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Second-Generation Iranian Zoroastrians in a New American Homeland: A Case Study in California

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Abstract

The article contributes to filling the research gap concerning Iranian Zoroastrians in diaspora. Using a narrative approach, it explores how second-generation Zoroastrians raised in the United States learn and practice religion while facing the challenges of a pluralistic American society. The article includes a case study of two young Zoroastrian women interviewed in 2019, members of the Californian community. The contrastive cases shed light on the internal heterogeneity of Zoroastrianism, different ways the religion is perceived and experienced, and different ideas about future preservation of the ethno-religious heritage. The study contributes to an understanding of how Zoroastrianism evolves on a new continent and how it differs from what Zoroastrian immigrants brought from Iran.

Keywords: California; diaspora; women; Zoroastrianism; Zoroastrians

The Islamization that started in the seventh century profoundly changed the religious profile of the Middle East. As a result, Zoroastrians in Iran—once dominant in the society and power structures of the Sasanian Empire (224–651)—became a small group on the social margin, subordinate to Muslims. To protect themselves from assimilation, over time they strengthened their collective boundaries based not only on adherence to their religion but also on some ethnic indicators such as their own dialect (Zoroastrian Dari), clothing, restrictions on conversion, endogamy, and perception of intermarriage and sexual intercourse with Muslims as a ritually polluting act.¹ Those who decided to keep the Zoroastrian religion of their ancestors suffered from discrimination and persecution, and usually their fate depended on the policy of local authorities.

The modern Zoroastrian community in Iran began to form at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. Its members received aid from Parsis—their coreligionists who had found shelter in India to escape Islamization, settled there, and established an economically solid position in local society.² Iranian Zoroastrians also benefited from social changes in the country, as for local non-Muslims it was a period of opening religious ghettos and improvement in the quality of life. As a result of the constitutional movement (1905–11), along with Jews and Eastern Christians—the communities following religions accepted by Islam—they received certain privileges and the status of citizens, even though their status was still not equal to the one granted to Muslims.³

¹ Choksy, “Zoroastrians”; cf Niechcial, “Sacred Homeland.”

² On Parsi settlement in India, cf Boyce, *Zoroastrians*, 166–68; Maneck, *Death of Ahriman*, 15–32; Writer, *Contemporary Zoroastrians*, 21–37.

³ Cf Stausberg, “From Power to Powerlessness.”

It is noteworthy that Zoroastrians in modern Iran have been a unique community within the category of accepted non-Muslims, due to their cultural and linguistic proximity to the dominant group. Whereas Jews, Armenians, Assyrians, and Chaldeans are heirs of non-Iranian cultural traditions, the Zoroastrians share a Persian descent with the majority of local Muslims, differing mainly by religion. This has made the situation of Zoroastrians in Iran complex and ambivalent, significantly influencing the relations of the two groups. During the reign of the Pahlavis (1925–79), when Zoroastrians became a symbol of Iran's pre-Islamic heritage, this brought them some benefits. However, even though the community had loosened its boundaries and the number of intermarriages had increased slightly, its members were generally still reluctant to integrate with others on the most intimate level, and some families who accepted marriages with non-Zoroastrians faced disapproval or even ostracism.⁴

After the Islamic Revolution of 1979, religion in the Islamic Republic of Iran became the basic determinant of social status. Religious minorities occupied a lower place in the social structure than Muslims, and the policy toward them changed, depending on the government's mood. The new constitution confirmed the status of all recognized religious minorities (*aqaliyat-e dini*) and their right to keep their customs, organize their own religious education, and elect their representatives to the Iranian Parliament. However, this was followed by a variety of discriminatory legal regulations (for example, the civil code's dress regulations) as well as social practices (for example, treatment of non-Muslims as *najes*, or impure).⁵ According to Iran's civil code, marriage of a Muslim female to a non-Muslim male is prohibited, and although the code does not refer to the opposite situation, Shi'i jurists are usually against such marriages, allowing only temporary marriage of a Muslim man to a non-Muslim woman of a recognized religious minority. Because to marry a Muslim one must renounce a minority religion, ethno-religious boundaries of minorities are strengthened, and they incline toward endogamy (as did the Zoroastrians, in line with the Parsi anti-intermarriage policy popular in India, where the community emulated the caste system's endogamous practices as a defense against assimilation).⁶

Some members of non-Muslim minorities, both accepted and unaccepted (such as the Baha'is) had already left Iran before the Islamic Revolution, when opportunities arose, but after the revolution their numbers in Iran diminished significantly: some left in search of better education and jobs, whereas others departed primarily to escape the discrimination they faced. During the last decade, the Zoroastrian community in the Islamic Republic of Iran has shrunk from more than 20,000 to somewhere between 11,000 and 15,000 members, due to the negligible birth rate, intermarriages, and emigration.⁷ For some, the migration process had a few steps, starting when they left their village and moved to a city, usually Tehran, and after that left the country.⁸ The incentives for community members to stay offered by official Zoroastrian organizations, driven by fear of the loss of cultural and religious identity, do not seem to have had much effect.⁹

The most popular destination for emigrants is the US, where they can count on the support of relatives already settled there.¹⁰ Zoroastrians become part of the large Iranian diaspora, which in 2015 numbered almost half a million, with almost two-thirds being

⁴ Kestenberg Amighi, *Zoroastrians of Iran*, 283–89.

⁵ For more on the social and political treatment of Zoroastrians in the Islamic Republic of Iran, see Choksy, "Despite Shāhs and Mollās"; and Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities in Iran*. For more on the legal situation, see Stewart, *Voices*, 73–83.

⁶ Writer, *Contemporary Zoroastrians*, 58–59.

⁷ These estimates were collected during talks with Iranian Zoroastrian leaders. According to statistics provided by the Federation of Zoroastrian Associations of North America, between 2004 and 2012 the population in Iran decreased by 37.5 percent; Rivetna, "Zarathushti World," 3.

⁸ Stewart, *Voices*, 98.

⁹ Foltz, "Zoroastrians in Iran," 82–83.

¹⁰ Stewart, *Voices*, 98.

foreign-born.¹¹ The diaspora is diverse: the first wave came between 1950 and 1977, when approximately 35,000 Iranians came to study, especially as the oil price boom made it affordable for their families; the Islamic Revolution triggered the movement of refugees, and in the period between 1978 and 1986 approximately 104,000 Iranians of different ethnic and social backgrounds arrived in the US; the third wave has been settling since 1995.¹² Every wave has included non-Muslim minorities. Since 2004, as one of the persecuted Iranian religious minorities, Zoroastrians have been eligible for consideration of refugee status under the Lautenberg Amendment. The current refugee process is supported by HIAS (the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society)—a Jewish American nonprofit organization established at the end of the nineteenth century—and the US government-funded and HIAS-run Resettlement Support Center in Vienna.¹³ It is noteworthy that in the last few years migration has been marked by difficulties incurred as a result of Trump administration policies.¹⁴

As Parsis in large numbers also have left their traditional settlements in India and their colonies in Africa and China, today North America is home to the fastest growing Zoroastrian community. An extensive majority resides in the US, where in 2012 the Zoroastrian population of Iranian and Parsi descent was estimated at over 14,000 people, with the former comprising more than one-third of the total.¹⁵ Small communities of Iranian Zoroastrians are scattered around the US, for example, in Washington, DC and New York City, and the main population centers are located in California.

