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Reclaiming the Faravahar

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The Performance of Difference and Similarity

While Islamic traditions are derived from a complex nexus of influences, the impact of Zoroastrian tradition in spawning a multi-faceted and often contradictory corpus of religious theories in Islam is generally acknowledged. Jonathan Berkey remarks:

[T]here is evidence for the circulation of Iranian religious ideas in Arabia in the form of Persian loan words in the Koran, most notably *firdoaws*, ‘paradise.’ And so the extensive influence of Iranian civilization on Islam after the seventh-century conquests would seem in fact to continue much older trends among the Arabs. (2003:47–48)

More palpable influences can be traced in some Shi‘i theological and liturgical practices that differ from those of the Sunnis. Distinctions between Shi‘a and Sunnis have been interpreted by some scholars in terms of semi-otics of Iranian resistance. For instance, Rajabi suggests that the emergence of Shi‘i after the Arab invasion, who did not have a clear understanding of Islam, was an Iranian attempt to maintain its cultural existence and practices (2001). Similarly, the high mobed told me:

Shi‘a have preserved Zoroastrian culture. They still respect the light, albeit in Islamic way by remembering Prophet Mohammad through a *salavāt* when they light up a bulb [*salavāt* refers to a collective recitation of ‘May God send His praise upon Mohammad and his Family’]; they still visit graves of their ancestors on Thursday nights, which is a Zoroastrian custom; they also use the rosary, and pray five times a day. The stew that Shi‘a prepare for Imam Hoseyn’s commemoration reflects generosity of our Gāhambārs too.

He concluded that “Iranians did not become Arabs.” In this sense, in addition to maintaining the pre-Islamic cultural practices enshrined in the

Gāthās as discussed earlier, Zoroastrians that I worked with believed that Iranian Shi'a had remained somewhat Zoroastrian. In fact, they recalled the marriage of Imam Hoseyn to *Shahrbanu*, a daughter of the last Sasanian king, Yazdgird.

Here I further analyse Zoroastrians' complex performative construction of their contemporary relations with Iranian Shi'a and the Shi'i state, where agendas and ideas produced by public figures, artists, and scholars cannot be freely circulated unless they reflect the official dogmas of the state religion. As Warner suggests, “[I]t might be that the only way a public is able to act [in this case, in Iran] is through its imaginary coupling with the state” (2002:89). By extension of the same principle, the Zoroastrian religion has been historically protected under the Shi'i mantle. I heard from a Shi'a who was interested in history that “many treatises attributed to Shi'i Imams belong to Zoroastrians, like *Nahjol-Balaqeh* (a treatise attributed to Imam Ali).” He added, “It was a Zoroastrian strategy to preserve their writings.” Similar strategies have been adopted to protect other aspects of their tradition as well. For instance, many informants told me that Zoroastrians have succeeded in protecting their sacred sites by associating them with Shi'i figures, which includes calling them *imam-zādehs*, burials of the Imams' descendants. In this sense, to apply Warner's model of publics and counterpublics one more time, Zoroastrian religious space was public too, since it worked by many of the same “circular postulates” (2002:81).

Therefore, I argue that the reconstruction of Zoroastrian imaginaries that I documented revolved around similarities and differences in relation to Shi'i Islam. My informants explained resemblances with Shi'a as signs of their influence, asserting origin and authority. At the same time, they maintained a discourse of difference, sustaining fundamental uniqueness and often asserting the inferiority of Shi'i theories and practices. Moreover, as we saw and shall further see, these discursive conventions differentiated between Shi'i tradition and Iranian culture, carving out a habitable niche in the national cultural realm.

Let me give an example as a prelude to my discussion. When linking Zoroastrian tradition to Iranian culture, a mobed referred to the Gāthic decree of ‘making others happy’ (hāt 43) and asserted, “That is why generosity is one of the most admired virtues among Iranians.” *Immediately*, he parsed a contradistinction with Islam, emphasizing that “this generosity differs from that which is promoted in Islam: We do not give donations (*sadaqeh*) to avert seventy two calamities as Muslims do; rather, we are committed to acts

of generosity (*dahesh*) so everyone will *benefit* from it.” Similarly, regarding the same *hât*, another exegete told me, “We have to help others *not in the hope of reciprocation*, as Shi‘a do. For us, helping others is *inherently* an act of worship.” (According to them, this articulation should not be confused with the ritualized tradition of *nazri*, when one makes a wish and in order to make it come true or when it came true feeds people or relatives, which is a practice also adopted by Shi‘a).

In addition to establishing difference from and similarity to Shi‘a, a body of Zoroastrian religious knowledge has been formulated that emphasizes Enlightenment and defines Zoroaster’s teachings as guidelines for the discovery of a universal truth. Within this framework, the official lens of Zoroastrian tradition magnifies certain aspects of the Iranian Zoroastrian historical past and ignores others in order to situate the religion both nationally and globally. For instance, scholars have argued that a political Shi‘i is a legacy of the Zoroastrian Church’s central role in the pre-Islamic Persian Sasanian Empire. According to Berkey, “Zoroastrian doctrine affirmed the union of Kingship and religion, and so enjoined universal obedience to the sacralized monarch” (Cf. Choksy 1988). Elsewhere Berkey states, “The close connection between religious and political authority in late antique Zoroastrianism is important for its foreshadowing of later developments in Islam” (2003:29). However, my informants refrained from making this historical connection, since emphasizing unity of church and state would violate the Enlightenment’s secularism thesis and validate the present regime in Iran. Instead, they stressed the division between the two. The high mobed once asked me the following rhetorical question: “Why did previous mobeds not change the first day of the Nowruz, celebrated on the first day of month Farvardin, to the birth of Zoroaster on the sixth of Farvardin? Why did they not merge these two celebrations?” He answered himself: “I believe that this is because they kept politics and religion separate.” He supported his thesis by adding that “[f]or the mobeds the sixth day of Farvardin is still considered Nowruz-e Bozorg [Great Nowruz], however, they did not turn it into a religious holiday for everyone.”

At the same time, in this body of religious knowledge, some of the aspects of Zoroastrian religion that are more appealing to present-day Zoroastrians are stressed. Among them is the proclamation of Zoroaster as the founder of the oldest and first monotheistic religion, a proclamation which formulated their religion as the foundation of Western theology. This is despite the fact that in his surviving hymns, the *Gāthās*, Zoroaster regards himself as a “devotional poet” (Choksy 2003b:408), and “only with the advent of

Protestant Christian missionaries to Iran and India did the doctrine of cosmic dualism,²⁰³ and the elaborate rites it had spawned, slowly begin to attenuate” (Choksy 1996:104).

