldwork in Iran*

In summer 2004, after ten years away, I returned to Iran for two months. As a Baha’i who had illegally left Iran in 1994 and was now a U.S. citizen, I was able to obtain an Iranian passport only due to the changes brought about during the presidency of reformist Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005). I visited Tehran University, but despite all my endeavours I was able to meet with only one faculty member in the anthropology department and also with an enthusiastic young official in the Cultural Heritage Centre. Under the assumption, rather the illusion, of positive changes and freedom that the youth was being offered, I flew confidently to Orumieh in western Iran, planning to hitchhike for the rest of my trip to the Kurdistan region and visit several Sufi lodges (*khānqāh*) on my way. In my mind, this perambulation, which had an element of randomness in it, was the ideal way of finding the field site. Soon I learned that fieldwork should be approached as an adjustable method based on the preterrain, which James Clifford defines as “all those places you have to go through and be in relation with just to get to your village or to that place of work you will call your field” (1992:100).

When I first became familiar with ethnographic methods, I found them particularly attractive because of the parallel connections I could draw between these and the principal practice of Persian mysticism. I had become familiar with ideas such as purity of mind and heart as necessary conditions for a first-hand encounter with Reality. My personal take on fieldwork epistemological soundness and philosophical underpinning had convinced me that, like a mystic wayfarer on a spiritual path, a fieldworker had to be *immersed* in the culture of study (Malinowski 1922:1–25; Geertz 1988:73–101). More related to the process of finding the field site, I reviewed, over and over again, the following edifying verse by Sheikh Farid al-Din Attār (1145–1221) one of the most influential Iranian mystical theoreticians:⁷⁴ “You step in the path and ask naught; the path itself tells you how to traverse.” As I understood this, unyielding decision and genuine intention were necessary precondition to step in the path. From the moment I entered the University of Wisconsin-Madison graduate program in anthropology until I transferred to Boston University, I was hoping to be able to undertake such a fieldwork project. As my knowledge of, and attraction towards, Per-

sian mysticism informed my ideal ethnographic method, I also decided to focus my field site on a Sufi group.

The immediate hurdle hindering the fulfillment of my ideal method emerged when I was arrested during the first few hours of my arrival in Orumieh. I was interrogated at the Ministry of Intelligence and Security from noon until the evening; I answered truthfully all their concerns about my trip to the area, my religion, and family, why ten years earlier I had left Iran illegally and my consequent life in Pakistan and Austria as an asylum seeker. When the last of the four interrogators, the highest ranking one, questioned me, I was put in a corner, facing the wall so as not to look at him. He told me, “You are lucky that *we* arrested you, who knows what could have happened to you had you continued on going to Kurdistan.” So, after all, it was a blessing in disguise; as we couch it in Persian, “[t]he enemy becomes the source of Good, if God willeth.” After this scary event, I modified my ideal field search method, and instead of wandering round in search of a mystic group, I decided to identify a community first and go directly to it, which I attempted during the next summer.

In addition to the domestic preterrain of the social sciences, there is an international politics that shapes the possibility of fieldwork in Iran. Upon returning to Boston, I formulated my proposal and received funding from the Fulbright-Hays.⁷⁵ The release of my funds however was contingent upon permission from the U.S. Department of Treasury. After six months of correspondence, finally involving the Boston University legal team, on 31 October 2006, I was informed that the Department of Treasury had issued a permission letter for my work. The letter, nevertheless, prohibited me from taking my laptop to Iran, stating that “[t]he exportation to and importation from Iran of a laptop computer are prohibited,” but that my “other personal effects” were authorized “by general license.”⁷⁶ Furthermore, I had planned to share my findings with Tehran University and the Cultural Heritage Centre in Iran. Since the Department categorized these institutions as “agencies of Iranian government,” citing “the Iranian Transactions Regulations, 31 C.F.R. Part 560,” it did not approve this academic exchange. I was also informed that after the issue of this “authorization” by the Treasury Department, the Department of State raised “no objection” regarding the legality of conducting fieldwork in Iran.

