

The contribution of leisure to religious continuity among the Zoroastrians

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Abstract

The aim of this anthropological study is to understand how Iranian Zoroastrians maintain their religion through the process of sanctification and desanctification due to the threat of identity extinction. Zoroastrianism, which exists in Iran, is the oldest surviving religion in the world. Although the population of Iranian Zoroastrians has been reduced over time, it has only been since the 1980s that this decline has been significant due to low birth rate and migration. The issue of this decline persists and has become a challenge to the community. In their efforts to respond to religious challenges, the Zoroastrian religious minority has frequently modified the features that form their ethnic identity and their religious rituals, ceremonies and feasts through the processes of sanctifying and desanctifying them. The purpose for these modifications has been to cope with new challenges of identity that, on one hand, posed a threat that could lead to their cultural fading away through their population decline and, on the other hand, which could regenerate their identity. Through these processes, their religious rituals, ceremonies, and feasts have become increasingly leisurely so that hybrid forms that are neither religious nor leisurely have been appearing. By using these processes, the continuity of their religion has been guaranteed.

KEYWORDS: Zoroastrianism, sanctification, desanctification, leisure, hybridisation

Introduction

When I began my fieldwork in 2010 concerning the outdoor leisure time of Iran's Zoroastrians, the first things that struck me were the numerous feasts and festivals held weekly, monthly and annually, emphasising both religious and recreational aspects. I realised that the feasts, ceremonies, and festivals must have a unique and central role in Zoroastrianism, because when a Zoroastrian was asked about his/her religion, their prompt reply would be to explain their religion based on these religious events. What

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seemed bewildering was the different manner in which these rituals were performed, which had changed from the early ways, as recounted in the Zoroastrians' holy book.

For a long time, most investigations conducted on Zoroastrianism have been mainly concerned with the following topics: its historical and religious origins (Boyce 1975, 1977, 1982; Boyce & Grenet 1991; Clark 1998; Dhalla 1977; Zaehner 1961); the Zoroastrians' beliefs and teachings (Kreyenbroek 1997; Zaehner 1970); their sacred books (Hintze 2007; Hultgard 2000; Humbach 1991; Skjarvo 2004, 2005); Zoroastrianism under the Achaemenian and Sasanian Empires (Gnoli 1989; Hultgard 1998; Lincoln 2007; Shaked 1990, 1994, 1997; Shayegan 2003; Williams 1996); Zoroastrianism in Islamic Iran, past and present (Choksy 2006; Fischer & Abedi 1990; Kestenberg Amighi 1990; Russell 2004; Shaked 1994b, 1995; Yarshater 1998); gender studies (Brosius 1996; Choksy 2002; De Jong 2003; Lincoln 1988; Rose 1998); rituals and purity among the Zoroastrians (Choksy 1989, 2007; De Jong 1999, 2002; Skjarvo 2007; Stausberg 2004; Williams 1994; Williams & Boyd 1993). These research studies have rarely considered Zoroastrians as people who continue to exist, and have neglected their ordinary lives in the social context. In other words, in most of the studies conducted, Zoroastrians have been abstracted from their social context, with a failure to investigate the social aspect of religiosity. This fieldwork conducted among Zoroastrians could fill the existing gap in the research. As far as our investigations were able to reveal, only a few fieldwork studies have been conducted on the community of Iran's Zoroastrians. These works include Fischer's unpublished PhD dissertation (1973), Mary Boyce's fieldwork conducted between 1963 and 1964, and Kestenberg Amighi's fieldwork conducted in 1972 and 1973 and published in 1990. One reason behind the lack of fieldwork on Zoroastrians has been the problems encountered by foreign scholars when conducting research on them. This was especially the case after the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran when the majority of defined research projects being conducted or about to be conducted became suspended.

Scholars have not neglected the reforms that Zoroastrianism has undergone since its inception to the present day, as they have dealt with it in their various studies (Mazdapour 2004). However, it seems that not many studies have been conducted concerning the reasons behind these reforms and their social function in Zoroastrian festivals and ceremonies. The questions that arise here are: How have these reforms taken place in their religious festivals? What is the social function of these reforms in their religious festivals? How have the reforms in their religious ceremonies and festivals occurred and developed? Finally, why do Zoroastrians perform their religious rituals in the form of leisure and recreation?

In anthropology, religion is one of the main components of culture (Messina 2007). The way in which Zoroastrians perform their religious rituals, festivals, and ceremonies has an interactive relationship with their social environment. Therefore, in order to understand this religion as a life tradition, we needed to have a close look at their festivals and ceremonies in natural environments. The purpose of this study was not to understand Zoroastrianism but – in order to understand the reforms happening in this religion, the reasons and quality of these reforms, and their social function which had been mainly in line with cultural and religious continuity – we needed to investigate them in the natural environments in which they happened.

Field of study

Zoroastrians are one of the religious minorities in Iran and are sometimes called *Gabr* (a derogatory term used by Muslims that means “infidels”), non-Muslims or *Magus*. According to the most recent census of the Islamic Republic of Iran (in 2011), their population was around 26,000, comprising about 0.3% of Iran’s population. Although most of them reside in Tehran, the capital of Iran, some live in Kerman, the history of which has been associated with Zoroastrianism. In fact, after the Arab invasion of Iran, unlike other cities of Iran in which Zoroastrians were forced to either convert to Islam or leave Iran, Kerman’s Zoroastrians were able to retain their traditions.