This eclectic approach to the past in fact has a regularity that informs its creative adaptation to the present, a poiesis mode of historicity. That is, at the same time that it secures a place among the Shi‘a through a discourse of similarity, it establishes influence and originality. When they maintained distinctiveness, however, it was through a discourse of difference based on the morality of universalism, articulated nonetheless on Zoroastrian principles. Thus, survival and distinction constituted the criteria of validity and feasibility that governed the production of Zoroastrian knowledge tradition, generated through the interplay of life with both the monopolizing Shi‘i state and a plurality-conscious world. Accordingly, by identifying the potentials and constraints that these criteria provide, we can observe the trajectory of a changing mass of knowledge for the production and transmission of the Iranian Zoroastrian tradition. More importantly, as we shall see further, this inquiry allows us to explicate the forms of coherence that the Zoroastrian tradition of knowledge achieves within its present-day relationship with Shi‘i theocracy.²⁰⁴

The Zoroastrian hierarchical community of the laities, adepts, and mobeds participated in this creative process differently. While the mobeds and adepts provided the intellectual capital, laypeople furnished the necessary social and economic capital, which made the world in which religious knowledge was mediated, reproduced, and practised. For instance, the adepts theorized and outlined Zoroastrian pedagogy of historical remembrance, seeking to discipline the community in protocols of contemporary self-understanding. This was done through juxtaposition to the dominant Shi‘a and principles of the modern secular, moored in Zoroastrian theology. As discussed previously, the continuous tensions accompanying the social and political Islamization of post-invasion Iran have been maintained within the contrasting structures of affects and sensibilities and within the religious practices wherein such forms of expression and experiences have been cultivated. In this respect, as Taylor writes, “What start off as theories held by a few people may come to infiltrate the social imaginary, first that of elites, perhaps, and then of society as a whole” (2002:106).

Zoroastrian historical lenses that understand the Islamic Shi‘i religiosity in ways tending to delineate the Arab/Iranian boundaries while emphasizing the Zoroastrian impact on Shi‘a ensure the originality, preeminence, and authenticity of the tradition. Emphasizing the role of Salmān-e Fārsī, a Per-

sian Muslim, in the development of Islam depicts only one of these historical patterns of remembrance. Similarly Persian literary figures are understood in terms of their links to the Zoroastrian religion. This has provided the community with a way to claim and incorporate the rich Persian literary landscape, although it is generally recognized as a product of the Islamic period. Moreover, as we have seen, Shi'i socio-religious practices such as *sofreh* and commemorations such as Ashura are perceived as and proclaimed to be the continuation of pre-Islamic practices.²⁰⁵ Also, symbolic and numerical expressions such as the choice of the colour green to represent Islam, and Shi'i veneration gestures and other moral physiology such as *proskynesis* integral to ritual observances in holy places are attributed to the influence of Zoroastrians, and as such raised to the status of public truths.

This discourse of influence stretched the ambit of the Zoroastrian habitable niche in the Islamic Republic. One critical outcome was the ability to blame Zoroastrians' historical sufferings on the violation of the "true" will of Prophet Mohammad by Sunni Arabs who denied his son-in-law Ali's right to succession—a narrative shared by the Shi'a as well, who understand the "fall" of Islam as dating from the murder of Ali and the later betrayal and martyrdom of his son Hoseyn at the battle of Karbala. For example, a Shi'i cleric who was invited to the Zoroastrian library argued that since Imam Ali was denied succession to the Prophet, a peaceful Islam was morphed into a military machine, resulting in the murder of many Iranians. By blaming the Arab Sunnis for this catastrophe, he both vindicated the Shi'a and established a tie with the Zoroastrian community.²⁰⁶

The continuous shared legacy of enmity with Sunni Arabs is apparent from Zoroastrian and Shi'i devotion to the tomb of Abu-Lolo, who is the alleged Iranian murderer of the second Sunni Caliph, Omar. However, this otherwise clear alliance between Zoroastrians and Shi'a in opposition to Arab Sunnis has been complicated by the contemporary politics of the Islamic Republic, which insists that Muslim unity should supersede the national cultural heritage. As a result, local Shi'i rituals honouring and commemorating Abu-Lolo were cancelled and the building was closed²⁰⁷ soon after the Religious Leader Khamenei named the year 2007 as "The Year of National Unity and Islamic Harmony."²⁰⁸ Even though this building has been registered as one of the Iran's cultural heritage sites, an order for its destruction has been issued by the government in order to facilitate Shi'a/Sunni unity.²⁰⁹ Reports say that this was a positive response to the request of Mohammad Salim Al'awa, the Secretary-General of the International Union for Muslim Scholars (IUMS), who told the al-Arabi'a news agency:

The request for its [Firuzan] destruction was delivered to Iran by a group of Arab representatives ... after the Doha assembly at the beginning of the year. At the assembly a large number of Sunni scholars asked Iran for the total destruction of the tomb.²¹⁰

5.1 – Similarities, Differences, and Influences

In the important monthly celebration of Ardibeheshtegān that honours Fire and Light, the high mobed explained that the Zoroastrian God is *sheydān-e sheid*, which means light of lights. He added, “*nur al-anvār* of the Quran in reference to God is the exact translation of this *Avestan* phrase.” On another occasion, a young Zoroastrian female physician, an occasional speaker to the congregation, explained that Zoroastrians recognize human beings to be the highest creation of Ahura Mazda since only a human has the faculty of thought. Thus, in the Zoroastrian religion a human being is called *Daman* (creation) and *Pahlom* (the highest or superior). She was quick to add that “in Islam the exact same phrase is adopted from Zoroastrian religion to refer to human, which is *Ashraf-e Makhluqāt*.” In the same vein, on many occasions the mobeds and speakers reiterated that it was originally Zoroaster who introduced and distinguished between the two worlds of *Gītavi* or the material world, and *Minavi* or the celestial world, known as *Jamādāt* and *Kāenāt*. One speaker said, “Later Greek and Muslim thinkers adopted these notions and in Islam they replaced them respectively with *Māddi* and *Ma’navi*.” Thus he not only articulated an identity vis-à-vis the Shi’a but also carved out a worldwide niche.

Influences were also articulated in the symbolic and numerical realm. During the celebration of Zoroaster’s birth, the mobedyar told me that according to Zoroastrian folk culture seventy two blessed events happened on that day. One Zoroastrian preacher remarked that “[a]t the age of seventy seven with seventy two of his followers, Zoroaster was martyred by Tor Brator.” I was familiar with the significance of the number seventy two, with the parallel numerology within the Shi’i context in which the third Imam Hoseyn is said to have been martyred with seventy two of his followers, a similarity that the preacher traced its roots to Zoroastrian tradition. Even in the early years of the Islamic Revolution the number of high ranking officials killed in an attack on the parliament was reported to be seventy two.