I was lucky that Fulbright-Hays did not ask for a research permit from the host country. The Iranian government requires that researchers present their projects and apply for permits. But for a resident, more specifically the holder of an Iranian passport, this was not a major practical obstacle. For

a foreigner, however, acquiring a long-term fieldwork permit is the main problem. That is why little long-term fieldwork has taken place in Iran. Among foreigners themselves the challenge of obtaining the permit varies. For instance, born in India, raised in Sri Lanka, and now a U.S. citizen, Jamsheed Choksy offers a unique case. He told me that the Iranian government had never asked him to obtain a permit, “so long as I worked on Zardoshtis, Achemenians, Sasanians, Muslim dynasties and not on the present.” Yuko Suzuki faced many challenges but eventually obtained permission for long-term fieldwork (2004). Beyond the general difficulties foreigners face, her experience as a Japanese citizen shows that Asians receive more cooperation than westerners like Mary Hegland who was granted only a two-week permit (2004).

Regarding challenges of anthropological research in Iran, Amanolahi refers to the “lack of international exchanges that would facilitate keeping in touch with colleagues and international developments” in the field (2004:621). He blames both the Iranian government that makes it difficult for the foreign anthropologists to come to Iran as well as the American government that does not allow Iranian scholars to travel to the United States to participate in the wider academic community, a limitation that spills across its borders. For example, during the 2008 International Society for Iranian Studies biennial conference in Toronto many Iranian scholars were denied visas. Addressing these hurdles, Shahnaz Nadjmabadi and the aforementioned Shahbazi call for collaboration between foreign and Iranian anthropologists. As Nadjmabadi puts it, this is necessary in order to make a viable academic community and for Iranians to become familiar with new methods and theories and begin the huge amount of fieldwork that needs to be done (2004). This problem is also created by the Islamic Republic. In a gathering in Tehran where several students of Persian language and history from Germany, Venezuela, and Switzerland, as well as some Iranian documentary filmmakers and artists were gathered, I was fascinated by the visceral reactions of the foreign guests when late into the night the doorbell rang. One rushed to the computer to turn down the music, another one hid the alcoholic drinks, and all the girls put on their headscarves.

I eventually flew to Tehran on 10 November 2006, and to the town of Gahwāreh soon afterwards, to start my fieldwork with the Kurdish Ahl-e Haqq that I was put in touch with. Everything was going well until two months into my fieldwork when I left Gahwāreh for Tehran to fetch the rest of my belongings. Upon my return, in a phone conversation with my host,

to my surprise he told me to visit the Ahl-e Haqq religious leader before returning to Gahwāreh and to ask his permission for my research. But I had already obtained his permission and my host knew it, which is how I had been able to rent a place there in the first place, as the followers did his bidding. On my way to Gahwāreh, I went to Kermanshah, a couple of hours distant from Gahwāreh, and met the religious leader in his home. He told me that for the fear of the new government people would not cooperate. Also, he said that soon I would be identified by the Secret Service and that they would stop my research. In light of this, he also told me to stop my fieldwork. I knew this was the end of it. I went to Gahwāreh, surrendered my lease, paid a penalty, gave away some of my belongings, and returned to Tehran.

2.1.1.1 – Choices and Challenges of Working with Zoroastrians

After ceasing to conduct fieldwork with the Ahl-e Haqq, I further modified my methods and avoided politically charged cultural groups in small towns. As a member of the Baha'i community myself, I knew that I could conduct fieldwork among the Baha'is, but this was not my ideal choice for two reasons. One was that publishing on this persecuted religious minority in Iran would have left them even more susceptible to repression. As a last resort nonetheless I met with two of the seven Baha'i leaders, and they sanctioned my work. It is worth noting that these seven were arrested the same year and as of August 2014 they are still imprisoned. The other concern that I had was academic, going back to Bronislaw Malinowski's (1922) continued disciplinary influence on anthropology. He famously outlined that in order to gain the most complete understanding of "the native's point of view," fieldworkers must emphasize their role as participants. The immediate supposition of Malinowski's statement is that works of "native" or "indigenous" anthropologists are by default different from those of "regular" anthropologists. While the latter groups study "Others," the former "are believed to write about their own cultures from a position of intimate affinity" (Narayan 1993:671). Ignoring education, gender, religion, and life experience in general, the idea that "nativity" affords privileges assumes, moreover, the homogeneity of an entire cultural group, hence works of "native" anthropologists are imagined to have an unproblematic and authentic insider status. A logical extension of this assumption is to devalue the "native's" works, not just due to the assumed *easy* access, but rather due to the familiarity that causes the researcher to take for granted and omit valuable nuances of the field. This disciplinary assumption that equates nativity with insider could easily be extended to my fieldwork even among Zoroastrians.