The burden of organizing religious life for the newcomers has been generally shouldered by local associations, so some ceremonies may not be held at home, and due to the scarcity of priests (*mobeds*) some services may be presided over by laity. Access to religious infrastructure, local concentration of the Zoroastrian community, and the frequency of interactions, may have significant implications for future preservation of heritage and identity in the new land.¹⁶ If a family has other Zoroastrians living nearby, they may at least socialize within the group. If the local population is bigger and more established, family members may more regularly attend local temples or praying halls and participate in what is organized by local associations in community facilities: religious events, cultural gatherings, educational circles, and religious classes for children and teenagers. However, if a family lives far from other community members or facilities, it may participate in community life rarely or not at all, and I met young US-born Zoroastrians who were unfamiliar with the location of any temples in their country.

Scope and Method of Research

Fifteen years ago, a renowned scholar of Zoroastrianism, John Hinnells, pointed out that many Zoroastrians facing the demographic decline of the Parsi community in India believed that the future of their religion was in North America.¹⁷ And this has never been more true than today, not only for the Parsis, but also—and perhaps most importantly—for the several times smaller population of Iranian Zoroastrians. When in 2008 I went to Tehran to conduct fieldwork among the local Zoroastrian community, little did I expect that a decade later interest in this ancient Iranian religion would lead me to another part of the world.¹⁸ But over time I realized that to understand contemporary Zoroastrianism it is necessary to

¹¹ Bozorgmehr and Ketcham, “Adult Children,” 27.

¹² Ansari, “Iranian Immigrants,” 1076–78; Bozorgmehr, “Diaspora”; Hinnells, *Zoroastrian Diaspora*, 432.

¹³ “HIAS Vienna.”

¹⁴ E. G. Javānmardi, “Otrish rāh-e mohājerat rā bar ruy-e 300 Irāni-ye qeyreh-mosalmān bast.”

¹⁵ Rivetna, “Zarathushti World.” The data do not include converts of different origins to Zoroastrianism living in North America.

¹⁶ Cf Mahdi, “Ethnic Identity.”

¹⁷ Hinnells, *Zoroastrian Diaspora*, 2.

¹⁸ Niechciał, *Mniejszość zaratusztriańska we współczesnym Teheranie*; Niechciał, “Key Content”; Niechciał, “Sacred Homeland.”

conduct research in North America. Modern migrations have been significantly transforming Zoroastrianism, which for centuries functioned in its traditional settings in Iran and India, where communities maintained collective boundaries strengthened by such practices as endogamy, non-acceptance of converts, and belief in the impurity of non-Zoroastrians. Although in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Parsis established colonies in China and East Africa, the settlers kept limited contacts with the outside world. Now, thousands of Zoroastrians, who have been leaving their traditional settlements since the middle of the twentieth century to establish new settlements, employ different survival strategies, such as paying less attention to emphasizing social boundaries and internal contacts and more to the transmission of shared heritage and religious education and to identifying with a new homeland.¹⁹

The studies of Writer and of Hinnells, based on personal encounters with Zoroastrians, brought insight into the life of the Zoroastrian diaspora, but they referred to the end of the previous century and were substantially Parsi-centric.²⁰ Following Hinnells's quantitative path, Mehta conducted research among Zoroastrians in Europe—also a Parsi-dominated community—focusing on purity laws.²¹ The comparative works on Iranian immigrants of different ethno-religious origins either do not include Iranians Zoroastrians or include them without deep consideration.²² Some information regarding religious practices of Iranian Zoroastrians in the twenty-first-century's North American diaspora appears in the works of Jenny Rose.²³ By addressing the self-consciousness of the Zoroastrian community in Canada, Richard Foltz allows the reader insight into their situation and their role in the evolution of Zoroastrian, Iranian, and Canadian identities.²⁴ Kaviani, based on a survey and interviews conducted among Zoroastrians in California and Washington, illustrates their process of assimilation in the American environment (such as not adopting the native language or American names).²⁵ Knaute analyzes Zoroastrian activities on the Internet. Although his data is somewhat outdated, he demonstrates how the Internet fulfills social needs in a diaspora, when it may be difficult to meet other Zoroastrians in person.²⁶

In the face of the limited prior research in the field, this article seeks to increase the understanding of Iranian Zoroastrianism in the US. I want to describe how the religion survives and transforms outside its homeland, and how it is experienced and practiced when facing the challenges of a pluralistic American society. Of particular interest to me is how second-generation Zoroastrians (raised by parents of Iranian descent) learn and practice the religion, while maintaining relatively loose connections with Iran, especially in the face of travel restrictions between that country and the US.

I decided to conduct research in California. It is the state with the highest concentration of Iranian immigrants, but the ethno-religious structure differs from that in Iran. As the fear of persecution under the post-revolutionary regime in Iran has driven religious minorities to leave, in Los Angeles the percentage of religious minorities in relation to Iranian Muslims is higher than in Iran.²⁷ Moreover, the state presents a world exception in the population of Zoroastrian diasporas. In communities in the US, Canada, and Australia, the percentage of Parsis is more than double that of Iranian Zoroastrians, but in California the number of Iranian Zoroastrians exceeds the number of Parsis in the population. In 2012, over 2 thousand of them were registered in the state.²⁸ All these characteristics make it easier to

¹⁹ Hinnells, *Zoroastrian Diaspora*, 699–713.

²⁰ Writer, *Contemporary Zoroastrians*; Hinnells, *Zoroastrians in Britain*; Hinnells, *Zoroastrian Diaspora*.

²¹ Mehta, *European Zoroastrian Attitudes*; Mehta, "Zoroastrians in Europe."

²² Bozorgmehr, "Internal Ethnicity"; McAuliffe, "Home"; Kelley, *Irangeles*.

²³ Rose, *Zoroastrianism: Guide*; Rose, *Zoroastrianism: Introduction*.

²⁴ Foltz, "Iranian Zoroastrians in Canada."

²⁵ Kaviani, "Emigrant Experiences."

²⁶ Knaute, "Discovering the Zoroastrian e-Diaspora."

²⁷ Bozorgmehr, "Internal Ethnicity," 394.