The articulation of Zoroastrian influence over Islam and Shi’i tradition goes beyond the ideological, symbolic, and numerical. It contains the realm

of practices as well, for instance, that of the obligatory prayer mentioned earlier. The mobedyar once said that the beginning of the Gāthās consists of *namanghā*, in which both palms are raised towards the sky; this *namāj* or *namāz* became *salāt* in Islam.²¹¹ Thus, the five daily obligatory prayers in Islam, one of the pillars of the religion, is said to have been modelled on Zoroastrian practice.²¹² Zoroastrians observe this practice by turning towards the Light, which could be the sun during the day or any source of light at night. The *Ka'ba*, Zoroastrians believe, is a substitute for this source of adoration in Islam.

Another significant ritual influence claimed by the Zoroastrians was the commemoration of Imam Hoseyn. On the occasion of Ashura, the mobedyar explained that “[t]he very style of commemorating Ashura began after the murder of Syavash,²¹³ an Old Iranian hero. Afterwards, the *su-va-shun* style of mourning for him was adopted by the Shi’a [to commemorate Imam Hoseyn].” Similarly, he argued that the *tarhim* sessions where Shi’a commemorate the deceased, accompanied by a *nowheh* or ritual lamentation, originated in Zoroastrian practices, though without the Shi’i addition of self-flagellation. But, as he clarified:

Fortunately we [Zoroastrians] do not have a culture of mourning. Instead, we have *sugvāri*, to commemorate or honor (*bozorgdāsh*t). The same ritual is now held for Imam Hoseyn, to whom we also pay tribute. There is no mourning, self laceration, or cursing of the enemy in that; rather, it is to learn from these great figures, as learning is just one of the attributes of our culture.

As pointed out earlier, jubilation was always enthusiastically embraced among Zoroastrians, even in *porseh* commemorations and other events that the Shi’a would perceive as mourning occasions, on which they would wear black, weep, and occasionally beat themselves. Zoroastrian *porseh* commemorations provided a stark contrast, as participants wore white and did not lament. Similarly, announcing the news of the passing of a mobed,²¹⁴ the high mobed expressed his sorrow and sent condolences, but he was quick to remind the congregation that “[w]e do not mourn.” This difference, in particular on the occasion of death, is informed by Zoroaster’s cosmology, which I outline here to address how this distinction was addressed in the community. The most popular section of *porseh* rituals, as I discussed in chapter 3, was the speech given by the mobeds and acolytes. These talks mostly focused on the ways in which Zoroaster understood and addressed

human existential questions. Using these speeches, and similar talks given on other occasions, I here construct a more complete picture of the connections or distinctions between the Zoroastrian tradition and the Shi'i and Islamic heritage.

Informed by Zoroastrian cosmological dualism, the mobedyar explained why mourning on the occasion of death was proscribed in the Zoroastrian religion but prescribed among the Shi'a. "The philosophy behind this is that whatever is unpleasant to us has a purpose. Insomuch as thorns are necessary to see the beauty of flowers, death is necessary for us to feel and understand the beauty of life. This belief helps us to celebrate and pay homage to life, and not to lament death." He added, "This is why happiness is at the core of our religion, not sadness or asceticism." The mobedyar also discussed the nature of death itself:

When we move from this world to the next, there is no death; it is just a transformation. This life is not linear with a starting and an ending point. Rather, there is no beginning nor is there an end; it is a continuous process. In reality when our body has reached the end of its cycle in this world it dons different form. That is why there is no need for crying and mourning. Rather, we need to be happy as we become closer to God. Isn't this the ultimate goal of all religions?

Then, he referred to two fundamentals of Zoroastrian ideology about humans: "[t]he *ravān* and *faravahar* of the dead to which we offer our salutation are always alive."

These concepts were further elucidated by the community's poetess. According to her, Zoroaster teaches that an effulgence of *sheydān-e sheid* or light of lights is deposited in every individual. This is "a drop of the endless ocean of Ahura Mazda. A drop called faravahar that does not cease to exist after death." Acknowledging that a similar notion existed in other religions and in Islam, she added, "Nonetheless it is not as fully developed as it is in Zoroaster's teachings." Rather,

Other religions believe only in *ravān*, which is the human faculty responsible for decision making (while) three worlds exist in Zoroastrian cosmology: that of the Amshāspands or manifestations of Ahura Mazda, that of the *Izadān* or angels, and faravaharān (sing., faravahar). After death, our faravahar remains intact and returns to its origin, the world of faravaharān, and becomes part of the cosmos.

Stressing Zoroastrian influence on Islam, she stated that the Quranic verse proclaiming “that ‘*all are from God and return to Him*’²¹⁵ is directly taken from this Zoroastrian ideology.” She added, “Faravahar leads us like a lamp, but if we stray from the right path it is our own fault since our *orvān* or *ravān* is responsible for making the final decision.” Using the notion of *ravān*, the mobedyar provided an interpretation that addressed the continuity of one’s life after death even in this world, beyond the survival of faravahar that is due to its connection to Ahura Mazda. He named the great Persian mystics and poets Ferdowsi, Hāfez, and Rumi “who are always alive to us, because *ravān* never dies but remains in this world; memory lives forever.”

As we see, emphasizing this world and stressing Zoroastrian influence and originality were the consistent messages of the porseh’s commemorative expositions. Concepts of Heaven and Hell were discussed along the same lines. The poetess explained, “While Heaven and Hell are notions diffused from Zoroastrians not just to Islam but also to Judaism and Christianity, there remains a fundamental distinction.” She stated, “Zoroaster focused on *this* life and emphasized *ahishteh-vahishteh* that includes the best and worst of psychological conditions. So if we are merry this world is Heaven and otherwise it is Hell.”

This is a good point at which to return to the question I posed earlier. That is, how then were the commemorative rites and rituals understood—Zoroastrian ceremonies that are, as Fischer writes, citing a Zoroastrian informant, “the most burdensome of the several religions [in Iran, including Jews, Muslims and Baha’is]” (1973:194). The answer is that commemorations were framed as ways to comfort the deceased’s family and to honour the *ravān* and *faravshis* (*faravahar*) of the dead, and also as occasions to offer advice for leading an ethical life. A mobed said that “[t]oday in Yazd a beautiful tradition exists among Zoroastrians that the villagers bring burning candles to the doorsteps of the deceased family. In so doing, they invite light to the house and try to comfort the family. All these gatherings aim to ease the pain of the loss and help the deceased family.” Such understanding was adopted by the laypeople as well. During a conversation in a porseh observed for a young man, a middle-aged woman discussed the jubilant nature of the Zoroastrian religion and told me that “[t]hese are not mourning gatherings. Rather, they are to help overcome these periods of hardship.” She justified this attitude by emphasizing that “[t]he law of nature is that things have a destiny, which is to move forward, so death is not bad [unavoidable].” Since that porseh was for the untimely death of a young man who was killed

in a car accident, she clarified that “this view of death is of course only for when we reach old age not for youth.” Thus, there was no attempt to ignore the poignant nature of a premature death.