After spending some time assessing my options, I decided to work with the Tehrani Zoroastrian community. To start with, I visited one of their establishments and participated in some public gatherings. The first encounter was in Iraj Hall, one of the two Zoroastrian gathering places in the Zoroastrian Hill (*Ku-ye Zartoshtiyân*) adjacent to the community's fire-temple. It was decorated for a wedding ceremony. There I gathered some information from a man and a woman who were in their mid-sixties; the woman spoke with a *Yazdi* accent. They immediately recognized that I did not belong there; she asked, "Where are you from, here or there (West)?" I replied, "I am a student of anthropology in America." "Why have you left such a nice place and come here?" she inquired. "People like me belong to *nowhere*, but I grew up *here*," I answered. Long before, during my first trip to Iran after being away for ten years, I had purchased a *faravahar* necklace that I have worn since then. She noticed it and asked, rhetorically, "Are you a Zoroastrian? Why are you wearing the faravahar?" The man interposed, "He is *interested*." I replied, "Many Iranians wear the faravahar nowadays; it has become a symbol of Iranianness."

FIGURE 1 Faravahar



In Zoroastrian modern theological interpretation, the faravahar represents an effulgence of the light of Ahura Mazda that is implanted in every person. The faravahar's symbolic representation encodes Zoroastrian cosmology and teachings. It is in the form of an open-winged bird with the head of an Achaemenid (Persian Empire, 550–330 B.C.E) person. Corresponding to the Zoroastrian cosmology of a constant battle between good and bad, a ring divides the upper body, which stands for the former, from the lower limbs,

depicting the latter. As I gathered, the ring itself corresponds to a continuous notion of time, without a beginning or an end. The figure's right hand leads forward, meaning there is only one path: that of progress; and his left hand holds the ring of covenant with the triad adage of good thoughts, good words, and good deeds. The adage itself is manifested in the wings, divided into three parts. The tail represents the opposite, a triad of bad thoughts, bad words, and bad deeds.

Like many other pre-Islamic Iranian symbols that are now fashionable, the faravahar could be found everywhere in Iran in forms including pendants, paintings, and decorative materials. Although these images may be divested of their Zoroastrian links and whittled down to a secular national object for many, and although Zoroastrians criticize this "fashionization" of religious symbols,⁷⁷ the Zoroastrian religion has nevertheless been shown in a positive light through its connections to these symbols. As the scenery of Iranian nationalism is increasingly permeated with images linked to the Zoroastrian tradition—including celebrations of *Sadeh*, *Mehregān*, and *Nowruz* that I discuss in the next chapter—Zoroastrians acquire new forms of visibility. Their own efforts to highlight their past and its contribution to the Iranian present have also bolstered this new-found visibility. Many Iranians, in particular the young, are aware of the connections. I was surprised when the thirty-year-old son of my Ahl-e Haqq host became excited at seeing my necklace, showed me a nicely framed faravahar in their home, and expressed the Ahl-e Haqq's deep deference for Zoroaster. As we shall see further in the last chapter, when Zoroastrian tradition is enacted in a charged political context, images of the past do not just become a source of pride for the followers, but also penetrate Iranian national imaginaries.⁷⁸ Notwithstanding, although my necklace represented more than a general statement of nationalism, it never gave me insider status. My presence in the Zoroastrian space and my expressed desire to do a study of their tradition provided the exegetical condition for it to be interpreted at best as a declaration of *interest*.