²⁸ Rivetna, "Zarathushti World."

socialize with Iranian Zoroastrians in California than anywhere else in the country, both privately and during public events.

Iranian Zoroastrians actively contribute to the life of their Californian collective through the institutions and foundations they have established to preserve their religious and cultural heritage and to hold the community together, including the California Zoroastrian Center, with its branches in Los Angeles, Orange County, and San Diego in Southern California; the Persian Zoroastrian Organization in San Jose; and the Sacramento Zoroastrian Association in Northern California. They manage temples and prayer halls needed for religious functions and infrastructure designated for social gatherings (including common spaces and kitchens), as well as classrooms and libraries. They organize religious education for children and adults, even though its quality and scope vary due to the scarcity of trained teachers and limitations related to pedagogical competence and official training. The local associations run websites, issue publications in both English and Persian, set up religious ceremonies, have occasional parties (for example, a Nowruz party to celebrate the spring New Year, which falls on the spring equinox in the Zoroastrian calendar), and organize cultural gatherings including concerts, a variety of nonreligious courses (for example, yoga, and different levels of the Persian language), sports activities, camps that integrate children, and retreats for adults.

The framework for this research was based on social research that emphasizes the narratives of individuals and groups. I share the perspective that we cannot study an individual's religious experience in the moment it is experienced, so we have to focus on its linguistic expression.²⁹ To explore how people transform their Zoroastrian experience into a story and make it meaningful, I used qualitative interviewing, believing it leads to "a deeper understanding and appreciation of the amazing intricacies and, yet, coherence of people's experiences."³⁰ I conducted anonymous, narrative interviews to establish a respectful relationship with research participants and gain in-depth insight into Zoroastrian experiences in a broad cultural and social context. In the first stage I asked interviewees to outline their life stories and experiences as members of the Zoroastrian community, and restricted my interventions; afterward, shifting from narration to dialogue, I asked additional questions concerning their stories and based on prepared interview guidelines.³¹

This article describes the case study of two Zoroastrian women from California interviewed in November 2019, each a second-generation Iranian born to Zoroastrian parents and raised in California.³² At the time of the interview, they were in their late 20s, unmarried, and well educated. Both had spent most of their lives in different parts of California, identified themselves as Americans, belonged to the Zoroastrian community, were able to speak Persian, and admitted to Persian descent, but without any experience of visiting Iran.

I chose these two interviewees based on their similarities as well as their differences. The two women experienced and evaluated life as members of the Californian Zoroastrian community differently and had varying ideas about future preservation of their ethno-religious heritage. Migrant communities are never homogenous, as members of various social and economic backgrounds may have left their country for different reasons (as in the case of Zoroastrians coming to California during different waves of migration), and they may have divergent identities, worldviews, needs, interests, experiences, and agendas concerning their future.³³ Their perceptions of the religion and cultural heritage of their home country may differ. Differences among Zoroastrians are reflected in frictions between liberal and conservative groups who have opposing beliefs about rituals and tradition, the validity of

²⁹ Yamane, "Narrative and Religious Experience."

³⁰ Seidman, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research*, 130.

³¹ Goodson and Gill, *Narrative Pedagogy*, 39–42; cf Ammerman and Williams, "Speaking of Methods," 120–22.

³² The interviewees were chosen using a snowball sampling technique. Each was provided with detailed information and completed an informed consent form prior to the interview. Their participation was entirely voluntary. The study was conducted in accordance with the Code of Ethics of the Polish Sociological Association, and the data generated are kept securely. This publication does not breach any agreements of confidentiality or anonymity.

³³ Baser and Halperin, "Diasporas from the Middle East."

religious texts, endogamy, and conversion to Zoroastrianism. These beliefs date to the conflict between the reformist and orthodox wings of the Parsi community in India, which significantly changed the religion and then was echoed in Iran.³⁴

I call the first of my two interviewees Anahita.³⁵ Her Zoroastrian parents were raised in Iran, but one of them came to the US at a very young age, so her family had been—in Anahita’s own words—“pretty Americanized” and “on the more liberal side.”³⁶ They socialized on a daily basis within the Zoroastrian community and also maintained friendly relations with non-Zoroastrian Americans. Anahita had quite ambivalent feelings about interactions within the relatively close local Zoroastrian community. As an adult she was little involved with fulfilling Zoroastrian social obligations and distant from the religion, happy that she has not been “brainwashed” by the conservative religious environment.

My second interviewee appears here as Mitra. Her Iranian family had some connections with the Zoroastrian environment in India, where one of her parents was raised. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries visits to or settlement in India by Iranian Zoroastrians was not rare. Mitra’s family maintained contact not only with local Iranians, but also with Parsis. Another of Mitra’s parents was raised in Iran. She painted a picture of a more religious, traditional family of Iranian immigrants with some Indian (Parsi) cultural influences. She described herself as “spiritual and religious” and was actively involved in the life of the local Zoroastrian community, maintaining regular interactions with Iranian Zoroastrians as well as Parsis.

I connect my approach with that of a sociologist who is “an advocate of people and groups who would otherwise have no chance to be heard publicly.”³⁷ I have observed intergenerational misunderstanding among Zoroastrians, including complaints of the older generation about youths’ lack of interest in religion and concerns about religion dying out and identity being lost.³⁸ I seek here to give the young generation a voice. The nature of this research does not lend itself to generalized conclusions about Iranian Zoroastrians in California. Instead, I hope to provide insight into the lived experience of individual community members and enrich understanding of the American Zoroastrian culture. I will first focus on my interviewees’ stories and then place them in a more general context, and conclude with a discussion of the present state and the future of the community.

The Voices of Young Iranian Zoroastrians

Hinnells noted that many of his Zoroastrian friends in North America claimed to become more religious after migration, so that their foreign-born children would be more likely to maintain their identity and community ties through religious practices.³⁹ The two young women I interviewed had been raised by immigrant parents who made similar efforts to maintain Zoroastrian traditions. Anahita saw her parents as less involved in the Zoroastrian community than the less Americanized parents of her peers (who socialized exclusively with Iranian Zoroastrians). Even so, they “still made an effort,” encouraging her to participate in religious classes or camps and socialize within the group. Mitra stated that her parents (who apparently had a more traditional mindset than Anahita’s parents) “tried to bring as much of those religious interactions and religious consciousness to us [Mitra and her siblings] as possible.” Along with the typical American celebrations that Anahita and Mitra were familiar with from school, home, or through friends (for example, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and the Fourth of July), in childhood they had been taught to celebrate Nowruz—the Zoroastrian New Year that falls at the spring equinox—and other

³⁴ Ringer, *Pious Citizens*, 89–90.

³⁵ I gave the women random names that were popular in Iran and referred to Zoroastrian tradition. I removed all elements from the text that might help readers identify the interviewees.