Another repeated theme in these rituals referred to eulogizing, arguing, “The remembrance of the *life* of the deceased is also important. We have to remember the birthday of the deceased.” The mobedyar added, “Thus, we should live in a manner so that after our death those left behind say good things about us behind this podium. Death is the destination of us all, but it is important to prepare for this journey [with good deeds] as we prepare for a worldly trip. But unfortunately, we prepare for the latter more.” Nonetheless, he immediately and implicitly criticized the Islamic notion of moral policing, and affirmed his point by reciting from Hāfez: “Whether I am good or bad, O pious man! you mind your own life. Everyone will harvest only what he sows.”²¹⁶ Moreover, the long rituals were understood for the community to go beyond formalities and contribute towards the progress of the deceased’s soul in two religiously outlined ways: generosity and prayer, which are both ritually achieved. For instance, during these rituals, *kheyrāt* or generosity is practised by inviting people in and feeding them.

While the influence of Zoroastrian ideas and practices over Iranians was always emphasized as positive, the reciprocal influences from Shi’a were painted as negative. The mobedyar and other speakers repeatedly addressed some of these “undesired” influences. For instance, the mobedyar said, “On the first day of the New Year we visit families who have lost loved ones (this is a standard practice among the Shi’a). This visit is not a *porseh*, but just to show that if an uncle is gone the familial ties remain strong.” He suggested, “Therefore, instead of the Arabic phrase *tasliyyat* that conveys sadness [during these visits], we could use the Persian term *ārāmesh-bāsh*, wishing tranquility and peace.”

5.1.1 – *Claiming the Mystics*

In the previous chapter, I provided an example of contemporary interpretation of the seven archangels (*Amshāspands*), an interpretation that understands them in terms of Persian mystical tradition and reiterates Zoroastrian influence. Here, I outline how, through a discourse that also emphasizes the influence of Zoroastrian ideology over mysticism, they actually claim Persian mystics. As Amighi points out the community generally countered the threat of assimilation to the Shi’a dominant society “by the incorpora-

tion of those dominant influences within the boundaries of the community” (1990:333). In addition, such a discourse ventured to further exploit the existing rift between Shi‘a and Iranian culture and created yet another opening for Zoroastrians by claiming Persian mystics as direct heirs of Zoroaster’s teachings. The mobedyar occasionally expounded:

We have three general modes of living: that of the *zāhed*, an ascetic who suffers in this world in order to attain heaven in the next; that of the *ābed* who enslaves himself in this world in the hope of heaven; and 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.’²¹⁷ The first two categories of *zāhed* and *ābed* refer to religious orthodoxy that was criticized by eminent Persian mystics including Rumi, Hāfez, Khayyām, and Attār.

He added, “From these three modes Iranians mostly followed Rumi who says, ‘I am the Divine Bird of the Heavenly Garden and am not from the World of Dust, they have just made a temporary cage of my body, rejoice the moment that I fly in the Divine Realm of God.’” Then he framed this vision as a contribution of Iranians to the world as follows:

What Iranians have given to the world is *erfān* or *shenākht* or knowledge that encourages us to learn about our path and try to advance, not by rejecting the world or by enslavement to God; rather, by working hard to provide order and manage our lives. Of course, worship is an important part of it, but it is not the whole story.

Nonetheless, Zoroastrians believe that the influence of the *faravahar* concept is either consciously adopted or unconsciously reflected in this mode of mysticism among Muslim poets who attack hopelessness and affirm eternal life. For instance, the community poetess said that Rumi’s most celebrated poem, the *Masnavi* clearly reflects the influence of the Zoroastrian notion of *faravahar* “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.’”²¹⁸ 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 Hāfez also says, “My body becomes the veil of my soul, rejoice when I rend

asunder this veil. Such a cage is not worthy of a bird like me, I migrate to Heaven to which I belong. How could I circumambulate the Sacred World, as I am limited to the shackles of this body.”²¹⁹ “This last part,” she clarified, “shows that our faravahar is caged in our body, wishing to return to its origin.”

Claiming that these eminent mystics were influenced by Zoroastrian theology affords present-day Zoroastrians yet another opportunity to establish their distinct and authoritative spiritual identity: like the mystics, they believe that they too are in touch with the ecstatic mystical knowledge of an encompassing truth. In this sense, Zoroastrians’ emphasis on merriment strengthens their connection to Persian mysticism. When I researched the link further, I discovered that in his essay on mysticism among Zoroastrians, James Russell points out, “Where one does encounter joy as a salient feature of mysticism in Iran, it may well have Zoroastrian hallmark, even in its later, Sufi manifestations” (1993:76). He traces further Sufi practices and qualities: “[t]he Sufi leapt in ecstatic dance, *mast-e alast*, intoxicated by the great Question ‘Am I not your Lord?’ to which the souls of men answered ‘We testify to it!’ before Creation. His wine and his joy, the Question, the Answer, and the stages and mysteries of the Creation that follow [...]” and concludes that “all derive ultimately from the mystical practices—and orthodox doctrine—of the Good Religion of Iran, rooted in the primal, revelatory source of that faith: the Gāthās of Zoroaster” (1993:93–94).

Moreover, it is also curious that the process through which it is believed that Zoroaster received revelations is akin to the anchorite mystics’ experience in the state of selflessness, attained through an abstemious life by suppressing carnal desires during a long period of prayer and meditation. Boyce states:

That material offerings were not, moreover, enough in themselves [Zoroaster] made abundantly clear in another verse which is still spoken daily in the presence of fire: ‘Then as gift Zoroaster gives to Mazda the life indeed of his own body, the choiceness of his good intentions, and those of his acts and thoughts which accord with righteousness, and (his) obedience and dominion’ (Y. 33.14) ... these all indicate of Zoroaster to have been ... a priest, reached his complex doctrines of the seven great Amshāspand and the seven creations: through pondering, that is, on the daily rituals in which he had been trained since childhood, which must, through ceaseless repetition, have been as familiar to him as drawing breath.

(1975:219–220)

The speakers occasionally and subtly conveyed that while nowadays Iranian mystics, like Rumi and Hāfez, are being claimed and accepted by the Shi'a (of course, no mystical group is free to practise in contemporary Iran), during their lives they were criticized by the Muslim orthodoxy and even accused of heresy. Some were forced into exile, like Rumi's family; some were executed, like Sohravardi (d. 1234) and Eyn al-Qozāt (1098–1131); and the most renowned of all the self-apotheosizing Mansur Hallaj (d. 922) was arrested, crucified, and decapitated for utterances such as *ana'l-Haqq* or "I am the Truth." A mobed once said that even Hāfez was denied a proper Muslim burial by the clergy who opposed him. Therefore, the discursive expansion of Zoroastrians' link with mysticism was accompanied by an exploitation of Shi'i orthodox opposition to it.