I was hoping to stay for the wedding ceremony that day and explained my research project, but they said that I needed an invitation. It was justified; I totally understood that attending a wedding without an invitation is problematic. Now, however, I understand this exclusion not merely as a matter of cultural propriety. Like other minorities in Iran, Zoroastrians are exclusive, in particular when the private sphere is at stake. This exclusivity was demonstrated at all levels, by priests as well by the laities. My effort to access private gatherings was an academic urge for more in-depth fieldwork. However, I

soon learned that there was no lack of rituals and ceremonies which I could attend. A great number of these were based in the Zoroastrian calendar, which outlines a ritualized and ceremonial tradition, and others were occasional gatherings, both of which I address fully in the next chapter. However, another reason for the increase in the number and importance of these gatherings was a direct result of minorities' condition in post-revolutionary Iran. As Bekhradnia points out, "There are far fewer social gatherings in private homes, explained partly by the expense and difficulty of purchasing good quality food, meeting in the temple on socially neutral ground is convenient" (1991:130). She also refers to "increase in attendance at temples to celebrate the various festivals and holy days: In Iran this can be understood in terms of a communal desire to increase the opportunities for social interaction and solidarity within a community of like-minded people as well as a manifestation of religious persuasion" (Ibid)—it is in one of these public rituals, discussed in the following chapter, that I return to the discussion of Zoroastrian exclusivity. Therefore, after the revolution public rituals, mostly held in the complex premises of the fire-temple or other religious buildings temporarily transformed into places of collective discipline, have emerged as the privileged social medium for passing on Zoroastrian religious knowledge.

Here I provide several examples of my ethnographic encounters throughout which I had to further modify my method. This is (1) further to outline the preterrain of this ethnography, (2) to show how my academic training had made me obsessed with accessing the private sphere, (3) to make a point that being a persecuted minority helped me to identify with and to respect and appreciate Zoroastrians' exclusivity, (4) but, most importantly, I outline this in order to demonstrate how I positioned myself and the kind of data I was able to access. At the beginning, in a phone conversation with my initial Zoroastrian contact, he gave me the address of the Zoroastrian Hill (*Ku-ye Zartoshtiyân*) and also of a Zoroastrian bookshop. When I told him about my desire to observe religious rituals and ceremonies, he told me that rituals were organized only for families to supervise their children so they would not waste time on the streets. He also said, "Ceremonies are very laic nowadays, and religious ordinances are not much observed." He also told me that the youth were totally disinterested in religious affairs—as we shall see in chapter 6, steps are being taken to change this new generation's disregard—and that their parents listened to the B.B.C. Persian Service and Voice of America, waiting for the regime to change. After several phone conversations, when I

requested a meeting with him, he declined and said that we could talk over the phone, saving time in traffic. He promised to look into the possibility of putting me in touch with a mobed who held a Ph.D. in Theology from Tehran University and another *farhikhteh* (lit., an educated or a cultured person) who was knowledgeable about details of the ceremonies and meanings of the symbols. I followed up, but none of these promises materialized. After several months he and his family of four migrated to the U.S.

On 28 January 2007, in order to acquire a research permit from the Zoroastrian Association, I met with a Zoroastrian authority, an active organizer of the community—it was here that I first noticed distinct Zoroastrian greetings, such as *ruz khosh* (good day), that differ from the Muslims' *salâm*. He told me that I would have access to public and semi-public gatherings, but not to private homes. He downplayed the importance of rituals, and said that Zoroaster believed that Iran was a vast country and rituals were matters of local customs. Soon however I discovered that Zoroastrian tradition is in fact highly ritualized.

