The Experience of Fire among Parsi Priests

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Zoroastrians have often been stigmatized as fire-worshipers. Zoroastrians themselves have rejected that label. While the prominent status of fire in their ritual practice remains a fact, the theological question of the status of fire is a recurrent topic in virtually all modern books written by Zoroastrians about their religion. The solutions vary in detail, for instance with regard to the divine status of fire. But all authors make a theological distinction and draw a clear line of demarcation between fire and Ahura Mazda as the ultimate point of reference. In his Outlines of Parsi History (1987), Hormazdizar Dastur Kayoji Mirza phrases it in this way (p. 389):

In the Zoroastrian Religion the fire is especially venerated as the shining emblem of Ahura Mazda ... As ‘the son’ and, therefore, the representative of Ahura Mazda, the presence of fire in all Zoroastrian ceremonies is inevitable.

Iran

Fire being a material object, any visible ritual or discursive emphasis on fire may in Islamic contexts be classified as ‘polytheism’ or ‘idolatry’ respectively. It thereby undermines the legitimacy of Zoroastrianism in Islamic legal and theological classificatory systems. For Iranian Zoroastrians, during the 20th Century modernization partly entailed the hope that stigmatization might eventually be overcome. However, the project of civic equality has moved beyond reach with
the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Fortunately, the Islamic state has not reintroduced all pre-modern requirements that once were imposed on the Zoroastrians.

One major achievement had been the abolishment of the poll-tax in the late 19th Century. The tax has not been reintroduced. In the course of the twentieth century, many Zoroastrians have left agriculture and their homes in Central Iran and become part of the urban Middle class in Teheran, the modern capital, where they for the most part live in dispersion. Visible badges of identity have been abolished. In the capital, Zoroastrians cannot be recognized by the clothes they are wearing. The fragile quasi-integration—fragile because it is subject to possible political changes—was not only an external affair.

Modernization likewise entailed an inner refurbishment of the community. Since religion was the main factor indicating the boundaries of the community, this process necessarily affected the religion. Deemphasizing the boundaries of the community went along with deemphasizing the purity rules which regulate the social interaction within and between groups. The strategy of deemphasizing differences directly affected what maybe are the two most visible icons of Zoroastrianism, namely the funerary structures—the ‘towers of silence’—and fire. The ‘towers of silence’ were disbanded in favour of cemeteries (first in Teheran and later on in the older settlements). Although there was no discussion of closing the fire-temples, a much more relaxed attitude with regard to fire was adopted, much in line with the relaxation of the purity rules in general. Traditional practices were branded superstitious. Worship of, or in the presence of, fire was naturally perceived to be a sensitive area. On the one hand, it visibly set Zoroastrianism apart; on the other hand, it was “inevitable” (Dastur Mirza) in ritual and theological terms. As a result of the adopted (or permitted) changes, the ritual commitment to fire has lost much of its vigour throughout the second half of the 20th Century. Several rules previously regarded as essential have been abandoned. Accordingly, the priesthood was deprived of one of its main functions. As part of the modernization-project the role of the priesthood was redefined. At least in the villages, whatever remains of ritual work is now been done by lay-people who were trained as priests as a second career option. As a consequence, full-time professional priesthood is a thing of the past in Iranian Zoroastrianism.

India

Things have fared quite differently in India. The Parsis have opted for a different path of modernization. Even here, the priesthood has been under siege and has seen its prestige undermined, with many bright young boys taking up other paths in life. In India, however, ritual practice has likewise become less rigorous than previously. But many basic rules are still being enforced. In India, modernization has led to a dramatic increase in the number of fire-temples, which provided new working spaces and business opportunities for priests. As has been the case throughout Zoroastrian history—at least in so far as we have relevant sources for it—among the Parsi Zoroastrian priesthood continues to be hereditary. The hereditary factor makes up for a rigid functional distinction between priesthood and lay-people. Contrary to earlier times, however, marriages between people from priestly and non-priestly lineages are nowadays quite common.
Fire-temples

Zoroastrian temples are usually referred to as fire-temples. This is correct to the extent that fire is one of the main features of the temples, the others being spaces for the performance of specific sets of rituals as well as halls, a well, and a number of functional spaces. For the performance of most priestly rituals a fire is required. (This no longer holds true for Iran.) The fires used for the performance of priestly rituals, which in the overwhelming majority of the cases are done for the benefit and in memory of the departed ones, can be ignited, tended and eventually allowed to die down at the exact place where the respective ritual is being held. Other fires are stationary. This is the case with the temple-fires in the proper sense. They are ritually enthroned, as the technical expression goes, in one specific place, where they are bound to remain, unless there are repairs, in which case they are temporarily shifted.