³⁶ All quotations without footnotes are from interview transcripts.

³⁷ Bertaux and Kohli, “Life Story Approach,” 217.

³⁸ Cf Hinnells, *Zoroastrian Diaspora*, 494.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 472.

important days of the Zoroastrian ritual calendar. Mitra listed the festivals celebrated, usually at local facilities or at-home parties: Chahārshanbeh Suri, which is the festival of fire celebrated on the eve of the last Wednesday before Nowruz; the seasonal festivals of Tirgān (in mid-summer), Mehregān (in autumn) and Sadeh (in winter); a winter solstice celebration called Shab-e Yaldā; and Sizdah Bedar, which falls on the thirteenth day after Nowruz and honors nature. She mentioned Nowruz itself as the most important event: “Nowruz is the one that we [her family] would always celebrate on our own, regardless of any invitations.”⁴⁰

For both Anahita and Mitra, these parental efforts to keep the children connected with their Zoroastrian heritage were strengthened by the engagement of grandmothers in the enculturation process. These family figures had a large impact on their religious upbringing; they were actively involved in passing their knowledge about Zoroastrianism on to their US-born grandchildren. Anahita mentioned that her grandma, who came to the US from Iran, was “a source” of tradition, and she connected her with the spiritual and religious aspects of her childhood:

When I think about my religion or spirituality, that is where I think more of my grandma, that’s where I had my exposure from. Because she was part of an older generation, . . . she was born and raised in Yazd, where the Zoroastrian community primarily reside . . . she only spoke Farsi [Persian], and that’s where I think of tradition and spirituality, that’s what I think of, I think of being with her.⁴¹

Mitra, when she referred to prayers or other religious customs, also mentioned that she learned about these from her grandmother. Starting in the mid-1990s, many middle class migrants over the age of 65 left Iran to join their adult children already settled in the US, who, as naturalized citizens, were able to invite them.⁴² It is easy to surmise that those newcomers brought along traditional religious knowledge. As retirees, they had more time to spend with Mitra and Anahita’s generation than their parents, who were busy working, commuting, making a good life for their families, and struggling with the cultural and linguistic differences they faced in the outside world.

With their families, Anahita and Mitra attended religious ceremonies, cultural events, and religious classes held at local Zoroastrian centers. Anahita remembered that she treated such activities mainly as social, not religious, and as a child she sometimes pushed her parents to take her to a community event to meet her friends. She recalled that such activities were an important part of growing up, stressing that she valued the feeling of belonging to a group:

Everyone was looking forward to that because I got to hang out with other kids my age. . . . And whenever I think of any time we would go to a place of worship like our *ma’bad* [Persian temple] for holidays or we would go to other Sunday religious classes, I looked at it as a more social thing. And I think other people did as well, but again, I think that’s what’s important. I mean that’s one of the most important things about a religious community—the social aspect that uplifts people a lot of the time and makes you feel comfortable and, you know, belong, belonging.

In addition to regular religious classes, Mitra and Anahita also participated in annual, several-day camps held at the San Jose facility in Northern California. These camps aimed to integrate young Zoroastrians from different regions, and both women recalled the

⁴⁰ For more on traditional festivals of Iranian Zoroastrians, see Niknām, *Yādegāre dirin*.

⁴¹ Yazd is a province (in which the main city is also called Yazd) located in central Iran where Zoroastrians found shelter after Islamization, and where the majority of them resided until twentieth-century migration to Tehran. The community living there today is perceived as more traditional and conservative than the one in Tehran.

⁴² Ansari, “Iranian Immigrants,” 1078.

camps as especially important events in their teenage lives, associated with positive experiences and friendships. They both admired the place itself, telling me about the beauty of nature in the foothills of Mount Hamilton. I visited the facilities and indeed found them impressive: situated in dry, brownish mountains, they resembled an oasis hidden by trees. There was a white, one-story temple building with a gray roof and wide stairs leading to the front entrance under a triangular portico with a golden *faravahar* sign.⁴³ There was a large palm tree at the front. It was very different from the small prayer halls established in some other North American Zoroastrian facilities.

Anahita and Mitra also appreciated the camp for its diverse participants. They had a chance to meet Zoroastrian peers outside of the local communities in which they were raised. Anahita explained that the camp was “one of the highlights of everybody’s year, because it was when the majority of kids from Southern California and Northern California came together and got to hang out for four days,” and that “everybody has such good memories.” Mitra called the camp “a really big event” in her teenage life and recounted,

That was really great, because we got to interact with Zoroastrians from all over the state, even outside of the United States, for a couple of days. Meet, greet, make friends, play games, engage. And they did have religious activities that were taught in the temple. We would all sit together, girls upstairs, boys downstairs. And it was really great! Some of our lifelong friends were met at this camp.

Both Anahita and Mitra still socialized with some old Zoroastrian friends, but they differed in their evaluation of Zoroastrian social life. Mitra—more involved and connected with the local community—mentioned the importance of community life, invitations, and social events often advertised by word of mouth in her present life. Anahita was less engaged and more distanced from the community life, and she criticized her peers for socializing only within the group, forming cliques and evaluating themselves relative to their social position in a group, and then marrying within the group. She shared her disappointment about superficial contacts affecting one’s social position—a constant game of being invited and accepted, which I relate to the values of Iranian traditional culture, in which individual lives have been dominated by wide family relationships and connections. This tradition values long-lasting friendships, care for one’s social position, exchange of favors, fulfilling others’ expectations, and avoiding public criticism and even truthfulness if it might hurt somebody.⁴⁴ Anahita commented critically on community members who “will do anything just to talk to another person and get invited somewhere,” and added bitterly, “there’s just a lot of politics that you see when you stand on the outside of it. And sometimes I think a little bit of the reason why I’d like to leave [California].” Disappointed with the homogenous, exclusive Iranian Zoroastrian social life that stands in contrast to the outside American environment to which she belongs, she explained to me:

I feel like I look at it as that life is two different lives. I mean me and my [Zoroastrian] friends always described it as . . . we have our Zoroastrian community life, and then we have everything else, and it’s like two different lives we live . . . because we have two separate groups of friends; that we have our school friends, and our Zoroastrian friends—it’s like a whole other world that no one really understands.

Although disillusioned, Anahita still participated in some of the events, treating them as “just an awesome place to reconnect with people.” She especially valued the Zoroastrian

⁴³ A *faravahar* (in Parsi culture usually called a *farohar*) is a depiction of a person with three-layer wings, carrying a ring. The symbol dates from antiquity and has a variety of interpretations (see Curtis, “Ancient Iranian Motifs”). It is the main iconographic symbol of Zoroastrianism.

⁴⁴ Cf Jalali, “Iranian Families.”

