



ZOROASTRIAN RITUALS

ZOROASTRIAN RITUALS. Ritual has been variously theorized in recent decades (Kreinath, Snoek, and Stausberg). While the category remains elusive, the formative social importance of ritual is by now generally acknowledged even in Zoroastrian studies (Stausberg, 2004a). The [Gathas](#) are now interpreted by many (e.g., Kellens and Pirart; Skjærvø, 2002; idem, 2003; Cantera) as sacrificial poetry rather than sermons by a prophet. Most contemporary Zoroastrians, however, define their religious identity in ethical and subjective terms, namely as a commitment to “good thoughts, good words, and good deeds” and the individual choice of the autonomous believer. This is probably a modern development, reflecting various projects to reform the religion stimulated by exposure to colonialism in India and nationalism in Iran (Stausberg, 2002; Ringer). While the success of such reforms was limited in India, they were pursued by a modernizing lay community leadership (spearheaded by Arbāb Kaykōsrow Šāhroḡ) and, later, by liberal high priests in Tehran.

In Iran, this policy resulted in rather dramatic changes taking the forms of substitution (e.g., disposal of the dead [see [BURIAL iii](#)] replaced by burial), abandonment (e.g., the use of cow’s urine [[gōmēz](#)] as a cleansing agent), reduction (e.g., the number of times consecrated fires are given ritual care on a daily basis), relaxation (e.g., the requirements for ritual purity), and innovation (e.g., the introduction of weekly congressional prayer sessions in some places or more bourgeois settings, such as priests sitting on chairs at tables rather than on the ground, or women becoming formally appointed as



[assistant] priests, *mobedyār*).

As Zoroastrians left their bounded space and sought to become part of Iranian mainstream society, ritual boundaries were downplayed and the ritual function of the emblematic fire was de-emphasized. At the same time, shrines and pilgrimage places (*pirān* or *ziāratgāh*; e.g., Bānu Pars) of various size and types, which are unconnected to the cult of fire, have been thriving inconspicuously (Langer). The shrine Pīr-e Sabz (Green Shrine), also known as Pīr-e Sabz-e Čak-ak Kuh, “drip-drip-mountain” [commonly interpreted as a diminutive of Čak]; for this shrine see Boyce, pp. 255-62; Afšār, I, pp. 63-65; II, pp. 855-58; Langer, pp. 328-51) is located in the desert east of [Ardakān-e Yazd](#) at the northeastern end of the plain of Yazd. The annual pilgrimage to this shrine, held for several days in mid-June, has become a kind of national event for Iranian Zoroastrians. Images of the shrine can be found in many Zoroastrian homes in Iran.

In India, visits to Ātaš Bahrām fire temples, in particular to the one at Udvaḍa (see [IRĀNŠĀH](#)), are often referred to as pilgrimages. In contrast to the Iranian case, however, the involvement of the Parsis in modern (colonial and post-colonial) Indian society went along with an affirmation of their ethnic identity, including religious and ritual boundaries. In present-day Iran, non-Zoroastrians can enter many fire temples, but this is still not the case in India.

Secondary sources such as the reports by non-Zoroastrian authors writing in Greek, Latin, Syriac, Armenian, Arabic, or Persian give glimpses of non-priestly perspectives and practices, while almost all primary sources on Zoroastrian religion in pre-modern languages (starting from the Avesta) were written by priests. Accordingly, in these sources one finds intricate discussions of ritual matters, but they only provide very limited information on popular practices, for example in relation to feasts and festivals (see [FESTIVALS i. ZOROASTRIAN](#); [GĀHĀNBĀR](#); [SADA FESTIVAL](#)) or life cycle ceremonies such as initiations or weddings. Besides reflecting the particular ideologies, values, and interests of the priestly authors, this lack points to the importance of the professional priesthood values for Zoroastrian history, even in the present age. In interviews with non-priestly Zoroastrians about the priesthood conducted by the present author in Mumbai in 2007, the overwhelming majority of the 101 respondents affirmed that the priesthood was necessary in Zoroastrianism.

