



BĀJ (ZOROASTRIANISM)

BĀJ, a principal Zoroastrian observance meaning primarily “utterance of consecration;” reference to *bāj* has been current in Mazdean literature since at least Sasanian times, spelled in Book Pahlavi *w’c*, Middle Persian *wāz*, Parthian *wāj*, and variously *wāj*, *wāž*, *bāj*, *bāž*, *bāz* in New Persian. Boyce and Kotwal, in their exhaustive studies of *bāj*, explain the term as deriving from Old Iranian *wā/āk*– “word, speech” and follow Tavadia’s definition of *bāj* as a “particular essential formula” which precedes, accompanies, or follows an action (J. C. Tavadia, in *Dinshah Irani Memorial Volume*, pt. 2; Boyce and Kotwal, I, p. 57). Always recited in Avestan language, *bāj* serves to frame ritual actions with a symbolic boundary of sacred speech (just as the physical boundary of the *karš* “furrow” known as *pāvi* is drawn around the actual location of a religious ritual). A *bāj* must be recited without faltering, and only the prescribed actions (and none other) may be performed under the protection of that *bāj*. The major Zoroastrian liturgical rite, the *yasna*, is held to be so powerful in itself that its initial and concluding *bāj* are simply one recitation of the prayer *ašəm vohū*, by each priest, before and after the ceremony. Integral parts of the *yasna* ritual, however, have their own *bāj*, when the two celebrant priests “give” and “take” *bāj* between themselves to maintain the utmost cooperation, “so that their full ritual power (*amal*) may be concentrated in order to make more effective the rite about to be performed” (Boyce and Kotwal, I, p. 60). A shorter form of the *yasna* ceremony (*yašt ī keh*) contains a *bāj* which is called *yašt ī drōn* “service of the *drōn*” (because there it encloses the ritual tastings of the *drōn* “sacred portion [of bread]”). The *yašt ī drōn* was said as a service in its own right as a *bāj ī nān xwardan* “*bāj* for eating bread,” i.e., as a grace for



eating food at normal daily meals. Just as in temple services after the initial *bāj* was spoken no words other than those of the accompanying *bāj* might be pronounced, so with *bāj ī nān xwardan* silence was maintained until the concluding *bāj* was spoken after the meal. In liturgical and domestic contexts, if any other speech was necessary it was uttered *bista* “with closed [lips]” (New Persian *basta*, cf. Middle Persian *māwāg* “inarticulate[ly]”). Nowadays in Iran only priests eat with *bāj*, as also in India where Parsi priests do so only when maintaining high states of ritual purity and for festivals. *Yašt ī drōn*, which is known by the generic term *bāj* among Parsi Zoroastrians, is said as a powerful prophylactic prayer for many actions in daily life; such a *bāj* is dedicated to the *yazad* whose protection is believed to be strongest for the particular action. E.g., *Srōš* is invoked to protect against decay and death (for funerary and purification rites, etc.). Forms of *bāj* have functioned as frames for the highest religious and also the most personal human actions, and as such they have exerted a force of discipline and control upon Zoroastrian community and individual.

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