This time, through a friend of a friend who had a notary's office (*mahzar*) round the corner from the Zoroastrian Hill that offered services to Zoroastrians, I managed to meet with the Chair of the Zoroastrian Association on 8 March 2007. We spent about an hour in the Association's building, which was a busy place. Referring to the amount of work they did, he told me that "the Association should be elevated to a ministry (*vezârat-khâneh*) by the state and all the people that worked there voluntarily should get paid by the government." He showed interest in my project and promised that "in the fire-temple (*âdashkadeh*) and other public places, we can arrange so you can observe." When I asked if he could help me attend private ceremonies, he said, "We do not have access to what happens in people's homes and some people would not like to have a stranger (*qaribeh*) in their ceremonies and our pilgrimages are tightly controlled by the government."

We walked from the office to the fire-temple which was located at the centre of this Zoroastrian block. He introduced me to the mobed who was in charge of the fire-temple, who in turn, as a customary expression of hospitality, told me, "We are at your service; whatever we can do [we won't hesitate]." The gesture of hospitality was flawless: he gave me three phone numbers, those of the temple, his home, and his mobile phone, and received mine "to keep me informed." He asked the Chair if I had permission to film. I said I had no intention of doing so, but might take some photos. He reacted, "I just asked so if you do it and people object to it, I tell them

you are permitted by the Association.” I was ecstatic; it could not be better than this. He basically lived in the fire-temple and was well informed about what was going on in the community. When I contacted him after a couple of days, he said that there were no programmes to attend. When I asked about future events, he replied, “Who knows?” His answer was the same the next several times; he did not even mention the public ceremonies that I had obtained information about through the bulletin boards placed in various Zoroastrian establishments.

In another attempt to access private spheres, through a friend who knew a Baha’i family from a Zoroastrian background, I was put in touch with another mobed, one of the main ritual officiants. Talking to him, I expressed my desire to attend private events in addition to the public ones. With hesitation and consternation he invited me to the House of Narges, another Zoroastrian centre. In the ceremony, he introduced me to others as “[o]ne of my very best friends.” I phoned him at least once a week, but the answer was always a variation of “[y]ou called late”; “[y]ou should have called earlier”; “[w]e had several programmes, but they are all over”; “I did not have your number to call you.” Once he said, “I had several programmes, but you did not call ... I had some wedding ceremonies I wanted you to see.” I asked his permission to call him more often. “It would be fine,” he replied, “but I won’t be having any programmes scheduled for the next two months.” Then, referring to the unpredictability of his job, he added, “It is like a business (*kâsebi*).” I asked, “So, if I call you tomorrow something might unexpectedly come up?” He answered, “I don’t think so; if there would be a ceremony they request my services a couple of months in advance.” During the second part of my fieldwork, when I called him on 18 January 2008, he sounded excited at hearing my voice. Knowing my work, he said that he would not have any programmes until 9 February. I asked if I could participate then. He apologized and said that it was a small one, at a home. Soon I learned that, as with Agnes Loeffler’s experience in Iran, even though I am an Iranian, my identity was “double edged,” since “at all times and in all situations I was at once welcome and suspect, a source of pride and danger, someone to seek out and to avoid” (2004:642).

As I was pushing for access to private spheres, a friend introduced me to a Muslim eye doctor. He in turn wrote me an introduction letter to take to a Zoroastrian eye specialist, who turned out to be the head of the Mobeds’ Council (henceforth, the high mobed). I gave the sealed envelope to his secretary and after calling him several times, I finally arranged a conversation. He welcomed my research, asked about my own religion, and

in the end said that as far as attending private ceremonies was concerned he could not be of any help.

While there were many other similar instances, I would like to end this section with the most revealing story when I tried to establish another line through a Zoroastrian uncle of my childhood friend's wife. The uncle immediately asked me to provide a letter from my university so he could "persuade the mobeds to cooperate." In two weeks my friend told me that the uncle had complained that since I had not followed up I did not have an important project. The truth of the matter was that as soon as my letter was ready—I received it from Boston University Anthropology Department only two days after he demanded it—I had called him several times but my calls never went through, and once it sounded as if he had hung up the phone. After this conversation with my friend, I called again. He immediately recognized my voice and sounded as if he was expecting my call. He asked me to call him the next day to make an appointment then. When I called, a man who introduced himself as "his driver" told me that "[h]e is in the garrison (*pâdegân*) but will return your call." Since he did not, I called him in the afternoon, but the phone was hung up. The day after I called, the "driver" answered again and told me the uncle was in the garrison. When I shared the story with my friend, he said *they are* like that. The uncle had asked my friend, "Why are you looking for trouble?" to which my friend had responded, "If you call it a trouble, please do not bother, but I will do much more for a friend." Then the uncle had replied, "Well, we do help as well." From the rest of their conversation, my friend had gathered that the uncle was afraid that I was a spy on behalf of the state (Iran) with ulterior motives.