Sources from pre-Islamic Iran attest that the [magi](#) performed a variety of tasks



in addition to the purely ritual ones; they were involved in administration, education, politics, and legal affairs. In Sasanian times, the clergy was reorganized in the form of a hierarchy. In the centuries after the Arab conquest, when Zoroastrianism became a religious minority, the priesthood was decoupled from the state, but priests probably continued to act as community leaders. A few centuries after the loss of power, the term *dastur* (priest, authority, minister) emerged to denote the higher ranks of the priesthood with the *dastur-e dasturān* (high priest) or *dastur-e mas* at the top (nowadays, this title is more one of prestige rather than of power). In the early modern period the laity, often wealthy landowners and agriculturists, merchants, and traders, assumed preeminence in the community leadership. Modern community organizations such as the [Bombay Parsi Panchayat](#) and the [Anjoman-e Zartoštīān](#) are dominated by the laity; priests are consulted in religious matters.

In Iran, shortly after the Islamic Revolution of 1978-79, an outspoken Zoroastrian priest, Mobed Rostam Šāhzādi (1912-2000), made his voice heard at the Assembly of Experts (Majles-e Kōbragān), where the four acknowledged religious minorities were represented by religious leaders (Sanasarian, 2000, pp. 58-72). Šāhzādi is an example of modern Iranian priests who were critical of many inherited ritual traditions and blamed the great influence of the clergy for the downfall of the Sasanian empire. In India and Pakistan, the Parsi priest [Dastur Maneckji Nusserwani Dhalla](#) (1875-1956) abandoned many rituals in favor of an ethicist, intellectualist, and devotional form of Zoroastrianism, but as a profession the priesthood in the subcontinent has continued its main role as providers of ritual services to their clients.

In both Iran and India, the number of priests has declined sharply in modern times. In India, most priests are nowadays trained in special boarding schools in Mumbai, where they also receive secular education. In India, priests are initiated before the onset of puberty, but in Iran only adults are trained as priests. While there is some evidence for women playing active parts in the performance of public religious rituals in Sasanian times (see *Nērangestān* 22.1-5, and discussion in Elman), for the past millennium or so the priesthood has been an all-male profession, and entry is restricted by genealogy (but in Iran, in 2011, eight Zoroastrian women were formally recognized as [assistant] priests, termed *mobedyār*). In India, not all of those who are initiated into the priesthood will pursue this as a profession later in life; priests who work as full-time practicing priests are nowadays referred to as *mobed*, the others as



ērvad (see [HĒRBED](#)).

Water and fire are central agents and elements in Zoroastrian rituals. Before the introduction of electricity, the domestic hearth fire was the ritual/religious focus of the homes, and the development of fire temples (the exact introduction of which remains unclear) can be seen as an extension of the cult of the domestic fires. There were several classifications of fires. In India, a distinction in three grades (*Ātaš Bahrām*, *Ādorān*, *Dādgāh*; see [ĀTAŠ](#)) is still maintained in ritual practice, while this has become obsolete in Iran. Several temples have been erected in the diaspora (several in North America, referred to as *Darb-e Mehr*; see [DAR-e MEHR](#), which in India refers to one part of a temple), but, at present time, none of them houses a fully consecrated fire. By their consecration, temple fires are traditionally considered as ritual agents in their own right, having their own personalities. The recital at the [Ātaš Nyāyišn](#), together with the offering of dry wood (and fragrance), is traditionally the key act of daily temple worship, which is to be performed in each of the five divisions of the day (*gāh*). Believers are likewise expected to say their prayers in each of these five *gāhs*. Not only priests but also lay people among the Parsis report of experiences and expectations related to some fire(s). Indian temples need to have a well to draw fresh water for some rituals, and visitors to the temples can be seen praying at the wells. In colonial India, many wells, which often were held to be the abode of spirits, were closed for reasons of hygiene. In central south Mumbai, the Bhikha Behram Well continues to serve as a site of worship for Zoroastrians (non-Parsis are not admitted). In Iran, wells, springs, and ponds often serve as the natural basis for shrines (Stausberg, 2004b, pp. 258-62).