As Mary Boyce (2001) wrote, after the invasion, the majority of Zoroastrians from Sistan (a province in the east of Iran) moved to the city of Kerman for safety. During the Afghan invasion of Iran at the end of *Safavid* year 1719 AD, most poor Zoroastrians who lived outside Kerman’s castle due to segregation from the Muslims, were slaughtered, although some escaped and were allowed to enter the city. They organised a small community in Kerman known by the Muslims as “Gabr Mahalleh”. From that time continuing to the present, Zoroastrians have resided in this area although some have moved to other areas within Kerman or abroad. Today, Gabr Mahalleh is one of the cleanest areas in Kerman and has retained this longstanding cultural heritage. Gabr Mahalleh has narrow alleys; each home has high walls that have protected the Zoroastrians over time against people who wanted to harass them.

The Zoroastrians’ language is *Dari*, also known as *Gabri* and *Behdini* (Farudi & Toosarvandani 2004, 2005), which is mostly used in speech and is rarely written. This language has several dialects that are incomprehensible to non-Zoroastrians (Boyce 2001; Browne 1893).

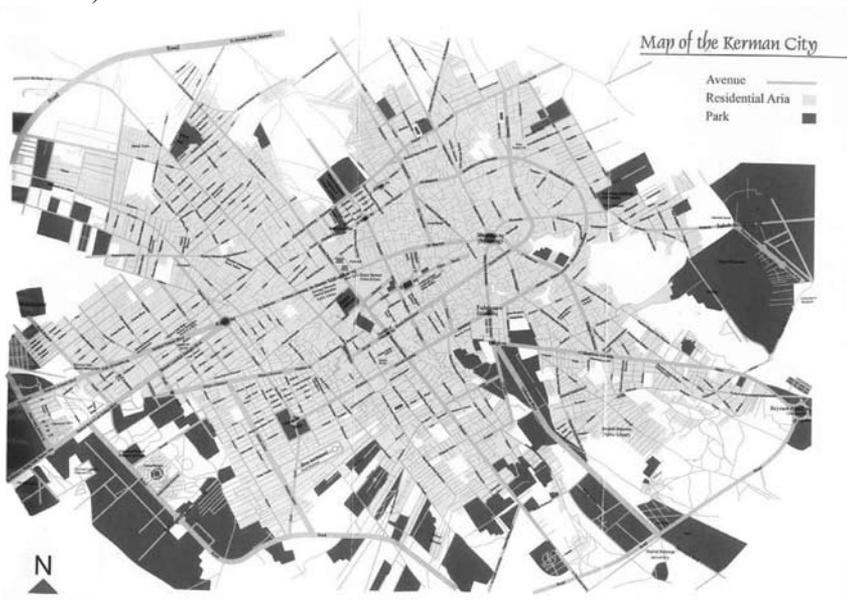


Figure 1: Fieldwork sites in Kerman

Although Kerman's Zoroastrians were farmers until the most recent generation, due to educational opportunities developed during the Pahlavi era, the majority of them achieved various positions such as private entrepreneurs, engineers, doctors, teachers, lecturers, etc. Due to this economic improvement, they started to donate some of their wealth to the construction of worship places, schools, and hospitals. Since most of Iran's experts were Zoroastrians, their per capita income was higher than that of the rest of the Iranian population.

This fieldwork began among the Zoroastrians in 2010. The sanctification and desanctification of religious rituals, ceremonies, and feasts were studied in order to understand how these processes played a role in their religious continuity. The data collection was conducted during several field visits between 2010 and 2012.

Zoroastrians: ethno-religious perspective from inception to the present

Zoroastrianism is the oldest surviving religion, having arisen in Iran almost 3000 years ago (Darrow 1987; Sundermann 2008). Three pre-Islamic Persian empires adopted Zoroastrianism as their state religion: the last of these was the Sasanian Empire (Sanasarian 2000) before the invasion of Iran by the Arabs in the 7th century AD. Prior to the Arab invasion, this period was known as the golden era for Zoroastrians because not only did Zoroastrianism become the official religion of Iran but the number of its believers rose to its maximum level. The Arab invasion not only resulted in the development of Islam and the marginalisation of Zoroastrianism, but also in the enforced conversion of many Zoroastrians to Islam and the expatriation of other followers of this faith to the Indian subcontinent (Choksy 1987). Contrary to the beliefs of many, the religious conversion of Iranians was not a sudden and pervasive phenomenon; rather, it took many consecutive centuries (Bulliet 1979). Due to both the social and financial pressures applied to Zoroastrians and the limitations imposed on them by governments, the number of Zoroastrians converting to Islam began to gradually increase. Throughout the centuries, Zoroastrians were marginalised, their numbers decreased and, through time, they became an impoverished community that continued to survive around the cities of Kerman and Yazd. On a local scale, they were harassed and insulted with complete impunity by Muslims (Foltz 2011). Iran's Zoroastrians have always been bothered and harassed by their Muslim compatriots. For instance, as with other minorities, Zoroastrians were prohibited from riding horses because riding horses was an indication of wealth and of belonging to the aristocratic class; therefore, they were only permitted to ride mules (Choksy 1997). They were not only denied their rights by Islamic rule but were also forced to dress in a different colour so they would stand out.

During the Safavid reign, many Zoroastrians were forced to convert to Islam: otherwise, they would have been banished to remote and desert areas of Iran, such as Yazd and Kerman (Choksy 2006). During the same period, other strict rules such as paying *jizya* were imposed on them (Boyce 2001:211). This rule continued for many centuries. By the time of the Arab invasion of Iran (1724–1719 AD), this process began to accelerate (Choksy 2006).