Exploring relationships between some prominent men among the early Muslim Sufis and Zoroastrian tradition, I found that Bāyazid-e Bastāmi (d. 874), the founder of the intoxicated tradition among the sufis (as opposed to that of the sober mysticism), was the son or grandson of a Zoroastrian,²²⁰ and the aforementioned Hallaj,²²¹ the epitome of ecstatic union, is said to have been "the grandson of a Zoroastrian priest" (Stepaniants 2002:172). Moreover, Sohravardi's school of Illuminationist philosophy (*Eshrāqi*) was influenced by the Zoroastrian notion of light of lights (Stepaniants 2002:168) and, as Mottahedeh remarks, he saw himself as heir to "the Iranian prophet Zoroaster and a host of culture heroes mentioned in the pre-Islamic Iranian tradition" (1985:150). These figures promoted latitudinarianism, while their allegorical rejection of orthodox religion was characterized in terms of antinomianism, and their self-apotheosizing public statements of ecstatic gnosis were judged heretical. As a result, they aroused the ire of Islamic orthodoxy.

5.1.2 – Zoroastrians and the Shi'i 'Religion' Concept

When it came to the exposition of the concept of 'religion', contradictory and somewhat confused accounts were formulated. Nonetheless, they all shared a familiar theme: that the proper concept of *din* or religion was originally announced and perfected by Zoroaster, and that others, including Muslims, have tainted this Zoroastrian contribution. For instance, the high mobed stated:

There are two components that make every religion: a book that gives rise to religion and a tradition (*sonnat*) that creates a sect (*mazhab* in Arabic,

kish in Persian). There never had been a religion before Zoroaster, for he brought the first religious book, but *mazhab* (pl. *mazāheb*) existed. Mazahebs have problems due to being confined in religious law (*shari'at*) that discusses the unnecessary nuances of the mundane.

Thus, as he implicitly criticized the Islamic obsession with religious laws, he established Zoroastrian originality. According to the mobedyar, verified by the high mobed, Buddhism and Confucius “are schools of thoughts (*maktab-e fekri*) and not religions.” On another level, both men stated that through five faculties of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch, the human being gathers information, and then through an internal command of *daenā* or ‘a conscious conscience’ (*vejdān-e āgāh*) these various data are combined, without such a synthesis they are worthless. They agreed that all human beings possess this quality; they only need to use it.

In Persian and Arabic, the word *din*, a derivative of *daenā*, stands for religion. The high mobed once clarified that based on Zoroastrian ethical dualism while wisdom (*kherad*) drives us to pursue personal gains, *daenā*²²² is at the basis of love for others. “We have to find a balance between the two,” he added. In addition to an enunciation of a universal concept of religion, this exegetical emphasis on subjectivity in religion distinguished it from Islam. Further, this notion of religion is said to transcend that of the Shi'a, which is first and foremost concerned with the regulation of rights and not the quality of the consciousness. The contemporary Zoroastrian rendition of the concept of religion furthermore makes conversion absurd and emphasizes racial heritage while in Islam conversion is fundamental. Choksy notes:

When marriage occurs between a Muslim and a Zoroastrian in Iran, sometimes-but not always-there are attempts to incorporate the couple into the Zoroastrian community, *even without conversion of the Muslim partner* (my emphasis), and thus forestall Zoroastrian spouse's conversion to Islam and further decline in the community's demographics.

(2006a:172)

In addition to the conversion issue, fully discussed in the next chapter, another related trope drawing a distinction from Islam was the peacefulness that Zoroastrians claimed, entailed in statements such as “Zoroaster replaced swords with pens.” On an occasion, in a text recited by a young man Zoroaster was introduced as a prophet who inspired righteous follow-

ers without bloodshed. According to the high mobed, “When Zoroaster reached the Truth, he started to fight,” but “with thought and not with sword.” Using this religious parable then he commented, “No one has the right to attack others’ beliefs.” They further referred to the Gāthās 46:1 where Zoroaster complains that even his own family did not accept his teachings. Instead of forcing them to believe, he left them and wandered around the world until he found king *Goshtāsb* [Vishtaspa] *Kiani* who accepted his teachings. After that his teachings spread.²²³ Living among the proselytizing Muslims for over a millennium is certainly one of the reasons that different speakers reiterated and cherished the idea that Zoroaster forced his teachings on no one—with the implication that no one should force his beliefs on them. It seems that they have perhaps revised their historical memory in order to fit into the modern world and complete their differentiating narrative from Islam, but more importantly in order implicitly to criticize the oppressive treatment they receive from the dominant Shi’a.²²⁴

5.1.3 – *Spiritual Development*

Addressing the issue of spiritual development was another area of differentiation from Islam. The mobedyar once drew a connection between the *inner* and *outer* and said that “the light around our body, the aura particularly around our head, intensifies with our inner purity; prophets had an intense aura around their heads. This aura is proven today by scientists.” By asserting scientific proof he tried to validate the spiritual in a modern way. Emphasizing purity, a forty-year-old male informant used the following illustrative analogy: “[a] human is like a glass, standing on the table of the material world. Ahriman or the Devil is his shadow that corresponds to humans’ greed, bad thoughts, jealousy, and so forth.” He continued, “In this world, humanity is always attached to this shadow. However, as one purifies his heart the shadow gradually fades away and when one enters the World of Light this shadow vanishes entirely.” I asked him, “How can one purify his heart to enter the World of Light?” I mentioned that some religions offer a *practical* method, sometimes presented in terms of the devotions and techniques of mysticism. He noted, “The Zoroastrian community is divided mainly into two Iranian and Indian communities. Under the influence of Indian mysticism, the Parsi community in India adopted many ascetic practices.” He labelled them *tavahhom* or illusions, but stated that “we do not have such practices in Iran.”

I found this answer unsettling, since the *Gāthās* emphasize the necessity of a struggle to attain the World of Light. Thus, I thought that a tradition of mystical practice has to exist. Indeed, historically speaking Zoroaster's discovery of a constant conflict and struggle between the forces of nature did influence some specific ascetic traditions. For instance, albeit dated and indirect evidence, theologian Henry Smith affirms that Zoroaster's discovery "intensified the Manichean revolt against the world and the flesh; it lay at the heart of the asceticism which arose in moral protest against the luxury and sensuality of the age" (1904:501). Moreover, James Russell reports that "[a]mong modern Zoroastrians there is a school of theosophical esotericists, organized in the 20th century by incorporating various older traditions, called '*elm-e khshnum*'" (1993:83). He also reports a specific practice, that "[t]he Kayvanis [linked to the Persian Zoroastrian Eshrāqi mystic of the time of the Mughal emperor Akbar], and Khshnumists, recite the Persian mantra, *Nist hasti be-joz yazdān*, 'There is no being but God,' which may perhaps be seen as a philosophical extension, and a calque in its phrasing, of the Muslim credo, *Lā ilāha illā Allāh*, 'There is no god but God'" (Ibid:92–93). Choksy points out, "[T]he twentieth-century and twenty-first-century CE initiates of Ilm-e Khshnum, 'Teaching of Joy,' a Parsi Zoroastrian mystical movement, seek to subdue sexual desire for they hold that it arises from *Drug* to lead humans away from the divine" (2002:105).