Games that, along with World Zoroastrian Youth Congresses for young Iranian Zoroastrians, serve as a platform to socialize with coreligionists (including Parsis) from different local communities, states, and countries. Mitra also mentioned these kinds of events. She told me that she participated in a congress and liked it very much:

That was really, really great because you're interacting with Zoroastrians, that most likely you wouldn't meet, for example, that are in Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong. You know, one thing you've noticed is that there is a lot of Zoroastrians living in diaspora, so even the diaspora could be super far away; so it's not likely that you're gonna be interacting with Zoroastrians from Australia all the time, unless it's some virtual interactions. . . . And it's nice to see friendships and relationships develop from that [Congress].

Such cultural events held on an international level regularly integrate hundreds of Zoroastrians. They have developed in North America because of the growing emphasis on youth activities since the end of the 1980s, resulting from the idea that Zoroastrian youth have to marry within the community.⁴⁵ During my numerous talks with Zoroastrians in the US, I indeed had the impression that some treated youth congresses as matrimonial platforms. However, will Anahita and Mitra marry Zoroastrian men? Neither of them seemed taken with the idea of endogamy. Anahita, when asked about the possibility of marrying a non-Zoroastrian, admitted that many people asked her if her parents want her to marry an Iranian Zoroastrian. The answer she gave me shows how she has been caught between her Americanized way of life and the culture of her Iranian family: even though she laughed about this question, she believed it might be easier to share life with a Zoroastrian, but was concerned that finding one to marry, especially in a relatively small local community, whose members you knew from childhood, was very difficult. She told me,

That's like telling someone: Go marry someone, who . . . like first of all go find a needle in a haystack. And you have to like them, and they can't be your cousin, to have not grown up with them. So it's very difficult. It would make things a lot easier if they were [Iranian Zoroastrians], but that's not something I'm looking for. And it doesn't always make them good people, if they are.

Mitra also admitted that it was not her goal to marry a Zoroastrian and, on the condition of keeping her religion, she was open to marrying out:

I think the person has to be good; if somebody can respect my religion, I think that's more important. I would never be with somebody who would force me to convert. I'm not going to give up my religion for somebody else. . . . I'm open to whoever it might be, but I am not willing to change my religion for anybody else.

Not only does Mitra not feel confined to endogamy, she also would accept the conversion of a future husband to her religion—a practice not approved by conservative Zoroastrians. She explained, “if somebody would want to convert, I'm open to that.” However, asked about the potential reactions to her marrying out of the religion, she admitted that she did not know how her family (the extended family on both sides was described as “very religious”), or her father, would react. Like Anahita, she pointed to the difficulties of reconciling her experience of growing up in American society and participation in American culture with how her family might feel in the case of her intermarriage:

⁴⁵ Hinnells, *Zoroastrian Diaspora*, 475. More recently Knaute pointed to another helpful tool, matrimonial websites (Knaute, “Discovering the Zoroastrian e-Diaspora,” 14). After the 2019 congress in California, BBC released a documentary called *Looking For Love: The Zoroastrian Way*.

I don't think my grandmother would be okay with it, I don't think my father would be okay with it. But once again, I have a very American perspective on things, so that's where my American side comes out. But I'm not sure. I mean, I only know once that happens.

Questioning the necessity of endogamy is one way the second generation may challenge the collective boundaries created by ethnic indicators. There are other examples as well: Anahita criticized the homogeneity of Zoroastrian social life; Mitra, although raised in a relatively traditional family, mentioned the issue of boundaries explicitly, saying that she had been "disappointed by Zoroastrianism when it comes to inclusion." She criticized traditional practices of closing the Zoroastrian community to others, such as refusal of converts; not welcoming people who marry out (especially women); and closing temples to those not born in traditional Zoroastrian families (as practiced by Parsis in India and postulated by some in the US, where the two Zoroastrian branches often share temples and prayer halls).⁴⁶ She said,

If I were to go to a church, I don't think anybody would say "no." I've been in churches, I've been in a mosque, I've been in a Hindu temple, I've been in a Jewish temple before, and nobody has really said "no." They've welcomed it with open arms, in order . . . for somebody else to learn and see about it. . . . If somebody says they want to go in with good intentions, to learn, to be in a positive environment where positive energy is performed, I don't see the harm in that. It's just a little disappointing to be honest.

However, Mitra optimistically assumed that this would change: "I think with time we will see a greater inclusion. I think cultural identity will become less, and religious identity will become more, but it all is a process, it takes time." In other words, she believes that over time the elements that have contributed to the closure of the community in a predominantly ethnic framework (such as following principles of endogamy and a ban on conversion), will give way to religious affiliation that is not necessarily based on birth in a Zoroastrian community and is available to be claimed by people of different origins, who so far have been kept at a distance by many born into Zoroastrianism.

Regarding the future of Zoroastrianism, there remained the question of whether Mitra and Anahita would pass the religion on to their children, if they have any. Even though neither is yet married or engaged, when asked this question both Anahita and Mitra expressed thoughtful reflection. Anahita was aware that "since their [grandparents'] generation is pretty much all gone, it's a lot harder for all this tradition to be carried and passed on, but we're all trying, I mean little things that we remember from my childhood we're trying." However, she personally does not intend to stress the religious aspect, but the philosophy and values, as she believes that Zoroastrianism is primarily "a very forward-thinking philosophy." Talking about her potential children, she told me how she sees their future:

I want to expose them to the culture and say, "this is a culture of your ancestry, this is where we come from." But I don't want to represent it as a religion, I want to represent it as philosophy. . . . So I won't hide it, but I also wouldn't impose it.

Regarding the enculturation of her future children, Anahita believed that her future children, willing or not, would pick up religious and cultural awareness because "the community will always be around," and "definitely it's just inevitable, because my close friends, my close family and friends come from this community." Anahita added she may even prefer to raise her children far from the local Iranian Zoroastrian community, because of its homogeneity

⁴⁶ Unlike in Iran, in India only Zoroastrians of Parsi or Iranian origin are allowed to visit temples hosting sacred fires; non-Zoroastrians are seen as impure and are not allowed entrance.

and the stress put on superficial social contacts within the community. With regard to her feelings of being rejected and the social anxiety she experienced in the community because her parents were not as involved in community life as other Zoroastrian parents were, she explained,⁴⁷

I would never want any child or anybody to feel the way that I felt or someone else . . . other people, they felt it too, because it's a common thing. . . . everybody is expressing it one time or another, that they felt this.

On the contrary, Mitra—brought up in a less Americanized, more traditional way—seemed to play this “social game” much better. Asked if she wanted to pass on the religion, she stated firmly: “I would want that. That is the condition that I would have [for her future husband].”