The last time that I called and the "driver" told me that the uncle was in garrison I pressed my demand further and asked, "Where is this garrison? Can I come and visit him there?" He replied, "This is the garrison of the *Sepâh-e Pâsdârân* [The Islamic Republic Revolutionary Guard]." To his surprise, I asked the address so that I could visit him there, but he refused to give it to me. Later I learned that the uncle had told my friend, "Your friend called several times; either I gave the phone to some friends or *pichundamesh* myself," which is a slang word that in this context means *getting rid of someone*.⁷⁹

Most of the scholars who have done fieldwork with Iranian Zoroastrians are foreigners and did it before the Revolution. The famous Orientalist Mary Boyce spent a year in the village of Sharif-Abad of Yazd in 1963–1964. Anthropologist Michael Fischer did his Ph.D. dissertation fieldwork in Yazd in

1970–1971. Similarly, Janet Amighi, who was mentioned earlier, did hers in Yazd and Kerman in 1972–1973. After reading my work, she told me that she “had easier access as the wife of a Zoroastrian in Iran and an Iranian citizen [herself] through marriage.” They enjoyed great access to individuals and to ceremonies, producing rich ethnographies. Jamsheed Choksy—born in India as a Zoroastrian, raised in Sri Lanka, and now a U.S. citizen—told me that he has “the aura of being an ‘ancient Iranian,’ and a foreign scholar of ancient Iran and of Zoroastrians.” “So the Zoroastrians accept me and I can go into any of their ceremonies; also the Iranian government tolerates me even though I criticize them, and Muslim Iranians, Jewish Iranians, and Baha’i Iranians are delighted to show me their rites and Iranian national sites.”

Reinhold Loeffler’s fieldwork in Iran convinced him that “Iranians frequently take foreigners to be spies” (2004:589). The distrust of foreigners is not limited to the perception of espionage. In a commemorative ceremony (*porseh*), the community’s parliamentary representative (henceforth, the *mobedyar*) recalled a memory conveying that “foreigners have always come to Iran and stolen our cultural heritage.” The following story had reached him via someone who had heard it from the owner of a caravanserai in the Zein-Abad village on the outskirts of Yazd, going back about a hundred years.

In front of the caravanserai there was a sacred two-storey building where all the three villages of *Zein-Abad*, *Mobarake* and *Cham* came for pilgrimage and to light candles. Two foreigners with their horses came and stayed in the caravanserai. They rested during the day and in the night would leave with their torches. Once they asked the caravanserai owner to go to the city and buy some fruit, meat, and other necessities for them, as they said they would have guests. The walking distance was about three to four hours from the village to the city of Yazd. When the owner returned, they were gone. In the morning people gathered in front of the sacred building and were angry as the foreigners had moved the main stone and removed whatever was hidden under it. It was customary in the past to hide valuables in such places. These two knew the secret and had done their research and had succeeded in stealing whatever was there.

As my experience shows, this distrustful belief that foreign scholars are spies or cultural thieves does not mean that Iranian researchers are to be trusted. Nadjmabadi, who is also an Iranian anthropologist, uses the term “conceivability” to capture her experience regarding the dichotomy of a native and

foreign researcher. She states that Iranians worry that foreigners may disappear without a trace as opposed to the native who always is traceable. She also states, “The native anthropologist inevitably will be associated with government authorities,” and concludes that “even for a native anthropologist, fieldwork does not necessarily imply being ‘at home’” (2004:604). Her conclusion is based on work in rural areas, where, as she says, “people are guided by experiences they have had with government officials coming to rural areas” (2004:604).