Although these hints support the existence of such practices among the Indian Parsis, they refer to the link to Persian mysticism outlined earlier. The high mobed's discourses, nonetheless, always stressed that Zoroaster's art was that "he never put the two forces of good and devil against one another. Rather, he introduced them *alongside* one another (*dar rāstā-ye yek-digar*), opposite but complementary." Contrasting this teaching with Hindu ascetics' suppression of this world to achieve the other, on the one hand, and the this-worldly Western culture rooted in the Greek philosophy, on the other, a mobed stated that "Zoroaster argues that both are equally important."²²⁵

I decided to investigate whether there were any mystical practices among Iranian Zoroastrians, even if these practices were not necessarily ascetic, rather similar to dances of *samā* and fervent repetition of devotional phrases of *zeker* practised by some Muslim mystics. In the Sofreh Exhibition that I discussed before, when a student described the seventh element of the sofreh as a symbol of immortality, I raised the question about mystical practices. I also shared the above story that I had heard about the Indian

Parsi community's ascetic practices. He vehemently disagreed, averring that "there is no such thing in Zoroastrian religion." While acknowledging that "Parsis are *mota'asseb* or conservative," he clarified, "nonetheless *riyāzat* or asceticism is prohibited." A bystander listening to our conversation interjected, "In a museum in Baku²²⁶ [Azerbaijan] I saw a demonstration of painful ascetic practices endured by Zoroastrians." At this point a Zoroastrian female student intervened and retorted that "there is no such thing in Zoroastrian religion." I clarified that I did not mean asceticism characterized by the austerity of practices and suffering; rather clear sets of practice, methods to achieve the World of Light, an achievement at the heart of the Gāthās. This time he replied that "it is to be achieved through the principle of good thoughts."

I could not understand why they were so sensitive about this issue, in particular since they emphasized their influence on Persian mysticism but simultaneously rejected the normative asceticism that is common among mystics. So, I tried once more from a different angle and said that in the Gāthās there is an ongoing struggle between Light and Darkness. It is not merely an internal fight, like that of the lesser *jihad* in Islam; rather, it extends to the outside world. Zoroaster constantly reminds us that those who help bad people go to Hell. I added that even Zoroaster himself implores Ahura Mazda's help in succeeding in his own endeavour against the devil. Given all this, it seems logical to have a clear method for achieving spirituality, internally and externally. She replied, "I do not see these two as two separate entities, they are together."²²⁷ I agreed that they are inseparable, but said that at the same time they are opposite and mutually exclusive. This time she adamantly reiterated that "the way to achieve spiritual perfection is through good thoughts."²²⁸

It seems that this opposition to asceticism is a logical extension of emphasis on merriment and rejection of the mode of religiosity that promotes this-worldly suffering for the next. As inducing pain would be a violation of this principle, the forceful denial of asceticism could be interpreted as yet another way to distinguish themselves from the mournful Shi'a. However, as opposed to other instances they did not articulate this distinction clearly. Even later I learned that some discourse does exist on how to realize the spiritual requirement of good thoughts. For instance, once the community's poetess said, "in order to purify our thoughts, we have to try not to hold grudges and hatred, not to testify unless we have witnessed, and not to gossip." She introduced the Gāthās 25:5 as Zoroaster's instruction "how to discover Ahura Mazda within us," and added that "if we become pure

we can see Ahura Mazda with our thoughts. Then faravahar, the implanted effulgence of Ahura Mazda in us, guides our ravān, our responsible faculty for decision making.” She concluded that “the next step is sorush to which in the Gāthās is referred as ‘the summoning of our conscience.’ We have to become aware of this summoning and if we fail to hearken, we might lose it.”

The Zoroastrians that I worked with recognized one’s commitment to truthfulness as an absolute principle for spiritual development, the maintenance of a healthy society, and the sustenance of the cosmos. Regarding the place of truthfulness in Zoroastrian theology, Ilya Gershevitch writes, “Truth is one of the organs, aspects, or emanations of Ahura Mazda through which the god acts becomes accessible” (1964:12). Once the high mobed told us that “[r]ighteousness is made of reality and truth; we have to recognize that lying is horrible and, as holy Zoroaster taught us, it destroys society.” Again he turned to science to substantiate religious principle through objective proofs and said that “nowadays science has discovered that all humanities’ problems and sufferings originate from lies.”

In terms of spiritual development, truthfulness is identification with God and constitutes an important way in which an individual may contribute to the sustenance of *ashā*, a fundamental Zoroastrian concept. Jackson, who investigated the usage of *ashā* in Zoroastrian rituals, remarks that “[t]he designation signifies not alone the ceremonies fitness in accordance with the outward order of the ritual and its observance, but, above all, that inward holiness of spirit which makes for righteousness and for final deliverance” (1913:201). Lawrence Mills asserts that *ashā* is the rhythm of universal law that “expresses the sublime rhythm in the regularity of his [Ahura] procedure which was supposed to follow from the internal characteristic or attribute which was believed to reside in his nature” (1899b:53). Babayan regards *ashā* to be “knowledge of the truth and of order [...] of the skies and time [...] the knowledge of a cosmic order that entails an understanding of the associations between the material and spiritual world, with the earth at its center and partners of stars above,” and “the order governing this world and its synchronicity with universal ethics” (2002:21), and Skjaervo considers it to be the cosmic and ritual order (2011:10–11).

The internal expositions provided many examples to make the concept more accessible; but the emphasis was always on good thought and good deed. According to the poetess, “*Ashuii*, a derivative of *ashā*, says that the

smallest change in this world, for instance in the motion of the stars, causes enormous changes in the whole cosmos: the law of ashā maintains order in our world.” The high mobed also addressed the issue, elaborating that “[w]e have to discover ashā, the ruling law of the world, through our kherad or wisdom. In the stage of *Ashāvahishta* we become attuned with ashā and can achieve ashuii or the best attributes.” The mobedyar provided further exegeses, drawing on famous poems. In addition to considering the role of personal endeavour and kherad or wisdom as an important focus for one to become aligned with the law of ashā, he emphasized the link with the teachings of Zoroaster:

Zoroaster’s Gāthās establishes that there is one creator whose symbol on earth is *vahuman* or good thought, which has to be used to discover ashā or ‘the law of creation’ (*hanjār-e hasti*). As Sa’di says, ‘every leaf of the green trees is a book for a wise person to know the Creator’;²²⁹ thus, we have to observe and ponder that rain fulfills its destiny by descending while water does so by ascending. We have also to become attuned with the law of ashā, to discharge our duty. As Sa’di says, ‘the clouds and the wind and the moon and the sun and the skies all are in motion, so you [human] earn a living and do not subsist oblivious of their works, all of them are wandering, obedient for your sake, it is not fair if you do not abide.’²³⁰ As Zoroaster instructs us, we have to do deeds that make the ravān or soul of the creation joyous, to be committed to good deeds, love all, be kind, and help others.