During the Qajar dynasty, the strict rules of the Safavid reign enforcing the conversion of Zoroastrians to Islam continued to be applied. Some of these harsh rules included only being allowed to work in low-paid jobs, and being denied the right to trade, to travel, and to leave home on rainy days. During the Qajar dynasty, many prejudiced people and gangs attacked the Zoroastrians of Yazd and Kerman (these regions were their main areas of residence during the Qajar dynasty) assaulting them, and even killing them, and stealing their property. They also used to burn their books. During this period, Zoroastrians were still banned from travel (Boyce 2001). Following centuries of paying *jizya* to Muslims, the economic situation of Zoroastrians deteriorated so badly in the 19th century that the Indian *Parsis*, that is, the Zoroastrian Iranians who had migrated to India after the Arab invasion, began to support their fellow believers in Iran and built schools and hospitals for them (Boyce 2001). After Nasser-al-Din Shah experienced increasing pressure from the Indian *Parsis*, he finally abolished payment of the *jizya* by Zoroastrians in 1882; this had been a kind of poll tax paid by non-Muslims. During the early 20th century, enlightened Zoroastrians participated in the progress of the constitutional movement. They were able to have a candidate as a member of parliament in Iran's first parliament held in 1906.

Following the rise of Reza Shah and the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty, respecting Iran's Zoroastrian heritage became part of the state's nationalist ideology (Boyce 1992). During this same period, the improving economic situation of rural areas helped improve the lives of impoverished Zoroastrians. Over the course of a few decades, Iran's Zoroastrians turned into the most valuable social community from having been the most economically disadvantaged Iranian community (Foltz 2011). The crucial outcome of this economic boost was their migration to urban areas, especially Yazd, Kerman and the capital city, Tehran. In these cities, Zoroastrians could have access to higher education and had a more active part in the labour market. Meanwhile, Muslims were now residing in the villages from which they had moved (*ibid.*). Zoroastrians still encountered discrimination by Muslims in their daily life. However, overall during this period and in the 20th century more generally, Zoroastrians' situation improved in terms of education, urbanism and income (Sanasarian 2000).

The revolution of 1979, especially in its early years, brought a return to assaults and persecution for Zoroastrians. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the spiritual leader of the Islamic revolution, called their intentions "reactionary", the Zoroastrians "fire-worshippers", and their religion "an old and inveterate sect" (Sanasarian 2000). Emboldened by these statements, in the early years of the revolution, Iranian Muslims began stealing the properties of Zoroastrians, and the superficial respect that had been restored during the Pahlavi reign quickly vanished (Sanasarian 2000). According to the Quran, Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians are described as the people of the book (Jahanbakhsh 2006) and deserve to be under the protection of an Islamic government; moreover, it was actually after the Islamic revolution in Iran that Zoroastrians were recognised by Article 64 of the Constitution (Sanasarian 2000). Although the right to have a member of parliament was preserved for them, they still did not have equal rights with Muslims. For instance, according to the laws of jurisprudence that have remained from the 8th and 9th centuries, if a Zoroastrian converts

to Islam and marries a Muslim, then that person would inherit the entire inheritance of the Zoroastrian family. These rules are still maintained and are binding.

Apparently, Iranian Zoroastrians benefit from some social rights not received by Iranian Muslims. For instance, Zoroastrian youth and other minorities are legally allowed to consume alcohol at their private gatherings and to have mixed gender parties, rights not accord to Iranian Muslims. It is acknowledged by most Iranian Zoroastrians that they have more social freedoms than their Muslim compatriots. However, Muslims do not respect their defined rights and, in some cases, these rights are only partly considered: the result is that the daily routines of Zoroastrian members of the Islamic parliament involves correspondence to resolve the cases of assault committed by police against Zoroastrians who have held parties or who have carried alcohol. For instance, in 1985, Rostam Shahzadi, the first representative of the Zoroastrians in parliament, officially protested against the police who had attacked Zoroastrian gatherings while they were performing their social events, emphasising that holding happy festivals is the fundamental component of the Zoroastrian faith.

Zoroastrians: population decline and new identity challenges

Contrary to global trends, one of the immediate and observable outcomes of the improvement in Zoroastrians' level of success, urbanisation and education has been a remarkable fall in their birth rate. According to the heads of this community, this rate is about 1%, which is below the replacement rate.¹ For most Zoroastrian youth who are establishing their careers, there is little motivation to have many children. At present, the average number of children in each Zoroastrian family is one, a number that guarantees only half of the population of each successive generation. If this trend continues, their population of 20,000 will be reduced to half of that in the next generation. The present Zoroastrian representative in parliament indicated that his stance was: 'I recommend to young couples that they should have bigger families' he then continued, smiling, and stated: 'But my wife and I have just one child.'² At present, worries about population decline are deepening as the traditional extended families disappear and new marriage traditions arise. One respondent, the Zoroastrian Mubed, indicated that the age of marriage in Zoroastrian society was increasing and asserted that 'Girls delay their marriage up to 20 years of age and even after that they don't tend to have more than one child.' Mubed believed that delayed marriage was the most important factor in the reduction of the Zoroastrian population. He mentioned that: 'In the early years of the Islamic republic, our population was about 70–80,000 but now our population has dropped to one-third of that number.'

Many factors have been mentioned as reasons for not being inclined towards marriage and having children. One Zoroastrian informant indicated that the Zoroastrian community was worried about the expenses of marriage and having children. He also talked about the role of superstitions and rumours in preventing marriage, for example:

1 Personal conversation with the head of the Association of Zoroastrians.

2 Personal conversation with the Zoroastrian's representative in parliament.

We should prove this point that one of the challenges that the Zoroastrian community is facing is that our Zoroastrian women are jealous and take baseless rumours seriously; for instance, they say that this girl does not belong to our social class and is not suitable for our son. The first thing which is important for them is what his father's job is and how much money his father has.