Whereas officially I had full access to public and semi-private gatherings, the semiotics of Zoroastrian resistance to outsiders occasionally surfaced even in these ceremonies. For instance, when I attended celebrations of Zoroaster birth and rise to prophethood, which in fact required the Association’s permission to attend, a woman angrily inquired, “Are you a Muslim?” I responded, “I have permission to be here.” She retorted, “Why? Do you want to destroy us?” Perfunctorily, as if comforting in a belief that Zoroastrians are protected and could not be destroyed by people like me, she pointed to Zoroaster’s large framed portrayal and said, “He is the Super Human (*abar-mard*.)” Zoroastrians’ exclusivity is a characteristic that the community members themselves acknowledge. My informant in the fire-temple told me that, “as you will come to notice, we only feel comfortable around Zoroastrians and do not like to bring others in.” On another occasion she told me, “The media and researchers attend all of our ceremonies and the community is unhappy with it.” She added, “Thus, you might experience some resistance to your research.” In a conversation with a Kermani Zoroastrian, I told her about my difficulties in accessing private gatherings even though I had the Association’s permission. She believed that “since many Zoroastrians are leaving Iran nowadays, the community is not closed anymore,” but added that “[t]he old generations are like fossils.” I had only heard non-Zoroastrians anachronistically use such a term in their reference to Zoroastrians’ myopic commitment to the past, characterizing them as besotted with superstition.

2.2 – Conclusion

Mary Boyce writes, “Zoroastrianism is the most difficult of living faiths to study, because of its antiquity, the vicissitudes which it has undergone, and the loss, through them, of many of its holy texts” (2001:1). To these I would like to add the difficulties of conducting anthropological fieldwork. On the

surface, the mobeds and laypeople promised cooperation, but when it came to it they ducked out. They used strategies that included framing their rituals as private and out of reach, downplaying the significance of rituals as a whole, providing misleading information, citing the government's tight controls, or even, in an extreme case, trying to frighten me by mentioning the Islamic Republic's Revolutionary Guard. A mobed helped me to understand this behavior and told me, "The Zoroastrian community has suffered enormously and has been in a defensive mode too long. This has pushed the community to come together, to innovate and to find different ways to solidify, hence survive."

Being initially perceived as a Muslim was an important factor in the construction of my outsider status with Zoroastrians. But my multiple identities even further complicated this picture. I was an Iranian Baha'i who had illegally fled the Islamic Republic's persecution of the Baha'is and naturalized as a U.S. citizen, and now returned to Iran to do fieldwork with minorities. I experienced additional resistance from those who learned of my affiliation with the Baha'i faith. Zoroastrians have developed suspicion towards Baha'is that through their proselytizing efforts furthered the Zoroastrians' loss of membership in nineteenth century Iran.⁸⁰ Many Zoroastrians have observed conversions of their family members to the Baha'i faith, leading to major fractures within families and the community. Cultivated in and with respect to such a historical episode, this disposition overshadowed my claim to conduct neutral research. Let me give an example.

I was lucky to participate in a private ritual along with a Baha'i friend from a Zoroastrian background who was also participating in it for the first time. She was invited along with her aunt, also a Baha'i, who had returned from the U.S. after two decades away—it seems the temporal distance had transmuted her standing. So they had extended the invitation to my friend as well. Knowing about my work, she was kind enough to take me along. In the ceremony, an older lady asked my friend, "Where is your mother now? We used to go to school together and were inseparable forty years ago; I have not heard from her since." Later, I learned that a family rift had separated my friend's mother from the Zoroastrian community as she had converted to become a Baha'i. So, in addition to being born to Zoroastrian parents, steadfastness in religion is an imperative qualification for being considered an insider. In another example, a mobed who initially was open to me cut contacts after learning that I was a Baha'i. In addition to the bitter memory of losing members due to conversion to the Baha'i faith, this resistance was also due to the fear of association with Baha'is, an association that could be

punished by the state. This is because Baha'is who claim to be starting a new religious epoch and hence the abrogation of the Islamic laws, are framed as the new reviled enemy of Shi'a.