As I have discussed, my endeavour to identify how levels of enlightenment are achieved, practised, and recognized did not produce any substantial results. This is in contrast to Islamic mysticism that has specific ways of ranking the spirituality of a disciple and many specific methods for achieving enlightenment.²³¹ Unlike Sufi sheikhs, Zoroastrian mobeds only discharge their ceremonial roles. Their ability to recite texts does not necessarily mean they have other kinds of religious knowledge or spiritual qualities. In Weberian vocabulary (1993), they are priests, not prophets. Once I asked a mobed a simple question about the logic of numbers used to identify different chapters of the Avesta. He said, “I am *Avesta-khān* or reciter of the Avesta and not *Avesta-dān* or scholar of the Avesta.” It seems then that one’s spiritual rank and attunement to ashā could be a combination of knowledge produced through the power of thought, truthfulness, and other personal and moral attributes. As opposed to the Islamic mystics, this ranking is not through

submission to ascetic practices or to a religious authority, or through expressions of ecstatic communion.

5.1.4 – Gender

Due to the contested status of women in Islam—women are not qualified to act as witnesses in court, they inherit half of what a man does, have to be fully subservient to their husbands, and are easily divorced but have limited recourse to divorce—the Zoroastrian emphasis on an equal position for women has become an important marker of their distinct identity. While I draw on my fieldwork to address the modes of boundary maintenance as articulated within the framework of the treatment of women (a large proportion of the data comes from the monthly celebration of Women’s Day discussed below), Zoroastrian gatherings were not the only occasions for such discourse and practice. For instance, the community poetess who represented the Zoroastrian community in a meeting of religious representatives of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, held in response to the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, told a non-Zoroastrian crowd that “[w]hen other cultures were ashamed to have a daughter (a reference to the Arabs before Islam), women enjoyed maternity leave and were paid up to four times more than men under the Achaemenid Iran.”²³² Such hyperbolic statements were also common in the community. For instance, the mobedyar stated that “[i]n our religion, women are even ranked somewhat higher than men.” He qualified his statement by elaborating that “[e]tymologically, the Avestan word *zan* (lit., woman) is derived from *zenate*, meaning creator and the one that gives birth (*zāyesh dahan-deh*), which men are incapable of.” He added, “Men are indebted and dependent on their mothers their whole lives, even grown up men need their mothers.”

The Zoroastrian celebration of women during Esfandegān was one of the more elaborate of the monthly celebrations. The Esfandegān celebration that I attended in 2008 was held in Firuz-Bahram Zoroastrian high school in Tehran. Whereas in other celebrations the genders were evenly balanced, in this event with the exception of three men (including myself) the rest of the congregation were women. A woman who welcomed me and noticed my surprise said, in an explanatory tone, “Most of the participants are women.” She added, “But there are a few men and more will come.” Later an informant explained to me that for this particular day many families have their own plans to honour their mothers and, since the focus is on

women, men must not have felt obligated to attend. A speaker explained that this celebration was arranged by the Zoroastrian Women's Association, founded 58 years earlier, so the chairwoman of the Association remembered the founders.

When a Zoroastrian entertainer was invited to recite her poem, she described the occasion as one which again established the progressive nature of Zoroastrians as opposed to that of the dominant Shi'i culture. She relayed, "While I was riding in a taxi, the driver spoke ill of his daughter-in-law. I was so angry that when got home composed this poem." The gist of the poem was that women are equal to men, like men they make their own paths, and whoever says men are superior is simply reiterating the Arab's *jāheliyyat* or ignorance. The poem also warned against the belief that women are seductive, or that they have one rib less than men: "In the age of knowledge and science these beliefs are embarrassing." At the end of the ceremony, a teenage girl recited from Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāme*. She performed in the tradition of *naqqāli*, an oral and verbal art in which a professional storyteller or *naqqāl* (lit., transmitter) performs selected epic stories. Accordingly, she held a stick as a prop that took on the life of a horse, mountain, sword, and the like. She appeared on many other occasions, and since *naqqāli* is traditionally a male profession, her performance was always introduced in terms of Zoroastrian iconoclastic innovation.²³³

The internal gender discourse focused on several themes, of which the abovementioned superior position of women in ancient Iran compared to the subordination of women among the Arabs, was the most repeated trope. Despite the reiteration of the idea in different ways, the constant was a reference to "the misogynist Arabs before Islam who buried their daughters alive." After such a reference on the occasion of the Women's Day, one woman expressed a sense of "communal pride," since "in ancient Iran women were co-equal with men." She added, "We had female kings, like *Purāndokht*, women had legal status, and could own property." Emphasis was placed even on the "pre-Islamic" practices, both of the Arabs and Iranians, so as not to upset present-day Muslims, an implicit link between Islam and the Arabs in terms of their supposed misogyny once again explored a fissure between Iranianness and Islam.

At its core, such discourses sought to establish that the contribution of Zoroastrians made gender equality possible in ancient Iran—also a covert claim to advanced consciousness and to being more modern. Moreover, as on other occasions, reference was made to other world religions. The poetess asserted, "I can say, with absolute certainty, that the Zoroastrian tradition is

the only religion in the world in which women are coequal of men and that women can occupy the highest status.” She added:

In Old Iran, a woman could perform religious rituals, recite the *man-thrās*, and in her old age she could care even for the fire in the temple (*ātash-bān*). She could also become a lawyer, and participate in archery alongside men. We used to have women fighters like *Gord-Āfarid*.

Equating Iranian culture with Zoroastrian tradition, she immediately relayed a story by *Ferdowsi* in which *Sohrāb*, a Turanian hero, engaged in a duel, and only after the fight realized that he had fought a woman named *Gord-Āfarid*. At that moment he said, “If Iranian women fight such a [manly] fight, how then must their [male] warriors fight?”²³⁴

Beyond a religious ordinance, she argued that this equality of the sexes also has a divine manifestation “since three of the six Amshāspands are male and three female,”²³⁵ concluding, “Ahura Mazda then is both feminine and masculine.” This is a modern interpretation in Zoroastrian hermeneutics that ignores the gradual transformations in religious beliefs and imageries “on ascriptions of demonic and deistic feminine images vis-à-vis masculine images and of female roles in contrast to male roles” (Choksy 2002:105). “Zarathushtra appears to have differentiated, in devotional poems of praise and blame attributed to him, between a neuter Asha, ‘order, reality’ which was equated to ‘righteousness,’ and a feminine Drug, ‘disorder, illusion’ which was equated to ‘falsehood’” (Ibid:15). Moreover,

[W]hile the powers attributed to supposedly negative spiritual entities were on the wane, the Persian Revayats of the early modern period retained the notion that, in general, men were righteous and women were potentially problematic: “The holy Zarathushtra asked Ahura Mazda, ‘why is the father superior and the mother inferior?’ Ahura Mazda replied, ‘The father is superior because I first created a righteous man and pronounced blessings upon him ... [and because] the accursed Angra Mainyu first seduced woman from the true path’ (1:172).” (Ibid.:107)

Choksy points out that the “doctrinal adjustments and, consequent, wide-ranging communal transformation are largely direct consequences of western-style, non-sectarian, social and educational settings” (Ibid). The contemporary community focuses on its society in a modern context, rather than on misogynistic aspects of the religion in an historical one that for in-

stance sees women during menstruation as ritually impure and barred from entering the fire-temple, and generally women are prohibited from achieving priestly status.