Whatever the second generation of Iranian Zoroastrians passes on to the following generation will be different from what they were taught by their families who came from Iran. Neither Anahita nor Mitra had visited Iran, and even though the latter mentioned she would love to go one day, she had no specific plans at the time. Due to the political situation in the Islamic Republic of Iran, the connections between the second generation and their ancestral homeland are weak, and few young US-born Zoroastrians have had a chance to see how the religion is practiced in its homeland. In contrast to many second-generation Parsi children who have had their initiation to the religious ceremony (called *sedreh-pushi* by Iranians and *navjote* by Parsis) performed during trips to India, their counterparts of Iranian origin typically undergo it in the US, and both Anahita and Mitra had their initiation locally.

The purpose of the initiation ceremony is the conscious acceptance of religion by a new community member, who for the first time puts on the white undershirt called the *sedreh* (sacred shirt) and the white woven belt called the *kusti*, the most recognizable Zoroastrian devotional objects, which after the ceremony should be worn constantly to symbolize one's Zoroastrian identity. After the ceremony, however, Anahita never wore her *sedreh* or *kusti*, and she generally admitted that she treated her initiation as “just something everybody did, and there was no particularly distinct . . . revelation or moment with that.” She mentioned, “I think my parents wanted us [she and her siblings] to do it, so we did it,” bringing to mind the first-generation immigrants who make efforts to keep the Zoroastrian identity of their US-born children. Mitra, probably because of Parsi cultural influence (which holds rituals to be more important than does Iranian Zoroastrianism), wore the *sedreh* and *kusti* for a period of time, but then she and her siblings stopped. She explained that “being in the school system here and having to go to the locker room to change, we got a lot of questions. It ended up becoming too much of a hassle to deal with, so none of us really wear it.” With regard to other religious objects, both Mitra and Anahita had jewelry (a necklace or earrings) with the Zoroastrian *faravahar*, but did not necessarily wear it daily. Although their parents kept many objects in their homes connected with Persian culture or Zoroastrianism, the two women did not have many where they lived. Only Mitra admitted to displaying a framed *faravahar* and a picture of Zoroaster that she kept with her whenever she moved.

Regarding religious practice, both women admitted that they visited Zoroastrian temples or facilities from time to time, usually for special occasions like weddings or initiation ceremonies. They did not say any prayers on a regular basis, and only Mitra admitted that she occasionally said a short prayer, and only in specific circumstances, usually *Ashem Vohu* or *Yata Ahu*—the most basic Zoroastrian prayers—which she knew by heart:

Sometimes if I feel like it, I will say one *Ashem Vohu* or *Yata Ahu*, just for myself; if it is a special occasion or I am hopeful or wishing for something to go through, then I would tune in and say *Ashem Vohu* or *Yata Ahu*, or something like that.

⁴⁷ Judging from her description, I believe Anahita's parents were quite active in community life.

Moreover, when stressed, she sometimes said a prayer to calm herself down, as her grandma taught her—she described it as “a form of spirituality or meditation.” Given that she did not use any special paraphernalia, did not cover her hair as Zoroastrian men and women traditionally do, and recited only in her mind, she called her occasional prayers more a “spiritual” than “religious” practice, as she connected religion with ritual.

When discussing religious practice, I asked Anahita and Mitra if they had ever obeyed any religious limitations connected with menstruation. Traditional Zoroastrian ritualistic practice dictates that menstruating women should be isolated, as the outflow of blood is perceived as an attack by demons on the perfect creation of God and results in pollution.⁴⁸ Some Zoroastrian women still abstain from religious practices while menstruating, but Anahita did not obey such rules; she was not even instructed to do so by her family. My question reminded her that she encountered this issue at a camp for young Zoroastrians, when participants were instructed that girls were not allowed into the temple during their menstruation. But Anahita explained that the instructions were not necessarily taken seriously:

They [the camp organizers] said if you were menstruating, you weren't allowed to go into the place of worship, into the *atashkadeh* [Persian fire temple]. But so many people just lied, because it was . . . I don't remember, during that time, that I was subject to that, because I just wasn't on my cycle then, but I remember other girls, kids like 13, 14, 15—it's a sensitive time, no one wanted, and no one was going to say anything, because then everybody would know [that you were menstruating].

Mitra was more familiar with principles regarding menstruation. She admitted that her grandma taught her about the rule not to enter the place of worship or participate in prayers during menstruation, but generally she did not obey it either. Her comments on the subject were another illustration of a young Zoroastrian caught between what the dictates of her ethno-religious culture of origin and her own America-shaped worldview:

I don't really follow it, because I don't think . . . I think of it from the logical point, I don't think it's really necessary. But if I do know that it does offend somebody or if I do know that person follows, then I will respect that, that person. So for example, if I know that a family does not like having the prayers done when somebody is on her period, I will not attend the prayer session, I'll just come later on. So it depends: if I know somebody does not like that, I will respect their wish; if they don't care, then I don't care.

The Zoroastrian practice of strictly regulated ritualistic behavior practiced by older generations in Iran or India was perceived by Mitra and Anahita as flexible and easily adaptable to a foreign culture. They believed that it could easily fit into the environment of their new homeland, and Anahita, who saw Zoroastrianism more as a philosophy than a religion, related:

I think our community has easily adapted to American culture, become modernized. I don't know why, maybe because it was easy, it's not like we have the Islam culture or something, where we have the head dressed, there are certain things that we have to follow, there are certain rules. It's easy to adapt, it's easy to balance both cultures. Definitely sometimes it's difficult, just being a first generation, an Iranian—there are differences in the culture, and it's harder to adapt, understand, fit in. But I think for the most part from the religious perspective, I think we've had probably

⁴⁸ Cf Choksy, *Purity and Pollution*, 94–100.

the easy . . . I can't see anything that stands out, that would make it difficult, stands out, sets us apart, I'm just any modern-day American.⁴⁹

Likewise, Mitra did not foresee any special difficulties for her generation in adapting to American society, such as those that were present for her parents' generation, who kept not only social boundaries between the Zoroastrian community and the non-Zoroastrian environment, but also boundaries between the Zoroastrianism of Iranian and Parsi origins:

I don't foresee there being a really big challenge in the future when it comes to the youth. So youth meaning people, I would say ages maybe forty to the generations that are growing after me. Because we all have a very Western perspective going forward, and we will understand that those cultural differences are not necessarily important to maintain a Zoroastrian identity. So the biggest challenge I could say, now, for the older generations, is language—that is one. And I'm sure you've heard it a lot, that all of the Iranians, they are only speaking in Farsi, and then the Parsis they're speaking in Gujarati. And then when it comes to functions and celebrations that are communal—that both celebrate, like Nowruz—those celebrations always end up causing problems because all of the music is in Farsi, the person conducting the ceremony or MC of the night is saying everything in Farsi. Or vice versa, everything is set in English, everything is set in Gujarati. I think the biggest challenge is language, which I do not foresee to be a problem in the future because I think the future generations will speak in English.