The social strains on Zoroastrians simplified migration conditions for Zoroastrian Iranians, in comparison to Muslim Iranians, and have resulted in a reduction in the Zoroastrian population. Therefore, due to the significant emigration of Zoroastrian youth and the low birth rate, the Zoroastrian community residing in Iran has faced a drop in population in recent years. This has had a remarkable effect, weakening their identity and endangering the existence of their community. With their younger generation migrating on a large scale, the outcome has been the reduction of their population in 1970 by half. What is worrisome for Zoroastrians is seeing their culture being wiped out in the same manner: this has gone so far that Katayun Namiraniyan (2008) in an interview with a Zoroastrian weekly periodical asserted that 'our main duty is to preserve the culture.' She hopes that every Zoroastrian would play their part. Western articles and media have also announced their worries about the ongoing existence of the Zoroastrian community. In an interview with the Middle East Times, Farhad Dehnavizadeh announced his regret for the population decline of the younger generation of Zoroastrians saying that 'I am really sad that they are leaving Iran; the second generation of Zoroastrians will have no images from Iran' (Farmani 2006). In a similar article, Susan Afshari highlighted the same problem and argued that 'We are the guardians of Zoroastrian ceremonies and traditions like *Mehregan*. If we leave Iran, who will preserve these ceremonies and traditions?' (Farmani 2006). However, most Zoroastrians with whom we talked during our fieldwork were planning to migrate or were encouraging their children to leave. The loss of the Zoroastrian community in Iran was upsetting for them but was not strong enough to deter them from planning to migrate to the West for a better life. However, most claimed that they liked Iran and, if one day conditions changed in Iran, they would return. Most respondents agreed with the fact that, despite the discrimination and prejudice from the Muslim majority, they had a much easier life in comparison to Muslims themselves and, in most cases, living in Iran was not unbearable. The formal policy of the Association of Zoroastrians was to discourage migration, but they could not do much in this regard.

Studies undertaken among the Zoroastrian community have shown that the main concern of Zoroastrians is to preserve their faith at any cost (Fakouhi 2010). One respondent said:

Today the most crucial challenge for us is to survive. We have to confess this complicated challenge in that our ancestors migrated to India, which was the only thing they could do to preserve their community which was on the verge of extinction. Even the inbound migrations inside Iran were carried out in order to preserve the sacred fire, for instance, the fire of Kerman fire temple was first brought from the west of Iran, that is, Azerbaijan. Unfortunately today, our

migrations are not done for the purpose of preserving our society or Zoroastrian faith. It is a blind migration which does not follow any purpose.

Concern about the migration of Zoroastrians was one of the prominent features of the election campaign of the three Zoroastrian candidates who sought to win the parliamentary election. One of the candidates called this problem ‘an important and serious issue which needs to be investigated,’ adding that: ‘in case the purpose of migration was education and then coming back to the country, then it could be considered as a positive act, but if the purpose was a permanent stay, then it is not right.’ He complained that ‘not only youth but also their families leave Iran.’ The Zoroastrians’ current representative in parliament also said that, in relation to this problem, they have formed a specialist commission comprised of youth to investigate the underlying reasons behind the migration of Zoroastrian youth. However, the third candidate claimed that ‘we can’t simply prevent the youth from leaving the country.’ He also mentioned problems such as unemployment, low wages and housing issues that had given rise to the low rate of marriage. However, he expressed his hope that a solution for this problem could be found with the help of the Zoroastrian assembly along with other organisations.

Although the above-mentioned problems were not exclusive to Zoroastrians and were similar for all Iranians living in Iran, like other religious minorities, Zoroastrians were provided with more chances to emigrate as religious refugees to Western countries. In most cases, Zoroastrians took these chances and embarked on emigration. The Islamic Republic of Iran is seemingly not worried about the high rate of migration of religious minorities, because there is no system planned to reduce this rate. The policies of organisations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees are to ease the migration process of Iranian religious minorities.

Since the 1990s, Zoroastrians residing in Iran have developed some strategies to solve this identity challenge that has arisen from the fall in their population growth. Reforms within the Zoroastrian religion have been an acceptable response, but these changes have had an accelerating rate. Most of these reforms involved the simplification of religious rituals and festivals so that most of these rituals could be performed in the form of leisure; thus, we could employ the term “holy leisure” meaning a process of simplification of religious rituals and festivals whose purpose is to attract more Zoroastrians, especially ordinary people, to these rituals. Sanctification and desanctification are dichotomies that have played a fundamental role in the generation and regeneration of the identity of Zoroastrians residing in Iran.

Sanctification and desanctification: a way to pass through the new identity crisis

From long ago, religion has played a fundamental role in the formation of human identity. Although religious identity has faded or been fully abandoned in favour of newly-emerging modern identities, the identity challenge of religious minorities in generating a meaningful identity different from the dominant majority still revolves around religion.



Figure 2: Sadeh Celebration, celebrated 50 days before the Iranian New Year

The Zoroastrian minority living in Iran believes that they alone are preserving the ancient civilisation of this land. They share many commonalities with other Iranians in terms of feelings of dependency and a sense of belonging to a group because Iranian Zoroastrians are loyal to the faith of their ancestors. Through their efforts to respond to religious challenges, the followers of this religious minority have frequently modified the features that form their ethnic identity as well as their religious rituals and beliefs through processes involving their sanctification and desanctification. The purpose of these modifications has been to define the elements that construct their identity, on the one hand, distinguishing the *self* from *others* and, on the other, regenerating their identity. Sanctification refers to the process on the basis of which the believers of a faith tend to establish religious dependencies within the scope of their beliefs. During this process, at times, they even propose some non-religious elements in a sanctified manner in order to postulate a religious load for these elements. The term *desanctification* refers to the process during which the believers of a faith try to moderate the sacredness of some religious elements through the simplification of religious rituals, proposing new items that were hitherto prohibited. The purpose of desanctification was to cope with the new challenge of identity for the Zoroastrians, which was a threat that could lead to their cultural fading away as a result of their population decline.