Another distinction from Islam was related to the issue of marriage. Citing Christensen, the famous scholar of Iranian culture and the Zoroastrian religion, the poetess explained that, “In Old Iran girls were free to choose.²³⁶ Zoroaster told his daughter Purchistā that she had to decide and chose her husband. Further, after marriage both men and women were called the head of the household.” She emphasized, “Our brides and grooms are reminded of this on the *govāh-girān* sofreh.” This distinction was more elaborately discussed by the mobedyar. “In the Old Iranian household there were two terms: *namān-o-pāeiti* and *namān-o-patāni*, which translated to head-man (*kad-khodā*) and head-woman (*kad-bānu*), so both were equally important, while in other religions man is clearly defined as the head of the family.” In these statements, “the other cultures” is a reference to the Arabs and “other religions” is an oblique reference to Islam; nonetheless, world religions are also included.

In addition to establishing the influence of Zoroaster’s teachings in the formation of Iranian culture, and emphasizing the differences between the Arabian and Iranian cultures, the speakers stressed Zoroastrian influence on Islam. For instance, the mobedyar said, “Many religions present women as inferior to men; this is while Avesta, the oldest part of Iranian culture, teaches us that there is no difference between men and women, and that only the pious peoples are superior.” He added, “As a result of Zoroastrian influence, a similar verse has entered the Quran, announcing that among believers only the pious ones are superior. However, it is never enforced in practice.”

As I mentioned earlier, the influence was not understood in one way, and in several instances the mobedyar warned the community against the influence of the Shi‘i ideology: “[i]t saddens me to see that sometimes in our gatherings men and women sit separately.” He added sarcastically, “if this is so, why not hang curtains so men and women could not see one another.” This comment hinted at the Shi‘i practice of separating men and women in this manner. Therefore, attempts were being made to ‘liberate’ Zoroastrian tradition from these “outside” influences. On another occasion the mobedyar generated excitement when he proudly and enthusiastically announced, “I am glad to inform you that breaking from the outside masculine (*mard-sālār*) culture that had affected our tradition, we have now passed an internal law that makes our daughters equal heirs.” This is yet

another sharp contrast with Islamic law, in which daughters inherit half of what sons do.

A related matter was divorce, which has risen sharply in contemporary Iran. The Zoroastrian community has not remained immune to this trend, and the way in which this problem was addressed in the community followed the general pattern that sought to elevate an ideal Zoroastrian thought and practice and criticize the dominant Shi'a. This is while "Zoroastrianism does not allow divorce: it is a twentieth century innovation" (Fischer 1973:194). Among a crowd of women in *Esfandgān* the representative said, "Unfortunately, we have come under the influence of the outside world. We should not have divorce in our community, as in our tradition there is no force and pressure for marriage." He added, "I remember when I was marrying, the mobed asked me and my wife separately 'Why are you getting married? Are you sure? Has anybody forced you to do so?' So when there is no pressure for marriage, there should not be any regrets afterward." Reappropriation of old practices was also discussed in order to combat divorce. On the same issue he said, "In the past, the Zoroastrian community had women called *usto* who taught life lessons. Nowadays boys and girls marry without having understood the realities of life. We might need to have men and women to teach lessons vital for their shared lives and thus prevent divorce."

Gender equality, free choice, and other enlightened themes of these expositions were generally directed at the West, demonstrating Zoroastrian modernity and advanced attitudes. But the construction of Zoroastrian identity was achieved, to a large extent, through drawing contrasts with the dominant Shi'a. Also, aligned with the discussion of previous chapters, Zoroastrians that I worked with portrayed themselves as creators of Iranian culture. As we saw, while they drew a genealogical link between the equality of men and women and the teachings of Zoroaster, this practice was also framed in terms of an Iranian practice in contrast to the supposed misogyny of the Arabs.

5.2 – Conclusion

While these practitioners emphasized similarity with Shi'a in order to establish their historical influence and moral authority, they also articulated a discourse of difference in order to maintain a distinct and superior identity. Moreover, beyond the two levels of uniqueness confined to a body

of original believers and the culture shared with the Iranian Shi'a, their discourse gradually moved from racial and cultural particularity to an all-encompassing universal and enlightened struggle to discover the Truth. We saw this in their concept of religion. The effort to achieve distinction was partly linked to the presentation of the Zoroastrian tradition as a modern religion by emphasizing gender equality, choice, and tolerance as opposed to their portrayal of the Shi'i religion as patriarchal, proselytizing, and intolerant. These contemporary and sometimes revisionist exegeses were shared with a community disposed to formulate "modern" self-imaginaries. Therefore, they emphasized Zoroastrian secularism versus Shi'i religious governance, downplaying the historical existence of the Zoroastrian religious state. The celebration of Women's Day in Esfandegān provided yet another occasion for an even more specific expression of boundary maintenance. The exegetes elaborated on the equality of men and women in the Zoroastrian religion vis-à-vis the Islamic patriarchy as manifested in marriage, divorce, and inheritance laws. Moreover, as preservers of a supposedly halcyon original Iranian culture, there was a constant emphasis on Zoroastrian merriment in contrast to the mournfulness of Shi'a.

At the same time, the Zoroastrian discourse of similarity made it possible for the community to function in Islamic Iran through the coupling of its imaginaries with the state. Nonetheless, these same imaginaries offered an opportunity for an internal discourse that emphasized Zoroastrians' precedence and influence, and superiority. Similarity with the Shi'i tradition, moreover, helped Zoroastrians imagine the survival or continuity of the beliefs and practices of their community among Iranian Shi'a, a survival that could compensate for the gradual dwindling of Zoroastrian believers that I will discuss in the next chapter. Zoroastrian influence over Islam was sometimes articulated as part of the general impact on world religions, which is also acknowledged by scholars—some more and some less interested in affirming Zoroastrian pre-eminence; they are eclectically cited by the community itself.