The question of my identity was unavoidable and I was committed to do the "right thing" and not lie about my heritage. All of this put me in an awkward position throughout my research. To avoid answering would not have helped; as a fieldworker I was supposed to improve access by reciprocating. My only strategy seemed to be not to put myself in such a position, but the result was the loss of even more trust and cooperation. My Muslim friends used to tell me that I "had to go after my informants and *demand* cooperation." But as a member of a minority community myself in a highly policed state, I could totally identify with Zoroastrians and respect their caution.

I understand Zoroastrians' resistance to outsiders to reflect a historically cultivated disposition. The extreme exclusivity that I faced was informed by a uniquely Zoroastrian history that goes beyond the generality of the Iranian fieldwork proviso discussed above. This specificity that conditioned my fieldwork constituted the unique preterrain of this project. Accordingly, my ethnographic method, and hence knowledge, was generated at the shifting junction of the informants' preterrain and ethnographers' positioning. As Alison Griffith writes, "different knowledges are imbedded in both the researcher's biography and the social relations of power and privilege in which the researcher is located" (1998:363).

My access and sensibilities to cultural materials were closely tied to my "multiple insider and outsider" positions to the subjects, to use Cynthia Deutsch's phrase (1981), or, to put it differently, to my "shifting identifications amid a field of interpenetrating communities and power relations," to use Kirin Narayan's (1993). As a citizen of the U.S.A., I was perceived as critical of the Islamic Republic, and in this sense an ally of the community, a trustworthy confidante. Being a Baha'i gave me the status of a proselytizing threat as well as a magnet for trouble from the Islamic Republic. At the same time, I had a first-hand encounter with Zoroastrians' sentiments towards the Baha'is that might remain hidden from non-Baha'is and, as mentioned earlier, growing up as one of a persecuted minority made me understand and then respect this reservations of the Zoroastrians in accepting me. As Diane Tober puts it, each of the challenges "can be viewed as a type of 'cultural artifacts' that provides ... a view of Iranian culture ..." (2004:653).⁸¹

My native command of the language, if I draw on Ohnuki-Tierney, made me able to understand "the emotive dimensions of behavior," but being an

Iranian did not constitute “a definite advantage” of an insider over an outsider in gaining access to the community (1984:584–586). Having been away from Iran for over ten years in general, and not being a member of the Zoroastrian community in particular, made me keen to be absorbed into the taken for granted daily life. As Borneman and Hammoudi write, fieldwork experience is “engagement with both Being There and with forms of distancing that help make cultural difference visible” (2009:19). My insider or outsider status was neither achieved nor ascribed; it was not a fixed position. Rather it was continuously evaluated (De Andrade 2000), in flux between the two extremes (Griffith, 1998).

In such a restricted fieldwork setting, I learned that whenever I pushed for information and persisted, I deprived myself of the opportunity to obtain any cooperation at all. I learned that not asking, not demanding, not requesting and just participating was the most effective and promising method for me. Being respectful, and attentive, showing interest and dressing appropriately all contributed positively to the level of cooperation I received. Like Shahbazi, “[t]hrough trial and error I found that I aroused the least suspicion and got the best results when I started a conversation casually and only gradually led the discussion to the topic about which I needed information” (2004:596). This discipline of enforced self-abnegation was another and possibly better way to reach the kind of knowledge I sought in the first place. I could terminate my research as I was not able to conduct my ideal fieldwork, or I could just try to make the best out of this situation. I chose the latter and followed Rumi’s (1207–1273) advice that, “[e]ven though we are unable to capture the sea-water, we should taste it in order to quench thirst.”⁸² Gradually I revised my ideal fieldwork method of wandering round in search of a mystic group, which I could penetrate in order to learn its deepest secrets, to studying Zoroastrian’s public and semi-private rituals, ceremonies, and celebrations. These are what I discuss in the next chapter.