Fires need to be purified (for which there are special techniques) before being consecrated. Purity is a key concept in most Zoroastrian rituals, which require ritually pure spaces, performers, and implements. Recurrent acts of [cleansing](#) such as the [pādyāb](#), which also involve prayers, are a feature of daily life of Zoroastrians; thereby, ideally, if one follows the prescriptions of the priestly texts, one's life becomes heavily ritualized from morning to night. Daily affairs such as eating, sleeping, or going to the toilet involve rites of purification. Simple purifications can be done by every believer, but more severe forms of pollution require rituals of purification performed by priests such as the *sāde-nāhn* and the [barašnom](#) (Boyce, 1977, pp. 111-12). The latter requires a separate ritual site. The priestly concept of purity, involving more than the absence of pollution, has developed into a positive quality. A state of



positive purity is a requirement for the performance of some ritual acts such as the worship of consecrated fires. Inversely, some traditions go so far as to deny prayer to women who are in menstruation (*bīnamāzī*); at any rate, in Zoroastrianism women are advised to stay away from the fire temples and other religious sites during their period. Water serves as the main cleansing agent; cow's urine is used in addition, both as a more powerful cleansing agent and to shield water from impurity. Consecrated cow's urine, called *nirang*, considered the most powerful cleansing agent, is also applied internally in some rituals of purification such as the *sāde-nāhn*, where the candidate also chews a pomegranate-twigg. In Iran, the use of cow's urine has been abandoned.

The *pādyāb-kosti* rite (performed at the beginning of a religious ritual or as an independent act of cleansing) involves the religious garments, the shirt (*šabīg; sodra*) and the cord or girdle (*kustīg; kosti*), the wearing of which is by the priestly texts considered a basic duty of all Zoroastrians. In pre-modern times, these garments were woven by the wives of priests. According to the priestly tradition, prayer is only valid when one is wearing the shirt, so it is only when being invested with these garments that people become endowed with ritual agency. It is only with the investiture with shirt and cord/girdle that they become responsible for their own actions. This ritual of initiation is known as *sedre-puši, sedre-pušun* (putting on of the shirt) in Iran and *navjote* (popular etymology: “new birth”) in India (e.g., see Boyce, 1977, pp. 238-40 and pls. VIIa-b; Stausberg, 2004b, pp. 402-15, with clips and pictures on CDs). The investiture proper is preceded by a ritual of purification administered by a priest, who then, in the initiation proper, assists the pre-pubescent child (typically seven to ten years old in India, somewhat older in Iran) in the first public prayer with shirt and girdle/cord and then recites a litany of blessing (*tandorosti*).

Similarly, in weddings the priest(s) conduct a purification and the blessing (*āšīrvād*). In Iran, the priest typically delivers a speech of admonishment. In addition to priestly officiation, initiations and weddings (Stausberg, 2004b, pp. 402-46) cannot do without a number of auspicious objects that are prepared and displayed, or without certain rites that are performed by the women (typically mothers and aunts, but the latter only when married and not widowed). In the case of weddings, the priestly ceremony was the culmination of a series of rites (some involving fertility symbolism) and visits between the family of bride and groom. These rites have been handed down by tradition



but are nowhere mentioned in the priestly literature. For those who can afford it, initiations and weddings are the occasion for lavish meals and parties; both are therefore highly costly events and markers of social status.

In funerals (see [DEATH](#)), women play no active role. The [corpse](#) is handled by the (male) corpse-bearers (*nasā-sālārs*), but the priests take care of the ceremonies related to the transition of the soul into the other world and the recurrent post-funeral ceremonies. This is the *Sitz-im-Leben* of most priestly liturgies, which are held on behalf of the departed ones. These liturgies are by the Indian priestly tradition divided into two main categories: those that are performed “within the ritual precincts” (*pāw mahal*) and the ordinary ones (*hušmordi*); the division is also known as “inner” versus “outer” liturgies (Modi, p. 246). In the case of the ‘inner’ liturgies the ritual precinct is demarcated by furrows (*pāwi*) in the floor; in the case of ‘outer’ rituals the ritual space is demarcated by placing a cloth or a rug on the ground.