The Zoroastrian minority residing in Iran has frequently modified their sacred elements in order to preserve their cultural identity. At times, their religious rituals, ceremonies and fundamental beliefs have faded into the background or even been ignored. This simplification process has, at times, gone so far that it has even generated a new religious identity. Sometimes, the reverse process has been adopted in which the religious elements have been emphasised in order to generate a stable religious identity.

According to historical accounts, most of the sanctifying measures taken among Zoroastrians occurred during the Sasanian Empire: these included gathering and compiling the *Avesta* (the sacred texts of Zoroastrianism), building various fire temples, establishing a systematic religious structure; revising the calendar, and the avoidance of the use of images in religious rituals (Boyce 2001). The idea of sanctification was the central motive behind these historical processes carried out by Zoroastrians. These processes were constantly observed and emphasised following the formation of a religious hierarchy and mutual interaction between kings and *Mubeds*.³ The orientation of these processes was diverted following the rise of Islam in Iran leading to the formation of new sanctification centres.

Among the various desanctifying measures taken by Zoroastrians with regard to post-Islamic-revolution Muslims was the denial of Cyrus's tomb, claiming that this tomb actually belonged to the mother of the prophet Solomon and not to Cyrus. This was an action taken to preserve Zoroastrian symbols and religious places: the result was the admission of this claim by Muslims who dedicated their sacrifices and bounties to this tomb. These actions were observed with other Zoroastrian religious places and were indicative of the formation of a sanctifying attitude along with ingenious initiatives that were compatible with the new conditions. The results of such compatibility were greater harmonisation and the replacement for Zoroastrians of some ethnic-national commonalities on the basis of their religious-national identity. Naturally, this process was not done constantly and, through the ages, Zoroastrian intellectuals have tried to respond to the ambiguities proposed by Muslims through writing many books and explaining Zoroastrians' religious rituals and traditions. That is why most of the books remaining from the 9th century are concerned with Zoroastrian religious practices, such as religious rituals, purification, and daily religious rituals and rights (Boyce 2001).

In order to explain Zoroastrians' understanding of what constitutes a holy place and the type of identity challenge created by it, it should be mentioned that the *Adrayn* or fire temple is one of the holy places where religious practices are performed, regardless of the historical process of revival, closure or changed function of the fire temples after Islam. It should be mentioned that the most sacred fire from Zoroastrians' point of view is *Vahram* fire. In Iran, the sacred fire of Vahram remaining from the Sasanian Empire is preserved in the fire temple in Yazd. In order to respect this fire place, the conduct of the followers of Zoroastrianism is controlled to a great extent. Even the Mubeds and priests pay serious attention to not polluting the fire with their saliva. Yet one of the interesting points about developments in recent years is that from the point of view of the Zoroastrian faith, Muslims are permitted to visit the Vahram fire. The right to visit the Vahram fire from behind a glass door is indicative of a two-sided process of desanctifying and sanctifying. This simultaneously illustrates the process of harmonisation and the emphasis on indices of religious identity. There is no prohibition on Muslims in terms of visiting the Zoroastrian fire temple in Kerman. One part of the desanctifying process can be seen in opening the Zoroastrian fire temples for visits by the public, an initiative that was not previously common. The public can continue to visit the fire temples freely without any religious constraints.

³ A Mubed is a Zoroastrian priest with a special rank.

Earth is one of the other holy places for Zoroastrians and is represented by the symbol of six *Spentamaz* (one of the six *spenta*), which should not be polluted. Towers of silence are the phenomena created by this belief. According to the Zoroastrian faith, at the time of death, first the *dive of Nasu* (the demon, Nasu) penetrates the body and makes the person die. That is why death is a devilish phenomenon: the corpse is filthy and should not touch the earth. That is the reason corpses are left on rocks: this allows the flesh to decompose over time and then the bones are taken and preserved in *ustudan* (the place for the bones). These rituals are no longer practiced in Iran due to cultural and environmental considerations. In order to preserve the purity of the earth, Zoroastrians used to create a protective layer between the corpse and the earth so that the corpse would not touch the earth. It seems that these rituals have been desanctified in order to create more compatibility with current conditions (Boyce 2001).

Another instance of the desanctifying process was the giving of permission for Muslims to attend Zoroastrian religious rituals. Today, in Tehran, Zoroastrians promote the attendance of Muslims at Zoroastrian religious rituals and ancient national festivals and charge them entrance fees. Nowadays, military bands accompany the *Sade* festivals, and menstruating women are not forced to stay in covered areas. These can also be regarded as instances of desanctifying processes undertaken by Zoroastrians to create harmonisation, simplification and regeneration of a new modern identity. To allow Muslims to take part in the *Sade* festivals and other ancient festivals is not only indicative of a desanctification process, but also is an attempt to introduce Zoroastrian rituals and ancient festivals to the Shi'a-dominated Iranian society. It is also indicative of Zoroastrians' efforts to show their cultural-religious identity to others and overcome their new identity crisis.

In addition to some desanctifying efforts, some sanctifying processes have also been observable, such as preserving the endowments⁴ in Kerman and Yazd and going back to them during the performance of festivals such as the six festivals of *Gahanbar* and other religious rituals. The clerics' emphasis on observing order and discipline in performing the rituals is a symbol of the regeneration of this sanctification. On the first day that I went to the Association of Zoroastrians in Kerman to submit my letter of introduction, the conversation with the head of the association mainly revolved around the legal process of reviving the endowments of the association in the nearby cities and around Kerman. Some members of the association had been selected to be in charge of following the case. Their emphasis on reviving the Zoroastrians' endowments and releasing them from illegal confiscation by Muslims, and on holding the religious festivals and rituals were all indicative of the sanctification process among Zoroastrians. Using these endowments to conduct group excursions and camping trips for a few days, as organised by the women's organisation within the Association of Zoroastrians, shows their attempts to preserve their heritage that had been forgotten over previous decades.