Since the 19th Century, Indian Zoroastrianism distinguishes between three degrees of consecrated fires. (Dastur Mirza has thrown considerable light on this process.) The higher the degree of the fire the greater are the restrictions and requirements for its ritual care. Whereas even non-priests may tend the lowest degree fire, only the priests reserve the right and the duty to take care of the upper two classes of fires. The fires are placed in separate chambers. The upper classes of fire are out of reach for the non-priests, but can be seen through metallic bars in otherwise open windows, their fragrance can be inhaled, and their ash can be touched. Lay-people may come to pray there and give wood to the fire, but this has to be given to the fire by the priest who serves as a sort of ritual mediator, by returning some of the ashes from the fire to the worshiper.

The Ritual Creation of a Divine Agent

The ritual preparation and maintenance are part of the same process of providing individual agency to the fire. Since this will lead us over to the question of experience, let me dwell a moment on these two issues. In order to serve as a temple fire, a fire needs to be prepared, that is transfigured from its ordinary state to a qualified entity. This, and not the building of the temple housing the fire, is the important step. Actually, more than one consecrated fire can find space in a temple, but they cannot be merged and must be held physically separate. Likewise, they are worshipped individually. Usually, they are from different categories. One temple may, for example, house three fires, one from each degree.

The process of consecration is different for each degree. The higher the degree, the more complex is the consecration. For the highest degree the process of consecration takes minimum one year and involves several pairs of priests who are dedicated to the endeavour on a full-time scale. The ritual fire is based on several physical fires, which are selected according to social functions of those using the fires. These selected fires are then refined, sublimated, and once that their physical state is deprived of its material antecedents, united and consecrated.

As I interpret it, the process consists of two main steps that reframe the relations between the material and the spiritual, the empirical and the meta-empirical, the natural and
the supernatural, gētīg and mēnōg—whatever pair of terms one may opt for. First, the material fires are transformed into a material which is being dematerialized, an empirical reality which has been reduced to its very essence, a natural reality that is being denaturalized in the ritual procedures of gathering and purifying. Out of these transfigured, but still independent entities a new agent is being created in the second ceremonial step. This is done by first consecrating each of the de- or rematerialized and de- or re-naturalized entities separately. Consecration means that priests perform a fixed number of liturgies on parts of the fires. In that way they partake of divine agency. This parallels the regular ritual production of special agency substances by such liturgies in ordinary contexts. While these substances, however, are effused, consumed, or applied in an instrumental sense, the ritual process here aims at creating a ritual agent in its own right. This is achieved, then, in that the separately consecrated and de- or rematerialized plus de- or re-naturalized fires are jointly put into a vase. Then, again by performing a certain amount of priestly liturgies, they are constituted as a new unit. This FIRE (capitalization indicating that I am referring to a transfigured entity reconfigured as a divine agent) is then transferred into its place of dwelling which in its turn has to be ritually prepared and consecrated. The final step of the procedure is the festive transfer of the FIRE to its dwelling place and its installation, known as enthronement, at the place and the festive opening of the worship.

**Empowered power**

Although the FIRES have been denaturalized in the process of consecration, they are still subject to the conditions of nature. Once ritually engendered, like ordinary living agents, they will die unless they are obtaining food. They are cultural and spiritual entities and not natural ones to the extent that they do not die as long as they are cared for, whereas even the most resistant natural living beings will eventually die. Also fires can die a natural death, but ritual (cultural and spiritual) efforts can keep them alive for centuries or even millennia.