The performance of ‘inner’ liturgies requires special priestly qualifications and entails the following characteristics: the recitation of the Avestan *Yasna* (either entirely, or sections thereof, or entirely but with further additions and embedded in other Avestan texts); the use of specific implements (see [ĀLĀT](#)) such as the sacred twigs ([barsom](#)); the marking, consecration, and tasting of a specific type of small flat bread (see [DRŌN](#)) and the preparation by mixing, pounding, and recitation of [haoma](#), which is today made out of goat milk and water (see [JIWĀM](#)), ephedra twigs and pomegranate twigs, pounded in a mortar. The standard ‘inner’ rituals are the *bāj-dharnā* or *drōn yašt* (Karanjia), where no *haoma* is produced, and the *Yasna*. Among the ‘inner’ rituals, the most complex one is the [nirang ceremony](#), which needs to be held from time to time in order to produce consecrated water and consecrated cow’s urine (*nirang*; MP *nērang*), these materials are (India), or were (Iran), indispensable for the performance of some rituals of purification. The ‘outer’ liturgies can be performed by any priest, or even qualified lay persons.

In contrast to the ‘inner’ liturgies, the texts recited in the ‘outer’ ceremonies are not dependent on the *Yasna*, but on the *Ḳorda Avesta* (see [KHORDEH AVESTĀ](#); moreover, Middle Persian texts are added to a greater extent. Standard ‘outer’ liturgies are the [āfrinagān](#), the [farokši](#), and [stūm](#). In all of them different sorts of food items such as cooked food (including meat), wine (now generally discontinued), dried and fresh fruit (especially pomegranate, bananas, dates, and grapes), milk, water, and lime juice are consecrated. In Iran, melons are widely used; in India, coconuts. In Iran, a mixture of several



(often seven) types of dried fruits (e.g., “*senjed* [the fruit of the oleaster], dates, raisins, walnuts, almonds, dried apricots, plums, and mulberries”; Boyce, 1977, p. 38) called *lorik* is used in all such rituals. In rural areas of Iran, women also prepare *sir-o-sedāb*, that is, garlic and rue (with some added herbs, seeds and spice) fried in hot oil and then cooled down by adding vinegar and water, thereby producing steam and an auspicious aroma (cf. ESFAND; Stausberg, 2004b, pp. 46-58).

The main medium of Zoroastrian rituals are words. Zoroastrian rituals (even those performed by lay women in Iran; see Phalippou for a detailed but sometimes speculative treatment) are verbal events, mainly comprising recitation of texts. In the case of the Iranian women, these folk- or fairy-tale like narrations are recited in the Zoroastrian dialect (see [BEHDINĀN DIALECT](#)), whereas the rituals administered by the priesthood draw mainly on the corpus in Avestan and Middle Persian. The priests have to learn the text of the *Yasna* by heart, which is why priests are trained while they are still young and can mnemotechnically absorb such a large amount of text. In Iran, however, the ‘inner’ liturgies are no longer performed in their entirety, and the texts are read from books. In order to be initiated into the religion the children have to learn some basic prayers. Some Avestan formulae (*manthras*) such as the *Yathā ahū vairiō* and the *Ašem vohū*, widely believed to be inherently powerful, are used throughout the entire register of rituals, from a short private prayer to the most elaborate priestly ceremonies. The more elaborate the rituals, the more texts need to be memorized and recited. These texts, many of which are proclamations of worship, constitute a corpus of revelation, which is not preached to an audience but executed in ritual practice. Priests can give speeches at specific occasions such as feasts, but there are no sermons as part of the priestly liturgies. Mistakes in the verbal (and non-verbal) performance are dramatic, since they undermine the cosmic order and strengthen the evil powers (amounting to “demon worship”). In addition to the Avestan *manthras*, there are formulae in Middle or New Persian (*nērang*), which are used in rituals, but they are also recited in short independent rites or used as amulets (see [MAGIC i](#)). Another structural element of Zoroastrian rituals, or of ritualizing acts such as eating, is the framing of a sequence of (verbal or non-verbal) acts by an opening and a concluding speech act (see [BĀJ](#)).



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