⁴ Refers to funds or property donated to institutions or individuals.

Holy leisure: the outcome of the dichotomy processes of sanctification and desanctification

For Zoroastrians, holding religious festivals, fairs, and rituals are a way both to remember their past and to use it to regenerate their new identity. The editor-in-chief of the Zoroastrians' newsletter told me that:

Over the past years, the focus of attention for Zoroastrian festivals was informing [people] about the religious and philosophical significance of these festivals but recently, the head of the Association of Zoroastrians has included many activities especially recreational and leisure activities in these religious events.

He believed that the purpose of these modifications was to attract the younger generation and consequently to reduce the migration rate. To permit Muslim visitors and visitors from other religions to attend the Zoroastrian rituals is seen as a way to regenerate the Zoroastrian identity. The researcher attended almost all of the Zoroastrian religious festivals. In one case, the researcher observed that organisers spent their time in two main activities. Firstly, they decorated the environment with coloured papers, flowers and images from the sacred and ancient monuments respected by Zoroastrians. These images usually suited the content of each ceremony. Secondly, they spent a significant amount of time preparing the youth for their performances, which included reading sacred texts, reading Zoroaster's teachings, music, and group dance. These activities promoted the religious identity of Zoroastrians by educating youth and others about the Zoroastrian ethics and rituals.

As mentioned before, the Zoroastrian community, in recent decades, has witnessed remarkable developments in their economic prosperity and their population. These developments have been accompanied by some cultural changes. For instance, their religious perception and practices have changed, their attendance to religious rituals has decreased (they perform religious rituals less and less day by day) and, increasingly, they have focused on the ethical-recreational (Foltz 2011) aspects of the rituals. Simplification of Zoroastrian religious rituals and a lack of emphasis on legitimating the rituals were also observed, which was characteristic of the Zoroastrian faith during the Sasanian Empire. In most cases, these changes have benefitted the validation of the Associations of Zoroastrian Mubed so that this was no longer such a burden for ordinary people.

Zoroastrian custodians have committed themselves to improving the quality of life and religion of Zoroastrians. During this study's fieldwork, the Zoroastrians were busy renovating buildings that had been newly released from being occupied by others or by the person who previously owned them. These buildings were, in fact, the places in which Zoroastrian religious festivals, rituals, and outdoor recreation and leisure were held. According to bans applied by the Islamic Republic of Iran, Zoroastrians cannot build new fire temples. In comparison to the past, members of the Zoroastrian community have fewer problems accessing the places where these rituals are held because transportation is provided to take them and to bring them home. New sports complexes have been built for them. Some of these complexes are multifunctional. In addition, the Association



Figure 3: Gahanbar Celebration, an ancient Zoroastrian celebration

of Zoroastrians has requested that Zoroastrians go beyond this simple improvement of Zoroastrian society, maintaining their desirability and freshness within the borders of the Shi'a-dominated society of Iran and continuing to survive. Today, Zoroastrians no longer exhibit their art exhibitions in Zoroastrian environments; rather, they are held in public areas open for visits by the public where they show their arts and handicrafts. Some of their festivals, such as those which feature Zoroastrian cuisine, are accessible for visits by the public outside Zoroastrian environments. Today, the library of the Association of Zoroastrians and the Zoroastrian fire temples are not only open for Zoroastrians, but they are also open for access by the public. Entering the Association for Zoroastrians is free for almost everyone with apparently no prohibitions for anyone. These changes are all indicative of the simplification of Zoroastrian rituals and festivals. They have paved the way for the desanctifying process of some matters previously considered to be sacred, in order to reconstruct and revive the Zoroastrian identity.

In fact, Iranian Zoroastrians have changed significantly in recent decades. Even the residents of Sharif Abad village known as the Iranian citadel of Zoroastrianism (whose lifestyle and daily rituals were portrayed by Mary Boyce in her famous study conducted

in 1963–1964) have all migrated to urban areas (Boyce 1977). The Zoroastrians' *Sedreh-Koshti pushi* ritual (which involved the wearing of the holy belt and undershirt used to characterise Zoroastrians' identity over the centuries as required in order to participate in religious rituals) are now held in a very cheerful, public and recreational manner, and the old strict traditions and rituals no longer exist. Most of the festivals like *Gahanbar* have lost their religious formalities with mainly their recreational and leisure aspects remaining. For instance, the long hours of praying have been reduced to 30 or at most 40 minutes. Limitations on entering sacred places have been somewhat reduced: the sacred fire temples in Iran whose fires have been burning for 1500 years have also been open to visits by the public and tourists. Today, the only Zoroastrian museum of anthropology located in Kerman, which contains many Zoroastrian documents, texts, sacred books, traditional clothes and a symbolic image of a Zoroastrian fire temple, attracts visitors from all over Iran. Websites belonging to Zoroastrians also promote the recreational and leisure programs and ask their fellow believers to cooperate with them. In one case, the *Amordad* website, one of the most famous Zoroastrian websites, sought a response to the question 'What is your suggestion for regularly holding recreational programs?' What was interesting was that most suggestions emphasised that the programs should be happy and cheerful with more focus on recreational aspects.

Rethinking identities through hybridisation

Cultural hybridisation refers to 'the ways in which forms become separated from existing practices and recombine with new forms in new practices' (Pieterse 2000:64). The identities are not independently assimilated or altered but, instead, elements of cultures are incorporated to create a new hybrid culture. The result is a form of hybridity that 'signifies the encounter, conflict, and/or blending of two ethnic or cultural categories which, while by no means pure and distinct in nature, tend to be understood and experienced as meaningful identity labels by members of these categories' (Lo 2002). As García Canclini stated: 'hybridization is "sociocultural processes in which discrete structures or practices, previously existing in separate form, are combined to generate new structures, objects, and practices"' (2005: xxv).