Like other living agents, fire is both powerful and fragile. In order to maintain its spiritual agency, fire must be materially sustained. In this, however, fire does not fare much different from other divine agents. For, from a ritual if not from a theological point of view, even the deities require praise in order to remain concerned, committed, and effective. With regard to fire, this implied structure of reciprocal relationship is immediately visible. Whenever the fire is not tended, its energies are diminishing. The FIRES need to be tended regularly. For the higher two categories, this has to be done at regular intervals five times a day, including once in the middle of the night. The higher the degree of the FIRE the greater are the requirements on the performing priests in terms of ritual purity and qualification. As the temple FIRE is not only a material, but also a spiritual entity, tending it does not only imply feeding it with wood, but also supplying it with recitation of spiritual verses of praise, where the FIRE is directly addressed as a praiseworthy being and as the son of Ahura Mazda. After the ritual feeding or charging of the FIRE, its re-established agency is immediately tapped by the performing priest by pronouncing either a formula of blessing or a confession of sins, both making an impact on the state of affairs of the worshiper who had commissioned the act of feeding.
Priests

Just as there are several categories and degrees of FIRE, there are also several categories and degrees of priesthood. Suffice is to mention that there is one category of priests who are in direct charge of the fires. These are called the Boiwallas. Then there are other priests who are in charge of the temple as such. They operate as managers or as entrepreneurs. But the priests directly ‘in touch’ with the FIRE are the Boiwallas.

In 2006 and 2007 we have conducted structured interviews with 47 practicing priests in Bombay and some other places in Western India. These interviews addressed most aspects of the priests’ professional lives, from social and economical matters to religious ones. We are still at an early stage of working with the dataset. What does the material so long say about the priests’ experience of FIRE? Let me add that I will be using the word experience in a very basic sense, i.e. as ‘the awareness of direct or repeated contact with some aspect or aspects of ones environment’. The foregoing presentation should have made it abundantly clear that there is direct and repeated contact with fire among the priests, especially the Boiwallas. So, when studying their experience of it, what sort of perceptions and awareness do they have of it, what sort of cognitive and emotional relations do they entertain with it, and what sort of communication do they have with it?

The cognitive side: beliefs about fire

In the course of our interviews, the issue of FIRE was explicitly addressed in two different contexts. One was more on the cognitive side. We had a series of questions clustering around key elements of the Zoroastrian belief-system. One of the questions addressed the status assigned to FIRE. Referring to the two most prominent ways of defining the issue, our informants were asked whether they consider the FIRES of the temple as mere symbols or as divine beings in their own right. The question is a bit tricky and some priests rejected the implied dichotomy and opted for more synthetic views. A Boiwalla of 76 phrased it like this: “It is both a symbol and a divine being.” Some opted for reiterating the kinship-model (“It is the son of Ahura Mazda”) without taking a stance. Others tried to link both options as closely as possible, while at the same time favoring one. A young priest (27) said: “Separate entity strongly connected to Ahura Mazda.” But the majority of the respondents clearly identified with one of the two options, although they rephrased it in different ways. Some ‘symbolists’, for example, rather used terms such as ‘quality’ or ‘aspect’. And one ‘separatist’ introduced the notion of an ‘authentic’ power.

Relationships

The second context where the issue was addressed was as part of a section on motivation, satisfaction, and commitment. This included a question on which rituals the respondents enjoyed performing most, followed by the question of how they related to the FIRE. All in all, at present we are able to distinguish 49 different statements (with each respondent uttering one or several). It was understood by the priests that the question addressed the FIRE they were in charge of. At least one respondent, a Boiwalla (= priest in ritual charge of a FIRE) aged 30, expressed an almost exclusive attachment
to ‘his’ FIRE when he stated: “only my Padshah Saheb and my Fire-temple I visit. I believe in that only.”

Few of our respondents did not emphasize any special relation to the fire. One said: “I don’t differentiate between fires.” And the other one: “All Fires are the same.” Interestingly, both statements were made by priests who are not attached to one specific temple or FIRE, but are working as freelancers, or on a daily wage basis. Another freelancer said that he had not really “thought about it yet”. One teacher at a training college for priests (Madressa) simply said that it was “a place to do rituals”. There is no personal relation involved in that statement.

As soon as the priests have a personal responsibility for the fires, however, their replies are taking a different direction. To begin with, they do describe personal relationships with the fire. One manager (31) said that he felt “very closely” related to the FIRE, and two respondents talked about the great ‘respect’ they were having for the FIRE, one indicating a parallel relationship to the FIRE and to Ahura Mazda. Their relationships with the FIREs are expressed in terms of different roles. A freelancing Boiwalla (35) referred to the FIRE as his “friend and guide”. Another one, a 46 year old priest in charge of a temple, phrased it in a more encompassing way: “The Fire is my father, my friend, my guide, my everything.”