Mitra, probably due to her family connections, seemed more aware of Parsi culture than her average Iranian Zoroastrian peers, and she commented not only on the integration of Zoroastrians into American society, but also on the integration of the two branches of Zoroastrianism. She noticed problems with language, but did not consider them important for her generation, raised as she was in an English-speaking, religiously and culturally diverse society. Similar to Anahita, she saw her generation as having an “Americanized” or “Westernized” worldview, quite well adjusted to life in America.

Discussion

Anahita and Mitra were born in the US, which is a new Zoroastrian homeland with an expanding, diverse community. They were each raised in California—the state with the highest concentration of not only Iranian Zoroastrians but also ethnically and religiously diverse Iranians. Bozorgmehr stressed the importance of so-called internal ethnicity: maintaining the separation of diverse ethno-religious subgroups within the Iranian diaspora. On the basis of research in Los Angeles, he reported that Armenians and Jews in Iran—members of recognized religious minorities—after coming here socialized mostly with their Iranian coreligionists, had close relatives in the neighborhood, and were more eager to keep religious observance and be active in cultural and religious organizations than Iranian Muslims. Bozorgmehr states that because of the dominant Muslim majority in Iran, prior coming to the US, minorities already had a well-developed ethnicity and identity, retarding their postmigration assimilation.⁵⁰ Elsewhere I have discussed a similar well-developed sense of distinctiveness in the Iranian Zoroastrians, another group with minority status in Iran.⁵¹ This framework is useful when considering Zoroastrian immigrants in California. Mitra's and

⁴⁹ Anahita used the term “first generation” to indicate that she was in the first US-born generation, whereas I use first generation to categorize migrants to the US born in Iran.

⁵⁰ Bozorgmehr, “Internal Ethnicity.”

⁵¹ Niechciał, *Mniejszość zaratusztriańska we współczesnym Teheranie*; Niechciał, “Key Content”; Niechciał, “Sacred Homeland.”

Anahita's parents made sure that a Zoroastrian environment was an integral part of their children's lives. The stories of Anahita and Mitra illustrate that their Zoroastrian families and friends as well as other coreligionists were constantly present when they were growing up. Their parents were first-generation Iranian immigrants, who, according to Sadeghi, usually "painstakingly attempt to re-create a sense of home, quality of life, and belonging for themselves and their families in nations where they feel no birthright or inheritance."⁵² Even though Anahita and Mitra evaluated their parents' engagement in the local community life differently, they were brought up in homes where Zoroastrianism was a part of life, connecting their parents with their homeland in Iran.

Although the first generation might "have not completely left their homeland, but serve as the bridge between the homeland and their host state," the connections of their children to Iran are quite loose.⁵³ Traveling is difficult and sometimes impossible for Iranians regardless of their religion, especially refugees. The Iranian second generation—in contrast to many second-generation immigrants, including Parsis—do not constitute a crossing borders, "transnational" generation that easily travels overseas. Instead, they may be compared to Cuban or Palestinian second-generation immigrants who—due to obstacles that include family, religious or political background, the circumstances and trauma of migration, passport issues, or fear of what may happen during a visit—build their connection with the ancestral homeland through media such as literature, music, and Internet publications rather than personal experience.⁵⁴ Although Parsi Zoroastrians easily travel to India and many immigrants show their children and grandchildren the land of their ancestors, and even perform their initiation ceremony there—in a more traditional setting and in the company of extended family left in India—Iranian Zoroastrians usually have no such comfort. Some US-born Zoroastrians may not feel comfortable about going to Iran due to the political situation there, and young males with both American and Iranian citizenship may fear that if they come to Iran they will be forced to serve in the army. Anahita and Mitra too had never been to Iran.

Mahdi believes that because of the decades of political hostility between the US and Iran, resulting in difficulties in travel between the countries, members of the Iranian diaspora dislike the culture represented by the post-revolutionary Islamic government in Iran, and that the perception US-born Iranians have of their ancestral land and its culture is blurred.⁵⁵ Other researchers show how the situation in Iran affects religious minorities in diaspora: younger generations prefer to stress their ethno-religious rather than their Iranian national identity, as has been discovered by Hosseini among the Yarsani community in Sweden as well as by Sadjed among Baha'is in Germany.⁵⁶ This process has been strengthened by the negative perception of Islam in Western countries for the last couple of decades, resulting in the discrimination against Iranians and other Middle Easterners in the diaspora, giving them more reason to distance themselves from the Iranian label.⁵⁷ This is not only the case for religious minorities like the Yarsanis or Baha'is, whose religious expression was suppressed in Iran, but, as Sadjed showed with the example of Iranian Jews in Germany,⁵⁸ it also may apply to communities accepted in Iran: even if their status in society is higher, they still are the subject of discrimination. Although Zoroastrians usually consider themselves the "real" Iranians and the true successors of Iranian heritage, migration changes their identity as well, moving them away from Iran and its current politics. Anahita and Mitra, like many other Iranian Zoroastrians I spoke with, identified themselves with Persian descent and Iranian cultural heritage, but they also considered themselves members of American society and mixed easily with non-Zoroastrians.

⁵² Sadeghi, "Boundaries of Belonging," 130; cf Mahdi, "Ethnic Identity."

⁵³ Carment and Sadjed, "Introduction," 4.

⁵⁴ Alinejad, *Internet*, 6.

⁵⁵ Mahdi, "Ethnic Identity," 94.

⁵⁶ Hosseini, *Yārsān of Iran*; Sadjed, "Influence of Islamophobia."

⁵⁷ Sadjed, "Influence of Islamophobia."

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

Moreover, in diaspora, with growing distance from the Islam-dominated, politically unwelcoming ancestral homeland, as well as mixing of the two Zoroastrian branches and growing numbers of converts with different origins, the Zoroastrian religious identity may overshadow ethno-national connections in the future. In the US, as Mitra and Anahita confirmed, interstate events allow young Zoroastrians to mingle with coreligionists of Parsi origin. Hinnells noted, “Many younger members of the international communities no longer wish to be known by what they see as purely ethnic markers, namely Parsis and Iranians, but simply as Zoroastrians.”⁵⁹ Over time, the barriers between the two Zoroastrian branches may blur, fulfilling Bozorgmehr’s prediction that although Iranian minorities in Los Angeles associated only on a very limited level with their non-Iranian coreligionists, that change is coming with the next generations.⁶⁰ I have seen that the firm collective boundaries migrants bring from their homeland, strengthened by ethnic indicators, may not be appealing to the US-born generation; Anahita and Mitra serve as examples. Anahita stressed the value of universal Zoroastrian philosophy and distanced herself from the specific culture, and Mitra stated that she believed that in the future religious identity will take the place of cultural identity. She noticed the difficulties her parents’ generation faced in adapting its culture to the American context (for instance, the language barrier), but did not see this in her generation. The native language and devotion to specific foods and other lifestyle indicators of her parents and grandparents were not that important to the next generation, and Mitra felt that a common religious identity might overshadow ethnic divisions between descendants of Iranian and Parsi Zoroastrianism.