Changes in the Zoroastrian rituals, traditions, and festivals have depended on the fundamental development of those ideas and beliefs that have created the essence of those rituals, festivals, and traditions. Contrary to the slow trend of changes undergone by the Zoroastrian written traditions and ancient rituals before 1950, since then, the performance of these traditions has stepped into a new world that is no longer sacred but, rather, is secular. In the secular world, in the hierarchy of new conceptual values, and in the era of the superiority of technology and science, the performance of old rituals and traditions has no value. Developments that had happened before this date have paved the way for the new forms of Zoroastrian traditions, rituals, and festivals.

Most of the traditions, festivals, and rituals performed up to 1970 are no longer even taught to children. Even observing and applying them seems to be unreasonable and odd. It should therefore be inferred that the old traditions of Zoroastrians have undergone drastic changes. These traditions, which once had a determinant role as an

independent unit in the general construction of the society's culture, have no longer been able to preserve that old role, thus losing their position in the minds of the holders of those traditions. The rationale behind this development is the transition from the era of sacredness to the era of secularity.

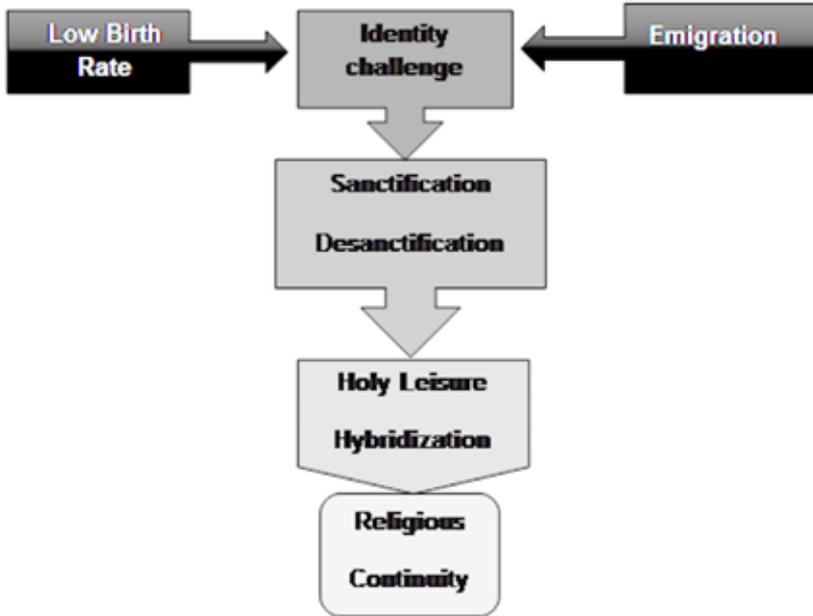


Figure 4: Paradigmatic model of religious continuity among Zoroastrians

Throughout such a change, only one or some of the constructing components are eliminated, but the whole collection, its name and its identity remains the same. The role and position of the whole set and the independent identity of the tradition might be modified in order to match the new conditions and to be sustained within them. Thus, one or some of the constructing components can be eliminated, changed, or even added without damaging the essence and totality of a tradition.

Even modification or elimination of the role and position of a significant part of an independent set comprising an independent tradition might result in the surface of a tradition remaining; however, even this can be regarded as a minor change and development within a bigger unit, and the identity and main meaning of the bigger units might not change. In this case, the totality of the bigger unit preserves a sketch of the tradition and helps it to survive although only a name or an opaque image remains, or it may fully vanish. It is even possible that a small part of a certain tradition, which is a member of a unit, survives independently and survives singly so that its relation to the old tradition is entirely forgotten. These mechanisms guarantee both change and survival of the tradition so long as factors preserving that tradition in the whole culture and thought of society survive, and providing that it has not been eliminated by other significant changes (Mazdapour 2004).

It is in the consequence of these mechanisms that we can observe the slow trend of the development of written rituals and traditions of Iranian Zoroastrians before 1950. Despite constant developments, the totality and the central meaning of the old traditions and rituals have been preserved. The created changes not only have not eliminated the old traditions: they have also created a kind of solidarity and coherence in society through the developments created in the old traditions. These traditions have been so reliable and coherent that they have functioned as the main pillar to preserve and carry the ancient culture despite the fact that it has been exposed to challenges and danger.

Both the ease created following the abolition of the *jizya* (1882 AD) for the Zoroastrian community in Iran and the value given to the old Iranian culture during recent periods have created a valuable position and role for old traditions in the hierarchy of personal and social values and people's mentality. These new roles and values will help the surviving remainder of these traditions to flourish once again and to gain a new trend and form. As a result, in comparison to the old traditions before 1950, new items have been added to the inventory of festivals.

The way each component of the tradition can survive depends both on the nature of that tradition itself and the type of relationship that this tradition builds with the other comprising units of traditions of the society. Zoroastrian Mubeds have preserved these traditions for many millenniums. Today, they welcome the changes and, in some cases, they themselves even lead these changes. Agreements based of old religious jurisprudence have been the origin of many developments in the present traditions of the Zoroastrian community in Iran and have functioned as an independent factor in the change of old traditions. Undoubtedly, the beliefs of the time have played a significant role in these changes. Most of these traditions will continue to survive as long as positive and supporting points help them to survive and guarantee their preservation.