Such relationships imply closeness, but also authority. The element of authority and superiority is expressed by a Boiwalla of 66 in a different role pattern when he says: “I am its servant.” Somewhat less submissive is another metaphor used by another 46 year old temple priest who ascribes a more active role to the priest by emphasizing his protective function: “We are like gardeners and guards of fire.” These sets of relationships also entail a sense of duty towards the FIRE that is voiced by several informants. One respondent, a Boiwalla of 73, even claims that the FIRE itself does remind the priest of his duties, when he said: “In case we oversleep, it wakes us up to give boi on time.” (Giving boi means ritually tending it.) All these statements imply, and the last quotation makes that quite explicit, that the FIRE does possess individuality and agency. As one priest (57) put it: “It is a living entity.”

Emotions and Communication

A Boiwalla of 47 conveyed to us a sense of great happiness, “some feeling which is unimaginable, something different only”, whenever he enters the fire-chamber. This comes close to a kind of experience that one traditionally would classify as mystical. The close relationship to the fire as a separate living entity intuitively entails the possibility of communication. As a matter of fact, several of our respondents mention that they do communicate with the fire, either in visible form, or in the form of the exchange of messages, generally in a verbal way. “When I am sad I just argue with it. When I am happy I just convey the reason why I am happy”, as a priest in charge of a temple (27) put it. Communicating with the FIRE is better than communicating with fellow human beings, since one can “share things with fire” that “you cannot share with other persons”, one freelancing Boiwalla held. Another one said that he does not fear FIRE like he fears people.
Knowledge and effects

The FIRE is a superior partner in communication also because it is held to possess superior knowledge. It possesses and may also convey strategically relevant information. So, one priest of 56 said that “you will get your reply” if you are serene and pray sincerely. “It answers all your calls, queries”, one priest stated. A Boiwalla (30) told us that he bows in front of the FIRE for 4-6 minutes “and give it all my wishes, but I never challenge that if I get this I will do this.” In other words: wishes are acceptable, vows are not. Apparently, one tries not to communicate with FIRE out of selfishness (stated by a 53 years old Boiwalla). But one may still get what one wants, under certain conditions. Putting forward problems to the FIRE opens the possibility that they will be resolved: “Difficulties are resolved if one confronts the fire with them”, is the way one freelancing Boiwalla of 35 worded it.

The agency of the FIRE, therefore, reaches far beyond the mere conveyance of strategic information. It not only works as an oracle, but it also has effects. The effects may be of a communicative nature. Thus, it is through the FIRE that prayers reach God, as a priest of 44 said. Since the prayers are directed to the ultimate source of agency, the prayers therefore are more efficacious. Effects of the FIRES mentioned by our respondents include the purification of body, mind, and soul; the fulfillment of wishes; blessings; protection; achievements; prosperity in life; healing. Unfortunately, our dataset does not specify in what way the priests had experienced these effects to happen (if they did at all), but they obviously found these effects prominent aspects of their relationship to the FIRE they are serving—for that was our question. (Actually, we did not ask specifically about the effects, but many respondents commented on such effects.)

Note also that for some respondents not only individuals, the priest or his clients, are beneficiaries of the FIRES’ effects, but “everyone” (a Boiwalle aged 63), or, more specifically, “Fire keeps an eye on all Parisis” (a priest aged 52). Another one (63) said that the FIRE “benefits all the residents staying nearby”. One temple-priest (69), however, pointed to the ambivalence of the power of FIRE and its effects, when he stated: “It brings prosperity also and it brings disaster also.” This seems to imply that there are factors to be taken into account that decide on the outcome of the effects, but he did not specify which ones. Since Zoroastrianism does not recognize any moral ambivalence in the divine world, I would speculate that he had the correct performance of the priestly duties and the ethical dimension in mind, so that a fire which is neglected or tended by immoral priests would take revenge.

Limitations and Prospects

Unfortunately, I have not yet reached the point in our work on the database which would allow us to correlate the answers to the two questions on the theological status and the practical relationship to FIRE with each other. I am also looking forward to the day when we can correlate the data to other elements in our dataset. This will certainly raise new questions. For this Festschrift, I have merely presented some of the answers given by the priests. But I do think that what the priests are saying about the FIRES is quite in line
with the ritual actions they are performing on their FIREs in the temples, both with regard to the ritual establishment of divine agency and its subsequent maintenance in the temple-cult. This hypothesis could be further tested and refined by a similar study of Iranian priests.
Dasturji Dr. Hormazdyar Dastur
Kayoji Mirza Birth Centenary
Memorial Volume

Dastur Kayoji Mirza Institute
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