Far from understanding Zoroastrianism as an ethnic religion, Mitra and Anahita challenged its internal ethnicity by criticizing the Zoroastrian community for being relatively closed. Anahita described the atmosphere of a homogenous community where people mingle only within the group, compete for social position based on their popularity, and put pressure on endogamy although the choice of spouses is very limited. Mitra’s criticism was directed at the lack of welcome for non-Zoroastrians and Zoroastrian women who married out. Indeed, endogamy has been a sensitive issue. Some Iranian Zoroastrians in the US—especially among first-generation immigrants—stick to the position that Zoroastrianism is a specific way of life and believe that those not born into the religion should not be included in the community. Writers reported in the late 1980s that some connected marrying out with being “disloyal” to the family and religion, and “dangerous to the community”; I have talked with women who married out more recently and still faced problems and pressure from their families.⁶¹ Bozorgmehr indicates that in Los Angeles the rate of endogamy among ethno-religious minorities from Iran used to be higher than among Iranian Muslims, and it is likely that first-generation Zoroastrians reflect a similar trend.⁶²

Nevertheless, the attitude toward endogamy has recently been changing everywhere, not only among the diaspora—now mixed marriages are a part of Zoroastrian daily life. Data, although incomplete with respect to Iran, indicate a significant upward trend in the percentage of intermarriages: in Mumbai, it has grown steadily from 20.5 percent in 1992 to 38.9 percent in 2011, and in North America from 23.7 percent in 1991 to approximately 60 percent in 2011.⁶³ Anahita and Mitra reflect the changing attitudes of the young generation: each was open to marrying an outsider, but unsure about the reactions of her family. They were no different from many other young Iranian American women, regardless of religion, who more than men have been “caught between the traditional values of their parents—who favored arranged marriages—and the liberal values of American society.”⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Hinnells, *Zoroastrian Diaspora*, 5.

⁶⁰ Bozorgmehr, “Internal Ethnicity,” 404.

⁶¹ Writer, *Contemporary Zoroastrians*, 218–19.

⁶² Bozorgmehr, “Internal Ethnicity,” 399.

⁶³ Rivetna, “Zarathushti World,” 6.

⁶⁴ Bozorgmehr and Ketcham, “Adult Children,” 34–35.

Although first-generation Iranian immigrants make efforts to keep their ethnic traditions, the second generation tries “only halfheartedly to adopt its parental culture.”⁶⁵ Ansari stresses the general similarity of young second-generation Iranians to other immigrants torn between two cultures, experiencing the generational cultural conflict between parents willing to cultivate their ancestral culture and their children growing up alien to that culture and cultivating their own values and ways of thinking.⁶⁶ This generational difference may be even stronger in the case of Iranian religious minorities such as Zoroastrians who likely came to the US with a more strongly defined ethnic identity and feeling more pressure to keep their specific tradition alive than their Muslim neighbors from Iran. However, one cannot generalize about all families; there may be similarities, and I have chosen individuals who illustrate the heterogeneity of the Iranian Zoroastrian diaspora in perceptions of heritage and belonging. Anahita’s family came much earlier, and she perceived her family to be more Americanized than many families of her Zoroastrian peers, and more likely to socialize with non-Zoroastrians. She revealed a feeling of not fitting well into the local Zoroastrian community, and described herself as caught between two worlds—a homogenous, endogamous ethno-religious community and American social culture. Mitra, from a quite traditional, religious, and probably less Americanized family than Anahita’s, gave the impression that she fit well in the Zoroastrian-dominated environment and was involved and integrated in community life. Yet she also mentioned the differences between her own and older generations’ worldviews, particularly around the issues of endogamy, conversion, and menstruation.

The two women considered in this article kept connections with their local Iranian Zoroastrian communities, but emphasized their social rather than spiritual or religious engagement, even the one who attached importance to spirituality in her private life. This contraction of the ritual sphere resulted in Anahita and Mitra perceiving Zoroastrianism as a flexible religion, with the potential to transform in new conditions.

Stewart suggests that Zoroastrians in Iran perceive emigration as the main threat to the survival of their religious and cultural heritage.⁶⁷ Indeed, a generation of US-born Iranian Zoroastrians have been losing direct ties with Iran, and Zoroastrianism is evolving on a new continent. What Anahita and Mitra chose to pass on to their future children would be different from what they had received at home, especially from their Iranian grandmothers. Mitra strongly wanted to pass on the religion, which seemed to be more important for her than ethnic heritage; Anahita stated a belief that her children would become enculturated as Iranian Zoroastrians due to their cultural environment, which might be the case if they stayed in California. This may be supported by Mahdi’s research indicating that next-generation Iranians in California understand their parents’ culture and language better than those living in communities with low numbers of Iranians.⁶⁸ If Anahita left California, the enculturation of her children might be very different from her own.

The generational transformations of Zoroastrian religious practice and of perceptions among young Iranian Zoroastrians of their cultural heritage call for a future comparison with their peers remaining in Iran. Such research may show to what extent the changes described in the article are related to immigration. It is noteworthy that a few generations ago Zoroastrianism in Iran was a religion of strict rules, laws, and complicated rituals, but in the twentieth century it experienced a dramatic transformation, including a significant simplification of its ritual practices.⁶⁹ This was the result of the reformist movement within the community, the modernization of the country, the influence of relationships with Parsis, and

⁶⁵ Mahdi, “Ethnic Identity,” 77.

⁶⁶ Ansari, “Iranian Immigrants.”

⁶⁷ Stewart, *Voices*, 98.

⁶⁸ Mahdi, “Ethnic Identity,” 90.

⁶⁹ Mazdāpur, “Tadāvom-e ādāb-e kohan dar rasmhā-ye mo’āser-e zartoshtiyān dar Irān.”

changes in life circumstances of community members who moved in great numbers from villages to cities, including large migration to Tehran.

The stories of these two women illustrate that descendants of Zoroastrian immigrants from Iran are caught between two cultures, that of the Zoroastrian community and America's social culture. The strong boundaries characteristic of Zoroastrianism in Iran have been loosened, and traditional Iranian Zoroastrian culture does not necessarily fit the new context. The younger generation deeply transforms the practices of their inherited religious tradition and challenges the significance of ethno-national indicators of identity as well as the meaning of ethnicity and religion.

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