The developments that Zoroastrian rituals and festivals have undergone during their transition from the sacred world to the secular world have not resulted in the elimination of these rituals and festivals: rather, we have witnessed the formation of joint types of traditions, which are neither fully secular nor fully sacred. In modern anthropology, this process is the outcome of the presence of modernity in all aspects of human life. From the viewpoint of modern anthropology, we do not have just one single modernism or tradition; rather, there is an infinite number of versions of modernism and an infinite number of traditions, each of which has its own features and characteristics (Arce & Long 2000).

Moreover, we do not observe any clear and obvious sort of separation and parting in the relationship between tradition and modernism; rather we face a very complicated line of cultural phenomena that connect the past and present. Therefore, as mentioned before, in this line we observe the formation of phenomena, called "joint phenomena" or sometimes "mixed-oriented phenomena". Joints are entities that are the outcome of the collapse and decomposition of modernism as a global and imported pattern whose reformation in the form of new modernism results in the formation of a new and endless number of other versions of modernism. This process is called "reconfiguration" (*ibid.*).

The other point about the joint forms created from the unity of modernism and tradition is that we see a kind of contradiction in terms of their form and content: modern

forms with traditional content or traditional forms with modern content. In terms of the secularisation of many religious rituals, the changes created in the traditional context do not eliminate the rituals; rather, new contexts are created that change the existing varying degrees of modernism to different forms and representations of new modernism with new interpretations. As a result, these new forms are used for their own survival. Therefore, in this way, the separation and contradiction between tradition and modernism turns to a constant process of mutual impact and mutual actions in both areas.

Conclusion

The sharp fall in the population growth of the Zoroastrian community in Iran due to both the low birth rate and the migration of their youth abroad on a vast scale has forced Iran's Zoroastrian community to confront a new identity challenge: its survival. The main concern of Zoroastrians residing in Iran is to survive at any price. In addition, due to the historically strict rules concerning the wide participation of youth in Zoroastrian religious rituals, Zoroastrians have lost their motivation for attending these rituals.

The formation and endurance of the identity of the investigated minority have always been dependent on the social and historical conditions in which they have been situated. This minority has experienced the constant replacement of beliefs through processes of desanctifying and sanctifying used in tandem to regenerate their identity. They have tried to tackle the challenge of Zoroastrian population loss caused by low birth rate through the simplification and desanctification of religious festivals and rituals and, in some cases, sanctification.

In order to achieve the simplification of religious rituals and festivals, the Zoroastrian minority has embarked on desanctifying measures and, only in certain cultural and sometimes political situations, have they adopted sanctifying measures. Such a process perhaps owes itself to the mentality that Zoroastrians propose for themselves and other Iranians. They consider themselves as the heirs of their ancestral religion who live in their homeland. Iranian Zoroastrians also honour their racial origin. As they have not mixed with other minorities and Muslims, they consider themselves to be a pure and clean Aryan race. Despite marriages between Iranians and other minorities or ethnicities such as Arabs and Mongols, Zoroastrians have never considered themselves as alien to other Iranians. They have not drawn a thick line between Us and Them in order to distinguish themselves from Muslims. Wherever they have been allowed to do so by other Iranians, Zoroastrians have peacefully coexisted beside them. A Muslim never feels a stranger among Zoroastrians especially as their common language is Persian, and they speak in the Behdini dialect.

This investigated minority has followed their identity-constructing processes through two lines of desanctifying and sanctifying. There was a meaningful difference in both foci selected by the investigated minority in terms of following up or refraining from the discussed ideas. To summarise, it can be argued that the Zoroastrian minority has followed a distinguishing trend to varying degrees. This distinction has been through reducing the desanctifying measures or fortifying the sanctifying measures, a process which, despite the extensive cultural developments in Iran, still makes it possible to

distinguish the difference between the minority and the majority. Despite the reduction in their population and following the decrease in external pressures, Zoroastrians' social lives are conspicuously lively. They attend religious rituals; religious events; art exhibitions and theatres; outdoor recreational excursions, such as picnics or walking; educational programs like religious education, scientific workshops, lectures historical topics, or computer classes; and, most prominently, sports' activities. These are some signs that can be interpreted either as the liveliness of the Zoroastrian community or its alarmed efforts to survive.

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Povzetek

Cilj te antropološke raziskave je bil ugotoviti, kako iranski zoroastrianci ohranjajo svojo religijo skozi proces posvetitve in razsvetitve in na ta način preprečujejo izgubo identitete. Zoroastrianizem, ki obstaja tudi v Iranu, je najstarejša religija na svetu. Čeprav se je populacija zoroastriancev v Iranu skozi čas manjšala, je od osemdesetih let dvajsetega stoletja prišlo do izrazitega upada zaradi nizke natalitete in izseljevanja zoroastriancev v tujino. Težava upada ostaja in je postal izziv za zoroastriansko skupnost. V naporih, da bi našli odgovore na verske izzive, je zoroastrianska religiozna skupnost pogosto spreminjala značilnosti, ki so oblikovale njeno etnično identiteto ter verske obrede, ceremonije in praznovanja skozi procese posvetitve in razsvetitve. Namen teh sprememb je bilo spopadanje z novimi izzivi identitete, ki bi na eni strani lahko pripeljali do kulturnega odmiranja zaradi upada populacije, na drugi strani pa bi ustrezni odgovori na te izzive lahko povzročili tudi identitetno regeneracijo. Skozi te procese njihovi verski obredi, slovesnosti in praznovanja postajajo vse bolj posvetne prostočasne prakse, te hibridne oblike pa ne zgedajo niti religiozne niti prostočasne. Vseeno pa ti procesi zagotavljajo obstoj in nadaljevanje njihove religije.

KLUČNE BESEDE: zoroastrianizem, posvečenje, razsvetitev, prosti čas, hibridizacija

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